

Effecting “V”

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What is the estrangement effect? How does one produce it? And, why would one desire to do so? If we want to understand the source of Cliff Falk’s desire to excite estrangement, to make the familiar (both philosophy of education, and the system of education) seem strange, we must look to Bertolt Brecht. It is, after all, Brechtian estrangement (*Verfremdung*) which Falk claims to excite with his text by (re)instating the organized production of the educated citizen (schooling) within the militarized-industrial political economy.

Has Falk made good on his promise of estranging the familiar? In order to answer this question, we turn to Fredric Jameson, whose commentary on the “usefulness” of Brecht for academic production informs Falk’s use of Brechtian *Verfremdung* (estranging the familiar).

Jameson identifies four moments in the V-effect (*Verfremdung-Effekte*).¹ We might categorize the four as the psychological, the technical, the emotional, and the political. The V-effect, is first and foremost, understood as psychological event where the artistic performance makes the audience perceive the world in strange ways. Most commentators agree that Brecht borrowed this component from the Russian Formalists’ “*ostranenie*” or “making strange.”² The Formalists—foreshadowing some aspects of the later Punk Rock movement—were infamous for cross-dressing and so-called lewd behavior (for example, spitting on the crowd). There are echoes of the Formalists’ “*ostranenie*” in the films of Sergei Eisenstein, whose concept of the montage influenced Brecht’s technical approach to the theater. This technical dimension of the V-effect is located in staging and performance, where the placement of objects and the spacing of actors is designed to upset what audiences expect in the theater. The third component of the V-effect, and perhaps the most estranging, is accomplished through the attempt to disconnect the audience from the drama by “turning down” or “shutting down” *Einfühlung* (empathy or even sympathy). Here the goal is to create a critical distance so the audience is able to “think” *during* the performance so that they might *act* after it is over. This is Brecht, depicted both as champion of the detached and intellectualist theater and criticized for being “propagandistic and didactic.”

For Jameson, the ambiguity surrounding the purpose of rupturing or refusing emotional connection adds another level of estrangement to Brecht’s work. The audience, the critics, are unable to resolve the purpose of the V-effect, and so are estranged from their epistemological security. And here lies the pedagogical export of the V-effect, which is central to what Brecht called “instructive theater”: the audience is inspired to search for new languages of description, interpretation, and critique, and, more importantly, to make the world anew. Thus, flowing out of the preceding three components is the (perhaps) didactic revelation that the human condition is historical. All is not “natural” (unchanging, predetermined), or moving

inherently towards a fixed end (*telos*). Specifically, all the technical aspects of human life that make up the stage of our life's performances (that is, institutions like schooling) are changeable. Like the spectacle of theater created by the shifting of sets on stage, when *our* world is made strange to us, its subjective character emerges from behind the mask of objectivity.³ What was once seen as static is now recognized as vital, in potentia, unfinished, and incomplete. To summarize, Brecht said:

Estrangement means to *historicize*, that is, consider people and incidents as historically conditioned and transitory....The spectator will no longer see the characters on stage as unalterable, uninfluenceable, helplessly delivered over to their fate. He will see that this man is such and such, because these circumstances are such. And circumstances are such, because the man is such. But he in turn is conceivable not only as he is now, but also as he might be—that is, otherwise—and the same holds true for circumstances. Hence, the spectator obtains a new attitude in the theater....He will be received in the theater as the great “transformer,” who can intervene in the natural processes and the social processes, and who no longer accepts the world but masters it.⁴

The revolutionary intentions of Brechtian estrangement, expressed through instructive theater, must be contrasted with the fatalism of a “natural” history which allows for no alternative, no other-wise, and thereby presents the future as an existential impossibility. Instructive theater breaks up the solidified and numbed everyday “reality” and seeks, in Jameson's words, to “energize a public into a sense of multiple possibilities.”⁵

Energy, force, and activity. The revolutionary export of the estrangement-effect is identified in the productivity of the creative act that is both fueled by and emits an energy of possibility (*nova*): “the New, the Novum, is somehow grasped as production and construction, it is always that which is “against Nature,” which must be aesthetically perceived as such in the shock of the V-effect.”⁶ Yet, what Jameson is naming the “natural” is not the *Natura* of the premoderns, but the “order” of things constructed and produced by human hands, “our” world (depicted as timeless, eternally recurring, predetermined). Estrangement effects a breach in this static “order” promoted by the narrative unfolding through a logic of historical necessity. In this breach we hear echoes of the San Simonist's call for a political aesthetic. The “usefulness” of Brecht's V-effect carries us to the didactic quality of “performance” which has the pragmatic result of rupturing that fatalistic apology of the contemporary social “reality.” This apology renders our world a static entity. But this apology also presents us with the very the status-quo that is made strange, and thereby changeable. *Energia* disrupts *Stasis*.

Now the issue is within which of these denotations of the V-effect do we place Falk's text, that is, his Foucauldian-inspired sketch of the disciplinary regime of education? On one level, it is clear that Falk has offered us something in the best tradition of Brechtian estrangement. “An [estranging] (*verfremdend*) depiction”, [Brecht] writes in the *Organon*, “is one that enables the object to be clearly recognized but at the same time to appear [strange] (*fremd*).”⁷ Indeed, Falk, in the spirit of Brecht, he has taken from “that which is self-evident, known, obvious and arous[ed] about them wonder or curiosity.”⁸ Falk accomplishes this through an intriguing combination of vignettes which identifies the emergence of the nation-state through the coupling of education and militarism. Yet, the historical narrative

expressed in the vignettes overwhelms, so much that the (potentially) estranging structure is submerged by the substance of the historiography. This outcome follows from the linearity of the tale of militarism and the unity of state sponsored education and military. Falk's history is a tragedy, a fatalistic trope. In the end, the work "affects," rather than excites, Brechtian estrangement.

For Brecht, the estranging quality of the work is precisely its offering up the sense that the world could be otherwise. Praxis *is* possible. Art, through its creative force, shows us the way. I do not sense this force in Falk's text. And this is my concern with the Foucauldian-inspired narrative. In "revealing" a discursive regime, (for example, education as the production of the military/industrial subject) it reifies the status quo. Stasis. Power circulates, but does not generate. Possibility is neither latent, nor potent. Praxis is moribund at this end-of-history tale of education and the production of the (post)industrial/militarized self.

What we confront in Falk is the presumed limits imposed (on the social critic, and philosopher of education) by the founding myth (re)discovered as a discursive cage. Falk writes: "Western education itself, from its founding onward, can be read as a function of war/militarism." To state it as such, to assert this myth, is not to produce an estranged reading in the Brechtian sense. Producing the V-effect requires more than the cutting offered by Falk when he deploys Foucault's method of "effective history," which claims to deprive the knowing subject of stability by uprooting tradition and disrupting its presumptuous continuity. Effecting *Verfremdung* (estrangement) demands that we splice these cuts into a montage that renders possibility. The "usefulness" of the Brechtian V-effect is located in the new freedom issued from the uprooting of the tradition. This freedom does not emerge as a rhetoric of liberation, experienced in linguistic play, but as the full blown force of understanding "our" world as historic process: "as a kind of institution which has come into being owing to the historical and collective actions of people and their societies, and which therefore now stands revealed as changeable."⁹

When Effecting V (estrangement) we extend and complete an effective historical narrative by revealing the possibility of reconstructing, rebuilding, and, yes, renewing "our" world. Cutting or splicing history through vignettes is thus *in*-effective if it does not vent the force of possibility latent in the static present. Jameson summarizes the extent of the editing process (cutting and splicing history) "in which new acts are formed together out of pieces of the old, in which the whole reified surface of a period seemingly beyond history and beyond change now submits to a first ludic un-building, before arriving at a real social and revolutionary collective reconstruction."¹⁰ The stress here is on the revolutionary energy released by the V-effect—expressed in the creative force of cutting, breaking down, uprooting the petrified world. My concern is that the Foucauldian inspired sketch will not energize the audience, but, on the contrary, produce a stultifying effect. Rather than estrange, such portraits merely ratify the perceived inflexibility of the status quo. Confronted with this "reality," cynicism fills the vacuum created by the negation of praxis (the *Nova* project), which is rendered absurd at the (apparent) closure of history. Perhaps the point I am making is driven home best by one of Brecht's

characters, a certain Ziffel, an exiled physicist who extends the Heisenberg principle to the work of the social critic. He says: “The investigation of social processes does not leave these processes untouched; it has a considerable, indeed, a revolutionary effect on them.”¹¹

1. Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 2000), 39.

2. See J. Willett, *The Theater of Bertolt Brecht* (New York: New Directions, 1960); Keith A. Dickson, *Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); and Fredric Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art and His Times* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1967).

3. The “world” understood in the Arendtian sense as that which we (humans) create, and thereby both brings us together and separates us. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52.

4. Brecht quoted in Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht*, 222.

5. Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 47.

6. *Ibid.*, 176.

7. Brecht quoted in Dickson, *Towards Utopia*, 241.

8. Brecht quoted in Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht*, 218.

9. Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 47.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Brecht *Flüchtlingsgespräche* quoted in Dickson, *Towards Utopia*, 247.