

Brecht/Cage  
Nathan Dueck

**MODEL**

Brecht

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Der V-Effekt besteht darin, daß das Ding, das zum Verständnis gebracht, auf welches das Augenmerk gelenkt werden soll, aus einem gewöhnlichen, bekannten unmittelbar vorliegenden Ding zu einem besonderen, auffälligen, unerwarteten Ding gemacht wird. Das Selbstverständliche wird in gewisser Weise unverständlich gemacht, das geschieht aber nur, um es dann um so verständlicher zu machen. Damit aus dem Bekannten etwas Erkanntes werden kann, muß es aus seiner Unauffälligkeit herauskommen; es muß mit der Gewohnheit gebrochen werden; das betreffende Ding bedürfe keiner Erläuterung.

from "Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst, die einen Verfremdungseffekt hervorbringt"

The bourgeoisie believe

they lived  
at the end of history  
throughout Vanilla-  
scened nineties.  
Political scientist francis  
fukuyama said so.  
Liberal democracy  
checks and balances.  
Free-market economies  
stock and bond.

Civilization evolved, after all.  
That evolution was linear:  
starting when  
French revolutionnaires  
guillotined King Louis XVI,  
leading through  
General Lee white-  
flagging  
Rebel surrenderer  
at  
Daber point,  
and ceasing  
after  
East Germans  
jackhammered  
and pickaxed  
reinforced concrete in Berlin.

Human beings,  
oh-so civilized,  
somehow allowed  
bigots  
and zealots  
to refute  
Fukuyama's theory of  
evolution.

Poet  
and playwright Bertolt Brecht  
died thirty-six  
years before History ended.  
His socialist plots  
only ever  
toppled Capitalism  
onstage.  
Still,  
Realism falls  
every night  
his audience  
sustains disbelief  
to seize the means of production.

By "obnázenie přímá"  
"laying bare the device," as  
literary critic Viktor Shklovsky  
put it,  
Brechtian theater  
flaunts how the show  
was made as part of  
the show.  
Sets  
changing in full view,  
costumes  
changing in  
full view lighting for a full  
view of filmy sets  
and chintzy costumes –  
the most obvious machinery of  
the play's  
on display  
just so the house knows  
nothing about  
the status quo  
is normal.

Symbols  
made subtle  
what placards  
make simple.

Such "epic" design,  
according to Brecht,  
grinds bifocals  
into spectacles  
to identify  
unacknowledged  
exploitation of  
the working class.

History ended  
some thirty weeks after  
composer and artist  
John Cage died.  
His avant-garde  
noise  
(sound?)  
forever stifled  
the musical  
canon.  
His audience  
expected melodies  
but heard  
the most obnoxious clamor  
from a piano  
prepared so  
hammers  
struck strings  
Cage bolted  
and screwed.  
Those performance  
methods  
taunted eardrums.

"let the sounds be themselves."

With those words  
Cage  
hit upon  
a theory,  
by that,  
he proposed  
work  
is less a product  
than a process  
between  
creators,  
composer  
and listener –  
no, that's not quite it –  
listeners, plural.  
The composer  
is as much  
a listener as  
a creator  
no better than  
any other listener.

The bench shouldn't  
creak.  
The virtuoso shouldn't  
perform for over  
some  
four minutes of  
silence –  
no, that's not right at all.  
The birds should  
sing.  
The clouds should  
rain.  
The crowds should  
walk, presumably.

All those accidental  
noises shouldn't  
sound much like melodies  
just so the concert hall knows  
everything about  
the norm  
is questionable.

Muzak  
made silent  
what silences  
make music.  
The process  
isn't "random,"  
which implies humbug,  
but "chance,"  
which supplies sincerity.  
This "procedure,"  
according to Cage,  
digs out wax  
that keeps  
accidents from ruining  
middle c  
and common time.

From his apocalyptic thesis,  
Fukuyama argued  
conflict  
is finished.  
Struggle over parity?  
Over liberty?  
Family?  
it is finished.

Thoroughly  
evolved,  
the bourgeoisie ended  
History through a  
cappella-toned nineties.

Only the fittest  
survived civilization.

with *Philosophy of Right*,  
Hegel reasons humans  
suffer when feeling  
spiritually  
separate

from the whole of humanity,  
so to speak,  
as "estrangement"/  
"Entfremdung."  
With *Das Kapital*,  
Marx posits "alienation"/  
"Entfremdung"  
happens when technology  
separates society  
into economic  
classes  
harming the essence,  
as they say,  
of humanity.

Shklovsky used the word  
"ostranenie"/  
"defamiliarization"  
in his study  
"Art as Device"  
to relate how  
the "true story" of  
*Tristram Shandy*  
by Laurence Sterne  
rankled  
by telling familiar  
tales in unfamiliar  
styles  
to avoid  
easy identification with  
the "author."

Influenced by those philosophies  
and practices,  
Brecht supported his platform  
was more lecturer than pulpit.  
A traveling production  
by Mei Lanfang of  
the Beijing Opera  
demonstrated the very concepts  
Brecht would  
teach.  
Actors would  
act between quotation  
marks, playing as  
though they were seated  
with  
bejeweled patrons  
side-eying  
their portrayal.  
A director would  
cast one actor in  
multiple roles  
or cast two  
actors in the same  
role.  
A playwright would  
adapt an historical narrative  
or traditional parable  
comparable to a story  
or event of the day  
to produce  
awareness of  
how History favors  
the values of  
the teller  
without fusing over  
the needs of  
the reader.

Emotionally  
distanced,  
intellectually  
alienated,  
the crowd would  
save their sympathy  
for the wronged  
until it gets  
what compelled the wrongdoer  
and learned how to stop  
that wrong from occurring again.  
With  
the  
"Verfremdungseffekt"/  
estrangement effect,  
Brecht makes  
good

on Shklovsky's phrase  
"priëm ostraneniia"  
through a theatrical  
method of  
making  
strange.

The  
V-effekt turns lenses  
for the spectator  
by focusing  
on the ideological wince  
that distorts  
perception.

In Buddhist teaching,  
the term  
*upaya-kaushalya*  
calls to mind a conscious  
action impelled  
by incomplete reasoning  
and exercised  
(or is it realized?)  
by "skill in  
means."  
Pondering that guidance,  
Cage saw experimental  
poetry as  
a path to liberation:  
freedom from frivolous  
rules of  
grammar,  
of course.  
Ego, though,  
had to go,  
since it imposes  
judgement.

So, Cage rolled  
coins with  
a second-  
hand *I Ching*  
to "write  
through" chance.

Following zen teaching,  
Cage renounced  
every form of violence,  
from aggression to anger.  
And when classics  
scholar Norman O. Brown  
pointed out  
etymologists think  
the word  
"syntax"  
once meant "the arrangement of an army,"

Cage determined his  
language must be  
"demilitarized" –  
to be sure  
the passive voice  
stands out  
since it  
omits the noun  
almost how Buddhists  
eliminate the subject.  
To take on  
the English military,  
Cage designed  
a variation of  
acrostic  
by aligning letters  
vertically along  
the middle of  
the page  
which were found in  
another  
text by using  
a system that restricts  
the author.  
To make  
that sort of poem,  
just pick a turn of phrase  
and search for  
it  
letter by letter  
in the pages of  
any published work.  
Called "mesostics,"  
the resulting poems  
do not  
make  
ordinary sense;  
instead, they make  
ordinary  
sentences  
senseless.

The sole compositional  
rule  
demands,  
"A given  
letter does  
not appear in  
the source between it  
and the previous  
appearance of that letter."  
Like  
found sound,  
nonsense sentences  
demilitarize  
language  
by liberating neglected  
elements, graphical  
and musical.

After  
baffling  
patrons burping caviar,  
Cage developed  
and revealed  
his technique  
by writing through  
the book  
*Finnegans Wake*  
at least five  
times.

Faith's  
a chance  
procedure.  
a  
well-ruled  
meiotic  
block  
the ideological drone  
by numbing  
assumptions  
that betray  
the critic's reception.

Fukuyama titled  
his book *The End of History*  
and *the Last man*,  
but only  
pedants use that second clause.  
Presumably, he,  
the prime mammal,  
is Christian.  
End  
times, as told in  
the book of revelation,  
promised sufferin'g for  
unbelievers  
while  
God judges  
their animosity.  
Of course, John  
the Revelator calmed  
believers by saying  
God accepts  
their religiosity.  
As the great  
tribulation afflicted  
the former  
with horsemen of  
pestilence, war, famine,  
and death,  
the latter  
awaited the second coming  
while staring long  
into the lake of  
fire.  
Tired,  
yet sated,  
the last man  
does nothing.

after all, civilization evolved.  
Then again, that so-so evolution wasn't  
linear, but cyclical:  
for each Hungarian wine and cheese  
picnic, fleets of combat  
aircraft bomb Iraqis.

With prosaic characters,  
formulaic dialog,  
and archaic conflicts,  
Brecht roused  
a revolution in  
the body politic to  
strike the set,  
read a tract,  
give alms,  
join a union,  
and march through the streets.

With atonal chords,  
oppremeral rhythms,  
and ideological themes,  
Cage arose  
a resolution in  
the self to  
roll the dice,  
trace a rock,  
listen to LPs,  
move chess pieces,  
and root out a mushroom.

Offend  
History.  
Despite  
Brecht's and Cage's  
conflicting poetics,  
the playwright's  
and the music composer's  
complementary  
aesthetics show  
how they processed realities  
the bourgeoisie  
ignored  
throughout manila-colored nineties.

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