

CAUGHT IN THE ACT: BRECHT, HANDKE AND DZOGCHEN

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You recognize. You see through. You have not
made up your minds. You have not seen
through. . . . Now you are seeing through. Your
thoughts were one thought too slow. Now you have
thoughts in the back of your mind.

– Peter Handke, *Offending the Audience*

for there is nothing
either good or bad, but thinking makes it so

– *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2

I worry of late that self-reflection within the theatre, especially reflection *on* theatre *in* the theatre *as* theatre, has been too easily dismissed out of hand by some modes of performance theory as a tired “poststructural tic” or solipsistic loop – a post-Lacanian, post-Derridean paracritical “unreadability.” This follows from decades-long tensions between the more empirical and historical-materialist approaches among those doing performance theory, and those engaged with a seemingly more conceptual and somewhat abstruse set of questions. Being in the conceptual gap, I’ve sometimes felt the bite of commentary that wants to marginalize this kind of work as at best ungrounded in real-world historical or “political” questions, and, at worst, spurious and self-indulgent. The issue for me, beyond the ego-pinch, is that the charge of ahistoricity or political naiveté in this context seems oftentimes itself ahistorical and politically disengaged. Brecht saw the issue quite clearly. The field of theatrical inquiry “has to be defined in *historically relative terms*,” he wrote:

we must drop our habit of taking different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our

own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple. Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes *so that our own period can be seen as impermanent too* [my emphasis]¹

Brecht seems on the surface to be saying something that runs quite opposite to what I will be proposing in this article: while I am suggesting that we can trace a continuity of estrangements, metacommentaries, and alienation effects running through theatre's history, Brecht suggests that we must be careful not to homogenize past theatrical history into forms we can more easily digest today, cleansing them of their historical particularities. At one level he seems to be resisting the impulse to project current historical modes (in this case, alienation effects) onto the past. But at a deeper level we can also read Brecht anticipating my previous point: that in too easily conceptualizing and hypostasizing "the historical," we miss its very contours—that the historical is, in essence, that aspect of the world that *is* change, changing, already-other. In determining that the maddening indeterminacies of certain kinds of poststructural theory are somehow ahistorical, we lose sight of the fact that they are, in their very maddening shapes and shadows, the very figuration of this historical moment. Our very episteme, it might be argued, is the episteme of indeterminacy itself.

In addition, in dismissing a large portion of that aspect of theatre history that has been quite obviously invested in ontological questions of perception, identity, and the nature of the theatrical and non-theatrical Real as being somehow precious or irrelevant, we are in danger of falling prey to a brand of historical revisionism which wants to erase the centuries long inquiry into the nature of mind that theatre has postulated. It is as if the theatre in the West were not a history that has continuously played hide-and-seek with self-critique and metacommentary. We too easily forget that, in the Euro-American canon, at least, since Euripides and Roman Comedy, theatre has been engaged in an internal and external dialogue with its own motivations, techniques, and epistemological and ontological impasses. This is not simply the perspective of Western culture's preoccupation with an overly-cerebral and disengaged Cartesianism, either.

¹ Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 190.

Recently this genre of metacommentary has moved seamlessly into questions about the nature of consciousness, the perceptual space of performance in “this distracted globe,” and the likeness of theatre, and the seeming life it refracts, to dream, even hallucination, thus raising questions about the empirical or at least homological relationship between the conceptual worlds created by theatre and the conceptual worlds created by mind/consciousness. What I would like to concern myself with here—without claiming to present any sort of History itself, and conscious of Brecht’s admonitions about “normalizing” what is historically unique—is a brief shadow of theatre’s movement through various modes and intensities of self-reflection and self-distancing within and by consciousness *in* the theatre, using performance-consciousness (the consciousness of performance) as the space that zeroes in more precisely on the experience of mind and its relationship to an alienated identity—being aware through all of its twists and turns of the ways in which mind and the experience of it, and the identity produced by it, operate squarely within the ontology and epistemology of theatre; that theatre is mind and mind theatre, with all of the attendant questions and conflicts of interpretation that that statement entails. If I seem here to be objectifying or even commodifying the idea of “mind,”² I will ask the reader’s forbearance as the issue unfolds. Finally, it is the issue of disengagement, distancing, and impermanence within performance and its theories that is the central concern of this inquiry.

At least as far back as Aeschylus’ deployment of the second actor, activating even further the fragmentation of mind/voice begun when Thespis presumably walked away from the unitary chorus, theatre within our own tradition has contained within it both an implicit and explicit critique of consciousness. This critique, moreover, is born of that very split or fragmentation, allowing one part of mind to reflect on another. Even if the stories of Thespis as first actor are merely mythic, the myth nonetheless points to a nascent critique of mind in which, through distancing and metacommentary, one is presumably able to see more clearly the situation at hand. While examples within the Classical Greek canon of such metacommentary are numerous, my current favorite is in Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, in which Pentheus, in a scene that prefigures the numerous dressing-room scenes in Restoration Comedy, clothes himself as a woman for his

² I will also be using the terms mind, consciousness, thought more or less interchangeably, referring to the activity of thinking.

surreptitious surveillance of the secret activities of the Bacchae.³ We have in this sequence the sense that we are eavesdropping (as Pentheus himself is preparing to do among the Bacchae) on actors preparing for a performance, and also, in a neat palimpsest, on audience members preparing to attend the day's festivities surrounding the Dionysian theatrical celebrations. In either case, the scene captures the overlay between the performance on stage, and its social contexts, suggesting that what occurs in the dressing rooms of the Dionysian theatres, and the bedrooms of the Athenian guests are not only the source of Pentheus' primping behaviors, but that the primping itself, played out in the privacy of the dressing-room and boudoir, has transformed those private spaces into a kind of stage. In either case the scene suggests a very early moment in which the cross-reflections of consciousness, and consciousness investigating consciousness, were already at play—"Do I look like anyone? Like Ino or my mother Agave?" asks Pentheus. "So much like I almost might be seeing one of them," replies Dionysius, in a pithy metacritique of Pentheus' stagecraft. This seems a moment of doubled self-recognition, an echo of the scene's opening when Pentheus, cross-dressed as an Athenian woman, sees the world suddenly split in two: "I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens," he cries, "And now two Thebes, two cities, and each with seven gates." (974-5) By crossing the boundaries between gender and class, the diacritical function of mind is revealed—the mind that, in order to perceive must shift, must split the world, the object, from the self, the subject, that sees. This is, in my estimation, one of the most powerful commentaries on the alienating functions of mind in the history of the drama.

Early comedy displays similar impulse, albeit in an obviously more sanguine mode. In Plautus' later, Roman play *Pseudolus*, whose very title (and title character's name) speaks the doubled nature of theatrical consciousness, we find a canny and incisive mind operating with lacerating acumen throughout the play. In but a single example, Pseudolus' theatrical aside at the end of

³ DIONYSUS: But look:
 One of your curls has come loose from under the snood
 Where I tucked it.
 PENTHEUS: It must have worked loose
 When I was dancing for joy and shaking my head.
 DIONYSUS: Then let me be your maid and tuck it back.
 Hold still.
 PENTHEUS: Arrange it. I am in your hands
 completely.

Act I, addresses the audience directly, bringing them immediately into the action on stage in such a way that also brings them to an awareness of their own thinking processes, “I suspect you suspect that I’ve made all these big promises just to keep you entertained until I get through this play, and that I’m not going to do the things I said I’d do,” he confides to the audience, but “So far as I can see I can’t see how I’m going to do it—but, if there’s one thing I *can* see, it’s that I *will* do it. After all, when a character comes on stage, he ought to bring something fresh and new in a fresh and new way.” Pseudolus, play and character, bring us into the machinations and plotting of the play itself by way of introducing us to the ways in which thought reciprocates itself, “I suspect you suspect . . .”

I use these two examples to suggest that these impulses to metacommentary occur very early in the Euro-American tradition. They continue through the Medieval theatres and onto the Early Modern stage, and beyond. The Medieval *Pinner’s Play (The Crucifixion)*, for example, with its self-conscious appeals to the audience for help in the grisly task at hand presumably brings them into consideration of their own culpability in attending a play about the crucifixion of Jesus. Or we might consider the plays of Hrotsvit, in which the sacred performance makes continual reference to the perceptual conundrums the plays present: the self-conscious theatricality of her self-presentation as a prostitute, for example, appealing to Paphnutius’ piety and power much as the prostitute Rosine does with the Bishop in the confessor scenes in Genet’s *Le Balcon*. Later, on the English Renaissance stage the instances of metacommentary are almost too numerous to mention, and the convention becomes near self-parody in the plays of Restoration Comedy. I realize, of course, that I am very quickly and all too briefly lumping together a vast number of plays from a large expanse of time within a single tradition, plays whose metacommentary varies a great deal from period to period and play to play. The point I am making, however, is that this inclination is set early on, and continues through the traditions of European theatre up to the current period. What strikes us as peculiarly modern is actually quite conventional by the time Modernism and the postmodern arrive, and has become almost a genre in itself; what we think of as the “Hamletic” mode—the brooding, self-obsessed, self-ruminating protagonist—is today simply a cliché.

What strikes many as self-absorption and an unproductive fascination with self-referentiality, then, represents theatre's own history, or at least an important part of it, that adumbrates a deeper set of concerns—most obviously, perhaps, the theatricality of everyday life, and life's reflection in and by the stage, but more significantly, the appearance of theatre/performance as the shadow or structural echo of the mind that produces it. Theatre may give us important clues, in other words, as to how the mind is experienced, how it seemingly produces the world, how it apparently produces and reproduces itself, and how, in its reflective and reproductive capacities, it manages to generate the most toxic of human emotions and affects—hatred, jealousy, terror, and addiction. Thus the most salient and crucial *political* question in the theatre, I would submit, concerns the nature of consciousness as it is experienced and projected on and onto stage, and the most important *historical* question is why we keep eluding the demands of *that* political question, most recently with forays into a kind of performance-theory-pseudo-scientific-romance with cognitive science, affect theory, and various epigones of historical materialism. The issue, in literal fact, is not an empirical one. When I suggest theatre as a means to understanding how the mind manifests, I am not proposing research into the functions of cognitive apparatus. The operational term here is how we *experience* the mind's workings, as when, for example, in Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience*, his long excursus on consciousness as theatre, the actors attempt to bring acute attention not simply to *what* one is thinking, but to the very experience of thought itself: "You are not thinking. You don't think of anything. You are thinking along. You are not thinking along. You feel uninhibited. Your thoughts are free," his actors tell the audience.

And yet the analysis of the experience of the mind's working are, of course, also a product of mind—in this case the mind of the actors who are infecting the consciousness of the audience. "We insinuate ourselves into your thought," they say, "You are thinking along, You are hearing. Your thoughts are following in the track of our thoughts. You are not free. You feel inhibited" (7). This moment to moment experience of the transforming, transformative mind is ultimately all we have to go on, not what objective science tells us about it, whether false or true. We try to remedy mind's travails not by some magical absorption of what we know to be the facts about brain function—that, for example, emotions generated by the amygdala are not particularly amenable to correction in the neocortex. We may want to think (again mind/emotion) that we can reason our way back through unproductive brain states to some semblance of rationality, but

emotion, desire, rage, and fear cannot be thought away—this single observation, in fact, might encapsulate the greatest portion of theatre’s wisdom. While understanding brain function may or may not help here, recognizing the mind-dynamic at play, recognizing the innate theatricality of mind, might, and this is what theatre has, in its history, very often tried to do by bringing to the surface the very self-referentiality that we sometimes erroneously ascribe to “the poststructural.”

In some final analysis, the Hamletic rub in Handke’s play lies in understanding that the mind experiences the world and its own workings as theatre, but not simply in the sense of interior play-acting, or role playing, nor in some sort of illusory virtuality, but as a theatre that comes alive in the very split between understanding the source of the pain in consciousness, and knowing we can do nothing about it. This, I would argue, is one way to understand tragedy, as contradictory brain states that remain unresolved: the world as both illusory and Real, coherent and infinitely fragmented, immediate but existing only in and as memory, seemingly solid, but absolutely ephemeral, determined and indeterminate, historically bound and yet the source of history’s own self-delusions and prevarications. The very experience of mind, in other words, is the experience of theatre and vice versa—they are inseparable. Experiencing the mind is to experience both the harmony and the complete incommensurability of things, the conflict and contradiction that appear together at the same time as thought/emotion responds to the world (dis)appearing to us. In the conceptual schema of Buddhist philosophy, this oscillation, that the real is both within and without, that the mind creates world at the same moment that world creates mind, is called “mutually dependent co-arising”—thought appears to construct its environment in the same instant that the environment instigates thought (“We insinuate ourselves into your thought”). Your thought creates us. We recreate you creating us. A synoptic world created in a synaptic instant of mind.

The metacommentary of theatre is, as I have suggested, historical. Its modes and structures have changed through time from early self-referentiality up to the more careful considerations of Brechtian theatre in which metacommentary gives way to critique proper. In later playwrights like Handke, attention is directed to the very thoughts themselves as they arise. Thoughts become particular images under consideration, apart from their broader conceptual meanings. This is not simply done for amusement, however, or to point out yet again with hoary wit that all life is a

stage, but, rather, to generate the recognition that, as Brecht says, “such images demand a way of acting which will leave the spectator’s intellect free and highly mobile.”⁴ Combining Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* and Handkean *Sprechtstücke*, we arrive at something else: the recognition of a distancing faculty of mind we call critique, but a critique that can itself be distanced and examined, very like watching the thinking of characters as it is happening on stage, and then subjecting that thinking to another level of critique. As we perhaps write our own critique and subject that to the theoretical audience, we begin to get a sense of the infinite regressions, the *mise en abyme*, of the critical faculties of mind. But this insight does not yet go far enough. It does not bring us to any understanding of the mind’s function in creating misery except in the crudest sense. In this regard, we might consider looking at the mind as it apprehends mind—not simply reflecting on thought’s content, but experiencing what it is like to think. *Cogito ergo sum*, *Cogito ergo ago*. Caught in the act.

Lived Liveness⁵

I think we have never performed live. I think we have never even been alive. I think we have always only—glossing Philip Auslander—been mediated. I think, moreover, that this mediation has nothing to do with cultural modes or manifestations—film, TV, theater—but exists first in *The Very Thinking About It*. Thinking casts within itself its own images and performance of *The World*, but this is a world that is not, and can never be, actual in the way we think it is. Media and theatre are secondary formations of this initial *mise en scène*. This sounds on the surface like a slightly dusted-off form of Idealism, but what I am suggesting is quite different from the Idealism that has to come to us through Plato via Kant and Hegel. Those more conventional modes of idealism tend to reject the idea that materiality exists at all, and suggest that all that exists is mind.

What I am suggesting is that there is indeed a real world, and we are living and experiencing it, but that the only access we have to it, the only way it exists for us, is in thought. As Elizabeth

⁴ Brecht, 191.

⁵ Many apologies to Philip Auslander throughout this section. What follows is not a critique of his fine work *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, but an idiosyncratic response to it. I am framing his argument, then, to suit my own purposes, and do not do justice to the work itself.

Grosz⁶ has pointed out in the replays of Deleuzian theory, this experiencing of the world is wholly determined by the evolutionary apparatus we have developed; the world is no way at all, and the way we perceive it is an absolute result of the tools evolution has given us to perceive it—the eyes, ears, olfactory and nervous systems we use in perception have been selected to perceive the world we have evolved within. Similarly, the cerebral process we call mind or thought is tuned to perceive the world in a particular way, but not in the way it actually is. There is no such thing as the way the world actually exists. Mind has evolved not to understand some “real world” but rather to categorize, delineate, and seek patterns within its environment—in other words, to read signs. Part of this sign reading skill rests in being able to isolate those signs from background “noise,” or in the case of mind, to recognize thoughts as distinct from the “noise” of other mental processes. I would suggest that this mind has evolved structurally as a theatre (*theatrum philosophicum*) that both emerges from mind and represents it in time and space.⁷ This evolution also entails the necessity to represent or mediate.

If we take Auslander’s project seriously, perhaps more seriously than he himself does, we might begin to understand that his distinction between liveness and mediation does not exist today because it never has. Minds have evolved to *immediately* transpose experience into what we call thought. This happens nearly instantaneously as the result of thought-processes that are themselves the product of evolution. These processes also mark the emergence of alienated experience, the pain and loneliness that we characterize in, and as, theater, a compendium of suffering that composes such a large part of our tradition from Aeschylus to Sarah Kane. It is also the source of broader political oppression, which sees in the alienation of thought an Other or others which need eradication, or at least erasure.

In thinking through Auslander’s thesis, we begin to understand what he means when he suggests that there was never an “authentic” or “live” experience somewhere that then became tainted by mediation, but, rather, that consciousness, in its very inception, creates experience *as* mediation,

⁶ See her *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)

⁷ I understand that this idea of “theatre” as a cross-cultural, trans-historical phenomena is going to be challenged. I obviously can’t engage with this issue here. Suffice it to say I am aware of the possible objections, and would ask they be put in temporary abeyance.

the hard-wired, “as-if” mode of mind that Jean Laplanche tells us may be in the neuromantic, neuro-machinery itself. There is also no “I” that accomplishes this “as-if-ness,” no self behind this mediation. “I” am simply the projection of this mediation, an ego that, although real and existing albeit in a purely provisional sense, has at the same time no material substance whatsoever. That much has already been suggested by Shakespeare, by Dennett, by Blau, even by the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna. In this sense, at least, Auslander comes into the equation already too late. Mediation is not something that occurs later, but is the immediate state of all thought (contradiction noted), with no originating principle ahead of it except another thought, another mediation. No agency. No beginning. No end. The arguments are immaterial.

If we could experience awareness in the moments before this kind of mediation or representation occurs, perhaps between the dissolution of one thought and the arising of another (and such an imagining is not without its critics and doubters—Kant among them), we might begin to imagine a very different sort of world, one which is not necessarily “always already” determined by culture and media, or at least not to the extent that it is now. In this proto-mediated, pre-representational, perceptual sphere, the world is boundless, boundary-less, and permeable, but also without extension—what Deleuze calls “virtual.” It is purely and already deterritorialized (without ever having been territorialized in the first place), the province of the nomad and the beggar, the place of Sorcerer and Pharmakos. It seemingly ceases to exist, or, rather, shifts from being to becoming. Within this sphere, what constitutes a person, what speaks, who answers, who perceives and who is perceived begins to dissolve into the textures of indeterminacy, simply because we apprehend mind before it commits to its representations and so its judgments. Even, as is necessary, conceptual, mediated, judgmental mind reappears, it does so now against the ground of this moment of pure awareness. Lucid awareness sustains and gives context to mediated experience, but not as something added to it, not as yet an additional experience. Here of course the language is inexact and necessarily false, inasmuch as pre- or nonrepresentational, nonconceptual awareness is precisely that (greater) portion of consciousness which cannot be articulated. I think here of Eliot’s phrase “raids on the inarticulate,” and feel some satisfaction, but am also chastened by Herbert Blau’s comments on these same Brechtian distances: “What is sought for, rather, in alienated acting is a productive emptiness,” he says. This emptiness “puts into question the (falsifying?) distance between representation and nonrepresentation. Not a void,

then, but a disequilibrium which is the space of contradictions.”⁸ In the deconstructive and contingency-theoried assaults on the solidity of phallographic truth and meaning—of categories, genders, and races—we come, inadvertently and not a little ironically, to believe in the solidity of our own words, our own thoughts, the very selves that give rise to such convoluted concepts.

At one level, then, it is really quite simple: there is no liveness because there is no hypostasized thinker, nothing “live” behind the thought. Any thought is “always already” mediated—even the thought of liveness. And that thought itself is simply a momentary burst of neurobiological energy. It has, as Shakespeare suspected, no substance whatsoever in itself, yet it is everything. It is pure ephemerality, pure quicksilver change. Yet finally it is the only world we know, unremittingly real, solid, but continuously changing, endlessly becoming, with no end in sight.

In the theatre, Blau reminds us, we come to realize that all of this solipsistic “thinking about thought” is no mere sophistic or rhapsodic exercise or display of theoretical competence. It is not Ideal. Thought is murderous. It is violent and miserable. It is in thought that we first hate, attack, kill, and destroy the Other before we actually set out to do these things in truth, in reality. We live first in that thought that, as Blau might say “kills me that I am not thought.”

Yet thought itself is not really the problem. It is the addiction to our thoughts that will kill us, an addiction which engenders the certainty through which we translate thought into action, cross the frontier between neurochemical process into solid, impacted fact in the instantaneous erasure of the difference between thought and performance, theatre and life. It is, then, precisely in our belief in the *solidity* and *materiality* of thought that misery and violence manifest in the world. We protect our mental turf. Circle our conceptual wagons. Harm and even kill real people to do so. We are indeed not free, and the theatre, glossing both Handke and Artaud, is here, finally, to teach us that.

So as Handke attempts to “out-Brecht Brecht” by trying to suggest a mode of alienation through which thoughts infect us from the outside in as well the inside out, moving continuously through

⁸ Herbert Blau, “The Thin, Thin Crust and the Colophon of Doubt: The Audience in Brecht,” *New Literary History* (Vol. 21, No. 1, Autumn, 1989, 175-197) 175.

the socius, suggesting something close to a social contagion, an electric meme, or viral replication, he comes to suggest at least a rudimentary understanding of karma—the energetic nature of an action that causes its results to move beyond the initial moment of performance. Telling the lie, perhaps, or instigating the crime, or doing the play. In karma, it is not so much that “what goes around comes around,” as it is “what I set in motion eventually returns to me,” if not literally, than in the very habits of thought I create in setting those actions (thoughts) into motion (in killing I become in my mind a killer). I would like to shift the discussion here to the final movement of this essay: the Vajrayana Buddhist⁹ practice of Dzogchen or Mahamudra,¹⁰ and especially those preliminary practices of Vipashana, or mind awareness, integral to it.

In the Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhist phenomenological context, which is similar in some respects to the kind of pseudo-phenomenology I have already laid out, entities in the world exist to us only through our perception of them. It is not that the world does not exist in its own right, but that our only access to it is through mind (and here mind refers to the entire panoply of perceptual apparatus—sensation, thought, emotion, memory), which, as I have noted, is molded by both evolutionary and cultural forces that drastically limit mind’s ability to perceive at all except within these very strictures. And what the strictures of mind produce, according to

⁹ I am afraid I am amalgamating many sources here. I will not quote from them because they are generally written within their own traditional styles and genres, and it would violate the spirit of these teachings, which prefer to be transmitted personally from teacher to student. What follows is my reading and interpretation of them—an interpretation for which I am entirely responsible. Whatever mistakes and misperceptions that appear are my own. The reader should nonetheless consult the following: *Mind at Ease: Self-Liberation Through Mahamudra Meditation*, by Traleg Kyabgon (Boston: Shambala Press, 2004), *Crystal Clear: Practical Advice for Mahamudra Meditators*, by Khenchen Thrangu, translated by Erik Pema Kunsang (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 2003), and the classic text *Mahamudra the Moonlight: Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, by Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, translated by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1986, 2006).

¹⁰ At this point I need to frame this discussion of the “Orientalized Other” of Tibetan Buddhist thought. While it may be true that any version of Tibetan Buddhism to which the West has access has already been tainted by the epistemologies and hidden assumptive logic of Western thought, (see Eve Sedgwick-Kosovsky) I contend that this is true of virtually any system of thought that is not native to a particular locale and time. The same, in fact, can be said of thought from other centuries, other social strata or “subject positions,” other gender experiences, or even, to push the argument, from different states of mind or emotional experiences. The idea, moreover, that, say, Buddhist philosophy is more foreign, or more inaccessible than other kinds of alienated experience (based on gender, historical period, etc.) because of its Asian-ness is itself Orientalist, and reinforces the very idea that Asian approaches to certain ideas are more or less hopelessly out of reach for Westerners because they are just too exotic for us to get. This whole assumption smacks of both paranoia and a hopelessly parochial, even ghettoized mindset. Spending time with an Asian teacher from within the Vajrayana tradition might very easily lead one to understand that tradition more fully than, say, spending time with a professor of philosophy explaining Cartesianism as it was understood in the 18th century, or Romantic thought in the early 19th.

Buddhism, is suffering. All kinds of suffering: personal, political, societal, big and small, agonies and dissatisfactions, terrors and anxieties, griefs and fleeting sadness. The origin of this suffering rests in the fact that mind has developed a seemingly necessary means of operating in the world that is based on “getting what it (we) wants.” And mind will do what it needs to get what it wants. At the instant of perception, then, mind is drawn to immediate categorizations of the percept according to its perceived usefulness to us—is this good, bad, or do I simply ignore it? There is thus an incipient attachment to every perceived object—whether positive or negative—that determines the world along the lines not of what the world actually is or might be, but, rather, along the lines of what’s in it (the world) for me. This much I’ve already suggested. Where Buddhist thinkers extend the issue, however, is in its further assessment of those strictures, and most importantly the way to release them.

The addicted and addicting self—the self which is the subject of Western drama, presented in all of its fickle pretensions, hidden lusts, and secret agendas, the self that is the source not only of its own misery, but that extends its agency outward into political oppression, greed, cruelty and ignorance—is, in our best dramatic estimation likely incurable. In lieu of cure, the drama seeks to understand this self through observation of other, similar, fictional selves, and, like the psychoanalyst, seeks a “therapy of desire” wherein one might come to understand and accept the inevitability of one’s own suffering through empathy and understanding. To this end, drama has used, as I’ve suggested, various modes of metacommentary to bring our attention to the mental process and perceptual conundrums that generate (at least in part) this tragic—or Epic—condition of pain and suffering.

Our history of this dramatic metacommentary, this distancing and *Verfremdungseffekt*, and the Buddhist path of unattachment are both resonant and radically different. Like the playwright, the Buddhist practitioner seeks first to understand her own mind, and in understanding this, to understand the desires and fears that animate others. In understanding this addicted and addicting self, she begins to understand what motivates others to act the way they do, and to have compassion for these actions and delusions. The main performance mode in which this occurs in Buddhist practice, however, is not drama, but meditation, which is less “sitting still and doing

nothing” than it is giving unencumbered performative space to mind so that it may enact and release the myriad reactive energies it has stored and continues to play out.

Now, as a cultural phenomenon, “meditation” continues to grow in popularity. More and more people are finding in meditative practices techniques to help them live less stressful, more focused lives. As a result, we have seen the growth of a minor “meditation industry” over the past two decades that has had a significant impact on book sales, seminars, and other venues in which, sometimes for a rather hefty price, meditation practice is taught. At the risk of sounding somewhat elitist, and although it is really impossible to do, I would at least provisionally like to separate this more popular approach to meditative practice—practice whose main purpose is to help integrate the personality, calm the mind, and de-stress the body—from those practices that are focused more on moving the practitioner beyond these salutary, though not especially Buddhist, techniques into ones that aim at the deeper roots of identity formation, ego-sickness, and suffering. To that end I am speaking specifically in this article of Vajrayana meditation, and even more specifically Mahamudra, or Dzogchen approaches. Mahamudra and Dzogchen are meditation practices that lead one to an experience and understanding, in each case, of the intrinsic clarity and nonconceptuality (emptiness) of mind, no matter what state that mind may be in. The two approaches differ somewhat, but the final goal and result are, according to the meditation masters, identical. The means of approaching this recognition of mind as both nonconceptual and lucid usually begins with two preliminary techniques, shamatha (“calm abiding”) meditation and Vipashana (“insight”) meditation. In shamatha, one begins by simply focusing the mind on a single object (often the breath) and gently and repeatedly bringing the mind back to that object. In doing this over time the mind calms somewhat, and begins to become aware of its own seemingly dys/functioning states—chaotic thoughts, fragmentary perceptions, disturbing emotions and the ceaseless cacophony of colliding images of which we are normally unaware. The first reaction to this state is often to try and control it, but control is not so easy, so in the Mahamudra form of shamatha meditation the approach is not to impose control, but to simply pay attention to what mind produces, how it flows, and how thoughts, perceptions and emotions arise. Beginning with shamatha practice, one notices that the mind eventually begins to feel more and more comfortable simply “sitting with itself” and letting

thought play out its stories, energies, and repressed desires.¹¹ At this point certain other types of inquiries may be brought to bear—these series of inquiries form the Vipashana aspect of meditation practice within the Vajrayana tradition.

In moving through the Vipashana process, one gradually becomes more familiar with the ways in which mind/perception moves. This is not simply an analytic process—when trying to describe the practice to others, they will sometimes say that they already know their minds, that they are well aware of their thoughts. This usually means that they are able to think about their thinking, perhaps even moving to the metacommentary or even the *Verfremdungseffekt* mode of critiquing their thoughts, making yet another set of “I like/don’t like” decisions based upon that critique. This is not meditative practice at all, and simply substitutes one set of conceptual thoughts for another. Understanding at a critical level the difference between the experience of thought-perception, and conceptualizing thought-experience allows us to discern the split between Vipashana and either metatheatrical commentary or Brechtian critique, but even here we are still simply thinking—for good or bad—and not paying attention to what it is *like* to think, to what *happens* when we think.

Handke, as we have seen, approaches the issue a bit more closely, but seems to get stuck at the very lip of understanding what the pathology of mind is—its tendency to infinite regress into the unending cross-reflections of perceptual thought, thinking about thinking that thinks about thinking, and so on. This is simply more mental activity, however, and doesn’t bring us any closer to understanding why it is that mind causes the suffering that it does—that in simply observing thought through meditative practice, we de-solidify it, de-reify it, and begin to understand that mind is simply the fluid movement of cerebral energies. Thoughts have no substance, are not enduring, and are in no way “material” but are nonetheless experienced as if they were. I would argue that in a historical sense this recognition of mind’s ephemerality has always been a major goal of theatrical performance. Watching the flow of images and sounds that are both real and not, consequential and not, seemingly solid but not, reflects our experience of both theatre and life; both seem at once dream-like and real, hallucinatory and painfully solid.

¹¹ I should add, at this point, that the outcome of Mahamudra shamatha meditation is one that is very amenable to what we often unsuccessfully try to teach our students: quiet the mind and look. What do you hear? What do you see? Release preconceptions and simply be with the work, and be with the mind that is interacting with the work.

This is the seemingness of theatre that Blau is so concerned with, the unreal reality of it all that drives one to distraction, that causes such desolation and despair.

More to the point in this article, however, are the ways in which the Dzogchen relationship to mind is mirrored in Brechtian approaches to theatre: Brecht's insistence that we not "forget" that we are watching a play, that we resist the temptation to immerse ourselves in the ersatz reality of the stage and lose sight of what is being presented to us is deeply resonant with Dzogchen practice, which admonishes us similarly in respect to our thoughts. What we are seeing in mind or on stage is actually occurring, and so is "real" in this sense, but is not real in the ways in which we have been conditioned to believe. We need to see the constructed, ephemeral, and unreal quality of mind and theatre in order to understand, in Brecht's case, our historical moment, or in the case of Dzogchen, the nature of thought itself—that it is lucid but immaterial. Ultimately, of course, from the Dzogchen perspective one is admonished to question everything—even history—to a degree unknown within Western systems of thought. The final goal is, as David Loy shows in his essay on Derrida and Mādhyamika philosophy,¹² the deconstructing of the very idea of the real in order to allow for the letting go of it.

In fact, what this type of meditative practice is aiming at is simply the letting go of unnecessary constraints of mind that limit our perceptual experiences: the ability to release into the present moment of experience, however conflicted and chaotic it may, be allows for a space of consciousness in which pain, social injustice, violence, or addictions to materiality may be allowed to appear and be dealt with, or, if deemed appropriate, allowed to dissipate. The movement toward Brechtian distancing, however, is inimical to what this other type of presence implies: in the former we constitute a radical alienation and a reinscription of separateness, in the other, we have—through the recognition of thought and critique as manifestation of mind—a dissolving of alienating distances and a realization of the potential unity of experience and critique: affect and thought, body and mind, recognized as co-extensive with one another yet not reified, not hypostasized. In Dzogchen critique does not disappear, but in fact becomes intensified because it (Dzogchen) does not fall into the trap of assuming that the contents of

¹² David Loy, *The Deconstruction of Buddhism*, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: SUNY Press, 1992) 227-54.

mind—conditioned as they are by endless mediations—are reliable versions of what exists in the world. By observing mind we are brought back to what theatre does best—sowing uncertainty about the solidity of the world instead of moving, as does Brecht, into an assumptive logic that presumes the reality of “material practices” and the critical possibilities they putatively entail: the questionable assumptions of neo-materialism that it is possible, for example, to make accurate assessments about the nature of the world and “fix it” by using instrumentalities born of a failing Enlightenment or an enduring Capitalism whose job it is to distract us from the basic fact of human suffering through the romance of social control. Yet it should be clear by now that I am not suggesting we abandon social action, nor that we toss critical theory and political engagement on the historical midden-heap. I am suggesting that the ways in which we make decisions about social action through theatrical inquiry need to be illuminated by an understanding of what actually motivates them—to what degree, for example, is social change motivated by rage instead of compassion, or by frustration instead of creative insight. These sorts of inquiries can sometimes be diminished within the constructs of Brechtian styles of rationality.

I have suggested in this essay an affinity, and even a kind of historical progression of different stages or intensities of distancing techniques within the drama, and the meditative practices of Vajrayana Buddhism. But what purpose might such a resonance serve? Should we try to inculcate meditation practice in theatre artists in order to produce a theatre that is more directly attuned to human suffering? This is not such a bad idea, it seems to me, but not really the point of this treatise. Rather, it is to show that metatheatre, *Verfremdungseffekt*, and even more recently, the thought-foregrounding of certain modes of theatrical *Sprechstücke* all demonstrate a recognition within our own performative tradition of the crucial import of thought-experience in the aesthetics of performance. This recognition runs parallel to the understanding within the emergent “sciences of mind,” including Buddhism, that to understand the experience of mind is to understand a great deal about the very history of suffering as it is presented within our theatrical and literary traditions.

Finally, though, even these miss the larger point. More basic questions loom in the background. Why do we engage in theatre practice at all? What is its purpose? Is our work oriented to trying to understand and cure the causes of human misery and injustice, is it to offer momentary

distraction from the enormities of contemporary life, or to fulfill some vague though powerful creative drive? Is our theoretical work pushing toward an understanding of human failure and some sense of compassionate insight that might flow from it? The problem is that most of us would likely answer yes to one or more of these questions—suggesting that our propensities toward self-delusion are stronger than we might think. Getting to our own motivations in doing theatrical work, our *real* motivations, requires digging a bit deeper than what our thoughts seem to tell us is true about ourselves. It requires retuning our sensibilities to the actual emotions, thoughts, and perceptions that arise in mind, seeing them for what they are, and dealing with them, because those most disreputable thoughts are the very substance of theatre history. I return, once again the Herbert Blau:

From the vantage point of that truth, I know the evasion when I see it, the hedged bets, the alibis, the cheats, the things you can get away with, the unexamined propositions, and the sort of stumbling erratic thought which is for me the major scandal of our theatre, sloppiness of mind. I know the pretense of experiment when I see it and the pretense of inquiry, as well as the kind of performance which is a self-deception from beginning to end. Sometimes it is innocent and sometimes it is not. It is when I am not sure, however, that I am deceiving myself, and would like to think otherwise, or to forget it, that I am probably closest to some ideological repression that I want to track down and see for what it is. Anything else is, in performance, ideological neglect.¹³

Disarming the censors. Letting thought arise as it will. Seeing what is there directly, nakedly, and without remorse. This is, putatively, theatre's origin, the core of political action and its failures, the root of Buddhist practice, the source life itself.

¹³ Herbert Blau, *Theatre Journal*, "Ideology & Theatre" (Vol. 35, No. 4, Dec., 1983, 441-460) 460.

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