Article 1

Exploring distancing in the work of Dorothy Heathcote: Estrangement as poetic distortion

Stig A. Eriksson
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Abstract

This article introduces the reader to a range of terms that have historically been applied to the notion of distancing, which in the author’s view was a major component of Heathcote’s work. These terms have emerged from various artistic and theoretical positions, particularly in Romanticism and Modernism. They include estrangement, ostranenie, Verfremdung, Entfremdung, and apostasiopoiēsis. Across the literature they have at times become tangled and misunderstood, resulting in unfortunate and confusing applications. To support a clearer understanding of distancing within Heathcote’s work, a historical survey of these terms is first offered. The article then moves on to consider Heathcote’s own thoughts about distance creation and especially estrangement and distortion. It concludes by suggesting the term poetic distortion as an appropriate way of describing her approach.
Introduction

In my doctoral dissertation, *Distancing at Close Range* (Eriksson 2009), distancing is presented as a poetic device as much as a pedagogical strategy, a dramaturgical convention as much as an acting technique, an aesthetic attitude as much as an aesthetic tradition. The broader concept of distancing – not restricted by the mundane understanding of it as detachment – has helped me to describe and discuss resemblances in Heathcote’s work to great modernists like Shklovsky and Brecht, and to romanticists like Shelley and Novalis.

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<th>Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984)</th>
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<th>Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)</th>
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All the images are found as free downloads on the Internet.

All these writers have, with some individual differences in nuance, jargon and style, applied the notion of distancing in their literary “programme”. Distancing has been expressed in their work through the coining of terms like estrangement, ostranenie, Verfremdung or Entfremdung (Eriksson 2009: 24-25). In Heathcote’s work the term apostasiopiësis has been applied (Hesten 1994: 168). My intention is to contribute to an increased understanding of the concept estrangement, as a form of distancing, and to help untangle unfortunate interpretations and translations of the terminology. In illuminating and exploring some historical origins of the concept – and its terminological derivations – an attempt is made to relate it to Heathcote’s praxis. Based on these explorations, I present the view that the most appropriate conception of Heathcote’s approach to distancing is to describe it as estrangement generated through poetic distortion.
Uses of distancing and making strange

Distancing is a concept that contains shades of meaning that are more complex than its two most common reference points of protection and the Brechtian concept of Verfremdung-effect. I regard at least three significant uses of distancing as highly relevant for the theory and practice of drama education: Distancing as, (a) an aesthetic principle which is a factor for creating a fiction, (b) a protective distance to a sensitive topic to be dealt with in dramatic playing or in performance, and (c) a poetic device which can create both artistic and pedagogic possibilities for influence and learning (Eriksson 2011a: 65). My research indicates that distancing, through these three areas of application, constitutes a foundational category in process drama, and not the least that distancing provides the drama teacher with a dimension that combines art and pedagogy, and that connects theatre and drama pedagogy. This way distancing has an interdisciplinary connecting function.

In my studies of Heathcote I have found that distancing is a most central aspect in all her work (Eriksson 2009). In an article in RIDE (Eriksson 2011b) I discuss from a concrete example how Heathcote works with a broad and nuanced register of estrangement devices. From what I have seen and experienced of her craft, I think that similar patterns, strategies and devices of estrangement are identifiable in her work more broadly. I have come to understand making strange or defamiliarisation as foundational ideas in Heathcote’s whole educational philosophy, and thus as key dimensions in the didactics and poetics of process drama. Through defamiliarisation and estrangement, reflection is realized by looking at the ordinary with new eyes, by making the familiar look strange. It is analogous to Novalis’ poetic philosophy, when he talks about the need to romanticize the world through art in order to retrieve the original meaning of the world and to create new meaning:

The world must be romanticized. Insofar as I give a higher meaning to what is commonplace, a mysterious appearance to what is ordinary, the dignity of the unfamiliar to what is familiar, a semblance of infinity to what is finite, I romanticize it (Novalis 1846, part 3: 236) [my translation].

To me, Heathcote applies a similar way of thinking when underlining the need of letting reflection on the drama work become active within the experience. In a Brechtian style poem essay, written in 1978 and entitled “Of These Seeds Becoming”, she expresses some of her views on estrangement:

So as a teacher I endeavour
to make the most of those moments – very rarely awakened –
when experience is an ascendency, and language freed for power to express,
so that while forces of doubt lie sleeping,
reflection upon experience, based on intuition, can spring to action.
This allows us to experience awe – the magic in the mundane,
the elegant classic exposition of the ordinary,
the phoenix rising from the dust of the familiar –
and neglected -
and to know at that moment and in this time
that this is what we make of it and comprehend about it
(Heathcote 1978: 15).

Needless to say, resemblances like this include differences as well, which is of course the case with all parallels I draw between Heathcote and the other literary sources in the present context. But comparison as such is not the focus of this article. The focus is conceptions of distancing, not as “detachment” or “alienation”, but in its meaning of making strange in order to see anew – which I regard as inherently educational – and inherently in keeping with Heathcote’s theory and practice. My observation that distancing is a device that she uses consistently, both poetically and pedagogically – is an understanding she seems to approve of: “I can’t agree more that distancing matters – it is the factor which births the self-spectator and therefore the artist is then summoned!” (Letter to the author, 09.02. 2005).

As far back as 1977, Oliver Fiala identified Heathcote’s “artistic affinity” with Brecht (Fiala 1977), and later Alistair Muir discussed Brechtian elements in her work (Muir 1996). My count is that distancing – understood as an umbrella-term of concepts like ostranenie, Verfremdung and apostasiopiēsis - runs like a thread through her work.

In the section below, these various terms will be discussed, beginning with the Greek term apostasiopiēsis which first emerged in the drama education literature when Hesten uses it in her doctoral thesis (1994: 175) as part of her discussion of Heathcote’s work and its connections to Brecht.

Untangling the Concepts

Whilst apostasiopiēsis (gr. αποστασιοποιησις), is a term that Heathcote may have liked, because it is the kind of word that is rich in meaning and has a ring of strangeness attached to it, it is not one that she ever, to my knowledge, used. With the suffix –poiēsis (Greek -ποιησις, pron. –piisis), it comes from the ancient Greek verb poiē (ποιεῖ): to make, to create. This suffix is very common in Ancient, Medieval and Modern Greek word composition for creating. The other word compound is a derivation from the feminine noun apóstasis (απόστασις), meaning distance. Since the word apostasiopiēsis is found in texts only from the 20th century, it is obvious that it is a neologism of the Greek language; the etymologists say that it translates the German term Verfremdung introduced by Brecht, i.e. is a translational loan. (I am indebted to my Greek colleague Jenny Karaviti for the etymological explanations).

However, Brecht’s term Verfremdung was not a word found in the German lexicon before his time. It was his own creation; in fact in Brecht’s first notes where he lays the foundation for his theory and practice of the epic theatre, in which distancing was going to be the central concept, he used the word Entfremdung. But in German this word translates as alienation, in the sense Marx used it to describe the workers’ relation to the means of production, i.e. with negative connotations. Alienation in
this sense means being separated from one’s own self, suffering a lack of self-fulfilment or self-worth, and experiencing an absence of meaning in existence. Inspired by romanticists like Novalis and Shelley, Brecht from the start specifically endowed his use of it with the notion of estrangement:

One was looking for a kind of presentation, by which the familiar could become conspicuous, the habitual amazing. Common events should appear strange, and much which seemed natural, should be recognized as artificial (Brecht [1936] 1963a: 196) [my translation].

Entfremdung is also used in a well-known essay: “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction”, from the same year 1936, in which Brecht underlines his commitment to use theatre for critical reflection:

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in the play. The production took the subject matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation [Entfremdungsprozess, my addition]: the alienation [Entfremdung – my addition] that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems ‘the most obvious thing in the world’ it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up (Brecht [1936] 2001a: 71) [John Willett’s translation].

There seems to be an agreement amongst Brechtian scholars that the change-over from Entfremdung to Verfremdung took place towards the end of 1936. The German theatre researcher Jan Knopf ascertains that Verfremdung was theoretically defined by the end of 1936. (Knopf 1984: 385, note 62). Willett points out that almost certainly “the first mention in his writings of the term ‘Verfremdungseffekt’” happens in Brecht’s essay: “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting”, first printed in English in Life and Letters, London, 1936. (Willett 2001: 99, note). Willett points to the likeness with Shklovsky’s term priem ostranenie and suggests that it was the influence from Russian formalism, and particularly Brecht’s visit in Moscow in 1935, which led to his adoption of Verfremdung in replacement of Entfremdung (ibid.). However before I continue to Shklovsky, I would like to offer just a brief comment in relation to Willett’s rather unfortunate choice of translation of Entfremdung/Verfremdung to alienation. I shall let him just speak for himself:

I myself would have preferred some less mystifying English term such as ‘detachment’. There is also the accepted concept of ‘aesthetic distance’ or ‘distancing’; indeed the French often translate Verfremdung by distanciation. The trouble however was that when I came into the Brecht business [...] ‘alienation’ was so widely in use as a rendering of Brecht’s term that I felt it would be too confusing (not to mention laborious) to attempt to change it. I just hope that the ambiguity doesn’t do any harm (Willett 1984: 221).
Unfortunately, in my opinion, it would seem that Willett’s concern was well founded, because alienation has too often been attributed with negative connotations and thus misunderstandings of what distancing entails.

Distancing can also be contextualised in the literary theory background of Russian Formalism and its relationship to the Russian theatre innovations of the late 1920s and early 1930s. My dissertation explores the likely influences these developments had on Brecht’s work, as he became familiar with Russian colleagues through guest appearances in Berlin before 1933 and his own visit to Moscow in 1935. This is another interesting path to walk for historical investigation of mutual influences (see Eriksson 2009: 89-93), but in the present context I shall only highlight the distancing concept ostranenie as the most relevant parallel to Brecht’s Verfremdung and Heathcote’s estrangement approaches.

The Russian formalists considered it a task of the literary avant-garde to contribute to defamiliarisation of habitual perception through art. The means to realize it was by applying artistic techniques to represent well-known phenomena in new and unaccustomed ways. This is necessary, Shklovsky asserts, because human perception is vulnerable to the lethargic effect of automatization and routine: “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (Shklovsky 1917: 19). “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (op.cit.: 20). Daily life’s ways of thinking, as well as daily life’s practical actions, impair perception in such a way that things are no longer seen, only recognized; events are registered but not experienced.

Shklovsky finds in poetic language the antidote against automatization of perception. By disengagement from the prosaic language of everyday life, artistic language creates new powers of perception, a de-automatization of the habitual, and a more sharpened look at the customary – which enables reliving the known. It becomes Shklovsky’s thesis that the task of art is to free perception from senseless reproduction of objects and events and thus to restore fresh perception:

[A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known (ibid.).

It is very similar to Shelley’s notion that a fresh view of the world can be attained by de-habitualization:

It [poetry] reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration (Shelley [1821] 2001: 42).
Again, the key concept to enhance perception poetically, in Shelly and in Shklovsky, is distancing - in the sense of making strange. There is evidence in Heathcote’s writing that she received inspiration from both these authors (Heathcote & Hovda 1980; Heathcote 1984c).

Just like Brecht, Shklovsky too coined his own word for this: *ostranenie*, which means making strange, from strannost’ (strange, strangeness), for the realization of his de-familiarization project. The word priem often appears in conjunction with it. Priem translates as device, so priem ostranenie is the device of making strange (O’Toole and Shukman 1977: 16). But the word priem also entails procedure, which gives it a quality of process rather than technique.

This is of interest in relation to how the making strange concept is being used in Heathcote’s process drama contexts. The formalists’ attention to language is also worth taking note of in relation to Heathcote’s conscious use of poetic language to estrange reflection and understanding. The same can be said for exploratory potential. There is a quality of wondering or curiosity included in the making strange concept. This is clearly explained by Brecht, when he clarifies Verfremdung: “Estranging an event or a character means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them” (Brecht [1939] 1963b: 101 [my translation]). And there is a nice element of humour when he gives examples of what estrangement amounts to, in a manner quite similar to Shklovsky’s above: “To see one’s mother as a man’s wife one needs an A-effect” and: “If one sees one’s teacher hounded by the bailiffs an A-effect occurs” (Brecht [1940] 2001b: 144) [Willett’s translation].

**Heathcote Referencing Brecht and Shklovsky**

A willingness to reference her sources is not one of Heathcote’s strongest points, but both Brecht and Shklovsky are acknowledged influences in her work, although sparsely so. There is a published reference to Brecht in Heathcote’s essay: “From the Particular to the Universal” (1980), in which she commits herself to the same vision that Brecht has in working for reflection and new understanding:

I am concerned, in my teaching, with the difference in reality between the real world where we seem to ‘really exist’ and the ‘as if’ world where we can exist at will. I do live but I may also say, ‘If it were like this, this is how I would live.’ It is the nature of my teaching to create reflective elements within the existence of reality. Brecht calls this ‘visiting another room’.

The main differences between actions in these two rooms are to do with:
1. The freedom to experiment without the burden of future repercussions.
2. The absence of the ‘chance element’ of real life (Heathcote 1980: 8).

Brecht’s “other room”, however, is hardly discussed. Brecht is also the reference in an article Heathcote co-authors with Fiala: "Preparing Teachers to Use Drama: The Caucasian Chalk Circle" (1980), and in unpublished work notes to the video *Teaching*
**Political Awareness through Drama** (1981). In an interview with David Davis in 1985, she acknowledges notions from Brecht but adds that she has “never read him” and has never seen a real Brechtian production (Davis 1985: 77).

Like Brecht, Shklovsky is given limited formal attention in Heathcote’s work, being referred to, to my knowledge, in only one essay: “Material for Significance” ([1980] 1984c). Here, however, she commits herself very clearly to Shklovsky’s philosophy:

> What I’m trying to do [...] is to shake the reader out of the conventional view of the curriculum, by using the principle of ‘ostranenie’ defined by Viktor Shklovsky as being ‘that of making strange’. We very readily cease to ‘see’ the world we live in and become anaesthetized to its distinctive features. The arts permit us ‘to reverse that process and to creatively deform the usual, the normal, and so to inculcate a new, childlike, non-jaded vision in us’ (Heathcote [1980] 1984c: 127).

In the poem essay introduced previously, Heathcote outlines her beliefs about teaching, and significantly, among them is one that reveals her views on estrangement. Here she suggests that her aim was:

> Removing the situation when I could from prejudicial view, so as to enable a new view without the burden of an old label which prevents re-view (Heathcote 1978: 21).

Through this statement she appears to be aligning her practices with the poetic philosophies of Novalis, Shelley, Brecht and Shklovsky by indicating the importance of estrangement achieved through defamiliarisation. In the following section, I shall elucidate this notion of defamiliarisation by examining the art work of Brueghel the Elder where he uses estrangement to re-view the myth of Icarus.

**Brueghel’s Example**

Both Brecht and Heathcote used Brueghel the Elder as inspiration in their work, including his painting *The Fall of Icarus*. In a letter she informed me that this painting was one of her materials for creating drama (Letter to the author 11.01.2011). Indeed, I used it myself for the book cover of my dissertation (Eriksson 2009), because in my view, it can be conceived of as a *Verfremdung*-effect – a distancing device – in its own right. This is because one needs to get at close range in order to find out about the main event in it: Icarus falling from the sky.
What I find strange making in this picture is that it takes a while before the connection to the Icarus myth is discovered (the legend about Icarus who made wings of wax, and then plunged into the sea when the wax melted because he came too close to the sun). In the painting, what we see first is a landscape with a farmer ploughing his field, a shepherd guiding his sheep, and a man fishing from the shore. All three seem totally unaffected by the splash caused by Icarus, far down in the right hand corner of the artwork. However, having eventually noticed it, our curiosity becomes alerted, and we start reflecting: Will a change take place now in the relationship between the characters, or will their world just continue without any interest whatsoever in the creative daring deed just performed close by?

The small detail of Icarus’ legs disappearing into the sea, found only by getting at close range to it, is a distancing effect achieved through humour and irony. It enhances our interest and engagement. Brecht himself uses this same art work as an example of distancing. In his essay “Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Brueghel” he comments:

Anyone making a profound study of Brueghel’s pictorial contrasts must realize that he deals in contradictions. In *The Fall of Icarus* the catastrophe breaks into the idyll in such a way that it is clearly set apart from it and valuable insights into the idyll can be gained. He doesn’t allow the catastrophe to alter the idyll; the latter remains unaltered and survives undestroyed, merely disturbed (Brecht 2001c: 157).
This disturbance can be viewed as a form of poetic distortion, for here Brueghel has given the myth new life by providing the viewer with new and multiple perspectives on the experience of Icarus.

**Poetic Distortion**

The idea of distortion as a distancing device is a recurrent theme in Heathcote’s writings: “[W]e can be spectators of ourselves in ways often denied in a life situation, because we can distort time to give opportunity for reflection to be encountered” (Heathcote & Hovda 1980: 5). This focus on the reflective potential inherent in the dramatic event is persistently present in Heathcote’s work, and her awareness of the poetic is a foundational quality in the process of realizing reflection. It is the device of distortion that is implied as the underlying prerequisite when she writes about the contribution of the arts in understanding the human situation:

“...the arts isolate a factor of human experience. They particularize something to bring it to your attention. / They use life and understanding of life, but they make you examine it through a particular moment of life. / You cannot have art that does not in some way distort. It distorts productively” (Heathcote 1984a:114).

This is reflective productivity that works through selection, which is what both effective teaching and effective theatre amounts to. Heathcote asserts: “I use distortion in order to examine, and I seek for form, so that in the examining I may create reflective force to consider what I am learning” (op.cit.: 117). The attention to form is often overlooked by critics of Heathcote’s work; yet I have found that careful selection of form – in language, role, and dramatic structure – is of great importance in her dramas. It is form essentially shaped by a poetics of distancing.

Distortion is a quality of distancing, or estrangement. Distortion of the real world into a poetic world so that it becomes possible to see the world in a different light, means estranging it, so that it makes us wonder about it and to think about it anew: “we distort into understanding” (Heathcote 1976:8). Poetic distortion effectively describes Heathcote’s various approaches to estrangement, including her use of drama conventions such as ‘slow down time’ (Heathcote 1984b:166-167). These conventions are the foundation of what later has become ‘the conventions approach to drama’ (Neelands and Goode 2000). Intentionally conventions are poetic means of expression, not instrumental exercises. They have something in common with Brecht’s idea of Gestus. Gestus is stylized and natural all at once, just as Heathcote’s conventions are stylized, life-like depictions, yet removed from actual life (Eriksson 2009: 209). Thus poetic distortion is at the core of Heathcote’s intention: “The arts are metaphorical and analogous, and we can be spectators of ourselves in ways often denied in a life, because we can distort time to give opportunity for reflection to be encountered” (Heathcote & Hovda 1980a:5). Heathcote’s way of effecting reflection and understanding is by selectivity and distortion: “We take the human condition, and we isolate a factor to bring it under our view, and therefore we must distort” (op.cit.: 8). This sounds strikingly similar to the kind of consciousness-raising that
both Shelley and Novalis, as well as Shklovsky and Brecht aim for when purporting to present the world from unusual angles through an act of defamiliarisation or estrangement.

Conclusion

In the article I have explored central terms from the field vocabulary in relation to conceptions of distancing. In doing so, I have attempted to identify estrangement as a foundational element of distancing and I have suggested that the term poetic distortion – in analogy to estrangement - is an appropriate one to use in relation to Heathcote’s work.

This notion of the poetic is significant when re-considering Heathcote and her contribution to the field, because her work has by some critics, for example David Hornbrook (1989: 16-28), been considered to be more about schooling than artistic practice. In presenting her approach to distancing as being that of poetic distortion for estrangement, this article suggests a repositioning of Heathcote’s work that expands our view of her contribution to education to include more attention to the aesthetic dimension of her praxis. I see her work as being significantly informed by the kinds of artistic thinking that the romanticists and modernists stood for, allowing for productive combinations of education and art. This is why I regard the term poetic distortion as an appropriate way of describing her approach.
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