

Approaches to Modern and Contemporary art
the transcendence of the arts in China and beyond

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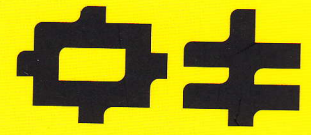
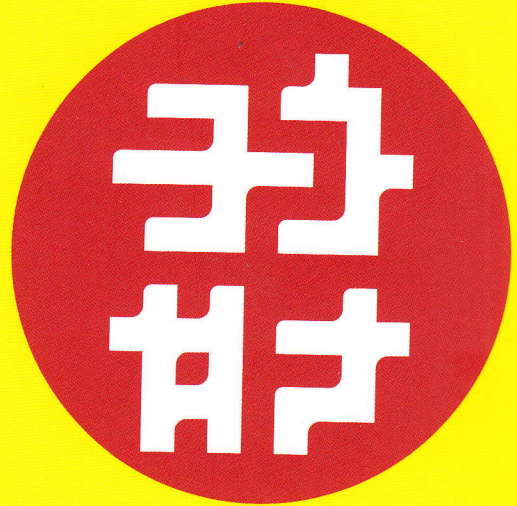


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Estrangement Techniques with Chinese characteristics. The Dialectics of Ver/Ent-Fremdung in the Drama of Gao Xingjian: Brechtian Reminiscences in Existentialist Disguise*

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Abstract

The study focuses on Chinese-born 2000 Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian's process of appropriation and subsequent reinterpretation of Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* as a drama technique. Particularly, it seeks to offer a panoramic view of the ways in which Gao developed an individualized version of the Brechtian prototype, which partakes of certain classical Chinese theatre practices whereas, at thematic level, it appears to be largely grounded in 20th century Existentialist philosophy, with particular reference to Sartre and Camus.

By illustrating his progressive distancing from *Verfremdung* in the strictly Brechtian sense, this paper argues that in Gao's drama *V* is employed as a preferred *mode of presentation* (rather than for its purported effect on the audience) aimed at showcasing the condition of existential *Entfremdung* (separation, laceration) experienced by the lonely characters portrayed in his plays. In this sense, the relationship between *Verfremdung* and *Entfremdung* as respectively a form and a motif of cardinal importance in Gao's dramaturgy, is informed by a complex dialectics aimed at raising awareness of the realities of modern man as a distressed human being, constantly fighting against a threatening Other than seems to be everywhere and can never be fully suppressed.

Introduction

In the text *Brecht and I* (1988), Chinese-born 2000 Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) concisely explained how the study of Brecht's theory of Epic Drama, which he discovered in the early 1960s, significantly informed and guided his artistic pursuits as a playwright.

Brecht was the first who made me understand that the art of drama might as well take a wide range of different shapes and that, in this respect, one should not be confined to the one-sided perspective of a single playwright. From this point of view, I can say that, later on, he would play a decisive role in the further course of my artistic pursuits.
(1988, p. 53)

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While a lot of information is available on Gao's rediscovery of ancient Chinese theatre practices as a means of renovating the contemporary Chinese theatrical scene, his individual appropriation of certain aspects of Brecht's epic dramaturgy has so far received less attention. Among the existing critical literature, an extensive analysis of Gao's exploration of Brecht's theory of performance is contained in Sy Ren Quah's *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theatre* (2004). However, a comprehensive investigation of Gao's treatment of *Verfremdung* including both its Brechtian roots and further re-elaboration into a crucial component of his theatrical system seems to be lacking. Building on a clear-cut distinction between concepts of *Verfremdung* (trans. as Estrangement) and *Entfremdung* (trans. as Alienation), this study aims to constitute an alternative to previous comparative researches on Brechtian theatre and Chinese drama, which neglect this important differentiation thus failing to properly illustrate how the two dramatic systems mutually influenced each other over the past century. Thus, this study focuses on the ways in which Gao employs a renewed version of Brecht's notion of *Verfremdung* as a means of showcasing the condition of existential *Entfremdung* (separation, laceration) experienced by the lonely characters portrayed in his plays, especially the post-exile series.¹ Particularly, I intend to illustrate Gao's progressive distancing from *Verfremdung* in the strictly Brechtian sense. Instead, Gao uses *Verfremdung* in a way analogous to certain dramatic devices found in classical Chinese theatre (i.e. decomposing the actor-character's identity, selfhood and using objective-correlatives), but at the same time his usage of estrangement techniques acquires markedly Existentialist implications. Unlike Brecht, whose theatre was concerned with the objectification of historical processes, Gao is interested in the objectification of the characters' psychological realities and, as such, he uses dramatic estrangement as a signifier of

1 Gao left China in 1987, relocating to Paris. His exile officially began in 1989 after the publication of *Escape*, a play inspired by the Tiananmen massacres, which caused all his works to be banned from performance in mainland China as well as his being declared *persona non grata* by the Chinese government. In his post-exile production are included the plays contained in *Gao Xingjian xiju luozhong* [Six volumes of plays by Gao Xingjian] (1995), as well as the plays *Zhoumo sichongzhou* (1996, *Weekend Quartet*), *Buyuexue* (2000, *Snow in August*) and *Kouwen Siwang* (2004, *The Man Who Questions Death*).

the predicament of modern man. Hence, in this paper I argue that Gao's usage of estrangement transcends both Brechtian drama and traditional Chinese theatre. As further explained below, not only does Gao's drama employ *Verfremdung* without any *V-effekt* (as in Chinese theatre), but this is also characterized by a complex dialectics between *Verfremdung* and *Entfremdung*, which I describe with reference to one of Gao's most recent pieces (*The Man who Questions Death*, 2004), whose dialogues take a confrontational structure. Last but not least, as a substantially artistic device, for Gao *Verfremdung* is aimed at raising awareness of the realities of modern man as a distressed human being, constantly fighting against a threatening Other than seems to be everywhere and can never be fully suppressed. In this sense, I consider the Gaoian *Verfremdung* as a preferred *mode of presentation* of the Chinese playwright's quasi-obsessive concern with the theme of the predicament of modern man (*xiandai ren de kunjing*).

1. Conceptual Framework: Comparing Entfremdung and Verfremdung

Unlike the notion of *Entfremdung*, whose earliest origins can be traced back to the Greco-Roman world², the term *Verfremdung* is a neologism coined by German dramatist and stage director Bertolt Brecht, which made its first official occurrence within the latter's 1936 pioneering essay on traditional Chinese acting.³ According to the linguistic function of the German prefix "ver-", which usually reinforces the semantic meaning of the root-verb, *Ver-fremdung* literally means "to make something bizarre, or unfamiliar", in the sense of "fulfilling" (ver-) its 'strangeness' or, better still, its 'extraneousness' (*fremdung*). Hence, from a purely philosophical viewpoint, *Verfremdung* could be described as a process of *de-familiarization* by means of an act of *distanciation*.

² For a history of the traditional uses of "Alienation" and "Entfremdung", see Schacht, 1970.

³ Originally written in German as *Verfremdungseffekte in der Chinesischen Schauspielkunst*, the text was initially published in English under the title *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting*.

The genesis of Brecht's theory of Verfremdung dates back to his 1930 theoretical work "The new theatre is the epic theatre", which contains the earliest formulation of his notion of *Grundgestus*.⁴ Although he intended to distance himself from previous conceptualizations thereof, therein he still used the old-fashioned word *Entfremdung*, of Hegelian-Marxian descent. (Rülicke-Weiler, 1968) At a later stage, Brecht perfected his interpretation of Entfremdung through the formulation of a theory of counter-discourse, aimed at challenging Entfremdung in the Marxian sense. Brecht's mature articulation of Verfremdung⁵ was specifically envisioned as a new technique of acting. This was primarily designed to impede the actor's *complete transformation (restlose Verwandlung)* into the character and ultimately aimed at producing a similar "effect" on the audience. Often (mis)rendered as "Alienation effect"⁶, Verfremdung in the Brechtian sense was rather meant to fight alienation, instead of favouring it. Hence, in an attempt to clarify the fundamental differentiation between Entfremdung and Verfremdung in Brecht's theory of drama, this study draws on Frederic Ewen's (1971) more accurate translation of those terms as, respectively, alienation and estrangement.⁷

Rather, "alienation" was generally used to render the Marxian concept of Entfremdung, as theorized in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Depending on the semantic content associated with the German prefix "ent-", the term Ent-fremdung could be said to mean either "to make alien" (in which case "ent-" denotes "the beginning of something"), or, conversely, "to de-alienate" (in which case "ent-" indicates "removing something from the object"). Whereas the first meaning is clearly Marxian, the second applies specifically to Brecht.

For Marx (and Hegel before him), Entfremdung designated a situation whereby an individual experiences the external world (whether it be the social substance, as Hegel put it, or the objective product of human labour, as for Marx) as something *alienated from himself*, i.e. foreign, separated from the subject as a result of an *involuntary*, yet *inevitable* process of "relinquishment through surrender". (Schacht, 1971, p. 111) Conversely, Brecht conceived of Entfremdung *less* as an unchanging, necessary state of affairs *than* as the result of the interplay of historical and social laws. Simply put, he would picture the Hegelian-Marxian Entfremdung as a transient, non-necessary, hence avoidable phenomenon. In philosophical terms, envisioning Entfremdung as a mode of the subject-object relation, Brecht shifted the emphasis from the object as unavoidably alienated *from* the individual, to the individual as the *main* actor of such process of alienation, i.e. as he who has the power to either permit or, conversely, combat the occurrence of Entfremdung. Thus, whereas the Marxian alienation implied the separation of the subject from the object, the Brechtian de-alienation should be understood in the opposite sense of de-extraneousness, whereby the subject is induced to regard the object in its obviousness: *not* as if it were other from himself, hence unfamiliar, *but* as if it were part of an establishment, hence familiar, or normal. In this sense, although his theory of Ver/Ent-fremdung was grounded in a recognizable Marxian Weltanschauung, unlike Marx, who theorized Entfremdung as a socio-economic condition, Brecht put the accent on the cognitive aspect of such phenomenon. It was the *effect* of Entfremdung that interested him, and this he intended to neutralize by a technique that could work out the opposite *effect*.

To him Entfremdung followed from what he called "the anesthetic effect of habits", which reminds us of the Existentialist concept of *Aliénation* as sketched by Jean-Paul Sartre with reference to the Camus' *The Outsider*: "Getting up, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, in the same *routine* (...), and then, suddenly, 'the seeing collapses' and we find ourselves in a state of *hopeless lucidity*". (cited in Aronson, 2004, p. 13) At dramatic level, such an image of alienation resembles Brecht's description of the audience's typical attitude when watching a play performed within the canons of the "old theatre" (i.e. "dramatic", Aristotelian theatre):

4 In Brecht's vocabulary for actors, *Gestik* indicated a mode of theatrical performance based on *presenting* (rather than *representing*) the character's deeds and personality traits by means of dedicated gestures.

5 The text, "Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst, die einen Verfremdungseffekt hervorbringen" was originally written in 1940, but only published in 1951.

6 See in particular the studies of John Willett's (1967) and Eric Bentley's (1981).

7 A similar reconsideration of Brecht's sometimes ambiguous terminology has recently been made by Luca Di Tommaso (2009), who proposed the term *estraniamento*, as opposed to the generally accepted *straniamento*.

*Their association here is like that of sleepers – but sleepers who dream incessantly
(...) their eyes are open, but they see not – they stare. They hear not – but listen.
They look at the stage entranced, with an expression like that of the Middle Ages.*
(Cited in Ewen, p. 202)

The picture of the “alienated spectator” according to Brecht appears to be on the same wavelength as the Camusian Outsider. Being a slave of his daily routines, thus incapable of experiencing the outside world in a proactive manner, he is, I argue, alienated from his alienation, like the passive spectator mentioned above. Quite noticeably Brecht’s alienated spectator and Camus’ Outsider both fulfill the characteristics of Entfremdung as a kind of *negative* alienation, in that it entails the subject’s *passive*, and, more importantly, *submit* detachment from the object, plus the acceptance of the reality of things as if it were an absolute *status quo*.

Conversely, Brecht conceived of Verfremdung as a kind of *double*, hence *positive* alienation. More precisely, one the one hand Verfremdung can be regarded as a double alienation, for it alienates alienation, that is, it attempts to rationalize the relationship self-world in such a way as to rectify that “feeling of absurdity” of Existentialist descent, whereby the individual is compelled to accept alienation as part and parcel of human nature. On the other hand, Verfremdung functions as a positive alienation which serves to place the audience in a position to *critically* examine and *actively* master the events presented onstage. Via such alienation of alienation Brecht aimed at empowering the spectator to make sense of the external world as fundamentally contradictory and impermanent, as well as to re-appropriate man’s faculty of controlling the mutable course of the human events. As Brecht put it,

The spectator obtains a new attitude in the theatre (...). He will be received in the theatre as the great ‘transformer’, who can intervene in the natural and the social processes, and who I no longer accepts the world but masters it.
(Cited in Ewen, p. 222)

In the light of the above, it is possible to construct a clear-cut differentiation-framework concerning Entfremdung and Verfremdung. Firstly, whilst Entfremdung is a passive phenomenon affecting the subject,

Verfremdung is an active process implemented for and by the same subject, whose main rationale consists in the neutralization of the former. As Reinhold Grimm pointed out, “*Entfremdung* as a ‘passive’ social process is defined against *Verfremdung* as an ‘active’ aesthetic means of undoing the former”. (Cited in von Held, 2011, p. 25) Secondly, Entfremdung operates on an emotional level, whereas *Verfremdung* involves the usage of man’s cognitive faculties. In fact, according to Brecht, Entfremdung would be closely connected to *Einfühlung*, which is the German word for “empathy”, and indicates the process of emotional identification affecting the actor-character relationship, as well as the audience’s attitude toward the theatrical events. By passively empathizing with the characters, the spectator is supposed to become *submissively* (i.e. uncritically) involved with the *dramatis personae*’s viewpoint, with the result that he finds himself eventually purged from the evil influence that these emotions might have on a psychological and social level.⁸

Nonetheless, Brecht warned against the negative effects of such purification: for him, this act of letting oneself become emotionally involved with the stage events would equal that “act of relinquishment through surrender” described by Marx as the source of Entfremdung. In this sense, refusing to put a halt to the stream of passions while watching a play would mean to “alienate” them, thus losing the ability to observe critically what is going on beyond the fourth wall. Instead, Verfremdung, as a corrective to *Einfühlung* as well as a counter-discourse to Entfremdung, would enable the spectator to adopt the attitude of the modern scientist, who observes natural phenomena from a totally unbiased angle, as if he were observing them for the first time, thus avoiding the influence of preconceived ideas. However, it is also necessary for him to “distance” himself from the object of his investigation, with the aim of re-discovering it, and comprehend its inner workings. To strip the object of its obviousness in order to make it appear bizarre, hence problematic is the only way for the spectator to understand it as something unfamiliar and unknown to him. Moreover, such object needs to appear extraneous, hence unrelated to the observer. Resuming the “scientist-metaphor”, it is now possible to introduce the Brechtian

8 See Aristotle’s definition of *catharsis* in his *Poetics*.

concept of *Verfremdung* not only as a theoretical construct, but also as a technique of performance. From the excerpt below, we can discern Brecht's own rationale for advocating a kind of drama based on such technique of estrangement:

In order to be able to see all those 'natural' events as equally problematic ones, he [the spectator] would need to develop for himself that 'estranged eye' with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier. He was amazed by this pendulum motion, as if he had not expected it and could not understand it's occurring, and this enabled him to come on the rules by which it was governed. Here is the outlook, disconcerting but fruitful, which the theatre must provoke with its representations of human social life. It must amaze its audience; and it can do so by means of a technique that seeks to estrange what would be otherwise assumed to be familiar. (1948, p. 9)

Hence, in Brecht's view, *Verfremdung* would fulfill the aim of facilitating the spectator take the attitude of a cold and detached "observer". His task would be to move from sensuous perception to intellectual cognition, and from astonishment to re-cognition. But how can the spectators develop such "estranged eye"? The answer is, by relinquishing the role of passive viewers thus becoming full-fledged actors, or, better still, executors of the dramatic process. In this sense, what Brecht advocated was the creation of a sound collaboration between actors and audience, still by the same token of *Verfremdung*. The previously mentioned task of developing Galileo's "estranged eye" Brecht demanded first and foremost from the actors themselves, by means of an act of "self-estrangement". This would mainly consist of favouring narrative modes of presentation over mere dramatic action, which means that an actor should never identify or side with the character (s)he portrays. In fact, instead of "becoming" the characters, which would entail a high degree of emotional identification, Brecht required his actors to "present" their *dramatis personae* to the audience, in such a way as to act as "intermediaries" between the characters and the public. Brechtian actors should behave less as impersonators than as imitators; they would perform an action as if they were mere eyewitnesses thereof. In this way, not only would they be able to maintain their own identity as actors, but, most importantly,

this would also have a beneficial *effect* on the audience, which would feel much more motivated to consider certain aspects of the narrated story from a more objective viewpoint.

Such effect is achieved through the usage of four interconnected techniques of estrangement: historicization, *Gestus*, literarization and musical interludes. In this study the focus will be on the first technique of estrangement, since Brecht conceived of *Verfremdung* and Epic as essentially "historicizing techniques". (Di Tommaso, 2008) In Brecht's language, "Historification" is the process whereby a particular event or episode is presented as if it were historically determined. This consequently loses its justification as soon as the historical conditions that made it happen cease to exist. Firstly, this requires the actor to perform his role using the third-person narrative mode, thus referring to the character as if it were extraneous to himself. Also, this emotional distance from the character produces the awareness of the human being as a historical process instead of a fixed essence or datum, namely the estrangement effect theorized by Brecht. In other words, "for the Brechtian actor, historicification meant not only to distance himself from the character, but most importantly to show an *historical* attitude with regard to the *historical* (i.e. mutable, artificial) character. For Brecht, *Verfremden* meant not only to revitalize the perception of an object by making it unfamiliar, but, by means of such exposed unfamiliarity, it was also to stress its non-necessary, hence changeable nature. (Di Tommaso, 2008)

Thus, another important aim of *Verfremdung* is that of challenging the idea of *Entfremdung* as an inescapable feature of being human, as the Existentialists would claim. Moving from the above analysis, we are now in a position to discuss (even briefly, though) the double role of *Verfremdung* within Epic theatre. Primarily, *Verfremdung* has a definite aesthetic function. By replacing the dramatic action with a narrated account thereof, hence by treating the character as if it were a separate, independent entity, it seeks to remind the audience of the fictional quality of the drama. In other words, it aims at destroying the dramatic illusion by what Brecht referred to as "breaking the fourth wall". (Di Tommaso, 2008) Secondly, *Verfremdung* has a markedly socio-political sub-aim. By historicizing both characters and events, presenting them as if they were overcome, hence exposable to criticism, it seeks to motivate the spectator to apply his newly acquired

powers of critical reasoning with the aim of correcting the evils of contemporary society. Following Marx's appeal to interpret the world in order to change it, Verfremdung "concludes rapidly from aesthetic estrangement to recognition and from social alienation to the potential of controlling and abolishing the now transparent social conditions". (von Held, p. 31)

As it were, the political aspect of Verfremdung becomes prominent in Brecht's mature writings, and nearly subsumes the aesthetic one. This is because Brechtian Epic theatre was intended as a kind of scientific drama, or better still, a drama for the scientific age.

To conclude, Verfremdung in the Brechtian sense is to be construed as an important ingredient of a Copernican Revolution in drama. Brecht's focus was particularly directed to the audience, rather than the actors, whose estranged technique of acting was ultimately meant at arousing in the spectator the "estranged eye" of the modern scientist.

Hence, as for Brecht Verfremdung was meant to negate and eventually neutralize the effect of Entfremdung, I believe a proper dialectical confrontation between Entfremdung and Verfremdung does not exist in Brechtian Epic theatre.

2. Gao's Theory of Estrangement in-between EpicDrama, Chinese Theatre and Existentialism With Brecht and beyond Brecht: Toward a theory of Verfremdung with Chinese characteristics

As widely acknowledged, Brecht's theory of Verfremdung constitutes the kernel of his entire dramaturgical system, as well as the starting point of his search for a type of theatre that could reproduce the complex dynamics underlying the socio-political evolution of a modern society and present them to the audience under a less obvious, hence problematic, perspective. To some extent, the same can be said with regard to Gao Xingjian's idea of the theatre. This, in fact, is grounded in a distinctive brand of Verfremdung, which, as we will see later, appears to be embedded in Brechtian dramaturgy, but draws on classical Chinese theatre practices and 20th century Existentialist philosophy.

Since the early introduction of Brecht's theatre aesthetics in China on the part of theatre and film director Huang Zuolin⁹, the Brechtian concept of Verfremdung was variously translated into Chinese as either *jianli fa* or *juli fa*¹⁰, both of which stand for *mode of distanciation*, or as *jianli xiaoguo* and *moshenghua xiaoguo*. (Ferrari, 2004) The latter two mean respectively distancing effect or defamiliarization effect, thus emphasizing the function of Verfremdung in terms of its impact on the audience. One further translation of the term would be *liqing zuoyong* which appears in Huang Zuolin's contrastive study on Stanislavsky, Brecht and Mei Lanfang (1981), as an alternative to the aforesaid *jianli xiaoguo*. Arguably, the latter option could be used as a supplement to the concept expressed via the term previously mentioned, since it fully encapsulates the typically Brechtian idea of Verfremdung as an antidote to the negative effects of dramatic empathy. As a matter of fact, the idiom *liqing-zuoyong* translates as *effect of emotional distance*. Huang explains this concept as a "means for breaking the illusion of real life on stage" (1981), thus underscoring Brecht's call for a de-romanticization of the theatrical medium.

With Brecht. Rethinking "distance": from Galileo's detached eye to Gao's third eye

In his foreword to his book on theatre co-authored with Gao (2010), theatre expert Gilbert Fong employs the word *juli-gan*, which translates as "the sense of distance", in order to differentiate Gao's idea of Verfremdung from its Brechtian counterpart (*juli-fa*). More specifically, Fong gives a brief outline of Gao's *juli-gan* as the process that prevents the spectator from becoming unconditionally involved with the characters' emotional flows, thus enabling him to gain an objective understanding of and enjoy the theatrical experience. Further on, Fong points out that,

9 For more information on this topic, see Ferrari, 2004.

10 In Gao's theoretical writings Verfremdung and V-effect are mostly referred to as *Jianli fa*.

Apparently, this [juli-gan] would be exactly the same as Brecht's V-effect [juli-fa]. Nevertheless, whereas Brecht sought to develop the audience's aptitude for critical thinking, for Gao it is a question of achieving that clarity of vision which is typically ascribed to an external observer, and enables him to keep a watchful eye on the outside world and become fully aware of humankind's predicament... Whilst the scope of Brechtian theatre was to boost the people's social consciousness, on the other hand Gao sheds light on the inner world of the individual.

(2003, p. 5)

Although, on the one hand, I agree with Fong's attempt to distinguish between Brecht's *juli-fa* and Gao's *juli-gan*, on the other, I argue that his reasoning needs further clarification. The fact that Gao's application of *Verfremdung* was not intended to arouse any revolutionary consciousness from the audience is only one of the major differentiating criteria that can be used to prove the specificity of Gao's understanding of *Verfremdung* with respect to Brecht. Instead, maintaining the opposition *juli-fa/juli-gan*, I suppose that both terms apply to Gao's dramatic theory, as they describe what I regard as the two aspects of the same phenomenon. In fact, considering the term *juli* (distance), the usage of the suffix-word *gan* (emotion; sense), as opposed to *fa* (mode; method) communicates the idea of *Verfremdung* as a feeling, rather than an effect or method, namely something that the subject experiences on an emotional level. Quite remarkably, if on the one hand this appears to be at odds with the seemingly Brechtian roots of Gao's discourse on *Verfremdung*, on the other it can be said to conjure up its unique linkages with the Existentialist view of alienation as *le sentiment de l'écart* (feeling of laceration; Camus, cited in Bartfeld, 1976). With this in mind, my hypothesis would be that Gao's drama be characterized by a double usage of dramatic distance, namely an active one (which is akin to Brecht's *Verfremdung*) and a passive one (which can be equated to *Entfremdung*). Hence, I propose to investigate Gao's treatment of *juli-fa* and *juli-gan* as, respectively, a mode of theatrical presentation and its thematic counterpart. I therefore intend to show that in Gao's drama, *Verfremdung* manifests itself via *juli-fa*, while *Entfremdung* comes into play as *juli-gan*. At stake will be Gao's concept of "distance" as a cornerstone of his poetics.

In this regard, it is necessary to re-examine Gao's well-known concept of "coldness", which he frequently discussed in relation to literature but that can be applied to theatre as well. In Gao's view, "coldness" appears to be the quintessential feature of poetic creation: "There are numerous levels of emotional expression and to reach higher levels requires cold detachment. Poetry is concealed in the distanced gaze." (2000) Gao declared in his Nobel Lecture. Later on he pointed out that "literature is simply man focusing his gaze on his self and while he does, a thread of consciousness which sheds light on this self begins to grow". (Gao, 2000) Undoubtedly, a basic definition of Gao's "distanced gaze" is contained within the aforesaid statement, whereby it is not simply the human gaze that creates such distanced attitude of man towards his own self, but rather the product of such observation, namely that *thread of consciousness* that reverberates through the prism of such quiet self-inspection. More specifically, that distanced look does not come from a plain human gaze but from a duly trained eye, namely the eye of consciousness, or third eye, as Gao calls it. Elsewhere Gao variously defined the third eye as "the neutral outlook", because it is informed by a non-aprioristic approach to dealing with the realities of human life in a modern world. (Cited in Fong, 2003, p. 34)

The premises of the Gaoian theory of the third eye remind us of those underlying Brecht's theory of *Verfremdung* as exemplified by the image of Galileo's "detached eye" contained in his *Short Organum for the Theatre*. As previously noted, the reference to Galileo observing the swinging chandelier from an estranged perspective was employed by Brecht in an attempt to provide his theatre of *Verfremdung* with a scientific foundation. By drawing on certain aspects of the modern scientific method, particularly the principle of sensory observation as a source of critical inquiry, Brecht intended to transform the theatre into an arena for showcasing the workings of social processes. For this purpose, it was necessary not only to see them but also to *see through* them. Hence the need for *Verfremdung*, that is for "a technique of estranging, i.e. distancing, the familiar". While one cannot prove that Gao derived his concept of the third eye directly from Galileo's estranged eye of Brechtian descent, it is confirmed that he got acquainted with Brecht's theory of epic drama, and consequently with this theory of *Verfremdung*, by reading Brecht's *Short Organum*. (Gao, 1988) Both theories share in fact the same guiding

principle, that is the notion of “distance” in the sense of a neutral outlook on things; also both theories aim at transforming such “distance” into a mode of narrative and dramatic presentation. Nevertheless, whilst for Brecht the distanced gaze was only the first step in the process of *Verfremdung* (Grimm, 1984), in that the actual purpose of estrangement would be the dissolution of the distance between subject and object¹¹, for Gao the distance is a constant component of poetry, drama and of life itself, an attitude that the individual should always maintain, if he does not want to succumb to the stranglehold of social pressure and its opposite, namely the trap of self-centeredness. Additionally, Brecht’s drama focused on the dialectics of historical and social processes, whereas Gao’s plays are concerned with the dynamics of the human interiority.

In sum, Gao’s third eye could be described as the perspective of a dispassionate observer, who, like an outsider living on the edge of society, can gain a better insight into the realities of the human existence precisely as a result of such distanced outlook. As Fong (2003, p. 10) remarks, Gao’s theatrical quest throughout the whole of his artistic career has been aimed at developing an appropriate “narrative of distanciation”, that could bring together two fundamental components of dramatic art: *narrativity* and *performance*. Interestingly, these are also the two main pillars of traditional Chinese theatre, which Jo Riley (1997, p. 155) interprets as a combination of “proximity and distance”. In his 1985 speech on the influence of Brechtian theories of epic theatre on his work as a drama innovator, Gao recollected that his reading Brecht’s *œuvre* made him realize that in the theatre narrativity, in the shape of nondramatic devices, can exist alongside performed actions, particularly as a means of overcoming the objective constraints of space and time generally connected to a naturalistic approach to drama. In this sense, Gao’s idea of transforming the dramatic space into a psychological field, highly flexible and intrinsically spiritual, was closely wed to his desire to go well beyond Brecht’s dramaturgy in an attempt to work out new methods of theatrical presentation that could develop the theatrical quality of dramatic performance, leaving aside any pretense of scientific demonstration *à la* Brecht.

11 Brecht’s main aspiration was the breaking of the fourth wall, so as to eliminate the usual distance between audience and actors.

Beyond Brecht. *Verfremdung* with Chinese characteristics: mode of estrangement without alienation effect

In the final section of Gao and Fong’s book on theatre, Gao further clarifies the meaning of his notion of the “third eye” in light of the actor’s preparatory work for acquiring the performer’s *forma mentis*. In this regard, Gao argues that the actor needs to “convert his [actorial] self-consciousness into a third eye which will enable him to carefully scrutinize his own body while engaged in acting”. This means that, in order to bring a character to life, an actor should seek to put his individual self aside, and base his re-enactment of the role less on his personal emotions than on his cognitive knowledge of the character *in se*. Such statement reminds us of an ancient couplet, famously recollected by Beijing Opera actor Mei Lanfang in his memoir, and which encapsulates the task of a traditional Chinese theatre performer with regard to the procedures for character impersonation: “Those who look at you do not see your own self; when you look at yourself you do not see your own self either. Whoever performs a certain character, whatever it is, has [the duty] to look like that”. (Mei, 2008) In this sense, the Chinese actor is not required to “become” the character, but rather to “resemble” (*xiang*) it, or, better still, to externalize the variability of the character’s temperament and consciousness in relation to a particular situation or historical context. Simply put, the actor is there to convey the whole gamut of human emotions including emotional conflicts and those innermost feelings that are usually most difficult to disclose and express in a way that is intelligible to a wider audience. To do so, the actor does not need to distance himself from the character, as Brecht advised; what he needs to estrange himself from, is rather his bonds with ordinary life, which he has to temporarily sever in order to concentrate on the character and achieve what Gao (1988, p. 176) calls “a liminal state, a stage of transition in-between the realm of reality and that of artistic performance”.

Nevertheless, classical Chinese theatre does not really aim at creating any “distance” between both the actor and the character or between the audience and the stage. Rather, if any distance is to be detected, this concerns the gap between real life and its artistic portrayal on stage.

(Huang, 1982) However, when comparing Chinese traditional theatre with Brecht's epic drama, Huang also (1982, p. 103) argued that, although Brecht's theory of "estrangement effect" does not really apply to Chinese theatre because this does not need to break the illusion of real life that is typical of naturalistic theatre, "the conscious self-control that a classical Chinese opera actor imposes on himself naturally keeps him at a distance from his character". That reflects Brecht's (mis)interpretation of the purpose of the Chinese performer's acting style which entails self-observation. In this regard, I concur with Sun Huizhu (1999, 176–177), who maintained that such self-observation is rather aimed at "presenting believable characterization" as well as "creating a sense of aesthetic beauty for the audience". This would confirm the fact that if there is any distance in Chinese traditional theatre, this coincides with the beautification of reality, an aesthetic principle which, in turn, is brought about by the interplay of dramaticity (*xijuxing*) – the usage of highly conventionalized gestures to reveal the inner world of a character – and theatricality (*yuchangxing*) – the sublimation of reality into art, which directly entails the idea that "play is play" and what happens on stage is a work of fiction.

Thus, assuming that classical Chinese theatre does not entail *Verfremdung* in the Brechtian sense, nor does it seek to produce any kind of estrangement effect either for the audience or the performers¹², how can it be a "Verfremdung with Chinese characteristics" with respect to Gao Xingjian's dramaturgy? I will attempt to answer this question by looking at the ways in which the Gaoian principle of "distance" is developed and applied through a peculiar (joint) usage of elements of narrative and performance. These, in fact, concur in effecting the process of dissection of the performative body of the actor into a number of separate units of articulations, all of which represent a specific layer of meaning. This "regulated disintegration" of the actor's body is then followed by the reassembly of those units into a whole, newly recomposed, performative axis. Jo Riley (1997) has provided an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon which Brecht misinterpreted as an attempt

12 Concerning the theories negating the existence of a Brechtian V-effect in traditional Chinese theatre see Tian (1997), Sun, in Fei (1999) and Yan (2008), amongst others.

at self-estrangement on the part of the Chinese artist, namely the tendency to observe himself while acting. In this regard, she mentions Mei Lanfang's interpretation of the role of the concubine Yang, in the play *The Drunken Beauty*. At some point during the play, the female protagonist's attention is caught by a flock of geese flying above her head. In order for the audience to be able to ideally visualize the geese, the actor metaphorically recreates the presence of those birds through singing, dancing and dedicated stylized hand gestures. In this way, the identity of the performer via his body units is split into a double role: on the one hand, he performs the *dramatis persona* of the young concubine, while on the other, his body (or parts of it) also signifies the various elements of the dramatic situation portrayed on stage. The representation of the elements that are "external" to the main subject, which is achieved not only via the body (performance) but also through the actor's voice (story-telling) serves not only to characterize the setting, but also, and most importantly, to dig out the psychological world of the performed self and externalize it by means of symbolic images. Here, the geese flying over the concubine's head in that particular instant do not have a purely decorative function, but stand for the woman's desire to be free from her condition of slavery. This means that the Chinese performer employs a heterogeneous method of presentation, which consists of both narrative and performative elements, which contribute to enhance his proximity to the character, mostly in terms of performative skills. This *mode* of presentation involves a temporary dissection of the actor's body in order to achieve what Riley defines as *likeness*. (1997, p. 155) In other words, likeness, namely the faithful rendering of the character's emotions, is achieved through the usage of an element of *otherness* which is responsible for creating a sense of apparent distance between actor and character. This is only an artistic device which is functional to the realization of a sense of aesthetic beauty on stage although it does not really correspond to the psychology of the character portrayed. While helping make the character's predicament more explicit to the audience, it does so by representing such predicament on the plane of art, but is *not* part of the character's interiority.

In other words, and comparing traditional Chinese theatre with Gao's drama, I argue that whilst the former tends to objectify the characters'

the idea of the performed character as something extraneous to one's self, i.e. as an Other (tazhe). Yet, it is worth remembering that such otherness does not affect the character *per se*, who remains a unified entity, but rather concerns the actor's relationship or approach to the role.

In short, the split personality and self-estrangement that the Chinese actor undergoes as part of his training is only a performative device, and, as such, does not coincide with the psychological situation of the character.

Beyond Chinese Theatre: Gao's Existentialist Turn

Having identified the Chinese roots of Gao's conception of "distance" and "estrangement", which concur to define his theory of *Verfremdung*, it is now necessary to clarify that whilst Chinese theatre's apparent estrangement techniques concern mainly the actor in performance, Gao's drama, especially the post-exile production, goes far beyond that and employs the above mentioned principle of objectification with a specific, quite different purpose. It not only *employs* the process of otherization (*tazhehua*), but also *represents* it as part of the character's psychological predicament. Again, Gao maintains that synchronicity of *narrative* and *performance* typical of classical Chinese theatre, but with exclusive reference to the character's shattered identity. In this respect, I argue that what differentiates Gao's application of the principle of otherization and objectification from its traditional Chinese theatre counterpart is the fact that in Gao's plays, this objectification is not only employed as a mode of presentation but is also dramatized, as part and parcel of the plays' content.

What is otherized and consequently objectified in Gao's theatre is the human self. Through his dramaturgy of shifting pronouns (*rencheng-zhuan*), the self is presented as a disaggregated unit which epitomizes the internal feeling of laceration experienced by the dramatis personae and narrated by the actors. The characters' individual self is split into three separate entities: an "I", a "you" and a "he" or "she". Apart from the "I" form, which is quite obvious, the "you" form and the "(s)he" form function both as modes of estrangement for better highlighting the

feelings only with the aim of exposing to the public and for the sake of ensuring theatricality, the latter employs the Chinese performative principle of *objectification from within* as a means of creating a sense of *real objectification* or otherness involving the characters themselves.

This process of objectification from within originates in the actor's preparatory work on himself before taking part in the proper performance. Borrowing from certain actor-training techniques characterizing a particular form of ancient folk theatre called *moxi*¹³, Gao revisited the underlying idea of emptying the actor's body in order to facilitate its metaphorical dismemberment into various units of expressive articulation, and the subsequent re-configuration thereof into a newly-composed self, and formulated the theory of the tripartite actor. In practice, such theory translates into a progressive process of self-estrangement, made up of three different, yet closely interrelated, *modes of Verfremdung*:

Wangzuo, which literally means "forgetting about the self" and stands for the actor's ability to detach himself from his individual identity in order to become something like a living puppet, or "a pure artifact, an empty vessel" (Riley, 1997, p. 115) as in *nuo* theatre.

Zhongxing yanyuan, which is the status of the "neutral performer" and refers to the result of the aforementioned process of self-estrangement or self-detachment whereby the actor symbolically relinquishes his real body and gets ready to undertake the designated role body.

Yijihua, which literally means "becoming another self", and indicates the actor in performance. This latter stage of self-estrangement is also referred by Gao as *Tazhehua*, which literally means "otherization", and is somewhat akin to the process whereby the actor does not only perform the character from *within* as if he were an automata himself, but also orchestrates it from *without*, thus assuming the double role of a puppet being moved by the puppet-master. In fact, the word *ta* (he) suggests

13 *Nuo* theatre refers to a kind of exorcistic performance typically found in southern China. For more information see Riley (1997). Contrarily, Min Tian interpreted Gao's theory of the tripartite actor as a "displacement of Chinese *xiqu* through Brecht" (2009, p. 188).

character's psychological conflict and as mirrored-images of the character's actual feeling of extraneousness to his/her own self. In this way the self is objectified, dissected but never recomposed because, according to Gao, the self as a unified whole does not really exist. (Quah, 2004, p. 154) Such a thing cannot be found in traditional Chinese theatre, where the identity of a character is always clear from its arrival on stage. Since I intend to describe Gao's theory and practice of *Verfremdung* in terms of *julifa* (mode) and *juligan* (feeling), below I identify two of Gao's practical techniques of *julifa* accompanied by some references to specific works.

Split personality. This is normally effected through a peculiar usage of personal pronouns whereby the characters refer to themselves alternatively as "I", "you" or "(s)he", often ending up losing any cognition of who they actually are and asking themselves whether there is, after all, an entity called "self". For example, in *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (*Duihua yu Fanjie*, 1992)¹⁴, the female protagonist is haunted by a mysterious presence hovering behind her, which eventually turns out to be nothing but a shadow. Then she frenziedly looks at herself and, referring to herself via the third person pronoun, she asks whether she is a shadow herself, or whether the shadow is she or even if she is the shadow of that shadow. She then closes her eyes and communicates her incertitude about her very identity by asking: "Who is the real she?" (Gao, 1999, p. 129) Such final question attests that Gao's technique of estrangement via the shift of pronouns definitely goes beyond both Brecht's *Verfremdung* and traditional Chinese theatre, in that the purpose of this kind of distanced acting style lies in the portrayal of the characters' *own* sense of distance from their own individuality. Hence, "distance" as *form* is used to signify that same sense of distance as a *motif*.

Objective-correlatives, which T. S. Eliot defined as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion". (1921, p. 28) and which are also common practice in classical Chinese theatre, where the characters' psychological realities are

14. D&R hereafter.

often laid bare via the usage of poetic visual imagery. In Gao's drama they consist in bringing into play either secondary characters or inanimate objects as projections of the main characters' emotional predicament. Various examples could be mentioned in this regard, such as the enigmatic character of the Buddhist Monk in *D&R*, who performs his role in parallel with the two protagonists yet seems to be definitely detached from the main storyline, as if there were a glass wall separating them from him. The Monk figure, who is trying hard to perform a handstand or to stand a stick up on the floor without much success, arguably indicates the two characters' reiterated yet failed attempts at establishing a peaceful and relaxed channel of communication for discussing their problems as a couple. In this sense, the fact that the Monk figure keeps itself at a distance from them, almost as if it were part of another world or even of another dimension, could possibly be a concrete sign of the two characters being at a distance both from each other and from their own selves, as if they themselves were stuck on two separate planets, incapable to understand each other. Another example of this sort could be the figure of the masked man in *Yeyoushen*. (*The Sleepwalker*, 1999) The masked man appears at the very end of the play, and blocks the protagonist's way. Both fight against each other until the sleepwalker is probably killed by his mysterious enemy. The sleepwalker's few final lines suggest that the masked man is not an independent character, but rather the personification of the dark side of his own self¹⁵, which he has misused during his dream and which pushed him to finish off all the people he came across in his sleepwalk. In fact, as soon as the masked man materializes, the sleepwalker addresses the threatening Other as if he and this Other were the same person, or, more precisely, as if this Other were actually part of himself: "Who are you? What do you want? You want *you* to step aside and let you pass! [...] You want *you* – to let you – pass". (Gao, 1999, p. 188) Whilst the first you and the third "you" stand for the masked man, the second "you", the one

15 "Evil is in your heart, you have to eliminate the feeling of evil in your heart". Soon afterward he corrects himself and cries: "You're born with this feeling, you can't eliminate it, everybody has it, there is no way you can be innocent, but I'll be alright as long as you don't think about it". (Gao, 1999, p. 187).

in italics, refers to the sleepwalker talking about himself. Therefore, the interplay between the two “you(s)” signifies the clash of the sleepwalker’s conflicting identities. In *Between Life and Death*, the protagonist, a nameless Woman who is going through a painful existential crisis, is haunted by the presence of a woman’s eye staring at her, which she perceives as the self looking at her from without, as if it had left her body. In fact, in that eye she believes she can see her own true soul irreversibly taken away from herself, to the extent that she eventually asks what the self ever is. Here, again, the objectification of the character’s identity, as well as its distanciation from the latter in the form of a separate character or an object, is functional to the representation, in visual terms, of the character’s own sense of self-alienation (*juligan*).

3. Uncovering The Dialectics of Ver/Ent-fremdung. A case study of *The Man who questions Death* (TMWQD)

As a strenuous advocate of “total theatre”¹⁶ (*quanneng xiju*), namely a form of art that encompasses a variety of artistic expressions ranging from the visual arts, literature and music, Gao ventured into experimenting with new presentational techniques borrowed from specific musical patterns. Generally speaking, from the outset of his dramatic production, Gao has employed the technique of multivocality (*dao shengbu*) as both a form and a motif. (Quah, 2004) In formal terms, this is aimed at emulating the simultaneousness of voices characterizing real-life dialogic interchanges. As Ralf Hertel (2005, p. 95) explains, in multivocal speech “there is no longer a master voice of a single narrator in control of the story (...); no one voice dominates the others, they all seem to be speaking at the same time, especially when the voices change more rapidly, overlap and blend”. Apart from constituting an innovative alternative mode of theatrical presentation, that challenges the linear structure of traditional dialogue (Quah, 2004), such polyphonic (*fudiao*) narrative, as Gao defines it, has also an evident estranging function in that, due to its continuous and

sudden change of focus, it allows one to observe and assess a particular subject from a multiplicity of perspectives. As a motif, multivocality represents the essence of reality as complex and multidimensional intricacy of phenomena which are often interrelated, as well as the human interpretation thereof, which allows for a variety of superstructural meanings. In this regard, “different motifs that complement or contradict each other are represented at a single time and therefore provide a platform for textual interreferentiality”, remarks Sy Ren Quah. (2004, p. 83)

From a technical viewpoint, polyphony is constructed via the juxtaposition of two or more melodic lines, which can be either in harmonious or contrapuntal relationship to each other. However, polyphony and counterpoint are not necessarily synonymous with each other. Whilst polyphony is simply the combination of two or more *independent* melodies played *simultaneously*, the structure of counterpoint involves a shared motif interpreted at different tonal levels by the participating voices. Thus, unlike simple polyphony, counterpoint creates a sense of dialectical contraposition that, once transposed into literary and dramatic speech, helps achieve that “clarity of vision” that Gao ascribed to the third eye.

The most complete example of contrapuntal polyphony is the fugue. The term “fugue” stems from the Latin word *fuga*, whose meaning is related to the verbs *fugere* and *fugare*, meaning respectively “to flee” and “to chase”. In keeping with this terminology, a musical fugue – or counterpoint – is defined as “a flight or a chase of melodies”. (Hubbard, 2005, p. 217) A complete definition of the musical fugue according to Hubbard follows:

The highest instrumental or vocal composition is counterpoint. (...) One part enters with the principal theme, a second takes up the theme and another follows until all have entered. Every development is directly or indirectly attached to the initial motif or subject, and variety is obtained by modulations and various combinations in imitation. The constructive elements indispensable to any fugue are the subject or principal theme; the answer; a repetition of the subject, given a fifth higher or a fourth lower; the counter subject, a counter point (...), which combines with the subject, and [finally] the stretto, in which subject and answer are brought as close together as possible for the sake of heightening the interest.

16 The term “quanneng xiju” literally translates as “omnipotent theatre”. For more information on this concept as applied to Gao’s drama see Fong’s “Introduction: Marginality, Zen and Omnipotent Theatre”, in *Snow in August* (2004).

character enters the stage. He is anonymously referred to as That Man, in relation and in opposition to This Man. That Man abruptly addresses This Man and forces him to confront the harsh realities of his mortal destiny as a wretched human being: "Are you done with your never-ending proclamation? (...) You're just a passerby. (...) No matter your pose, no matter your fancy steps, which you consider so exciting, they will inevitably fall into the Big Void, ending up in nothingness". (Gao, 2007, p. 77)

This Man and That Man represent the two voices set against each other in contrapuntal opposition. More specifically, while the former embodies the proposition or antecedent, the latter provides the answer or consequent, and vice versa. The subject in question is death, which is approached by This Man, the first voice, as the death of art following the death of God, and it is connected to the ugliness of the artistic revolution. The first voice interprets the reality of the museum from the viewpoint of Entfremdung, for he laments the fact that among all that mass of decaying stuff that the person the Man calls Mr. Curator calls "art", there is no room for the human being, given the absence of a living human exhibit. The character expresses the alienation of the human being in a world where art, which in the past was regarded as the celebration of human genius, is degenerated to the point of signifying the decreasing value of humankind which produces it. Moreover, not only are the objects on display not exactly *objets d'art* in the classical sense of the word, but they are also useless for any, like the rubber doll which "does not even have a hole" and it is just "a shriveled corpse". (2007, p. 90) Having been decontextualized and assembled to form a mass of "supermarket stuff", these objects have lost their soul, and therefore "art has been tortured and put to death". (2007, p. 86)

The second voice, That Man, resumes the death-theme from a different perspective, as if he were transposing it onto a different tonal level. He speaks of death as part of a human being's destiny – "What is absolutely certain is that you'll have to die sooner or later. Death is waiting for you, whatever you do or don't do. There is no escape from this ending" (2007, p. 88) – and interprets This Man's uncanny situation as a reflection of man's inescapable destiny as a prisoner awaiting death in a world which is already spiritually disintegrating. The variation on the main theme of the play coincides with the adoption of a perspective

To put it simply, in counterpoint each voice states a subject but with different tonal variations: the first voice enters and exposes the subject, then it is the turn of the second voice to express the same subject but transposed to another key, which corresponds to the so-called "answer". Afterwards, while the second voice is still imitating the subject, the first voice introduces the countersubject which the second voice will resume immediately after completing its first performance.

Gao's usage of multivocality in the form of a polyphonic narrative has been discussed by Sy Ren Quah (2004, p. 66–75), although in general terms and with particular reference to the pre-exile plays. For this reason I intend to deal with a specific form of contrapuntal polyphony, the fugue, and explore the ways in which Gao reinterpreted such a technique of musical composition to serve as the fundamental texture of his post-exile play *TMWQD*. Below, I will examine the role of Verfremdung and Entfremdung with respect to this pattern as well as the dialectical "fight" engendered by their shifting intersections.

The dialectical fugue of Ver/Ent-fremdung

In *TMWQD*, the fugal structure informs the texture of the frenzied dialogue between the protagonist (This Man) and his mysterious alter-ego (That Man). On closer examination, this is not exactly a dialogue but a "double soliloquy", in that each character actually performs a soliloquy without a true interaction with the other. In fact, in his Introductory Notes on the performance of this play, Gao points out that although the two characters seem to be engaged in a dialogue, there should be no eye contact between them (2007).

The play begins in *medias res* and is set in a museum for contemporary art where the protagonist, an old, neurotic man, intends to spend a few hours sheltering from the rain. However, as he realizes that he is inexplicably and inescapably locked inside, he determines to take a look around in order to kill time, thus coming across all sorts of bizarre exhibits, which testify, in his opinion, to the ugliness of contemporary art, or better to the *death* of art as a reflection of man's spiritual degradation in a society dominated by consumerism. At this point a second

of estrangement. Through the lens of Verfremdung, the theme of the precariousness of the human being replaces This Man's initial concern with issues related to the artistic revolution. In fact, I argue, That Man's distanced perspective transposes the subject introduced by the first voice onto an existential level, to signify that the tangible reality of the museum is not an end in itself but alludes to the spiritual predicament of the individual facing senility and ultimately death. Furthermore, That Man's distanced voice, which is comparable to Gao's third eye¹⁷, is to showcase This Man's alienation from reality, for he has no clear cognition of what is actually happening to him.

At this point the dialectic confrontation between the two voices takes off. This Man starts to follow That Man's line of thought, that is, he starts reflecting on his mortal destiny ("He lures you into his illusion, made of a sliver of light and nothing else. But it makes you happy and you follow him moving around joyfully in circles" 2007, p. 93), and gradually comes to a kind of spiritual awakening, which paves the way for the presentation of the second theme or countersubject. If the main subject was death, in its material and moral aspects, the countersubject will be the affirmation of life at any price. This Man purports a new start, in spite of his old age and current entrapment. But his alter-ego tries hard to discourage him by reminding him that it is too late:

This Man: No one would commit suicide unless he was at the end of his tether and had nowhere to go. But then you're not at that stage yet, even though you are locked up in here and you can't get out. (...) Whatever the outcome, there's got to be an end. (...)

That Man: There's got to be an ending. But it's not for you to choose.

This Man: you can't become senile, you've got to shout and cry for help.

That Man: Who would come to your rescue?
(2007, p. 99–100)

That Man continues challenging This Man's attempts at counteracting his antagonist's gloomy reflections about man's wretched destiny,

17 Talking about That Man, This Man acknowledges: "The world is unknowing [like himself], and he is very much self-aware". 2007, p. 94.

until he manages to persuade This Man that he is right. This Man resumes the motif of death from the viewpoint of his alter-ego, i.e. from a self-conscious perspective, and prepares to commit suicide "Man is such a fragile and insignificant creature. (...) Come, throw away what is left of your life as you would a small coin. (...) Put a speedy end to your misery while there is still time". (2007, p. 102) However, his notion of suicide is imbued with a sense of happiness that is not part of his ghastly clone. Unlike That Man, who thinks that by claiming his life he has lost any glimpse of human dignity, This Man is convinced that by killing himself, namely by effecting his own destiny through an act of will, he will be able to give a meaning to his life and to himself as an individual: "You end your life at the right time, and you accept this in peace. This is ten thousand times smarter than a fly dying from slow suffocation inside a glass window case". (2007, p. 104)

Hence, when That Man mocks him for making "something out of nothing, a tiny bit of meaning out of meaninglessness", This Man retorts: "Your brief life just bestows on you this feeling of beauty, and the vast world is meaningful only in this small way". (2007, p. 105)

Shortly before he hangs himself with the help of his alter-ego, This Man solemnly declares that "In the face of this increasingly vulgar world, a world as degenerate as art and in the name of a loser, someone who has wasted his entire useless life away, you proclaim the death of this weak and helpless person!" (2007, p. 107) Such statement coincides with the last section of the fugal structure, the *stretto*, which consists in the final combination of theme and counterpoint: the protagonist has reached the highest peak of self-awareness by viewing his bizarre situation through the estranged look of an Other, but at the same time he detaches himself from the Other's totally pessimistic worldview, and affirms his liberty over death. The dialectic confrontation between the two voices, the one being initially unaware, the other showing off a strong self-consciousness; the one being gradually raised to the level of recognition, the other prey to his self-contempt, concludes with an apparent compromise.

But this is not the end of it. Soon after the death of This Man, the sound of sirens is heard as a sign that somebody, probably the police, is eventually coming to rescue the unfortunate visitor. Arguably, this

stands for a sudden return to reality, which not only signals the actual pointlessness of the protagonist's suicide, but also the fact that the mysterious figure of That Man was only the personification of his neurosis, his haunting thoughts, his suicidal manias; in other words, his existential predicament. Through the usage of a doppelgänger, This Man's latent madness is distanced, objectified, and even personified. That sense of self-otherness, namely alienation, or Entfremdung, or juli-gan, as Gao calls it, is in turn otherized through techniques of estrangement, or Verfremdung, or *juli-fa* (mostly through the usage of objective-relative) and clearly showcased in his play. This Man is persecuted by an Other which is actually his own estranged self, his own existential plight, his alienation, which haunts him and chases him until he complies and accepts it.

Conclusive Remarks

As previously mentioned, Gao's techniques of Verfremdung, or *juli-fa*, identified in this study, seem to be largely based on an extensive use of "externalization" through objectification, which has its roots in traditional Chinese theatre practices. Concurrently, this method of presentation serves the purpose of "estranging", that is, "distancing", the various aspects of a character's existential predicament in order to make it more explicit and detectable. This factor reveals, conversely, the Brechtian parentage of such a stylistic choice. Nevertheless, Gao's brand of estrangement techniques is specifically designed to dramatize the feeling of alienation underlying the character's psychological sufferings. In other words, *juli-fa* works as a mirror-image of *juli-gan*. Distance operates here as both a *form* and a *motif*: it is simultaneously a narrative tool, and the objective of the narrative itself. Alienation, or Entfremdung, in Gao's drama, is primarily a condition of the human self, and may manifest itself on a variety of levels: it may affect gender relations, like in *D&R* where the two protagonists fail to communicate effectively; it may have to do with the clash between the real life and dreams, like in *The Sleepwalker*, where the main character's longing for happiness as

a consequence of attaining total freedom is crushed after discovering how this can turn into a dangerous double-edged sword; but it may also reveal itself in man's failure to accept his mortal destiny as an inescapable reality of human existence, like in *TMWQD*, where the protagonist is initially alienated from himself and his condition of human being who cannot avoid getting old and dying, until he sees himself reflected in his estranged self-consciousness constantly following him, pestering him and eventually pushing him to take his own life.

All these manifestations of existential Entfremdung through Verfremdung, albeit varied, share a common denominator, namely the fragmentation of the self in the existentialist sense. Not only is the self of those characters referred to as a fluid tridimensional entity¹⁸ (I, you, he), which, incidentally, evokes Sartre's theory of the three modes of being (in-itself, for-itself, for-others), but it is also portrayed as something that does not entirely belong to the characters themselves. Their sense of identity – that is, their self-consciousness – is displaced, dismembered and, sometimes, even dissolved. In other words, it is alienated from themselves. But what is most interesting about that and probably most peculiar to Gao's drama, is the fact that Verfremdung and Entfremdung, i.e. the process of revealing objectification (read "alienation") through estrangement, are reflected in each other as the latter resonates through the former and vice versa. As particularly evidenced in *TMWQD*, such interchange assumes the shape of a true dialectic confrontation, which is characterized by a contrapuntal texture.

18 Compare Huang's reference to the Chinese theatre characters as "tridimensional" in Fei, 1999, p. 156.

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