Visibility, Divisibility and the Language of Revolution: a Brechtian Perspective

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Signs are mental representation of objects. Each mental representation has a specific, though not fixed relative position within a schema of understanding. The total system of relations that signs maintain is what we call a language or Weltanschauung and the relative position a sign occupies is what we call its definition.

The visible implies two things—that which is seen and that which it is possible to see. We speak of the visible as a product of perception—that which we can see or that which could be seen. However, the neurological phenomenon that we call sight is related to, yet distinct from the process of making sense of what we see. First we perceive and then we define. That is, first we perceive the object and then, in order to make sense of it, we must form a mental representation (i.e. sign) of it. We classify it, categorize it, differentiate it, locate or place it into a language.

Like the visible, the invisible has two connotations—that which is simply not seen and that which cannot be seen. Something which is simply not seen is something which is not perceived; whereas something which cannot be perceived admits of an incapability of the perceptive functions. However the perceptive functions of the human subject are constantly evolving.

Not everything which is unseen is unperceivable and things which once were unperceivable can become perceivable and perceived. This happens when new methods of differentiation emerge like the application of tools (e.g. the telescope, ultrasound machines, etc).

Often we are able to fit new signs into the existing language with ease. But in other circumstances the visibility of previously invisible objects requires a large scale reordering of language. This is no simple task because material interests are usually linked to the particular ordering of signs within a Weltanschauung. In order to maintain particular material interests there are those who argue that the current, dominant Weltanschauung is totalized and indivisible. Brecht, for example, envisions a bourgeoisie who seeks to hide its particular interests within an indivisible and totalized Weltanschauung. For example, he says the bourgeoisie is “eagerly and desperately occupied with achieving a new totality” (Brecht, Kuhn, Giles, & Bradley, 2003 p.97). The reason the bourgeoisie attempts to create a totality is obvious for Brecht, it is an “attempt to give lasting shape to specific proposals of an ethical and aesthetic nature, and to confer on them a final, definitive character, in other words, the attempt of a class to give permanence to itself and to give its proposals the appearance of finality” (Brecht, Kuhn, Giles, & Bradley, 2003 p.98).

But how does the appearance of finality come about? For Brecht, like Gramsci (1971) and Barthes (1972; Barthes & Lavers, 1972) the sedimentation of bourgeois ideology can be found in the language it uses. Art is, for example, according to Brecht, “a skill in preparing reproductions of human beings’ life together such as lead people to a particular kind of feeling, thought and action”
Brecht, 1965, 95). Bourgeois art and more generally bourgeois language lead people to certain feelings, thoughts and actions which are, of course, beneficial in maintaining bourgeois social order.

A large scale reordering of language which is warranted by the previously invisible becoming visible is likely to be resisted because reordering the moons using his telescope. However the philosopher asks, "Mr. Galilei, before we apply ourselves to your famous tube, we should like to request the pleasure of a disputation: Can such planets exist?" (32). Galileo replies "I thought you'd just look through the telescope and see for yourselves" (32). However, the Florentine scholars refuse.

jeopardizes the privilege of some in the current social order. This phenomenon is illustrated quite clearly by Brecht, in his Life of Galileo (Brecht, Manheim, & Willett, 1972), most specifically in the attitudes of the court scholars of the Grand Duke Medici.

After discovering the moons of Jupiter, by employing a new manner of differentiation (the telescope), Galileo names the moons after the Grand Duke, in hopes of gaining a patronage. Galileo is invited to Florence where the Grand Duke's scholars attempt to verify his findings. Galileo offers to show them The philosopher states, "The cosmos of the divine Aristotle...is an edifice of such order and beauty that we shall be well advised not to disturb its harmony." (32). In other words, the philosopher is arguing for the indivisibility of the Aristotelian Weltanschauung. Galileo's stars are a truth which disrupts the dominant Weltanschauung's claims to totality and indivisibility. For the philosopher all is accounted for. There is no contradiction to be seen. A point which is continued by the mathematician: "One might be tempted to reply that if your tube shows something that cannot exist it must be
a rather unreliable tube” (33). Brecht represents these claims of totality and invisibility as coming from the courtesan scholars. Here Brecht reminds the viewer of the connection between material interests and the dominant Weltanschauung. The Mathematician and the Philosopher have gained their privileged positions because they lay claims to a mastery of truth. Galileo challenges their mastery of truth and thus the claims to occupy the positions they are in, and by extension the entire social order.

In the end the Florentine scholars refuse Galileo’s plea to look through the telescope. What is the nature of this plea? It is phenomenological. He wants the scholars to simply see what which is now visible. However, the scholar’s material interests and the Weltanschauung which protects and legitimizes them force a betrayal of their perceptive capacities. They must not see. No one must see.

**What is visible is largely a product of what the dominant classes want to be visible.**

In short, material interests can dictate what is visible, what remains invisible and what is indivisible. What is visible is largely a product of what the dominant classes want to be visible. Therefore, in order for revolutionary social change to occur subaltern classes cannot rely on the language of the dominant class. A new language must be developed—one that effectively makes the old one divisible and one that can make visible that which is currently invisible. Understanding, as Brecht did the relationship between ideological hegemony and language and his assertion that this relationship can become undone in the service of a revolutionary movement is an important contribution and one that current practitioners of theatre can use in their own efforts at creating a revolutionary aesthetic.

**Works Cited**


