

Jinsong Chen

From Wagner to Brecht: An Aesthetic Analysis of Elfriede Jelinek's *Rein Gold*

Elfriede Jelinek's stage-essay *Rein Gold*, a contribution to the 200th anniversary of Wagner's birth, has been brought onto stage twice by the German director Nicolas Stemmann: first as a six-hour improvised scenic reading in Prinzregententheater München in 2012 and then as a music theater at the Berliner Staatsoper (in Schillertheater) two years later. In both its literary and theatrical form, *Rein Gold* communicates strong political and aesthetic affinities with Richard Wagner and Bertolt Brecht. In this paper I will examine Brechtian and Wagnerian references within a postdramatic context and argue that the ultimate goal of both writer and director, while applying Brechtian techniques as a means to dislocate Wagner's familiar theme and voice of the *Ring*, is to make them totally "EPIC."

— Brecht and Brechtian theater

As the crucial figure in destabilizing conventional theater aesthetics in the twentieth century, Brecht's work and aesthetic theory have indisputably impacted Western theater practitioners until the present day. Many Austrian playwrights—including Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek—adopt a Brechtian aesthetic in constructing their post-modern dramaturgy.

The nature of Brechtian aesthetics is inevitably bound to three key terms: *Verfremdungseffekte*, *Gestus*, and *epic*, which the theatre reformer developed to engage his spectators into critical thinking of reality. For Brecht, *Verfremdungseffekte* (alienation/distancing effects) is a device, with which the familiar is made strange in order to engender a political, critically oriented process of perception. *Gestus*, on the other hand, allows actors/performers, through their socially meaningful body and gestures, to experience the events in a realistic realm. It distinguishes from the "illustrative or expressive gesticulation," as Fowler points out.¹ In any case, both terms identify a defamiliarized performing process as well as a denaturalizing performing agent (body).

— Jelinek and the written essay: Language as means of alienation

Being a Marxist writer, Jelinek deploys an overtly political dimension in her oeuvre. As a dramatist, she shares Brechtian political aesthetics in incorporating Marxist philosophy into her early dramatic works. In her writing "Zu Brecht,"² Jelinek shows her critical view of Brecht but cannot deny his contribution to the modern theater; following in the theater reformer's footsteps, she conceptualizes modern theater as a platform for social and political activism. For instance, her breakthrough play *Was Geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte; oder Stützen der Gesellschaften* (1979), within the Brechtian tradition of the *Lehrstück*, reveals how a small elite segment of the exploitative capitalist society is capable of controlling political and economic institutions.

Brecht's influence on Jelinek finds its further evidence in her dramaturgical technique, where she unapologetically adopts Brechtian alienation effects by means of intertextual reference, as documented in her own words about *Nora*:

Ich sehe [...] mein Nora-Stück als eine Weiterentwicklung des Brechtschen Theaters mit modernen

¹ Fowler, Kenneth: *Receive Truths: Bertolt Brecht and the Problem of Gestus and Musical Meaning*. New York: AMS 1991. 29.

² The text encompasses three short essays: "Alles oder Nichts," "Brecht aus der Mode," and "Das Maß der Maßlosigkeit."

Mitteln der Literatur, [...], vorgefundenes Material—pur oder gemischt mit eigenem, aus dem ursprünglichen Zusammenhang gerissen—nebeneinanderzusetzen, um eine Bewußtmachung von Zuständen und Sachverhalten zu erreichen.³

In *Rein Gold*, Jelinek also overtly employs Brechtian aesthetics to underline the problem of modern society: the capitalist market oriented political and economic system. However, her strategy of achieving alienation effects, inevitably bound to her playful language, goes beyond Brecht.

The very title of Jelinek's prose work refers to *Rheingold* (1985), the first part of Wagner's epic music drama *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. By dropping the letter "h," Jelinek sarcastically makes use of phonetic pun to familiarize readers with the thematic matter of Wagner's *Ring*. i.e., money/gold and power. However, her radical deconstruction of Wagner's myth confronts readers with a flood of associations. Without a traditional plot driven form, the essayistic writing is permeated with a monologue-like, restless dialogue between Wotan and his favorite daughter Brünnhilde, who bear only the names of Wagner's operatic characters. From the first 48 pages' words of the Marxist daughter, readers are informed that Wotan, despite the fact that of financial inability, wants to build his home Valhalla. Knowing he would never repay the debts, the almighty god still lets giants build the castle.

Distorting Wagner's dramatic intended original libretto in Act 3 of "Valkyrie," Jelinek presents a number of events—from the Nibelungen Saga to the recent international financial crisis—by means of intertextual reference, including Hermann Jelinek, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Richard Wagner, Wolfgang Schild, etc.

Jelinek's conscious and explicit intention of referencing Wagner demonstrates how Wagner's ideological loaded myth is disseminated from the past into our time. For instance, as a god of capitalism who has power the gold and money, Wotan's action mirrors the dubious financial conduct of the former German federal president Christian Wulff, who accepted a private loan to purchase his house. In doing so, Wagner's characters are demythologized in Jelinek's text. Together with the defamiliarization of the canonical text, Wagner's famous, pre-existing storyline is destroyed while a new meaning is created, and this requires readers to take an attentive, active, and critical position.

To detach her work from the formal element and aesthetics of theatrical illusion, Jelinek overtly announces in her programmatic essay "Ich möchte seicht sein": "Ich will kein Theater. Vielleicht will ich einmal nur Tätigkeiten ausstellen."⁴ A strategy of distancing her work from the "dramatic" is seen in the deliberately labeling of the *Rein Gold* as a "stage-essay," which simultaneously verifies a heterogeneous writing style—namely, the amalgamation of "stage" and "essay" designates an interrelationship between text and performance (performance="stage"; a literary text="essay"). Meanwhile, with the word "stage," Jelinek detaches her text from the genre "drama" without denying its potential for either a theatrical or operatic (re)production. More importantly, using the tag "essay," Jelinek self-consciously restrains her text to a literary genre/form, which, in a structured format, involves someone's own argument or an analytical, critical reflection on a certain subject matter. This suggests that Jelinek has no intention to either re-write (or re-stage) Wagner's *Rheingold* or compose her *Rein Gold* in a dramatic format and with traditional theatre aesthetics

³ Jelinek, Elfriede: *Ich schlage sozusagen mit der Axt drein*. In: Theater Zeitschrift 7/1984, pp. 14-16, p.15.

⁴ Jelinek, Elfriede: *Ich möchte seicht sein*. In: Theater heute. Jahrbuch 1983, p.102.

— Nicola Stemann and music theater: epic performance and meta-theatricality

In the over three-hour theatrical production, Stemann, departing from dramatic convention, employs Brechtian alienation effects to defamiliarize Jelinek's text in the staged performance. The essayistic prose text becomes a now slashed, dissected, and rearranged *Sprechtext*. Three actors, who do not impersonate any characters but identify themselves as speakers, deliver Jelinek's distorted text.⁵ In order to underline their function as simply *Textträger* (text bearers),⁶ all actors hold the scripts in their hands. Lacking dialogical interaction and psychological development of their actions, the speaking actors disable spectators' traditional on-stage illusion, their empathic emotion, as well as their identification with either Wagner's mythical or Jelinek's demythologized characters. On the other hand, dressing in modern clothes, they present a closer connection with spectators who are now on the boundary between Wagner's mythic world and their own reality. By directly addressing the spectators and emphasizing their presence like omniscient narrators or commentators, these actors break the "fourth wall," as it is applied in a typical Brechtian epic theatre.

While ready-made dialogue from the poetic text loses its primary position on the stage, music plays now an equal role [comparable with Wagner's aesthetic concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*]. Within its original Wagnerian music-dramatic context, the performance contains metatheatrical reference rather than an intertextual element—that is to say, Wagner's *Ring*, as the full embodiment of his concept of music drama,⁷ turns to a device of a kind of a "play-within-the-play." To enhance the vocal-symphonic texture of Wagner's music drama, a large traditional orchestra quotes some leitmotifs from the *Ring*, while the singing of Wotan, Brünnhilde, and three Rhine daughters comes in at certain points.

But more importantly, by combining Wagner's estranged music with the speaking of Jelinek's text, Stemann's stag production of *Rein Gold* also relies on the Brechtian technique of montage, which, according to Walter Benjamin, becomes "the modern, constructive, active, unmelancholy form of allegory, namely the ability to connect dissimilars in such a way as to 'shock' people into new recognitions and understandings" for Brecht.⁸ In the process of montage, the continuity of both Wagner's music/opera and Jelinek's *Sprechen* are broken, and it is difficult to say whether Wagner's canonical music functions as a disruptive device for the flow of Jelinek's speakers' speaking, or vice versa. This confusion results in the spectators' constant attentiveness of the events presented on the stage and the current reality, and it eventually forces them to become detached analysts rather than passive bystanders.

— Conclusion

As a music practitioner Jelinek, with her admiration of Wagner, is embedded in her self-portrayal as "a passionate Wagnerian." With neither a logically developed plot nor psychologically determined internal conflicts, Jelinek's distorted representation of Wagner's ready-made libretto updates the

⁵ In the role of mediator, they "exist only in language, and as long as they speak, they are present; when they don't speak, they disappear." See Jelinek, Elfriede: *Wir leben auf einem Berg von Leichen und Schmerz. Interview by Peter von Becker*. In: *Theater heute* 22/ September 1992: 4.

⁶ A term advanced by Gerda Poschmann in her discussion about postdramatic theatre. See Poschmann, Gerda: *Der nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext: Aktuelle Bühnenstücke und ihre dramaturgische Analyse*. Berlin: De Gruyter 1997, reprint 2010.

⁷ In his book *Oper und Drama* (1850-51), Wagner uses simply the term "drama" instead of music drama, which was advanced by later critics and scholars. See Richard, Wagner: *Opera and Drama*. Translated by William Ashton Ellis. University of Nebraska: University of Nebraska press, 1995.

⁸ Mitchell, Stanley: *Introduction*. In: Benjamin, Walter: *Understanding Brecht*. London: Verso 1998, pp.i.-xix. p. xiii.

storyline of Wagner's *Rheingold* in her *Rein Gold*. The goal of her appropriation of Brechtian alienation effects is to draw parallels between the Wagnerian ideology and the political-economic reality of our time, and eventually to criticize the modern capitalist culture.

While Jelinek transfers Wagner's mythic world into the current global reality, Stemann makes use of spectators' prior knowledge of Wagner's famous music drama. With the technique of montage, Wagner's original music is selected, dispersed, and recomposed. By mixing up the estranged Wagnerian music with the defamiliarized text of Jelinek, Stemann imbues *Rein Gold* with metatheatrical features. Its epic performance within the context of postdramatic theater culture forces spectators to confront the boundary between the Wagnerian mythic world and the Jelinekian reality of the present.