

Challenging the Angel: Dramatic Defamiliarization in *Angels in America*

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ABSTRACT

Employing a montage of scenes, styles, and personal stories and plots, Tony Kushner's monumental theatrical undertaking Angels in America offers a dialectical examination of end-of-the-millennium America. This paper attempts to explore how Kushner's dramatic approach makes use of the dialectics inherent in the figure of the angel – with all of the implicit contradictions, paradoxes and ironies. Kushner's aesthetic functions on the basis of recurrent defamiliarization and re-familiarization which, though Brechtian in essence, technically provides the author and, in turn, also the audience with a space where elements of the epic theatre mix with traditional Aristotelian structure to offer a paradoxical unity between Verfremdung and catharsis. The intentional subversion of traditional forms and concepts (such as the character of the divine messenger) allows the dramatic presentation of a whole variety of ideas, implications and perceptions.

KEYWORDS

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, Bertolt Brecht, Verfremdung, epic theatre, subversion, angel

The mind [...] shouldn't be able to make up anything that wasn't there to start with, that didn't enter it from experience, from the real world. [...] Nothing unknown is knowable.

Angels in America: Millennium Approaches, Act I, Scene 7¹

At the end of *Millennium Approaches*, the first part of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Prior Walter, the play's protagonist and 'prophet-to-be' gasps in awe at the spectacular display of apparently supernatural powers in his bedroom and screams, terrified: "OH! PLEASE, OH PLEASE! Something's coming in here, I'm scared, I don't like this at all, something's approaching and I... OH!"² The invisible presence of the looming messenger fills him with feelings of horror, amazement and sexual arousal. Kushner's stage directions here read:

(There is a great blaze of triumphal music, heralding. The light turns an extraordinary harsh, cold, pale blue, then a rich, brilliant warm golden color, then a hot bilious green, and then finally a spectacular royal purple. Then silence.)³

The audience is invited to share this emotionally intense and visually stunning experience to be interrupted only seconds later by Prior's involuntary and distracting

- 1 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches. Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 38.
- 2 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 124.
- 3 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 124.

whisper: "God Almighty... *Very* Steven Spielberg."⁴ Then the angel plummets through the ceiling, splendidly and magnificently, and announces her arrival which concludes *Millennium Approaches*.

This diversion of the audience's attention and disruption of their immersion in the magical final scene owes a great deal to Bertolt Brecht's idea of *Verfremdung*, or estrangement, an illustrious and major tool of Brecht's political theatre. Kushner's politics very much draw on Brecht's legacy not only in terms of how he approaches his material, but also in how he employs specific instruments to present this material to the audience. In Kushner's plays, *Verfremdung* – as a device used in non-Aristotelian (or epic) theatre – functions in line with the classical dramatic structure employed in individual scenes.

In this paper I will attempt to explore how Kushner's dramatic approach makes use of the dialectics inherent in the figure of the angel – with all of the implicit and explicit contradictions, paradoxes and ironies. Kushner's aesthetic functions on the basis of frequent defamiliarization and re-familiarization which, though Brechtian in essence, technically provides the author and, in turn, also the audience with a space where elements of the epic theatre mix with the traditional Aristotelian structure. The result is a dynamic dramatic style that offers a paradoxical unity between *Verfremdung* and catharsis. It is my aim to prove that there is a whole series of paradoxes or outright contradictions which allow Kushner to embrace human diversity and claim it as a principal driving force of progress.

Epic configuration

Kushner's paradoxes provide a set of challenges which stimulate the plot and story, drive character development and dialogue, and help propel the play's political message. With *Angels in America*, Kushner wanted to write a primarily dialectical rather than strictly non-Aristotelian play because for him, drama made in the Brechtian fashion is "like dialectical materialist analysis" and it is set to explore "the magic of perception and the political, ideological employment to which the magic is put".⁵ The questioning, doubting and challenging of the classical building material for dramatic art provides the author with sufficient space to point out (without explicitly pointing his finger) relevant social, political and cultural issues of the last two decades of the 20th century and to bid the audience think about these issues deeply and critically.

Art Borreca effectively argues that the influence of Brecht's epic theatre on *Angels in America* is clearly visible in the play's "episodic structure, emblematic and 'ideologized' characters, and theatrical montage, and in the use of these techniques to 'estrangle' or 'defamiliarize' sociohistorical conditions in a particular place and time."⁶ For Brecht, montage – a tool adopted from modernist fiction and widely used in film – ensured a disruption of the traditional unity of time and space. Brecht metaphorically compared montage to taking "a pair of scissors and [cutting the play] into individual pieces, which

4 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 124.

5 Tony Kushner, "Notes About Political Theatre," *Kenyon Review*, XIX/3-4 (1997): 27.

6 Art Borreca, "Dramaturging the Dialectic: Brecht, Benjamin and Declan Donnellan's Production of *Angels in America*," in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 245.

[would] remain fully capable of life".⁷ In *Understanding Brecht*, Walter Benjamin writes about this particular aspect of the epic theatre:

In film, the theory has become more and more accepted that the audience should be able to 'come in' at any point, that complicated plot developments should be avoided and that each part, besides the value it has for the whole, should also possess its own episodic value. [...] Epic theatre introduces the same practice on stage.⁸

To a great degree, this applies to *Angels in America* as well – the episodic value of individual scenes remains high while never undermining the degree of causality visible in the play's plot. Kushner thus detaches himself from Brechtian theatre and counterbalances the 'epic' character of *Angels in America* with round, traditionally structured scenes. The paradox, though, is practical and functional: the slow build-up in the classical sense is subverted and deconstructed in a purely non-Aristotelian manner, for example the bearing of the angelic prophecy, which uses first flashbacks and then parallel scenes happening at different points in time, but shown simultaneously. If Brecht says that in epic theatre suspension of disbelief should be steered clear of by eschewing the creation of illusion,⁹ Kushner suggests that magical and illusion-laden scenes be played seriously, without ostentatious distancing of the actors from the realistic dimension of the story. In his "Note About the Staging" to both parts of *Angels in America*, Kushner gives producers and directors the following advice:

The play benefits from a pared-down style of presentation, with minimal scenery and scene shifts done rapidly (no blackouts!), employing the cast as well as stagehands – which makes for an actor-driven event, as this must be.

The moments of magic – all of them – are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion – which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing.¹⁰

Kushner's art relies on the supposition that a minimalist and truthful production and presentation of the individual scenes will ultimately stimulate the audience's critical and emotional approach to the play as a whole. The theatrical illusion ought to be breathtaking and the enchantment "thoroughly amazing", however, it should never betray the audience as either a piece of attempted realism, or exaggerated charade. "Every moment must be played for its reality, the terms always life and death; only then will the comedy emerge," Kushner writes in his "Playwright's Notes" to *Perestroika*, warning actors and directors against letting the characters and some of the magic slip into farce.¹¹

7 Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1964), 70.

8 Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso Books, 2003), 6.

9 Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 122.

10 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 141.

11 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 142.

Kushner walks a very thin line between outright Brechtian and traditionally Aristotelian form in both parts of *Angels in America*. The balance he is forced to maintain allows him to simultaneously entertain and emotionally stir his audience, while awakening their critical and rational perception. This approach is typical for epic theatre:

Far from being concerned to reinforce the audience's sense of security, Brecht wants, as he says, to 'create contradictions within them' – to unsettle their convictions, dismantle and refashion their received identities, and expose the unity of this selfhood as an ideological illusion.¹²

The contradictions created within the audience form the basis of a dialectical approach to theatre – an approach that allowed Brecht, as it does Kushner, to explore political and social ties, intricacies and correlations between a set of opposites that make up the whole of any given socio-political system. With an angel as one of the *dramatis personae*, the subversion of the audience's sense of security is achieved by means of a similar set of opposites which I will discuss in more detail below.

The Angel of History

Angels are beings of mystical nature, magical entities whose supernatural character and glorious countenance would deem them an unfamiliar sight in our everyday lives. Yet they are everywhere, portrayed in art, written and spoken about with idiomatic ease, believed in and imagined by people. Angels are a majestic and very traditional part of human mythology. They are God's messengers, a direct link between God and people, a channel through which – even if symbolically – the human kind can communicate with Heaven.

Tony Kushner quite consciously subverts the conventional view of angels when he defines the Continental Principalities in his play as "inconceivably powerful Celestial Apparatchik/Bureaucrat-Angels",¹³ and then throughout their appearance in the story in which they are portrayed as divine messengers lacking divine control, as administrators without any creative decision-making capacity. Kushner's subversion blurs our traditional and familiar image of angels as God's envoys with an overlapping picture of disarray and bureaucratic mayhem in a godless Heaven.

The angel who visits Prior and appoints him a prophet bears features of angels amalgamated from the Old Testament, Mormon religious history, works of visual art and even characters and themes in popular culture. According to Ken Nielsen, the angel in Kushner's play, introduced as 'the Continental Principality of America' is "magnificent yet powerless [...] neither Mormon nor Jewish but a quite American combination of the two."¹⁴ All angels in the play, Nielsen suggests, function within the logic of the fact that they "can only administer, not instigate action" and therefore they are to be identified by a set of binary opposites, so clearly reminiscent of Brecht's dialectical contradictions:

12 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1996), 162.

13 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 138.

14 Ken Nielsen, *Tony Kushner's Angels in America* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 48.

“powerful/weak, heavenly/earthly (after all [the angel] pulls a muscle in her thigh wrestling with Prior), male/female.”¹⁵

In other words, Kushner presents angels who are both serious and laughable, and whose appearance constantly verges on the farcical, but never quite becomes it. The audience feels that these are angelic officers who make us laugh, but who should not be laughed at – like politicians who are laughable, but enormously powerful. The audience’s expectations are thus constantly challenged in a process that first takes the glory and splendor away from the angel only to reinstate it later with a new sense of immense celestial power and magnificence.

ANGEL:

III

Am the Bird of America, The Bald Eagle,
Continental Principality

LUMEN PHOSPHOR FLUOR CANDLE!

I unfold my leaves, Bright steel,

In salutation open sharp before you:

PRIOR WALTER

[...]

American Prophet tonight you become,

American Eye that pierceth the Dark,

American Heart all Hot for Truth,

The True Great Vocalist, the Knowing Mind

Tongue-of-the-Land, Seer-Head!¹⁶

To which Prior Walter, aghast and frightened says: “Oh, shoo!” as if the angel was not God’s emissary appointing him a prophet, but an annoying pet. The fact that this scene is presented as a flashback in which Prior tells Belize what happened in his bedroom three weeks before is also an evident utilization of Brechtian dramatic instruments – the moments of magic and awe are interrupted with snippets of dialogue between Belize and Prior. When the angel has sexual intercourse with Prior, she echoes the nearly tantric mantra “the body is the garden of the soul”¹⁷ and the scene – though clearly absurd and exaggerated – thus acquires not just sexual, but also (subversively) spiritual implications. The shocked Belize is then told that the angel has “eight vaginas” and is “hermaphroditically as well equipped with a bouquet of phalli”¹⁸ endowing all the splendor and magnificence of the scene with rather peculiar, Star-Trek-like qualities.

But the Brechtian dialectical opposites which can be traced in Kushner’s text emerge only later, as a consequence of the above mentioned visitation. The angel, with all her bureaucratic power, is unable to force Prior to accept and spread the prophecy of stasis. Prior rejects the message and philosophy contained in the ‘Tome of Immobility’ because, for all the pain and suffering life brings, the request to stop all motion and progress is, just like Belize says, “malevolent”, it goes against human nature.¹⁹ It only demonstrates the lack of knowledge, creativity and imagination on the part of the angels,

15 Ken Nielsen, *Tony Kushner’s Angels in America*, 49.

16 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 170.

17 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 174.

18 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 175.

19 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 180.

who lost themselves in their aimless power after God had abandoned Heaven. And Prior's statement of refusal which he makes in Heaven, summoned before all of the Continental Principalities, is also a statement of his (and Kushner's) personal politics:

PRIOR:

I've lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much much worse, but... You see them living anyway. When they're more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they're burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children, they live. [...] I don't know if it's not braver to die. But I recognize the habit. The addiction to being alive. We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do.²⁰

Kushner subverts the traditional view of angels using epic dramatic elements, as well as via the character of Prior who challenges the Continental Principality of America – first in a physical fight in which he prevails, just like the biblical Jacob in the Book of Genesis, and then also in the moral and essentially human act of rejecting the order from Heaven to “stop moving”. Prior's defiance culminates in *Perestroika*, the second part of *Angels in America*, which comes to signify hope and reconstruction of all that has been wrecked in the apocalyptically imbued *Millennium Approaches*. Prior defies the angels and dismisses the prophecy even if it were to mean his death. But Prior's decision, though verging on the romantically sentimental, never ceases to be subversive, a little tongue-in-cheek. It never lapses into the improbable – or, at least not in terms of the effect it has on the audience in the framework of the play's personal politics. Brecht's presence here is more felt than rationally visible, or, to borrow a wonderful image from Janelle Reinelt, Brecht becomes more of a “specter, like Ethel Rosenberg or Roy Cohn in the play: a specific historical presence conjured up, but as a dramatic fiction, to haunt the play through both limitation and aspiration.”²¹

Quite evidently, Kushner's political and historical approach to his dramatic material in *Angels in America* has its origin and inspiration not only in Bertolt Brecht, but also in Walter Benjamin's philosophical interpretation of Paul Klee's painting entitled *Angelus Novus*. Many scholars, notably Michael Cadden, Martin Harries, and David Savran, have pointed out and analyzed the correlation between Klee's painting, Benjamin's interpretation thereof, and Kushner's angel. Here I will only reflect on the significance of Benjamin's angel of history to Kushner's shift from the traditionally magical to the epically (in the Brechtian sense) critical:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to

²⁰ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 266-267.

²¹ Janelle Reinelt, “Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theater,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 235.

stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.²²

The above passage is a reflection of the magical and critical which Kushner seeks to merge in *Angels in America*. Like in the painting, in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* we see attempts at reconstruction of what human history has shattered. The position of the angel is paradoxical – just like Kushner’s own position as a writer – he faces the past to which he cannot return because a storm from Paradise (from the past it seems) drives him towards the future, against his will. It appears that the angel is moving backwards, but progressing. This apparent paradox is the essential element that also drives forward *Angels in America* as a whole.

How unknown things can become knowable

James Fisher uses Benjamin’s interpretation of *Angelus Novus* to claim that Kushner’s play is constructed on the idea that “ruins of history [are] the price of progress.”²³ Fisher fittingly relates the image of Klee’s angel moving backwards into the future to Raymond Williams’s 1985 essay entitled ‘Walking Backwards Into the Future’ in which the author elaborates the importance of the interconnectedness between history and human progress in the process of moving from individualism towards a more community-based, socialist type of society.²⁴ According to Fisher, the common ground between *Angels in America* and Raymond Williams’s text is the idea that “[a] reformed society built on a progressive, compassionately humanist doctrine that draws its strength from the hard lessons of the past.”²⁵ Indeed, the play presents situations which correlate polar opposites and construct a future for the characters (and, in turn, of entire communities and ultimately the world) out of their disintegrated past:

HARPER:

Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, limbs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning. And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles, and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired.²⁶

22 Walter Benjamin in Lutz Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin And the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 167.

23 James Fisher, *Living Past Hope. The Theater of Tony Kushner* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 54.

24 James Fisher, *Living Past Hope*, 57.

25 James Fisher, *Living Past Hope*, 58.

26 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 275.

For Harper Pitt, this image reflects her own, very personal struggle with identity, Mormon upbringing and difficult familial relations. We do not get to see the end of this struggle, but her decision to undergo a radical change, however tough and wounding, propels her into a position similar to that of Paul Klee's (and ultimately Walter Benjamin's) angel of history. The web of souls patching up the hole in the ozone layer which she pictures refers not only to the link between the past and the future, ruin and reconstruction, death and birth, but also to the simple fact that all it sometimes takes is a different point of view and everything that seemed lost or unknowable can be instantly within a person's reach. "I saw something only I could see because of my astonishing ability to see such things,"²⁷ Harper says, realizing – and making the audience realize too – that being aware of oneself, taking notice of the structure and system of one's being, and recognizing one's limitations (e.g. when Harper understands that "nothing unknown is knowable"²⁸ because the mind works only with the data it has encountered) is what makes one capable of personal growth.

While the dialectical binaries inherent in Kushner's angel of America become manifest in most of the play's other characters who undergo major changes in their lives, it is the defamiliarization element, the awareness of what causes the changes and what their potential consequences might be, that sets all transformation in motion. In Kushner's play, this does not necessarily mean metatheatre or metadrama, but rather a notion that the spectator (and/or member of society) ought to adopt the position of the angel of history – i.e. look at the past while moving away from it, not nostalgically, not cynically or disapprovingly, but with a sense that our understanding of a reality we are not part of may aid us in improving all sorts of other realities – including our own. Just like a society aspiring to reach the perfection of Raymond Williams's ideal would require its members to live in it and at the same time view it from a critical and analytical distance.

In this correlation of cathartic (involved) and critical (detached) experience, the worlds of Kushner's politics and theatre meet. In both, the element of becoming critically aware of something we seem to know without realizing it extends our experience to new realms, just like Terry Eagleton says about literary language: "Most of the time we breathe in air without being conscious of it: like language, it is the very medium in which we move. But if the air is suddenly thickened or infected we are forced to attend to our breathing with new vigilance, and the effect of this may be a heightened experience of our bodily life."²⁹ In other words, if we are thrown off balance, if we lose our seemingly perfect mental, emotional and spiritual equilibrium, albeit for a brief instant, things that seemed unknowable may become known, and ultimately also, perhaps, understood.

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27 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, 275.

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