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ARTICLES

# **2D, 3D and other D's**

José Capela

## Abstract

This text is about detachment. A comparative analysis is carried out between the detachment performed (in theatre) by Bertolt Brecht and stage designer Caspar Neher and the type of detachment found (in architecture) by Manfredo Tafuri in buildings since the Renaissance.

In both cases, detachment is identified where there is a dissonance between an object and its context. Both Marxists and ideologically affiliated to “historical materialism”, Brecht and Tafuri advocate the practice of relativization of history through the confrontation of different historical periods (a particular way of decontextualization). Both of them believe also in the libertarian and politically destabilizing potential of detachment. However, the similarities end here. From this point onwards, the discussion evolves to identify the implications of the centrality Tafuri awards to the language of buildings, which constitutes a departure from the production issue at the basis of Brecht’s materialistic “aesthetics”. Finally, this difference leads to yet another divergence, related to the type of spatial device each of them works with: the difference between a stage and the opposite of a stage.

**Keywords:** Bertolt Brecht; Manfredo Tafuri; Caspar Neher; detachment

## Renaissance 3D

I shall begin by talking about the Renaissance period, six centuries ago. A time when there was no photography or printing press. A time when Architecture, often associated to Sculpture or Painting, was one of the few ways of producing and spreading images. The time when a scientific system for depicting reality, called “perspective”, was invented. After that, space could be represented, not just with depth of field, but also with a continuous, progressive and commensurable evolution between the *near* and the *distant*.

Perspective made it possible to create images – two-dimensional representations – similar in appearance to what the human eye sees when observing things around it; or, at least, considerably

more so than previously existing images. Filippo Brunelleschi sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of perspective as a representation system by making this similarity obvious, and for this he used his famous *tavoletta*. In order to use the *tavoletta*, the observer would stand in front of the *Battisterio de San Giovanni*, holding a painting of that building from the back, the depiction of the building facing the building itself. The real baptistery could be seen through a hole in the centre of the painting. In addition to the painting, the observer would also hold a mirror. When placed in front of the hole, the mirror would partially block the view of part of the building, but this could still be seen. The hidden part was replaced by the reflection of the painting. There would be seamless continuity between the baptistery parts that were not blocked by the mirror and the part that was blocked but replaced by the reflection of its depiction in the painting. From the standpoint of the human eye, the two-dimensional representation had an appearance similar to the three-dimensional object it depicted (Panofsky, 1992).

In addition to this empirical demonstration, Brunelleschi also substantiated the legitimacy of perspective *scientifically*, through the graphical construction which made the image possible, but I would like to focus on the appearance of perspective – its verisimilitude. The possibility of an image being convincing enough for the human eye not only marked the onset of a new era of representational epistemology (the representation of space and representation in general), but it was also the first time there was scope for representations that could *deceive* – which the French would later designate quite literally as “deceive the eye” (*trompe-l’oeil*).

The representation of spaces that did not exist was not a novelty. The novelty resided in the illusionism: the relatively convincing impression of standing before a space that was actually nothing more than its representation. This illusionism was all the more eloquent the more the fictitious thing was conceived to be mistaken for real, i.e., the more the perspectival representation of space co-existed in apparent seamlessness with real spaces, or with people and objects. And so was born the modern concept of “stage design”: spaces which

were only perspectically represented on a surface (the traditional backdrops) and spaces which did exist but, due to the accelerated perspective, appeared to be something they were not, such as the superlative *Teatro Olimpico* (1575-1585) by the architect Andrea Palladio.

### dissonance

I will not dwell on the history of stage design anymore. I would like to introduce a different subject and get back to stage design later. I will resume the topic of the Renaissance period but, this time, to consider some of Manfredo Tafuri's thoughts on this matter.

Referring to the Renaissance, Tafuri (1988: 36-38) stated:

From the moment that Brunelleschi institutionalizes a linguistic code and a symbolic system based on the supra-historical confrontation with the great example of Antiquity, at a time when Alberti is no longer satisfied by a mythical historicism and rationally explores the structure of that code in its syntactic as well as emblematic values, in that time span begins the first major attempt in modern history to refresh historical values as the translation of a mythical term to the present day, from archaic meanings to revolutionary messages, from old "words" to civil actions.

(...)

Brunelleschi's architectural objects, autonomous and absolute, were intended to intervene in the structures of the medieval city by subverting and changing their meanings. (...) One of the greatest lessons of Brunelleschi's Humanism resides in his view of the pre-existing city as an ephemeral and available structure, ready to change its global significance once the Romanesque-Gothic balance of "continuous narration" is changed with the introduction of compact architectural objects.

(...)

Therefore, Brunelleschi performs his urban revolution using architectural objects as a starting point. He seems aware that the level of rigour employed in their construction alone implies the introduction of a new code for interpretation, even

for the city as a structure. What was previously the norm – the historical overlay of events and the paratactic nature<sup>1</sup> of space – now becomes the exception, when interpreted in the light of the new humanist linguistic code. Conversely, the rational rigour of the organism, which used to be the exception, becomes the norm.

According to Tafuri, Brunelleschi's buildings inaugurated a new architecture. They did not obey or provide continuity to an urban and edificatory logic of the city, affirming their own, autonomous order instead. Tafuri draws several consequences from this observation, but I would like to focus on two particular aspects.

The invention of the entity called "project design" is historically credited to Alberti. It is based on the total separation between the design stage of the project – which is carried out by the architect and results in the production of a number of drawings that determine the form of buildings – and the subsequent stage when the building is constructed by a group of people which simply follow the instructions contained in the drawings. It was a decisive step towards what has been our concept of architecture for the past six centuries, and most of the time we still design projects according to Alberti's prescription.

However, this is not the invention Tafuri values the most when he looks retrospectively to the Renaissance "revolution". More than the procedural aspects intrinsic to the project of architecture, preceding the object, he is interested in the effect produced by objects, by their presence. He is particularly interested in the evocation of Classical Antiquity brought about by new buildings and in confronting that *evoked order* with the medieval urban context. The meaning of buildings – their language and their symbolizing capacity – is thus fulfilled in the confrontation with their respective context. In their *dissonance*. As Tafuri explains, this dissonance can even result in a reversal of roles: instead of looking to a Renaissance building as an exception in the medieval context, one may see it as a presentation (a sort of sample) of a new context in light of which the old medieval city is seen from a *detached* outlook.

In order to make these considerations, Tafuri sets out from a very particular acceptance of “context”. When discussing architectural projects, the term “context” usually means the geographic features or landscape of a particular location or region, the pre-existing “architecture”, the structure of land occupation... this acceptance may even be extended to include abstract aspects such as the habits and the culture of a specific population or specific rules which must be followed when intervening in a given land parcel. Tafuri refers to context as something that determines the interpretation of objects; as a set of conceptual assumptions in view of which it becomes possible to interpret what the works mean. As a cultural *a priori* that works tend to follow but in respect of which *certain* works (such as Renaissance buildings) may acquire a critical dimension. They may lead to *distancing* - the second aspect I would like to address.

### **distancing**

For Tafuri, the Renaissance marked the onset of a new stage for Architecture as a discipline. It is common knowledge that this was the period when an architectural language of the past was for the first time recovered in a *systematic* manner, and that this recovery reflects a framework of cultural and ontological values. Tafuri discusses this fact focusing specifically on the concept of “history”. From his point of view, Renaissance architects reused building forms from the past as a tool to construct a discourse. This discourse was not about the past, but rather about the *relation* between the *present* and the *past*. In other words, forms from the past were used not just out of the desire to recover that past, but because these forms served as a reference to a discourse about the relation between the present day and history. For Tafuri, these buildings convey a discourse that is, to that extent, *historiographical*.

Tafuri recognises highly intellectualised intents in these projects (much like his own discourse, for that matter). Andrew Leach (2007: 97) refers to this way of understanding Renaissance architecture, stating that ‘(...) *in intellectual terms, Architecture emerges from this moment as a practice subject to its own theoretical programme: it is different from*

*building for being what we would now call one of the arts*’.

Therefore, the establishment of Architecture’s “own theoretical programme” was based on projects which cited other projects that preceded them. It was based on an architecture that represented itself –in a self-representation. It is insofar as the projects acquire the ability to “speak” for themselves that Architecture develops a theoretical *corpus*.

Tafuri always sees this possibility of self-representation as the adoption of a retrospective stance. He understands the evolution of Architecture from the Renaissance period up to the time of his writings (the 1960s) as the history of the tension between historicism and anti-historicism – in other words, as a permanent choice of stance regarding the relation between the present and the *past*.

This also explains the fact that Tafuri refers to self-representation as “metalanguage”. If, in order to interpret a particular building, it becomes necessary to accurately realise which point past it makes reference to, then the language of the new building must connect with the language of the past it makes reference to. The building “speaks about a manner of speaking”. That is metalanguage indeed.

I do not think that, in order for Architecture to represent itself, it must represent architecture produced specifically in the past. A building that is not tied to the architecture of the past does not necessarily constitute an anti-historicist manifesto, as Tafuri assumes. An abstract building may represent a “way of understanding buildings”: it may represent the universe of buildings, i.e., Architecture (in its most traditional acceptance). The *Schröder House*, for example, can be seen as a representation of architectural objects in general, understood as “sets of coloured plans arranged in space conforming spaces”. To this extent, it is actually a possible definition for “architecture” (“architecture” as in “architectural object”). You could label such a project as anti-historicist, or supra-historical, but you can also consider it merely abstract – an attempt to define the basic constituents of space configuration and architectural form.

However, Tafuri’s argument is paramount to our understanding of Architecture as a “theoretical programme”. The revolution Tafuri identifies in

Renaissance architecture is in fact the revolution he himself introduced in the theory of Architecture: despite being bound to history or historiography, Tafuri systematizes the concept of *self-reflexive* project.

A project may represent other projects in order to create a discourse about projects.

### **distancing through stage design**

Let's get back to stage design. After having argued that projects which refer to other projects (or to project design) possess a self-reflexive nature, I would now like to address this issue in the context of stage design. I will only consider scenarios that represent some part of a supposed reality, regardless of their verisimilitude. I will be referring to mimetic scenarios, which happen to be the most common type, and out of these I will further exclude those representing "natural" things, such as forests, for example. So let's focus on scenarios representing constructions resulting from human design. Considering only this type of scenario, I would like to ask: If a scenario is a construction (that which is installed on stage) and it refers to other constructions (the part of the supposed reality evoked on stage), may one assume that all scenarios are self-reflexive?

I don't think so.

For several centuries, stage design has evolved to promote illusion, not consciousness. It evolved to become verisimilar. The invention of perspective in the Renaissance was a key step in this direction. The technical resources available to theatres also kept evolving until the golden age of mechanical devices and grandiose scenarios in the 19th Century, which preceded the invention of cinema. Things like volcanoes overflowing with lava and ashes falling over the actors or entire battles were something one could see staged in the great theatres, directed by top promoters to impress the wider audiences – to cause an impression as strong as the poignant situations endured by melodrama characters. Scenarios were meant to lend credibility to the narrative and magnify, atmospherically, its emotional effect. Their purpose was simply to be convincing, not to evoke reflection about them or anything else. Like a stimulant, they were aimed at emotions.

Already in the 20th Century, Bertolt Brecht would openly oppose this model of stage design. In his work, as well as set designer Caspar Neher's, with whom he worked, the reference to a "reality" outside the stage became critical in nature. Doubly critical, in fact:

1. The existence and operation of scenic devices were exposed. That which traditionally would be hidden was now left in plain sight. The recreated fragments of reality were now faced as fragments – limited in size in order to fit the stage. They no longer occupied the entire frame of the "window" through which the stage can be seen (breaking the illusion that there was a different place beyond the window) and, instead, they became scenic events that occupied only a part of the stage (which was accepted as a stage, i.e. the place for a representation). This way, more things could be placed on stage. It became possible to use elements of different natures which could be seen simultaneously, including, for example, projections and panels with texts. There was also room for some things that used to be hidden, such as light sources or the musicians. Scenery changes could now be seen. Ultimately, theatre itself was exposed as a device: the audience was not kept in the dark anymore, thus shattering the illusion that they were watching something which would happen even if the audience was not there and emphasizing the fact that they were experiencing a communication phenomenon. To this extent, Brecht and Neher made theatre critical of its own devices.
2. Through an inductive process, this theatre made apparent that everything mankind produces is a construction. Everything is the result of a particular choice in a given circumstance. Whether on or off the stage, facts are not pre-determined but rather guided by the will of individuals. That is what Brecht sought to prove his audience. He believed he could contribute to a process of social awareness – namely the promotion

of class consciousness. Common individuals should realise that their place in society was determined by the dominant classes, in other words, that they were dominated. For this to happen, the way of doing of artistic practice should evoke, or denounce, the way of doing of society in general: it should denounce that a production system was at the basis of social organisation and that the class deemed as “proletarian” had been created to feed that system. Speaking to those who make theatre, Brecht (1976: 321) advised: ‘Get [the audience], friends, to realise that this is not magic, but work’.

Therefore, the theatrical experience was understood as a cognitive exercise, much more reflexive than it used to be. *‘Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grasp with things’*, said Brecht (1964: 23) about his formula of “epic theatre”. And to *grasp with things* means to reach the distancing necessary in order to be able to see them clearly.

### historical distancing

In Brecht’s theatre, this distancing strategy includes an additional process known as “historicization”. In order to acquire a critical perspective regarding the “state of affairs” in the present, the present must be contrasted with the past – a contrast capable of allowing distancing in relation to things that may be too close in time to be seen with clarity. Analysing Brecht’s historicization, Meg Mumford (2009) identifies seven specific operative resources. She calls them “H-effects”: (1) distancing from current phenomena by moving them to the past; (2) viewing events as the result of circumstances and choices with an historical specificity; (3) showing the differences between the past and the present, highlighting the changes; (4) showing the similarities between the past and the present, promoting change; (5) denouncing the versions of history provided as the vision of the ruling class; (6) providing space for suppressed and interventionist stories; and (7) presenting all versions of history as serving vested interests.

At this point, it probably has become quite clear that I am trying to drive the argument towards a convergence between the distancing strategy proposed by Brecht (1898-1956) and the distancing strategy Tafuri (1935-1994) identified in Brunelleschi’s buildings. Brecht juxtaposed the past and the present within his dramatic narratives, so that both would become evident. Tafuri saw the Renaissance buildings as a juxtaposition of an object from a time to a city from another time, also with the purpose of making those times become evident.

Both Tafuri and Brecht believed that the confrontation of two different historical times could lead to *historical consciousness*, that is, the awareness that the present is the result of what was ideologically determined in the past and, above all, that what is happening in the present will determine the future. This basic realisation makes us agents of history just for living in the present. This is what allows us to modify history – to choose it, even. Or at least to be aware that we could do so.

Tafuri himself – by adopting a *transdisciplinary* perspective – took Brecht as a reference for his argument. Tafuri (1988: 113) advocates this promotion of consciousness as a possibility for all the different arts, stating that *‘Architecture, city and epic theatre, they all seek an extreme transparency of the processes that led to their making so that they can be revealed to those following their stories with distancing’*.

In his analysis of *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* (1968), Panayotis Tournikiotis (1999: 214-219) designates the possibility formulated by Tafuri – of opening Architecture to the questioning of its ideological bases – as *‘Brechtian poetics of Architecture’*.

After pointing out this convergence between the distancing *proposed* by Brecht and the one Tafuri *identified*, I would now like to consider a few issues related to the precise acceptance of said distancing according to the individual perspective of each of these thinkers, and then draw some conclusions about their differences.

### distancing from the means of production

What is Tafuri’s acceptance of “processes” when he is referring to the phenomena that originate the architecture or the city? I have already



mentioned the ideological function Tafuri assigns to the *language of buildings*. That language may be historicist, anti-historicist or – a role of paramount importance – the agent of historicization and, to that extent, destabiliser of history (Tafuri, 1988)<sup>2</sup>. This destabilisation leads to critical distancing, but what is it critical of?

Both Tafuri and Brecht were Marxists. Their political worldview is consistent with “historic materialism”: the belief that socialisation processes are organised, first and foremost, in terms of how people combine around a given *mode of production*. Brecht exposed the scenic mechanisms (productive) as a means to simultaneously expose historical mechanisms (the political narrative whose essence is production). How about Tafuri? How does language, a core element in Tafuri’s thought, relate to the production issues at the core of historical materialism?

From this point of view, it is difficult to relate Tafuri’s theory and the immediatism with which Brecht addressed the practical aspects of production – the *ways of doing*.

In *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* (1968), Brecht’s name often comes associated to Walter Benjamin, who also took Brecht a reference (Benjamin, 1992). For Benjamin, the epic theatre is a paradigmatic example of art that allows for distancing, precisely from the means of production. As seen in Dadaistic *collages*, the use of a given technique in epic theatre exposes the existence of that particular technique. The *way of doing* a particular work is not limited to a simple means of execution, nor is it a matter of virtuosity; it is primarily a part of the work’s *theme*. The work consists, at least in part, in demonstrating how it was made. It draws attention to the way it was produced like a finger pointing at it.

Tafuri does not take aspects of a productive nature into consideration. It is meaningful, for example, that Tafuri (1988) refers to Alberti as the precursor of the rational exploration of a linguistic code rooted in Antiquity and does not mention the fact that he also invented the labour concepts of “architect” and “project design” as we know them.

And now I can finally return to the starting point: perspective. If we momentarily refrain from situating facts in their historical context, it is interesting to note that Tafuri has elected Brunelleschi as

the founder of historicization in Architecture – a *distancing* process – when Brunelleschi is also the “inventor” of perspective – a feature of *illusionism*. Already in the 20th Century, Brecht (2000) would look upon the use of perspectival illusion with disdain, to the point of stating that it had no use other than providing a comic effect.

### device

To conclude, I propose returning to the theme of *dissonance* – that which occurs between the object and the context where it is inserted, and which is capable of triggering critical distancing. This strategy of “anomalous insertion” is historically associated to Marcel Duchamp’s readymade. In theatre, it is associated to Brecht. Tafuri proposed identifying it in Brunelleschi. In as far as regards the latter two (both at the core of my argument), an analogy could be established between:

- the dissonance between Brunelleschi’s Renaissance objects and the medieval city in which they were inserted;
- the dissonance between the stage design elements used by Brecht and Neher and the stage they were inserted in.

This explains why traditional scenarios – which occupy the whole stage so as to make it appear something it is not – do not have a self-reflexive scope.

However, there is a fundamental difference between Brunelleschi’s objects mentioned by Tafuri and the stage design elements used by Brecht and Neher.

Scenarios are meant to be observed from the outside. Their recipients (the audience) are external to them, even though Brecht liked to keep audiences illuminated so that they did not forget the situation they were in – that they were only watching theatre. One could say that in theatres the audience’s eye *converges* towards the stage.

This is not the case with Brunelleschi’s objects. They act as the counterpoint to other objects, their pre-existing “equals” which, together, make up the city. In other words, they are localised

interpretation keys that permit the understanding of a wider context – so wide as to encompass the day-to-day experience of the population which is their recipient. In a way, the interpretation is made *from* them. The reading is performed starting from a centre (the object, in its finitude) to its periphery (with its unstable boundaries).

In this sense, the way how Pier Vittorio Aureli interprets some of Mies van der Rohe's buildings seems to carry on – and radicalize – Tafuri's understanding of Brunelleschi's buildings. Regarding the plinths Mies created to place its buildings on, Aureli (2011: 37) wrote:

This is evident in projects such as Riehl Haus (1907), the Barcelona Pavilion (1929), the Seagram Building (1954-1958), and the Neue Nationalgalerie (1962-1968). By emphasizing the place of the building, the plinth inevitably makes that place a limit on what it contains. (...) The way the plinth organises the relation between the building and its place, affects not only the experience one has of what is on the plinth, but also – and especially – the experience one has of the city, that is outside of the plinth. One of the most remarkable things one feels when climbing onto a Mies plinth, whether in New York or Berlin, is the experience of facing away from the building and looking at the city. Suddenly, and for a brief moment, one feels detachment from the flows and organizational patterns which animate the city, even though confronting them.

A device that is formally similar to a stage, but works precisely in the opposite way.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Paratactic" is an adjective derived from the noun "parataxis," which designates the juxtaposition of phrases without the use of a conjunction between them. In the urban context, Tafuri refers to a logical sequence of spaces by simple juxtaposition. Cf. Tafuri (1988: 36-38).

<sup>2</sup> Tafuri states that "the new functions of art, design, architecture, negate the historicity of artistic processes, revolutionising its meanings, compromising its values, involving them in a dynamic of continuous construction of the world. This is what connects the architectural avant-garde to the thinking of [Alexander] Dörner, Benjamin, and Brecht: history does not shape performance, but rather, it's the latter that will transform the functions of the former". Cf. Tafuri (1988:76-77).

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