Between

Estrangement, Performativity, and Empathy in Bo Burnham's *Inside* (2021)

Carmen Bonasera

Abstract

This paper aims at a critical analysis of comedian Bo Burnham's Netflix special *Inside* (2021) – a show filmed during the Covid-19 lockdown period – in terms of defamiliarization techniques, and especially through the lens of the Brechtian notion of *Verfremdung*. By resuming the main theories of estrangement, comparing Shklovsky's *ostranenie* to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, and transposing them into the context of contemporary cinematic texts, the analysis foregrounds instances of the V-effect in *Inside*, namely the ironic exposure of the automatisms of contemporary society, the attention drawn towards performativity, and the goal of encouraging viewers to adopt a critical frame of mind. Despite the emotional detachment that *Verfremdung* conventionally pursues, this essay explores the complex interplay between estrangement and affective responses in the audience's engagement with the comedy special.

Keywords

Bo Burnham; Verfremdung; Defamiliarization; Empathy; Performativity; Media studies

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A strange year, viewed from *Inside*

Since March 2020, one of the most pervasive concerns in the social and cultural debate has been the question of how to decipher what happened to humanity during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing attempts to adjust to a radically changed global scenario. As ordinary people were striving to adapt to the so-called 'new normal', numerous artists attempted to process the collective trauma of the 2020 lockdown, either seeking comfort in rediscovering works from the tradition that could make sense of the feeling of isolation, or through original creative works of fiction and non-fiction[1]. Nevertheless, especially with regards to visual arts and the media, no project has been as successful and 'strangely' relatable as the award-winning comedy special *Inside*, released on the *Netflix* platform on 30th May 2021, to the point that enthusiastic reviewers have considered it as «the pandemic's wildest gift to comedy» (Logan 2021), as «captur[ing] our Zeitgeist perfectly» (Klein 2021), and as ultimately «set[ting] the bar for quarantine art» (Horton 2021).

Inside is, in many ways, an odd entertainment product. It is not a typical stand-up comedy show, because it is not a recorded live performance on a stage; rather, it is a work of creative non-fiction about the making of a comedy special; in a sense, it could be understood as a *poioumenon* – a type of postmodern meta-work in which «the central strand of the action purports to be the work's own composition [...] to explore the boundaries of fiction and reality – the limits of narrative truth» (Fowler 1987: 372). *Inside* was written, directed, performed, filmed, and edited by US comedian Bo

[1] Popular examples include Zadie Smith's essay collection *Intimations*, and the collective online reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* commissioned by the University of Plymouth.

Burnham[2] alone, without any crew or audience. Filming and editing are said to have taken place in the same single-room apartment, over the course of a year during Covid-19 lockdowns. Moreover, the label 'comedy special' does not really grasp the nature and format of this experimental product that incorporates a variety of artforms, including skilfully choreographed musical bits, stand-up comedy monologues, and metacommentary, to the extent that it was even dubbed as «a claustrophobic masterpiece [...] a comedy *Gesamtkunstwerk*» (Logan 2021).

Inside portrays a year in the life of a thirty-year-old comedian struggling to assemble a show in order to make use of the amount of free time offered by the Covid-19 lockdown started in early 2020 and as a means of «healing the world with comedy» – as Burnham ironically claims to be his mission. Nevertheless, it rapidly becomes clear that the title has a double meaning: being confined inside a room unable to exit, and inside one's own troubled mind. The ninety-minute show is a vertiginous collection of carefully constructed musical tableaux, comedy sketches, sharp monologues on the vanity of mundane Internet life, and meta footage of Burnham filming in his studio apartment, with increasingly impressive montage, sound, and lighting effects. After an opening series of numbers that mainly target the society's over-reliance on the Internet and day-to-day life in lockdown, the logic of the narrative progressively loses its cohesion and spirals into a whirling depressive rabbit hole. Halfway through the show, Burnham turns thirty, and his mental health seems to dramatically decline, while the tone of his commentary shifts to a bleaker shade of confessionalism and the sketches jump frantically from silent grievance to manic performances, mirroring his feelings of disassociation.

Although in a bizarre and unsettling way, Burnham's special encompasses the spectrum of feelings that the experience of lockdown brought about at a global level, at least for the generation of millennials that his comedy typically addresses: loneliness, frustration, forced introspection, attempts to seek comfort in vacuous virtual exchanges with other people. As much as the experiences depicted felt familiar and relatable to viewers, the erratic style of this work of art – with its confessional moments inter-

[2] Robert Pickering "Bo" Burnham (b. 1990) is a Massachusetts-born stand-up comedian, musician, actor, and filmmaker. He began his career in the early 2000s as a YouTuber and became a widely successful stand-up comedian until 2016, when he took a hiatus for mental health reasons and pursued a career in filmmaking.

rupted by the comedian who foregrounds the active creation of his performance – suggests that perhaps for the entertainer the only way to make sense of this unprecedented experience was to 'make it strange.'

This rather tempting wordplay serves the purposes of a broader reflection into the nature and the boundaries of the work of art in the 21st century. In particular, the present essay aims at extending the conceptualization of estrangement – as intended by two influential but divergent trends, embodied by formalist theorist Victor Shklovsky and by epic theatre theorist and playwright Bertolt Brecht – to the domain of contemporary media artforms. To this aim, the essay explores the effects that multiple strategies of defamiliarization have on contemporary audiences. Especially drawing on the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (V-effect) and on the debate over its affective impact on the audience, I argue that a number of features foregrounded in *Inside* exemplify a contemporary take on the V-effect, raising not only critical questions, but also paving the way for potential identification and empathy with the character's situation.

Despite the popularity of defamiliarization in literary and aesthetic studies, few attempts have been made to investigate its interplay with affective dynamics[3]. Most contributions have taken into consideration Shklovsky's theory with regards to literary texts, while Brechtian *Verfremdung* has long been viewed as opposed to (and opposing) emotional engagement and empathy; very few studies have tried to overcome this dichotomy[4]. While maintaining that defamiliarization in film is not a stable concept, as it entails not only critical detachment, but also an openness to affective reactions, I propose to engage in the analysis of *Inside* as a contemporary multimedia space for the interplay of estrangement and affect.

[3] Notable contributions mainly involve empirical approaches; cf., e.g., Miall - Kuiken 1994, Bohrn *et al.* 2012, Caracciolo 2014, and Koopman - Hakemulder 2015.

[4] Cf. Douglas Robinson's (2008) proposal of a 'somatics' of literature to bypass the opposition between estrangement and empathy, and Carl Plantinga's (2018) reappraisal of Brecht's theories for an ethics of immersion and engagement in film.

Ostranenie and *Verfremdung* from Theory to Practice

A Starting Point: Shklovsky's *Ostranenie*

Disguised under several labels that pertain to different cultural and critical traditions, the notion of estrangement has inhabited the field of aesthetic studies for over a century since Victor Shklovsky's pioneering writings on *ostranenie* ('making strange') in "Art as Technique" (1917). As is well known, Shklovsky's early theory considered the function of art as lying not in the mimetic representation of narrative content, but rather in the defamiliarization of both its subject and of the artistic devices. Deviating from conventional forms of representation, *ostranenie* is regarded as the instrument through which art is able to «recover the sensation of life; [...] to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*» (Shklovsky 1965: 12). By making things strange, i.e., by not calling a thing or event by its name but describing it «as if [we] were seeing it for the first time, [...] as if it were happening for the first time» (*ibid*.: 13), art is able to de-automatize the perception of the work. Consequently, readers whose perception was disrupted are encouraged to develop a more sophisticated sense of awareness of the represented object, as well as of the artistic device itself.

During the 20th century, despite its paramount importance within formalist theories, the concept of estrangement has had an unsteady fortune. Galin Tihanov (2005: 666) argues that it «has persisted in recent literary scholarship, despite the apparent wane in interest noticeable since the 1980s», observing that its fate in literary theory was «entwined with the curve of interest in Russian Formalism» (*ibid*.), to the extent that *ostranenie* «came to be considered by many a mere synecdoche of formalist aesthetics» (*ibid*.). Svetlana Boym sees Shklovsky's defamiliarization as a turning point in the beginning of a new literary theory, but, similarly to Tihanov, she argues that «by the 1970s, the theory that had once promised to foster a new artistic vision of the world was considered by many to be outmoded» (Boym 2005: 581). As a matter of fact, in discussing the fate of *ostranenie* in the late 20th century, Boym argues that it came to be considered as «too unsystematic for structuralism, too noncommittal for Marxist or post-structuralist criticism, and inferior to the better-known Brechtian *Verfremdung*» (*ibid*.).

One might ask what the legacy of the theory of estrangement may be today, a century after Shklovsky's foundational writings. Despite its decline in theoretical interest, the notion found a prolific field of scrutiny in film and, by extension, in media studies, as it was regarded, after all, as a

«general aesthetic principle» (Kessler 2010: 61) since its inception. The concept has been pivotal in the acknowledgement of the inherent defamiliarizing quality of movies, which are able to estrange the viewer's perception of reality by either showing it as it is, albeit in a way that widens the scope of our individual senses, or by showing it in a different way from the one we are used to, thus de-automatizing our perceptual systems (cf. Jullier 2010: 124). Furthermore, since the film industry is more rapidly evolving – especially in its techniques and technologies – than the literary medium, the effectiveness of defamiliarizing strategies and devices is always challenged by viewers getting used to certain cinematic styles and techniques, making film an exceptionally intriguing perspective on defamiliarization. As a result, estrangement has been recently re-functionalized to (re)evaluate its historical relevance on early and avant-garde cinema (cf. Thompson 1981; Thompson 1988), as well as to reassess its perceptual, experiential, and cognitive impact (cf. Bordwell 1985; Jullier 2010; Tarnay 2010).

Performing Estrangement: Brecht's *Verfremdung*

While the Shklovskian theory of estrangement exerted a significant influence on film studies, for the purposes of this paper it seems more appropriate to turn to its German cognate, *Verfremdung*[5], because of its inextricable bond with the domain of performative arts in which it was first conceived. Due to its entanglement with issues of representation and performativity, *Verfremdung* has long survived its creator in theatrical practices, to the extent that in the postmodern era its effects "can be felt almost anywhere in the theatre" (Wright 1989: 90), an outcome that Brecht himself had foreseen[6]. The influence of the V-effect spread to filmmaking (cf. Kotsourakis 2018) and cultural practices, becoming, as Peter Brooker claims,

[5] Issues in translation of the concept of *Verfremdung* have been pivotal in its critical reception, from Willett's translation as 'alienation', which highlights Marxist influences and relates *Verfremdung* to the Hegelian-Marxist notion of *Entfremdung* (Brecht 1964: 76), to its use as a German translation of the Russian *ostranenie* (Brecht 1964: 99). For the sake of clarity, I have maintained a distinction between the original Russian and German terms. For thorough etymological discussions on the several translations and their limits, cf. Robinson (2008: 173-5), and Carney (2005: 15).

[6] In fact, in a conversation related by Ernst Schumacher, Brecht commented: «Human nature knows how to adapt itself just as well as the rest of organic matter. Man is even capable of regarding atomic war as something normal, so

«so ubiquitous in modern advertising, feature films and television sit-coms as to lose all artistic and political effect» (2006: 218).

The circumstances that led to the genesis of *Verfremdung* – a term that first appeared in the 1936 essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" ("Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst") – are still a disputed matter among scholars, especially with regards to the supposed influence of Shklovsky's theory of estrangement, an idea first proposed by John Willett (Brecht 1964: 99)[7]. Whether or not there was a conscious reappraisal of Shklovsky's theory, indeed *Verfremdung* bears a strong resemblance to *ostranenie*. A play that deploys the V-effect is «a representation that alienates, [...] one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar» (Brecht 1964: 192). In a striking similarity to Shklovsky's 'making strange' as de-automatizing the familiar, Brecht argues that «to alienate an event or a character is simply to take[8] what to the event or character is obvious, known, evident and produce surprise and curiosity out of it» (Brecht 1961: 14). Therefore, the *Verfremdungseffekt*

> consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. (Brecht 1964: 143)

Analogies of this kind obviously contribute to perpetuating the theory of *ostranenie* as a major source for Brechtian *Verfremdung*. After all, as Mitchell (1974: 74) points out, «[t]hat the same word was chosen cannot be pure accident, for the term has similarities of implication», similarities that mainly consist in viewing the role of art as «de-routinisation, de-automatisation: art is the enemy of habit; it renews, refreshes our perceptions; by 'making-strange', it defamiliarises» (*ibid*.). To estrange the audience, the

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why should he not be capable of dealing with an affair as small as the alienation effect so that he does not need to open his eyes» (Schumacher 1974: 227-8).

[7] For in-depth accounts of the arguments in favor of and in opposition to the thesis of Shklovsky's role in the conception of *Verfremdung*, cf. Mitchell 1974; Ungvári 1979: 217-25; Tihanov 2005: 687-8; Robinson 2008: 169-72.

[8] I find that the original German for 'take' ['nehmen'] is best translated by Keith Dickson as a «*stripping* the event *of* its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality» (1978: 241, my emphasis). The sense of uncovering allows for a semantic analogy to Shklovsky's notion of "laying bare" the device (Shklovsky 1965: 27).

actor performs expressing «his awareness of being watched», so that «the audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place» (Brecht 1964: 92). In "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect" (*ibid*.: 136-47), Brecht discussed and inventoried a number of acting and staging techniques to achieve the V-effect, including: actors breaking the fourth wall and directly addressing the audience; distancing from their characters' feelings and lines; displaying issues of set design, making visible the sources of light, explaining scenes with intertitles, interrupting scenes and actions with music, showcasing rehearsing practices, thereby showing the 'behind the scenes' and emphasizing the artificiality of the staged performance; and, finally, not proceeding in a linear way, but in a montage of «curves and jumps» (*ibid*.: 37) that makes «the knots [...] easily noticed» (*ibid*.: 201).

Between Detachment and Empathy

Ostranenie and *Verfremdung* differ significantly in their ultimate goals, i.e., in the effects exerted on their respective audiences. While *ostranenie* is an aesthetic notion that defamiliarizes perception, Brecht's *Verfremdung* entails social, political, and didactical repercussions, since it is determined to trigger and enhance the spectators' critical consciousness. In fact, albeit with no reference to Shklovsky, Brecht rejected the view of estrangement as a mere self-reflexive and formal act, unhampered by political implications, by radicalizing the input of laying bare the device and speaking of his epic theatre as «laying bare society's causal network» (*ibid*.: 109). The V-effect in Brecht's epic theatre is thus used to «provoke an awareness of the individual's place in a concrete social narrative» (Brooker 2006: 210); to make the audience conscious and critical not only of the artificiality of the staged performance, but especially of the «historical aspect of a specific social situation» (Brecht 1964: 96), and of the many ideological contradictions, so that they no longer appeared as unchangeable. As Fredric Jameson points out, the V-effect would lead spectators to the realization that any current state of things is not a natural given, but a product of historical processes: «that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable» (Jameson 1972: 58), thus fostering a proactive participation of the audience to their own experience of reality: «the theatre now spreads the world in front of [the spectator] to take hold of and use for his own good» (Brecht 1961: 15). Conversely, in terms of awakening readers to political and social conditions, Shklovsky's take on estrangement was

more conservative[9], since he saw *ostranenie* as aimed at revealing things «as they are [...] not to change them or the social settings in which they occur» (Tihanov 2005: 686).

Therefore, Brecht envisioned a performance that would distance spectators and urge them to ultimately question social conditions and issues of representation, rather than to be captured by the vicissitudes and feelings of the characters. In fact, he strongly refused to encourage mimetic immersion and cathartic identification, which, according to his early writings, would impede the spectators' detached reasoning process and distract them with feelings of anticipation, compassion, and empathy[10]. Brecht distrusted affective responses because they would invite closeness and absorption into the stage situation, making the spectator «a victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience, [...] becoming completely 'entangled' in what is going on» (Brecht 1964: 78).

Nevertheless, Brecht's «rejection of empathy» (*ibid*.: 145) and of the viewers' «self-identification with the protagonist's feelings» (*ibid*.: 28), became less radical overtime. Gradually, he began discarding the simplistic duality between affective and critical engagement, a duality that was evident in his schematic discussion of the polarized differences between mimetic and epic theatre (cf. *ibid*.: 37). Brecht soon realized that such a dichotomy would never hold: «it is not true, though it is sometimes suggested, that epic theatre [...] proclaims the slogan: "Reason this side, Emotion (feeling) that". It by no means renounces emotion» (*ibid*.: 227). Rather, to soften the radicalization of his earlier positions, he re-evaluated certain types of emotions, particularly those toward which the spectator could develop a critical approach as well.

Therefore, a mature phase in Brecht's thoughts on theatre encouraged empathy and identification, to the extent that he even wrote in his diaries that the performance would resort to «two different methods [...]:

[9] In fact, Carlo Ginzburg argues that Shklovsky did not sufficiently emphasize the political implications of estrangement «as a delegitimizing device, operating at every level – political, social, religious» (Ginzburg 1996: 18) to devoid social and political structures of their power. On the contrary, delegitimization of power structures through their estrangement is what lies at the core of Brecht's *Verfremdung*.

[10] A major reason behind Brecht's rejection of empathic effects was his belief that they would transport the spectators into a state of mind susceptible of ideological indoctrination, while estrangement would challenge them to resist it (cf. Koss 1997: 811; Robinson 2008: 206-12).

the technique of empathy and the technique of alienation» [die einfühlungstechnik und die verfremdungstechnik] (Brecht 1996: 131), leaving room for theorists to positively reconsider the co-existence of critical judgement and emotional responses[11]. The process of emotional and psychological projection usually conveyed by the German concept for empathy – *Einfühlung*[12], literally 'feeling into' – enters the dialogue with *Verfremdung*, also in light of its «potentially uncomfortable destabilization of identity along the viewer's perceptual borders» (Koss 2006: 139). In Brechtian theatre, as Juliet Koss argues, «whereas empathy, the 'feeling-in' to an object or performance, overcomes distance by means of emotional transport, estrangement maintains the audience's awareness of its distance from the artwork» (Koss 1997: 817). This pendulum-like oscillation between distance and closeness, this «intermittent» (*ibid*.) experience of empathy lies at the core of the more sophisticated version of the V-effect in late Brechtian thought, and, I argue, it is especially conveyed by our case study. The next section will delve into the analysis of defamiliarizing techniques deployed by Bo Burnham, highlighting their interplay with more introspective moments that encourage the audience into an affective identification with the character and his story.

Verfremdung and Empathy: An analysis of *Inside*

Estrangement, Humor and Critique

Inside opens with a static shot of a small white room with minimal furniture and the door left ajar. After a few seconds, the door opens to a flash of light, and Bo Burnham – a tall and gangly young man – enters,

[11] For further perspectives on the compatibility between critical detachment and emotional engagement with regards to literature cf. Robinson 2008; with respect to cinema, cf. Plantinga 2018.

[12] First theorized by art historian and philosopher Robert Vischer in 1873 in order to describe the reception of art as a psychological projection of feelings into an object, the concept was developed in Germany in the late 19th century, particularly in the fields of aesthetics, psychology, and art history, offering «a forum for abstract discussions of the active perceptual experience of the individual spectator» (Koss 2006: 139). The term was then translated as 'empathy' by experimental psychologist E.B. Titchener in 1909, drawing on German psychologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps's theorization of *Einfühlung* as a process of «feeling one's way into» an art object or another person (cf. Keen 2007: 39).

locking the door behind him. The image is interrupted by a black screen signalling a head title, and then it fades to a closeup of a bearded, long-haired Burnham, wearing an oversized t-shirt, sitting and looking down in the dark. Spectators in 2021, still caught in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, will understand right away that the black screen separating the opening scene from the following one stands for the time that has passed between the beginning of the pandemic and the present moment. The lyrics of "Content", the opening song, say:

> If you'd have told me
> A year ago
> That I'd be locked inside of my home
> I would have told you
> A year ago
> Interesting, now leave me alone.
> Sorry that I look like a mess
> I booked a haircut
> But it got rescheduled

Without even mentioning the words 'pandemic' or 'Covid', the song not only explicitly refers to the lockdown experience, but immediately appeals to viewers, as it draws on aspects that have become familiar to a global audience – the reference to the missed haircut is highly relatable. For the purposes of this essay, this sequence can be seen as a first instance of how Burnham's performance invites the audience to *recognize* themselves in his situation and to strangely resonate with it. Drawing upon Murray Smith's ideas on engaging fictional characters, Rita Felski introduced recognition not only as «the most basic level of engagement» (Felski 2019: 100), but also as a fundamental aspect of identification, for which «one recognizes oneself in certain characters rather than in others [...]; an experience of *coming to know*, of being struck by some kind of insight or realization» (*ibid*.: 101). The viewers of *Inside* are therefore drawn into what Berys Gaut calls an «epistemic identification» (Gaut 1999: 205) with the character, since they share his knowledge about what is happening, and, in addition, they happen to be «stuck in the same epistemic situation» (*ibid*.: 211) as he is. The song then goes on with a metareference to comedy writing that points at the crafted nature of the artwork («I'm sitting down, writing jokes / Singing silly songs»), while Burnham addresses the spectators («But look / I made you some content / Daddy made you your favorite») and then he detaches from the character he is playing by referring to himself by his birthname

and in the third person («Robert's been a little depressed»). Right from the very beginning, then, the audience is drawn into an oscillation between the relatability of the depressed Burnham in disarray, on the one hand, and the estranging detachment that arises from emphasizing the crafted nature of the work, on the other.

As in his previous shows, throughout this special Burnham generally performs stand-up monologues and sings irreverent songs, often with the aid of auto-tuned vocals and sound effects. His lyrics aim at exposing the inauthenticity of celebrity, the hypocrisy of capitalistic consumerist ideals, the vacuity of mass-mediated cultural subjects; meanwhile, he often struggles with a performative identity increasingly split between confidence and self-deprecation. Burnham's 'onstage' character, in fact, oscillates between the narcissistic and unapologetic millennial that sneers at his own audience, and the self-aware comedian paralyzed by anxiety, who feels compelled to draw attention to his own performativity to criticize the consumer culture that forces him to deliver a fictional version of himself. The absurdity of the caricatures of both personae often results in comedy. Laughter is however disrupted by the growing distress arising from the friction between the performative and the private identity, as well as from Burnham's attempt of subverting the same cultural and social identity which he evidently belongs to.

While it is unclear whether Burnham has any in-depth knowledge of Brechtian theatre,[13] the performances of this comedy special suggest a significant use of aspects related to the V-effect, especially the interpolation of monologues and musical numbers. As said before, music is a trademark aspect of Burnham's style. The use of catchy melodies and funny lyrics allows him to attract the complacency of the audience, just before estranging them with the witty twists in his song lyrics. The result of this conflict is alienating, for the audience is placed in an uneasy position, unable to grasp the real meaning of the performance, and thus forced to adopt a consciously critical detachment. In addition, Burnham's choice of bright and colorful lights and of filming himself while he tests the equipment are further estranging factors that point directly at the fabricated and rehearsed quality of his performance. Furthermore, systematically allowing the audience to

[13] According to some interviews, Burnham was admitted into New York University's School of the Arts to study experimental theatre but ended up deferring his admission to pursue a career as a comedian (cf. Schulman 2018). Even though he did not attend it, it is clear where his interests in performance arts lie.

catch glimpses behind the scenes – by showing footage of himself editing shots that we have just watched or monologuing about the progress of filming – provides the work with a pretense of authenticity, which is, however, just a pretense.

Another technique to which Burnham heavily resorts is breaking the fourth wall and explicitly addressing the audience. In ordinary live shows, he would arrogantly deride the audience sitting in front of him in the theatre; in this situation, instead, he is forced to speak to the camera, the sole audience of his monologues, thus making the address even more alienating. After a couple of opening songs, he introduces the special, filming himself through a mirror:

> Hi. Welcome to, uh, whatever this is. Uh, I've been working for the last couple of months, uh, testing this camera, and testing lights, and writing, and I've decided to, uh, try to make a new special. For real. Uh, it's not gonna be a normal special because there's no audience, and there's no crew. It's just me and my camera, and you and your screen. Uh, the way that... that our Lord intended. Uh... And the whole special will be... will be filmed in this, uh, room. And instead of being filmed in a single night, it will be filmed in uh, however long it takes to finish. I hope you, uh, enjoy it.

The speech appears non-rehearsed, as if he were talking to his live audience, while he is in fact talking to himself through two reflecting surfaces: the mirror and the camera lens. Self-reflexivity motifs recur throughout the special, when Burnham projects his image on the wall or when he stares at his old videos, and their significance is directly linked to his sense of disassociation between subject and persona. Disassociation is paired with estrangement in a sketch in which he parodies a 'reaction video', a conventional form of YouTube content in which users comment and react to somebody else's videos. In this case, however, Burnham comments a video of himself singing a jazzy song about being an «unpaid intern». The criticism to the job market that allows for labor exploitation is however promptly discarded when the video suddenly becomes in turn the subject of a second-degree reaction video, giving rise to an absurd and narcissistic nesting doll of multiple reactions to his prior reactions, much to the viewers' confusion. Moreover, the uncanniness of self-reflexivity is also conveyed in a following sketch, where he lampoons the trope of the live streaming videogame playthrough, while impersonating both the gamer and the avatar. The setting and the scope of the fake videogame are his life

in lockdown, and the avatar's mission objectives only consist in getting up, playing the piano, and crying. Watching these sketches, viewers can certainly feel discomfort at the uncanny redoubling of Burnham's persona; nevertheless, they are also able to relate to his loneliness and to recognize themselves in the portrayal of alienation induced by lockdown, thus starting to affectively engage with the character.

The opening monologue ends by recalling another fundamental aspect in Brechtian theatre, i.e., the rejection of linear transitions from one scene to another, in favor of a montage that highlights jumps and joints: «And a warning. Uh, I can already sort of tell that this special is going to be a little all over the place, so don't expect incredibly smooth transi–». Here, the montage suddenly jumps to the following scene, without a conventional transition; by doing this, Burnham explicitly foregrounds the metareference to the construction of the work itself.

To delve more deeply into the defamiliarization effect, Burnham plays in explicit ways with the oscillation between alienating and attracting the audience for the purposes of his social critique. In the first half of *Inside*, in line with his earlier specials and live shows, he turns his ironic criticism toward two habits that characterized the millennials' experience of lockdown, namely 'FaceTiming' and 'sexting'. These practices, which have recently become quasi-automatisms for Burnham's generation, are ironically detailed, thus utterly defamiliarized, in two musical numbers. In both cases, a relatable experience easily recognized by the targeted audience, is de-automatized by its ironic and strangely detailed treatment, which urges the spectator to unveil the absurdity that lies at its core. Much as in Brecht's *Verfremdung*, the viewers' critical attention is awakened and mobilized into acknowledging the faux connectivity that virtual exchanges promote, and the frustration that they end up causing. However, these sketches are also capable of fostering a further aspect of character identification as proposed by Rita Felski, namely *allegiance*, i.e., progressively adhering to the same ethical position as the character, «siding with a character and what we take that character to stand for» (Felski 2019: 96).

Estrangement for the purpose of social critique is at the core of "How the World Works", a musical sketch in which Burnham impersonates a teacher addressing children in order to explain «how the world works». While his character sings about the natural world, Socko, the sock puppet that he is wearing on his hand, embarks on a cynical discussion about the "actual" ways of the world, i.e., tackling issues of classism, capitalism, violence, power structures, politics, thus violently disrupting the framework of the musical video for schoolchildren:

Don't you know?
The world is built with blood
And genocide and exploitation
The global network of capital
Essentially functions
To separate the worker
From the means of production
And the FBI killed Martin Luther King
Private property's inherently theft
And neoliberal fascists
Are destroying the left
And every politician
Every cop on the street
Protects the interests
Of the pedophilic corporate elite.

Here, Burnham's harsh criticism of capitalistic consumer culture, which is a leitmotiv of his comedy specials, is rendered particularly uncomfortable and alienating because of two main reasons. First, the sharp contrast in the ironic «superimposition», as Linda Hutcheon (1985: 34) would argue, between the contents of his lyrics, which unapologetically express his criticism, and the two ridiculous frameworks that encompass those lyrics: the cynical sock puppet and the didactical video for children. A second reason is the cruel ending of the sequence, in which Socko is humiliated for its impertinence in unmasking the complicity of Burnham's persona in the dynamics of white privilege:

"I'm sorry, Socko. I was just trying to become a better person."
"Why do you rich fucking white people insist on seeing every socio-political conflict through the myopic lens of your own self-actualization?"

The sock puppet is subjugated by Burnham, who attempts to take it off his hand, much to the puppet's terror, and reclaims his authority over it, with an obvious undertone of slavery and dominance that cannot help but exert an uncomfortable and estranging effect on the audience:

"Watch your mouth, buddy. Remember who's on whose hand here. [...] Are you gonna behave yourself?"
"Yes."
"Yes, what?"
"Yes, sir."

After an intertitle signaling a fake intermission, the tone of the show progressively shifts to a more introspective and claustrophobic description of Burnham's anxieties. He directly addresses the audience, breaking the fourth wall again, by asking for their attention («Do I have your attention? Yes or no? [...] Am I on the background? Are you on your phone?»). While his performances turn toward his personal contradictions between his 'staged' persona and his authentic self, the figure of this man trapped in a tiny studio and living on cereal invites compassion, especially when he sings about the existential dread of turning thirty and being lonely. But Burnham never abandons the social critique. "Welcome to the Internet" is a song in which he impersonates an imaginary Internet executive, who exposes cheerfully and in a spasmodic musical crescendo the mayhem of contents that can be found online, from pasta recipes to instructions on how to build a bomb. Interpolated by high-pitched demonic laughter, the chorus frantically repeats: «Could I interest you in everything / All of the time? / Apathy's a tragedy and boredom is a crime / Anything and everything / All of the time». He emphasizes the polarization that the web and social networks encourage («What would you prefer? / Would you like to fight / For civil rights / Or tweet a racial slur? [...] / We got a million ways / To engage.»), and his satire extends to the hypnotic force that digital tools exert on youths («Insatiable you / Mommy let you use her iPad / You were barely two / And it did all the things / We designed it to do / Now look at you [...] Your time is now / Your inside's out»), pointing sharply at the society's role in exploiting Internet addiction to media corporations' profits. As one can easily conclude, this musical number markedly evokes Brecht's approach to defamiliarization, by «turning the object of which one is to be made aware [...] from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected» (Brecht 1964: 143), for the purposes of enhancing the viewers' critical consciousness of their position in the social world and of the «historical aspect of a specific social situation» (*ibid*.: 96). And, in 2021, nothing is more ordinary, familiar, and immediately accessible than the Internet.

Seeking Empathy in the Spotlight

Approaching the end, as Burnham's mental health is visibly deteriorating and his appearance looks extremely unkempt, the special gradually elicits the viewers' compassion, shifting from mere relatability to empathic arousal. "That Funny Feeling" is one of the most poignant examples of Burnham's distillation of both alienating the audience and attracting their

emotional response. Playing an acoustic guitar with a projected campfire behind him, he mentions all the polarized tensions that, as a generation and culture, we are immersed in, i.e., the uncanny conflation between serious and vapid, existential and mundane:

> The whole world at your fingertips
> The ocean at your door
> The live-action Lion King
> The Pepsi halftime show
> Twenty thousand years of this
> Seven more to go [...]
> A gift shop at the gun range
> A mass shooting at the mall [...]
> A book on getting better
> Hand-delivered by a drone
> Total disassociation
> Fully out your mind
> Googling 'derealization'
> Hating what you find
> That unapparent summer air
> In early fall
> The quiet comprehending
> Of the ending of it all.

By juxtaposing the haunting climate crisis, terrorism and mental illness with cheap simulacra, trite catchphrases and useless cultural products, the spectator is drawn into experiencing "that funny feeling", a mix of alienation and relatability that activates not only the viewers' awareness, but also their potential for identification with the character. Nothing of what Burnham mentions is new or shocking, especially to American viewers – on the contrary, they can recognize themselves and their day-to-day life in these lyrics. Nevertheless, what results in a discomforting dialectics between identification and alienation is Burnham's historicizing and photographing the strange coexistence of all these things together, in the same globalized arena; a coexistence which, according to Burnham's use of estrangement, his audience must be aware of.

Although diluted in an estranging framework, "That Funny Feeling" promotes character identification and invites empathy. In film, the audience's empathic response can be encouraged by the narrative and through camera angles, perspective, music, and lights, which are able to foster perceptual, affective, and epistemic identification with the characters' por-

trayed situations (cf. Gaut 1999). While perceptual identification is hardly achieved in *Inside*, as the camera rarely shares the character's point of view, performances like "That Funny Feeling" speak at the dire exhaustion that highly resonates with the viewers' everyday experiences and their epistemic frames, while simultaneously de-automatizing mundane contents and delegitimizing haunting social issues.

In *Inside*, affective identification is particularly invited as a response to the character's suffering and pain. As Berys Gaut (*ibid*.: 210) argues, the visual evidence of a character suffering leads to affective identification, even if viewers do not really share the same perspective. Similarly, Suzanne Keen confirms that «empathic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions, whether or not a match in details of experience exists» (Keen 2007: xii). When, later on, Burnham confesses his distress at finishing his work, he is actively inviting affective identification. He tries to monologue about his progresses, but he gets frustrated and starts again, over and over, to the point of bursting into tears and knocking over his equipment, implicitly acknowledging that his mission to «heal the world with comedy» has failed.

Despite his distress, he ends up performing his climactic – and possibly cathartic – music number, "All Eyes on Me". This sequence opens with the sound of a crowd cheering over instrumental ballad music, while the camera that faces the mirror begins to zoom in; as the screen gets darker and darker, viewers feel swallowed into the dark lens, as if they were finally *inside* Burnham's mind, while he acknowledges a strong empathic link with his audience:

> I couldn't have done this without you guys. I couldn't, really. I… This last year has been… You know, there have been times that, um… But just knowing you're here, you know, *feeling you here with me*. Um… Yeah, thank you. (*my emphasis*)

The dark screen fades and reveals a disturbing closeup of Burnham's face as he looks away. The opening lyrics of "All Eyes on Me" recall conventional crowd instructions («put your hands up», «get on out of your seats»). While the soothing melody, the blue lights, and the closeup convey intimacy, the viewers' sense of safety is threatened by Burnham's voice, which is distorted – thus defamiliarized – to sound much deeper and haunting than his normal pitch. As he addresses the audience, he suddenly looks directly into the camera, resorting once again to breaking the fourth wall, singing: «Are you feeling nervous? / Are you having fun? / [...] Don't

be scared, don't be shy. / Come on in, the water's fine». Viewers' alienation peaks while they realize that they have been addressed, watched, and lured the entire time by Burnham's performances. He resumes a stand-up monologue framework («You want to hear a funny story?», he asks) and starts explaining the reasons why he stopped performing live. In a confessional – albeit ironic – tone, he says that he had been suffering from panic attacks on stage, «which is not a great place to have them», he says in a self-deprecating manner. With the intimacy favored by this monologue, sympathy (to feel *for* someone) and empathy (to feel *with* someone) are sharply elicited in their complex interplay; some viewers may feel concerned *for* him and care about his situation, others may feel represented on the grounds of a shared experience and empathize *with* him. Overall, within the framework of a narrative that has constantly played back and forth between alienation and identification, this characterizes as a major emotional moment for both performer and audience. He says that his mental health slowly improved to the extent that in January 2020 he decided to come back to the stage, but then «the funniest thing happened» – the funniest thing being, of course, the outburst of the pandemic. Once again, he uses irony and defamiliarization for the purposes of making the audience aware of the disruption that an unprecedented situation may have caused, both globally and individually.

He resumes his autotuned ballad, pointing at the unsettling global situation and the problem of climate change, delegitimizing it with a pessimistic take that finally shows how mental health issues and depressive thoughts can sink individuals into nihilism: «You say the ocean's rising / Like I give a shit / You say the whole world's ending / Honey, it already did / You're not gonna slow it / Heaven knows you tried / Got it? Good. Now get inside». It is clear now that the haunting distortion in his voice symbolizes his depression and alienation, the true villains of this story. After some other repetitions of «get your hands up», he addresses the viewers violently («Get up. I'm talking to you. Get the fuck up!»), as he walks towards the camera, grabs it as if he were grabbing a person by the throat, and lifts it, while obsessively repeating «All eyes on me, all eyes on me.» In the end, it is all performance. The lockdown, climate change, media and Internet simulacra, capitalist commodification, mental breakdowns, all bow down to performance.

The convergence of arrogance and self-loathing of Burnham's two personae finds expression in this disquieting musical number. As Judith Butler (1999) famously argued with regards to gender, all actions that attempt to define one's identity actually function as performances of identity,

rather than a reflection of an inherent, predetermined self, her argument being that «there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed» (*ibid*.: 195). Burnham urges his audience to be aware of the constructed nature of identity, as well as of Internet-driven life, as he says at one point during the show: «the outside world, the non-digital world, is merely a theatrical space in which one stages and records content for the much more real, much more vital digital space». To this end, he is bound to split himself into two personae that conflict through absurd, parodies and estrangement. Clearly, he struggles with his complicity to the social system; similarly, the viewers struggle to reconciliate, on the one hand, the portrayed emotional rollercoaster that resonates with their experience of the pandemic, and, on the other, the awareness that, as a celebrity, he certainly did not spend the lockdown stranded in a tiny studio, and that he has just delivered a Netflix-distributed work that thrives in the boundaries and ambiguities of non-fiction. Nevertheless, Burnham actively attempts to subvert the context in which he is caught, pushing the audience to critically engage with his message and with the limits of his performance, making viewers uncomfortable and estranged, but also opening new spaces of interaction between performativity, estrangement, and empathy. In the end, a smiling Burnham watches his special on the projector, maybe satisfied with his final product. His use of *Verfremdung* cannot help but point at his own inescapable performative nature, but, as the light cracks through the door at the end of the special, thus bringing the story full circle, some emotional, intimate, and empathy-seeking glimmers manage to shine through.

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