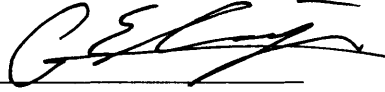


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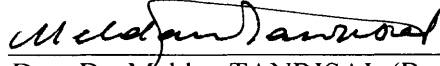
09. 06. 2008



Pembe Gözde Erdoğan

KABUL VE ONAY

P. Gzde Erdođan tarafından hazırlanan ‘‘Historiographic Metadrama: Tony Kushner’s *A Bright Room Called Day and Angels in America*’’ bařlıklı bu alıřma, 9 Haziran 2008 tarihinde yapılan savunma sınavı sonucunda bařarılı bulunarak jrimiz tarafından yksek lisans tezi olarak kabul edilmiřtir.



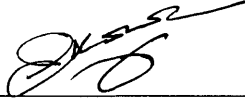
Do. Dr. Meldan TANRISAL (Bařkan)



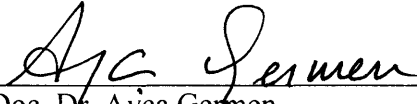
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Prof. Dr. İrfan akın
Enstit Mdr

ÖZET

ERDOĞAN, Pembe Gözde. “Tarihyazımcı Üsttiyatro: Tony Kushner’ın *A Bright Room Called Day* ve *Angels in America* Oyunlarının İncelemesi,” Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2008.

1960lardan itibaren Amerikan tiyatrosu gerek tema gerek yapısı açısından yenilikçi ve deneysel bir portre çizmektedir. Çağdaş Amerikan oyun yazarları da bu deneysel yolu seçmiş, geleneksel tiyatronun olay örgüsü, karakter, sahne ve metin gibi kalıplaşmış öğelerini sorgulayarak bütün totaliter sistemlere duydukları güvensizliği dile getirmişlerdir. Bu yazarların tiyatro eserleri günümüzde “postmodernizm” adı verilen bu sorgulayıcı akımın düşünsel ve sanatsal boyutundan yararlanmaktadır.

Postmodernizm bir çok tiyatrocunun ve kuramcının tarafından somut bir anlamı reddeden bir “derinliksiz deneysellik” olarak görülse de diğer bir çok yazar ve düşünür bu akımın tersyüz eden, kurcalayan, oyunbaz ruhunun arkasındaki politik potansiyeli görmüşlerdir. Postmodernizm, önceleri sistemlerin dışına itilen azınlık gruplarına egemen anlatıları ve yazınları sorgulayabilme ve kendi amaçlarına uydurarak birer politik silah olarak kullanabilme imkanı sağlamıştır. Postmodern tiyatronun önemli yazarlarından biri olan Tony Kushner da bu bağlamda yazan yazarlardan biridir. Kushner, üsttiyatronun politik ve oyunbaz duruşunu kullanarak eserlerinde tarih yazınına kalıplaşmış söylemlerinden kurtarıp kendi bakış açısıyla yeniden yazar. Kushner’ın oyunları tamamiyle bir insan yaratımı olan tarih yazınının ve benzer kalıplaşmış sistemlerin işleyişlerini gözler önüne serer ve her birinin değişime açık olduğunu göstermeyi amaçlar.

Kushner’ın tiyatrosu, postmodernizmin ideolojik gücünden yararlanan kuramlardan beslenir. Özellikle Linda Hutcheon’ın “tarihyazımcı üstkurmaca” terimi Kushner’ın oyunlarını özetler niteliktedir. Hutcheon’a göre “tarihyazımcı üstkurmaca” olarak adlandırılacak romanlar kendilerini tarihte bir noktaya yerleştirirler ve o dönemdeki tarih yazınlarını sorgulayarak hem o tarihin hem de kendilerinin birer insan yapımı, birer “kurmaca” olduklarını açık ederler.

Bu tez çalışması, Hutcheon'ın yarattığı “tarihyazımcı üstkurmaca” terimini Tony Kushner'ın iki oyununa uygulayarak o oyunların birer “tarihyazımcı üsttiyatro” olduklarını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu açıdan bakıldığında, Kushner'ın oyunları tarih ve benzeri sistemlerin kime “ait” olduklarını sorgulamakta ve üsttiyatronun oyunbaz doğasıyla bu sistemleri bir yeniden yazım sürecine tabi tutmaktadırlar.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Tarihyazımcı-Üsttiyatro, Tony Kushner, Linda Hutcheon, Tarihyazımcı-Üstkurmaca, Postmodernizm.

ABSTRACT

ERDOĞAN, Pembe Gözde. “Historiographic Metadrama: Tony Kushner’s *A Bright Room Called Day* and *Angels in America*,” M.A. Thesis, Ankara, 2007.

American drama since the 1960’s has been highly experimental in subject-matter and form. Influenced by the newly-formed non-trust towards any totalizing systems and notions, the contemporary experimental dramatists challenged fixed elements of drama as plot, character, stage and text. This widely varied contemporary body of work later appeared to be a part of the recent phenomenon called “postmodernism.”

Although most postmodernist theoreticians and dramatists consider the movement a depthless, formal experimentation rejecting any fixed meaning, some others have recognized the political potential behind the subversive and playful manner of postmodernism. The previously excluded, marginalized groups now had the opportunity to open up the hegemonic narratives and appropriate them for their own purposes. One such dramatist writing from a marginalized position is Tony Kushner. With his highly political, metatheatrical and playful theater, Kushner constantly turns to history in order to open it up to new possible rewritings. His theater usually shows the inner workings of systems like history, thus establishing that such systems are human constructs that are open to alteration.

Therefore, Kushner’s theater affiliates him with certain postmodern theoreticians who have realized the subversive power in postmodernism. One postmodern form in particular, Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction,” appears as an apt term to summarize what Kushner’s drama stands for. Originally a term used for the novel, “historiographic metafiction” grounds itself in history but paradoxically demonstrates the constructed nature of both *that* history and itself.

By appropriating Hutcheon’s theory to theater, this study aims to analyze two of Tony Kushner’s plays as examples of “historiographic metadrama.” Both plays question the

ownership of systems like history and open them to rewriting through the playfulness of metadrama.

Keywords

Historiographic-Metadrama, Tony Kushner, Linda Hutcheon, Historiographic-Metafiction, Postmodernism

INTRODUCTION

Since his sudden and conspicuous arrival on the international stage in the early 1990s with his seminal epic piece *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner has been deemed as one of the most prominent contemporary dramatists writing in America today. Kushner has been praised by the scholars so highly that James Fisher says of him, “His influence on the development of the American theater may ultimately equal that of O’Neill or Williams” (2002: 12).

While theater scholars studied Kushner and his work, their readings always seemed abundant with many different aspects of his personality and his work. Some emphasized his identity as a gay man and the reflections and implications of it in his art; some dug into his Jewish heritage and tried to demonstrate how this heritage affected his empathy with the discriminated; some chose to focus on his liberal politics, his pluralistic views and his Marxist leanings. However, the term that best characterizes Kushner’s drama is “eclectic” (Biggsby 1999: 86).

Christopher Biggsby has defined Kushner’s theater as “a grand kaleidoscope in which patterns form and re-form and different styles braid together to create startling images” (1999: 86). Kushner’s plays resist categorization. His work cannot be confined within the limits of tragedy, comedy, or fantasy but comprises them all. His theatre is not merely realist, absurd, epic, or metatheatrical, but all. There are no typical Kushneresque characters or recurring Kushneresque dramaturgical styles. There seems to be no form he has not tried his hand at. He is a producer, a playwright, a script-writer, a composer, an essayist, an orator and a scholar of politics. However, his work as a dramatist is probably the most interesting one. He wrote librettos, monologues, epics, comedies, tragedies, one-act plays, a seven-hour play, adding his own twist to these traditional forms.

The urge behind this great body of work for Kushner is to criticize and offer a different perspective on the culture of which he was a part. His criticism has never been prescriptively didactic; he has tried to show the possibility of change, although he never offered a definitive direction. His disposition as a “political” writer has compelled him to

deal with the history of mankind in such a way that he never accepted history as a fixed given; he has constantly evoked and rewritten his own versions of it through his theater. Bigsby called his theater “a political theater” which is “rational in its logical connections; it is also a theatre in which prescriptive politics are seen as destructive and the irrational the source of insight” (1999: 86). The reason Kushner turns to the “irrational” as his “source of insight” is because he is a product of the age he lives in, and understanding this age is key to understanding his theatre.

The age, the period, or, more appropriately, the condition in which Kushner lives has been defined as “postmodern” by many philosophers, socialists, economists and critics. Though the title “postmodern” is one of the few titles that the critics rarely used for Kushner, there is no way that Kushner can avoid being labeled a “postmodern” because, as Keith Jenkins puts it, “postmodernity is not an ideology or position we can choose to subscribe to or not, postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our historical fate to be living now” (“Introduction” 1).

This study aims at placing the theatre of Tony Kushner within the broad framework of postmodernism. In doing so, the study will apply the term “historiographic metadrama,” a more specific form among many in postmodernism, to his theatre, focusing on two of his plays, *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985), and *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes – Parts 1 and 2* (1991 - 1992).

The term “historiographic metadrama” was coined by Richard Knowles, a Canadian drama scholar. In his book *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning*, Knowles appropriates the term “historiographic metafiction,” created by another prominent Canadian scholar, Linda Hutcheon, to drama and applies the term to three different Canadian plays, using the already established notions on the subject by Hutcheon. Therefore, it is necessary to go back to Linda Hutcheon and analyze her studies on “historiographic metafiction.” In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon tries to tackle the ever-confusing question of postmodernism by studying different forms of production such as architecture, film, poetry and novel. Her focus, though, is mainly on novel as a form, and she creates the

term “historiographic metafiction” as embodying the styles, subject matters and the shared instinct in some of the novels written in the age of postmodernism.

While exploring the theoretical field, this study will move from the general to the particular. Starting from the umbrella term postmodernism and its relation to modernism, it will move to the more specific form of “historiographic metafiction,” discussing it in relation with the field of historiography and how it was influenced by postmodernism. Then, the appropriation of the term to drama will be discussed with its possible ramifications, exploring Knowles’s usage of “historiographic metadrama” and also by referring to Richard Hornby’s more general study of metadrama in his book *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*.

In trying to figure out what the term “postmodernism” entails, finding a clear definition for the term seems almost impossible. As Hutcheon suggests, “there is little sense in trying to find a definition of postmodernism that would encompass all the varying usages of the term. That route would only lead to further confusion” (1989: 16). However, a possible way to explore postmodernism may be to start from the idea of modernism since, according to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism “emerge[s] as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism” (1983: 111). Moreover, postmodernism hints at its direct relationship to modernism in its title; it is not a definitive, new term but one that implies both a continuance with and a break from modernism. “It incorporates its past within its very name and parodically seeks to inscribe its criticism of that past” (Hutcheon 1988: 47). As a result, “it would seem to be difficult to discuss postmodernism without somehow engaging in a debate about the value and even identity of modernism” (Hutcheon 1989: 27). Most of the theoreticians analyzed in this study started their explorations of the concept of postmodernism by analyzing modernism with its positive sides and its downfalls.

According to Jürgen Habermas, “the term ‘modern’ again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new” (3). However, this relation to “the past of antiquity” is only to define itself as “new,” as different from the past; a

consciousness “which freed itself from all the specific historical ties” (Habermas 4). Therefore, there is “an abstract opposition between past and present” (Habermas 4), and modernist works, in a way, exalted the present in their insistence on “making it new.”

In their quest to “make it new,” modernists felt the need to always bring something innovative, novel, and radically different from the works of other modernists; otherwise, one would not be a true Modern. “The great modernisms were... predicated on the invention of a personal private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body” (Jameson 1983: 114). Advocating uniqueness and novelty, great “Moderns” never questioned the integrity of the individual ego. For them, “the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality” was essential (Jameson 1983: 114).

Another very important aspect of the project of modernity was “to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic” (Habermas 9). This differentiation of the fields and self-importance attributed to each field in its own inner logic (e.g. art for art’s sake) led to some very important separations. First, a split occurred between culture and society, between “high art” and “mass culture,” closing the gates of certain fields like poetry or painting to common man, and admitting only “specialists” or “experts.” This also fostered distinct separations among different fields of study.

Each field is separate from the others because the subject matter is separate. Each separation corresponds immediately to a separation in function, institution, history and purpose. Each discourse ‘represents’ the field, which in turn is supported by its own constituency and the specialized audience to which it appeals. (Said 155)

This makes each of the fields more self-enclosed, and each, with “its own self-confirming authority” (Said 143), practices a great amount of power in its own realm. These fields create canons, a fixed body of representative works that embodies the self-acclaimed rules and functions of that field.

When the immediate effect of modernism began to subside and when people started to acquire a critical distance towards the claims and ramifications of modernism as a

movement, the chasms that the movement created seemed to have grown deeper. There was a distinct line between the past and the present, between each individual, between high and low art, between aesthetics and everyday life, between each separate field. Scholars saw these distinctions and exclusions as results of the assumption and practice of power. As Foucault argues; “power is essentially that which represses” (“Two Lectures” 682). Postmodernism reacted against those exclusive separations. As a result, maybe the only unifying instinct that postmodernism had was the one which sought to defy any type of distinct boundaries and tried to blur them in a highly elusive and playful manner. Postmodernist fiction, according to Hutcheon, “has come to contest the modernist ideology of artistic autonomy, individual expression, and the deliberate separation of art from mass culture and everyday life” (1989: 15).

One important characteristics of postmodernism that most scholars seem to agree upon is its unavoidability. Just as Jenkins sees it as our “historical fate,” Jameson also stresses that “it is not just another word for the description of a particular style” (1983: 112-113). In a similar vein, Eagleton admits; “part of postmodernism’s power is the fact it exists”(ix). Moreover, he maintains that there is no need to imagine or create a hypothetical period in our minds, “it is the one we are living in, and its name is postmodernism” (20). If postmodernism is a *condition*, as Lyotard called it, then, there is no way to avoid it in any field of study or in our everyday lives; it is not a style or movement one can choose to subscribe to or not, it is the *condition*, the *spirit* or the *instinct* of the era we are living in.

As the condition influences each and every field and person, and because there are many different boundaries to be blurred and many different ways to blur them, the body of work created under the title of postmodernism appears incredibly vast, significantly diverse, and undeniably contradictory. In talking about the corpus of postmodern literature, Matei Calinescu asserts that “there is nothing rigid or fixed about this corpus... it is wide open to revision, exclusions, inclusion, and even fundamental challenges... this corpus... does not qualify as a new canon” (297).

Probably the most important instinct prevalent in postmodernism is the distrust toward any self-enclosed, totalizing system that practices a considerable amount of power by ordering, reordering, choosing, eliminating, including, excluding and most importantly by giving a significant meaning to everything that falls under its category. For postmodernists, modernist distinct systems feel “dead, stifling, canonical” (Jameson 1983: 112). “The trouble,” as Said suggests, “with visions, reductive answers and systems is that they homogenize evidence very easily” (143). Contrary to the efforts of these systems to totalize the knowledge they are dealing with, in postmodernism it must be realized that there is “no single explanation sending one back immediately to a single origin” (Said 145). Postmodernism seeks to analyze totalitarian theories and systems not to “seal” them “in [their] own image,” but to “open [them], to rewrite [them]; to open [their] closed systems... to challenge [modernism’s] master narratives” (Foster xi). The theoretical unity of these systems is “put in abeyance...curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalised” (Foucault 676).

Another barrier that is constantly crossed in postmodernism is the one between high culture and mass or popular culture. For Jameson, postmodernism is

a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism. (1983: 113)

Thus, postmodernism emerges as a network where everything that might affect us in our everyday lives, from the “higher” art forms to media or television, connects to one another and are intersected in a continuous relation. As Hutcheon also states, “the borders between high art and mass or popular culture and those between the discourses of art and the discourses of the world are regularly crossed” (1989: 35).

Yet another border crossed is the one between the past and the present. “Instead of the earlier and dynamic image of a forward-looking, innovative modernism, what we now get is the image of a paradoxical ‘backward looking’ one” (Calinescu 292). The key word here is “paradoxical,” for the postmodernist looking back at the old times, forms and traditions is never a neutral one. Postmodernism, as it does with the totalizing systems,

opens the past and its forms to revision, to criticism, to rewriting; revisits them with a critical and almost ironical approach, but never loses its own standpoint in the present.

However, postmodernism's methods and styles in trying to open up fixed systems create its uniquely paradoxical nature. While trying to subvert fixed claims, postmodernism has to make some claims. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon adopts Barthes's notion of 'doxa' as public opinion and consensus, and talks exactly about this paradox when she asks,

Is the theorizing of Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Foucault, and others not, in a very real sense, entangled in its own de-doxifying logic? Is there not a center to even the most decentered of these theories? What is power to Foucault, writing to Derrida, or class to Marxism? Each of these theoretical perspectives can be argued to be deeply – and knowingly – implicated in that notion of center they attempt to subvert. It is this paradox that makes them postmodern (14).

As it opens up the inner workings of a system to critical viewing, postmodernism must use another totalizing system, language. Highly aware of the discomfort created by the paradoxical nature of postmodernism, some postmodernist theoreticians, scholars, artists have tried to avoid such totalizing claims in their writings, which, in turn, made their works vague, indetermined, and ambivalent. Hence, the trademark quality of most postmodern art is its "postmodern ambiguity" which seems to incorporate the very systems it seeks to subvert.

Another reason why the body of work under the title postmodernism is fragmentary is that the age-old belief in a unified individual, his distinct, authoritative and unique voice appears as a lie in postmodernism. "Not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it *never* really existed in the first place...Rather, this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they 'had' individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity" (Jameson 1983: 115). Postmodern works are always aware of the representational and discursive nature of subjectivity. "Subjectivity is represented as something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous, outside history" (Hutcheon 1989: 39). Thus, postmodernist works create multiple narrators, contradictory voices, elusive narratives,

contradictions and inconclusions to subvert that “authority” practiced by the unique individual, or, more specifically, the author.

The reception of postmodernism in all fields has also been contradictory, in tune with the nature of the era. Not everyone was willing to embrace it with open arms. Habermas, seeing postmodernism as a negative force, announced that the project of modernity is incomplete, it should continue in its own course. For some scholars postmodernism meant a kind of “anti – aesthetic.” Jameson saw it as the “reinforcer of the logic of consumer capitalism” which does not have much political or subversive power (1983: 112). Similarly, for Jean Baudrillard, postmodernism is the “hyperrealism of simulation” (128), a screen where pure “obscenity” takes place (130). Also talking about its lack of any political significance, Terry Eagleton claims that postmodernism fosters “political illiteracy” and “historical oblivion” through “its cult of flashy theoretical fashion and instant intellectual consumption” (23).

It will not be wrong to say that Linda Hutcheon has a contrary view towards postmodernism when compared to people like Jameson, Baudrillard or Eagleton. However, her approach is not “provisionally supportive” (Hutcheon 1989: 17) either. For her, “the postmodern marks neither a radical Utopian change nor a lamentable decline to hyperreal simulacra” (1988: xii). She maintains that what lies in the heart of postmodernism—“paradox”—gives it its subversive power, a power most theoreticians believe to be non-existent in postmodernism. Postmodernism is “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (1988: 3). The reason for this double-coding is that postmodernism does not reject those systems but instead realizes and accepts their nature as human constructs. Nothing is “given,” or found, but instead “made.” The postmodern spirit acknowledges that there is a constructed “discourse” at work in every field of our lives. Postmodernism is fully aware of the “complex institutional and discursive network of élite, official, mass, popular cultures that it operates in” (1988: 3).

When Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, defined postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (36), he voiced the spirit of postmodernism against

the belief that “an idea ... can be legitimated by reference to a metadiscourse of the kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (Jenkins “Editor’s Introduction” 33). This meant a newly-formed non-trust, insecurity or even rejection toward any totalizing system of beliefs constructed to unify, to order or to give meaning.

One such system of meaning-giving network worthy of attention in this debate is “history,” or “historiography.” The effects of postmodernism on this field need to be discussed in detail because the new outlook on “history” and the “past” constitutes a large part of the theory of “historiographic metafiction.” As one of many totalizing systems, “history” in the traditional sense works by giving meaning to a set of “events” as “facts.” Contrary to the beliefs of certain theoreticians, people’s perception of history could not avoid being affected by postmodernism. “Despite its detractors, the postmodern is not ahistorical or dehistoricized, though it does question our (perhaps unacknowledged) assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 1988: xii).

History always claimed to work with “facts” and “truths” in an “objective” manner. Peter Novick explains “objectivism” as follows;

The assumptions on which it[objectivism] rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between... fact and value and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent from [not constituted by] interpretation... Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are ‘found’, not ‘made’. (qtd in Jenkins “Introduction” 11)

That separation between “real” and “made,” “found” and “made,” and “history” and “fiction” does not seem to be relevant anymore. As Elizabeth Ermarth states, “the distinction between what is invented and what is real is one that for many reasons we can no longer afford” (47). It is essential to realize the narrativistic and meaning-giving nature of history. What is needed is “a new self-consciousness about the distinction between the brute *events* of the past and the historical *facts* we construct out of them. Facts are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events” (Hutcheon 1989: 57). Again, this turns out to be a question of power. When Foucault’s statement about power (which essentially represses) is remembered, the act of meaning-giving done by the

historiographer has certain implications. As Hutcheon suggests “all past ‘events’ are potential historical ‘facts’, but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated” (1989: 75). In this sense, the historian also practices a great amount of power, *choosing* to narrate certain facts and *repressing* others.

Postmodernism challenges the very notions the historians and historiographers claim to work on. Jenkins states that, “protected by a continued adherence to common sense empiricism and realist notions of representation and truth, most historians have been resistant to that postmodernism which has affected so many of their colleagues in adjacent discourses” (“Introduction” 1). Still, a great deal of exploration has been done by various philosophers, theoreticians and historians on the problem of history in the postmodern age. First of all, the term “fact” was under scrutiny when Nietzsche said, “There are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact” (qtd in Barthes 121). From this standpoint Roland Barthes defined the “historian” as “not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series” (121). For him the historical discourse was no longer an act of organizing what is already there but an act of giving significance by the historian, an “ideological elaboration, or to put it more precisely, an *imaginary* elaboration...” (121).

Michel Foucault also elaborated on the issue of history, demanding a new type of history that he calls “effective history.” For him, effective history “introduces discontinuity into our very being ... deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending” (“Nietzsche, genealogy” 124). He observes that historians try very hard to “erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place,” which is impossible. According to him history should affirm “knowledge as perspective” (“Nietzsche, genealogy” 124).

From all this philosophical reevaluation of history certain historiographers emerged who were willing to embrace this new perspective. One such historiographer was Hayden

White, who changed the face of the field of historiography with his seminal work, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. He was one of the few historians who worked in the field of history defining the historical work as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*” (2). In his book what he aimed to do was to reveal a metahistorical understructure, like the “metanarratives” Lyotard was writing about. By analyzing European historical works, historians and philosophers, he sought to reveal different strategies that are used by historians while writing an account of history. His work revealed that what historians actually worked on was language and linguistics, trying to impose their interpretations to raw “events.” White claims that “the historian performs an essentially *poetic act*”(x). His work forced historians to acknowledge the implications of their interpretative act as his claims emphasized that “the writing, reception, and ‘critical reading’ of narratives about the past are not unrelated to issues of power, both intellectual and institutional” (Hutcheon 1988: 97-98).

Another prominent historian investigating the new view of history is Frank Ankersmit. In his article “Historiography and Postmodernism”, Ankersmith calls for “a new and different link with the past” that will only be attained by an honest recognition of the new position historians find themselves in (279). Ankersmit situates history among many other narratives and discourses of today’s culture, thus destroying its image as a separate, different system dealing with “Truth” and “fact.” He also asks, “does not both the language of the novelist and of the historian give us the illusion of reality, either fictitious or genuine?” (284). The notion of “evidence” once seen as “a magnifying glass through which [historians] can study the past,” showing that reality is hidden behind it, now appears more like “the brushstrokes used by the painter to achieve a certain effect” (287). “Evidence does not point towards the *past* but to other *interpretations* of the past ... [it] does not send us back to the past, but gives rise to the question [of] what a historian here and now can or cannot do with it” (287). Therefore, for Ankersmit the focus is no longer on the past itself, but on the distance between present and past, on the difference between the language used for speaking about the past and the past itself.

Taking into account exactly *that* language and strategies used by the historian, what Hans Kellner suggests is finding a way of “getting the story crooked” instead of getting it straight (128). For him

getting the story crooked ... means looking at the historical text in such a way as to make more apparent the problems and decisions that shape its strategies, however hidden or disguised they may be. It is a way of looking honestly at the *other* sources of history, found not in archives or computer databases, but in discourse and rhetoric. (128)

According to Kellner, the notion of “continuity” attributed to history, or to the past, is not natural but artificial and literary. “Continuity is embodied in the mythic path of narrative which ‘explains’ by its very sequential course, even when it merely reports” (129). The problematic nature of presenting the past as essentially continuous becomes evident “at the boundaries of the historical text,” at its beginnings and endings (129).

The narratological problem of beginnings and endings is a special issue in historiography because it demonstrates in an obvious way how the fundamental choices made by historians affect the stories they tell and reveal the nature of their historical understanding. (134)

Kellner concludes that “history is not ‘about’ the past as such, but rather about our ways of creating meanings from the scattered, and profoundly meaningless debris we find around us” (136-137). Thus, once again, history possesses a literary dimension that is present even in the act of research.

It is important to recognize that what postmodernism brought about was not a “rejection” of the past or its importance. In his book *Rethinking History*, Keith Jenkins distinguishes between “past” and “history.” He argues that “there is a multiplicity of types of history whose only common feature is that their ostensible object of enquiry is ‘the past’” (3). He establishes that there is “one past – many histories” (11).

The past has occurred. It has gone and can only be brought back again by historians in very different media ... not as actual events. The past is gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work. History is the labour of historians. ... History (historiography) is an inter-textual, linguistic construct. (6-7)

Similarly, Hutcheon maintains that in postmodernism,

History is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct. And in arguing that history does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and ‘gleefully’ deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness account are texts. Even the institutions of the past, its social structures and practices, could be seen, in one sense, as social texts. (1988: 16)

Accepting history as a body of texts among many others in our culture also problematizes the distinct boundary between history and fiction, since in postmodernism both are regarded as linguistic, or even “poetic,” man-made narratives. The insistence of historians like White, LaCapra, Ankersmit, and Kellner about the linguistic, poetic, narrative nature of historiographic language brings about a transcendence of the distinct boundary between history and literature. This is “a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits: those of particular arts, of genres, of art itself” (Hutcheon 1988: 9). Not only the borders between literary genres have become fluid but also the bold line between history and fiction has been blurred.

At this point of the discussion comes the term “historiographic metafiction” and such novels which blend history and fiction. In her books *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Linda Hutcheon, while dealing with the more general notion of postmodernism, analyzes the works of a great number of writers from diverse backgrounds, such as E. L. Doctorow, Maxine Hong Kingston, Salman Rushdie, Umberto Eco, John Barth, Robert Coover, to name just a few, and discovers some common general qualities among those writers. She creates the term “historiographic metafiction,” referring to certain novels which turn to history, historical documents and traditional forms to open them up to new critical viewing. In addition, such novels also reflect their own narrativistic, constructed and fictitious nature. Thus, at this point, it might be useful to explore Hutcheon’s view of “metafiction” as the narrative that turns to itself, exploring “the language of its own meaning” (Worthen 734).

In one of her earlier books, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* Hutcheon defines metafiction as “fiction about fiction, ... fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1). She uses many different

adjectives for such fiction throughout her book, such as “self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational” (1). What metafiction creates is “a mimesis of process” (39) as opposed to “a mimesis of product” (38). “The novel no longer seeks just to provide an order and meaning to be recognized by the reader. It now demands that he be conscious of the work, the actual construction that he too is undertaking” (39). Hutcheon discusses that “textually self-conscious metafiction today is a most didactic form” (xi). She establishes that metafiction can both teach about “the ontological status of fiction and also the complex nature of reading” (xi-xii). She argues that while the readers are made aware of their roles as readers and of the fictional nature of the text at hand, they also learn to participate in the meaning-making process in their act of reading. “They are distanced, yet involved, co-producers of the novel” (xii). “Techniques of defamiliarization and distanciation” for her, helped form “a greater degree of ideological self-awareness” (xiii). Metafiction “demystif[ies]” power by “reveal[ing] it in all its arbitrariness” (xvi): when we see the fiction or narrative in front of us as what it is, and when we have a chance to analyze all the strategies used to create a narrative, as readers, we realize that the creator of such a narrative practices an act of power, leaving certain things out, including others in. This awareness makes us more conscious of all other narratives around us; we recognize all of them as acts of power.

Another aspect Hutcheon mentions in her book is that there are many different strategies that can be used in order to make a novel self-reflexive and she states that the range of this “metafictional phenomenon” (7) is broad. “In some metafiction there are direct addresses to the reader ... Sometimes, however, these positions are more subtly established” (xvi). Some metafictional novels assert their fictitiousness more loudly, while others choose to reveal their own constructed nature more implicitly. Hutcheon uses the adjective “overt” (29) for the first group, and “covert” (31) for the second group.

In relation to her analysis of metafiction, Hutcheon suggests that historiographic metafiction, “goes beyond self-reflexivity to situate discourse in a broader context” (1988: 41). Historiographic metafiction “not only is self-reflexively metafictional and parodic, but also makes a claim to some kind of (newly problematized) historical reference” (1988: 40). What makes this type of metafiction different is its “fundamentally

critical ... ironic relation to the past and the *present*" (1988: 41). Such novels, in addition to being self-reflexive, "also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988: 5). The texts of such kind are "historical and political in a way that much metafiction is not" (1988: 52).

Historiographic metafiction allows for "a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present" (1988: 19). Hutcheon calls this, "the presence of the past" (1988: 20). "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (1988: 110). The past is not "bracketed or effaced," it is "incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning" (1988: 24). However, this revisit to the past is "never a nostalgic return," it is "always a critical reflection" (1988: 4). It is at this point that "irony" and "parody" become indispensable tools to achieve this critical approach.

Most theoreticians of postmodernism – Jameson among them – see postmodern art as "empty formalism" (Worthen 735) because it "pays unusual attention to the surface" while exploring "the language of its own meaning" (Worthen 734). Such theorists also perceive postmodern works' tendency to frequently invoke and appropriate the forms of the past as something purely formalist, empty, only on the surface. Jameson argues that, in postmodernism, such invoking of past styles appears more like "pastiche" rather than "parody." For him, in today's world "parody has become impossible" (1983: 114), and has been replaced by pastiche.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs. (Jameson 2001: 17)

Thus, for Jameson, postmodern works invoke past styles in a strangely toneless register. "Pastiche renders the style of earlier periods, and so the history that style represents, as merely another commodity for sale" (Worthen 735). Therefore, pastiche does not bring a new understanding of the past and its forms, nor does it say anything concerning our

current historical situation. “Pastiche denatures that style by removing it from history, and history from it” (Worthen 735).

Rejecting this ahistorical form of “pastiche” as the dominant postmodernist art form, Hutcheon replaces it with “parody” which she calls “perfect postmodern form” (1988: 11). However, her understanding of parody is much more complex and political than what the style is commonly regarded as. As she quotes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of parody appears as follows:

A composition in prose or verse in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase in an author or class of authors are imitated in such a way as to make them appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects; an imitation of a work more or less closely modeled on the original, but so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect.. (1985: 32)

Hutcheon’s view of parody is more inclusive and challenging. According to her, what lies in the heart of parody is “irony.” “Irony participates in parodic discourse as a strategy which allows the decoder to interpret and evaluate” (1985: 31). Irony, as “the mode of the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen” possesses a certain “edge” (1995: 9). Hutcheon states, “the suspicion of deceit that accompanies indirection, especially when combined with the idea of power, understandably makes for a certain unease. That irony can be used as a weapon has always been known” (1995: 9). Moreover, Hutcheon notes that the “scene” of irony is a social and political scene which contains relations of power based in relations of communication. Irony “unavoidably involves touchy issues such as exclusion and inclusion, intervention and evasion” (1995: 2).

With “ironic inversion” as a characteristic of all parody, parody is never “a matter of nostalgic imitation of past models; it is a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity” (1985: 8). Parody operates as a method of inscribing continuity, but also permits critical distance (1985: 20). From Hutcheon’s point of view, parody is essentially double and divided; “its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression” (1985: 26). The critical distance created by irony, for Hutcheon, can be “playful as well as belittling; ... critically constructive as well as

destructive,” which means that a parodical work might not necessarily “ridicule” (1985: 32).

Parody is seen as “a perfect postmodern form” because it foregrounds both “a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality” and “a liberating challenge to a definition of subjectivity and creativity” (1988: 11). Novels of historiographic metafiction are “all overtly historical and unavoidably political, precisely because they are formally parodic” (1988: 23). They “use and abuse,” install and subvert different forms and conventions from the past in parodic ways. In this context, parody appears as “the formal analogue to the dialogue of past and present” (1988: 25). It allows the artist to “speak *to* a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it” (1988: 35).

Parody is also “the mode of the ‘ex-centric’” (1988: 35), the term Hutcheon uses for those who are marginalized by a dominant ideology. In postmodernism, and specifically in historiographic metafiction, notions like “center,” “margin,” “otherness,” “sameness” take on different meanings. As Hutcheon suggests, “the centre no longer completely holds” and in this decentered world, the “marginal” and the “ex-centric” (in class, race, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity) take on a new significance. “Our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed” (1988: 12). Hence, the issue is no longer about “alienated otherness,” it is one of “differences,” not of “centralized sameness” but of “decentralized community” (1988: 12). Hutcheon points at the fact that “‘difference’, unlike ‘otherness,’ has no exact opposite against which to define itself ... Postmodern difference or rather differences, in the plural, are always multiple and provisional” (1988: 6). The ex-centrics, traditionally excluded from fiction and history, gain a chance of telling their own “stories” in postmodernism and in historiographic metafiction. Their stories always bring the unsaid, unheard and unseen to a new light, since, as Hutcheon maintains, “to be ex-centric, on the border or margin, inside yet outside is to have a different perspective” (1988: 67).

One significant characteristic of postmodern (historiographic) metafiction for Hutcheon is its political, subversive and questioning potential. By looking at both the historiographic and fictional accounts of the past, such fiction “stud[ies] the ideological inscriptions of difference as social inequality” (1988: 19). “The relation of power to knowledge and to historical, social, and ideological discursive contexts is an obsession of postmodernism” (1988: 86). However, Hutcheon warns against seeing the ideology of postmodernism as non-problematic: “the ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical, for it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical; nor is it truly oppositional” (1988: 120). She further asserts, “historiographic metafiction is not ‘ideological novels’: they do not ‘seek, through the vehicle of fiction, to persuade their readers of the correctness of a particular way of interpreting the world.’ Instead, they make their readers *question* their own (and by implication others’) interpretations” (1988: 180). Still, these novels are “interrogative in mode and ‘de-doxifying’ in intent” (1989: 10).

In her broad research in creating a new novel genre (historiographic metafiction) which is “overtly historical,” “unavoidably political,” and “formally parodic,” Hutcheon borrows a lot from other genres, art forms and systems, and analyzes them thoroughly. Some of these are history, architecture, film, music, photography, and sometimes poetry. One of the few genres which almost never appear in her books is drama. The fact that drama is overlooked in Hutcheon’s work raises curious questions about the nature of the genre. Though Hutcheon is capable of understanding other complex systems and deciphering their workings, she leaves drama out. Christopher Bigsby calls attention to the fact that drama is excluded from the theoretical discussions in his book, *Modern American Drama*: “Why is it that literary critics, cultural historians, literary theorists, those interested in the evolution of genre, in discourse and ideology, find so little to say about the theatre in general and the American theatre in particular?” (1).

In fact, for theatre practitioners the new consciousness about history as a construct is not so new. As Knowles states,

Ever since Shakespeare and his contemporaries invented the chronicle history play in the late sixteenth century, the re-creation of history on the stage has frequently represented the past metatheatrically through dramaturgical structures that function

dialogically as negotiations between present enactments and the documentary 'facts', acts, and artifacts on which they are based. (123)

Moreover, these plays explored the concept of the historical persona whose role in history gains significance not from the notions of human character but, as Knowles suggests, from "their audiences and their self-conscious theatricality" (123). Shakespeare, in his plays, highlighted metatheatrical elements like rituals, role playing, the performative nature of speech and "the relationship between the historical act and theatrical enactment" (Knowles 123). Also, in the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, with their "epic theater," used presentational, audience-centered forms of drama to deconstruct traditional 'authoritative' views of history and replaced them with "self-consciously revisionist, populist, or oppositional re-presentations of history as (social) performance and process" (Knowles 123).

Postmodernism has also affected American theater in most significant ways. "From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s the American theatre began to develop an alternative aesthetic that coincided with the growth of Pop Art, rock music, and other innovative forms of artistic expression" (Geis 35). Alternative, experimental theater groups emerged all over the country. These groups and many other individual playwrights drew inspirations from previous drama theoreticians like Artaud and Brecht and experimented on the limits of theater. As Kerstin Schmidt suggests, postmodern drama "is not concerned with postulating a new concept to replace an older one. What matters more is the search for new forms and the concomitant ability to revitalize art" (18). Thus, the postmodern notion of play is at work in every field of dramatic experiment. Mainly, the issues postmodernist drama works on are "the postmodern sense of self, a problematization of the dramatic text, performance and authorship in postmodernism, and aspects of the theatrical space and its relationship to postmodern mediatized culture" (Schmidt 13). Postmodernism's contradictory, paradoxical and fragmented character shows itself as fragmentation in postmodern drama, one of its defining traits.

Some theatre groups like Judith Malina and Julian Beck's Living Theatre, Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater, and Richard Schechner's Performance Group emphasized the performative nature of theater. While putting out a play, such collectives usually started with an idea and improvised their way to the final production, collaborating in every

stage of the process. The plays that they put out was also communal by nature and required active audience participation. These groups tried to evoke a “collective unconscious ... through physical action and visual representation” (Geis 38), rejecting the realm of language. One of the key techniques used in postmodern drama is the technique of “transformation,” first generated by Chaikin’s Open Theater. As a technique, it requires “the abrupt taking on and dropping of different roles without any accompanying changes in setting, costume, or lighting” (Schmidt 12). Hence, this technique can be seen as an expression of postmodernism’s rejection of fixity and finality in meaning. Other groups also experimented on the boundaries of drama. Some of them, like Robert Wilson’s Byrad – Hoffman Foundation, focused on the imagistic nature of theater. Many others, like the San Francisco Mime Troupe and ethnic theater groups, seized the political side of postmodernist experimentation. Postmodernism’s playful spirit and openness admits those who have been excluded by restrictive and fixed concepts of theory, and, as a result, as Schmidt states, it has been “adopted by playwrights with a decisive political agenda” (23). Tony Kushner is one of those playwrights who embraces postmodernism’s fluid strategies to express his subversive political views.

One of the many issues under scrutiny in postmodern drama is “a concept of self that rests on unity, mastery, and completion, an idea of self as independent historical agent fully in charge of its actions and thoughts” (Schmidt 45). Like many other fields in postmodernism, postmodern drama takes the idea of self as a construct, not a given, which is always dependent on its cultural context. Therefore, the theatrical manifestation of the subject, the dramatic character, becomes fragmented and subverted. Instead of a developing, integrated character, in postmodern drama, what appears is the “variations of the decentered self,” “hybrid, partial identities” (Schmidt 45). As a part of the fragmentation of the self, the physical body of the actor/character is also used subversively in postmodern drama. Schmidt explains this subversion as follows: “emotions and fantasies are no longer repressed and hidden in the closed space of the body. Bodily fragments are brought to light and objectified, the (re)presented body is cut up, mostly by using techniques from photography, film and videotaping” (50). Another technique used by the individual performance artists like Karen Finley is “lesionism” – “the deliberate altering, sometimes even injuring, of body parts in front of an audience, to

present the body not as a fixed entity or a united whole, but as divided into fragments and parts” (50).

Another theatrical concept that undergoes experimentation in the postmodern age is the theatrical stage, or more appropriately, space. Also as an effort to politicize theater, works of many theater groups started to make use of unusual theater locations – private lofts, cafés, churches, public street corners among many other. According to Schmidt, this movement “represents the attempt to reach the public, to lend a new air to the site where theatrical performance takes place, and to attribute new aspects to everyday spaces otherwise alien to the usage as stage” (73). Thus, “society at large was theatricalized” (60). In addition, certain environmental theaters serve to integrate the spectator into the performance and break the boundary between the performer and the audience.

Most devices of postmodern American drama was designed to break certain illusions and fixed categories and boundaries of theater. The new distrust in language and verbal communication led towards new forms of textuality, “processual and transformative” (Schmidt 53). Postmodern drama also subverts traditional communicative patterns; dialogue “has receded from the superior position it held in traditional drama. Frequently monological structures subvert its communicative function” (Schmidt 56-57). Frequent audience addressing and even attempts to make physical contact with the audience are common in postmodern drama. “It is precisely in the moment of the breakdown in a performance, that is, when the illusion of the stage as a closed world is denied, that audience participation can take place and the spectator moves into the center of theatrical attention” (Schmidt 51). Thus, postmodern drama is highly metadramatic, as it “addresses the fragmentation and constructedness of every version of the real” (Schmidt 19). Kerstin Schmidt also calls postmodern drama “theater of theory” since “its emphasis on a play’s existence and the reflection on the ways in which a play comes into being intermingles theoretical concerns and theatrical practices” (22). Because the nature of representation is one of the basic concerns of postmodern theater, it constantly reflects upon itself, its parts and processes. Postmodern drama “deconstructs drama in the very process of producing drama and, as a consequence, it generates its own meta-discourse” (Schmidt 35).

As a part of this huge postmodern American stage, Tony Kushner was under the influence of this sceptical, experimental spirit. However, the medium he chose to explore these issues is significant since there is a quality in drama that makes it very suitable for postmodernist mode. Linda Hutcheon has highlighted notions like self-reflexivity, reader participation in the creation process, the process of creation gaining importance, and “incredulity” towards fixed meanings, fixed products and systems that try to impose themselves as “givens.” From this perspective, drama and theatre somehow seem more appropriate to show, and enact the double-voice of postmodernism. It was Bigsby again who tried to articulate this nature of theater with a set of questions directed at the theoreticians who tend to leave drama out:

Is drama, and the theatre in which it takes place, not inherently ideological? Does the transformation of the word on the page into the mobility of performance not raise questions about discourse and text? Is the stage, the most public of arts, not a place to see dramatised the tensions and concerns of a society? Is a concern with the perception of a work, with the way in which it is ‘read,’ not of special significance to an art in which that reception may profoundly modify the work in question? May questions of authorship not have special bearing on an art which might be thought to be collaborative? Is the very nature and status of criticism not challenged by work which to a large degree incorporates a critical reading in the very process of its transmission? (1992: 2)

Attracting attention to the fact that theater is not just the written text, that it is essentially the many different productions of that text, Bigsby tries to assert the instability and pluralistic nature of the theatre. As Knowles also suggests; “theatre practitioners have always been aware of the instability of the theatrical event where the re-creation *is* the (performance) text, of the need to ‘make it new’ with and for each new audience each night, and of the fact that each member of each audience constructs a different text” (122-123).

While metafictional novels may “permit languages, values and narratives to dispute, thereby resisting the single voice of dogmatic politics and religion” (qtd in Bigsby 1992: 341) as Salman Rushdie suggests, the same is also true about theatre, according to Bigsby, where “the pluralism of voices sounds out in an environment in which the disputing languages are given social form” (341). The novel is still about one speaking person and his discourse, but “theatre can enact what the novel can only describe,” it can

“dramatise a reality transposed into fiction, but that fiction is then recast as the reality of shared experience” (1992: 268). Theatre is a form which can demonstrate its pluralisms of meanings more easily and more visually.

In this vein, theatre is maybe “the only genre which unavoidably foregrounds its processes” (Bigsby 1992: 6). When you go to a theatre you cannot avoid seeing the lighting devices, the stage, the curtain; you have to go through the process of buying a ticket, which always reminds you that you are going to see a “play.” Even the text of the play continuously has to give directions about the setting, the lighting, the music, inscribing its own theatricality in itself. Moreover, as audience we are aware of our essential role in the meaning-making process. “We go to the theatre as ourselves part of a ceremony knowing that our own involvement will be central to the meanings which proliferate” (Bigsby 1992: 7).

This awareness of the audience inherent in theater led Eugene Ionesco to hate going to plays. Something in that experience bothered him immensely. He later pondered on this issue and wrote about it in one of his articles as follows:

What disturbed me in the theater was the presence on stage of characters of flesh and blood. Their material presence destroyed the fiction. It was as though there were present two levels of reality, the concrete reality, impoverished, empty, limited, of these banal living men, moving and speaking upon the stage, and the reality of the imagination. And these two realities faced each other, unmasked, irreconcilable: two antagonistic universes which could not succeed in unifying and blending. (78)

For him theater was “impure,” “imperfectly fiction,” “a raw material which had not undergone an indispensable transformation.” Theater is, after all, as Eric Bentley puts it, “human beings presenting other human beings to yet other human beings” (1973: xv). This double-sided, irreconcilable, paradoxical nature of theater makes it an apt mode for the paradoxical postmodernism: it is neither purely “real” nor purely “imaginary,” neither outside nor inside. Since this inherent duplicity could never be changed, Ionesco chooses to “exaggerate ... underline and accentuate” this tension. “It was necessary not to hide the strings, but to make them even more visible, deliberately evident” (Ionesco 85). This double consciousness, this strategy to make the artificialities of theater more visible is also the agenda of metadrama.

In his book *Modern American Drama*, Bigsby talks at one point about James Baldwin, discussing that Baldwin “turned to the theatre because he needed to deny himself a controlling voice, because he wished to subvert his own authority” (8). The same may very well be true of Kushner. In an interview Kushner talks about the nature of theatre and why he prefers that medium (Weber 2006: 149-161). He asserts that “the theatre is anti-fetishistic because it doesn’t ever finish, it’s never complete, it doesn’t present you with a product that you can pocket” (152). His views on the nature of playwriting in the broad experience of theater also demonstrates how the playwright is far from being the authoritative author; “I’m a playwright, so what I do is the only thing in theatre that has a shot at being permanent. But then again, what I write is sort of writing and sort of not.” He talks about how a play is something “completely different on stage. It’s on the page and it’s not” (158). Theatre can never stand for reality because, according to Kushner,

At it’s very, very deepest heart, what theatre is most intensely about is the conflict between reality and illusion ... There is no way to escape that conflict in theatre. And the greatest workers in the theatre are the people who embrace that because it’s actually not a limitation of the form, but is rather the form’s absolute strength and, in fact, its heart. (159)

Hutcheon advocates for metafictionality and self-reflexiveness because it creates the critical distance and awareness essential for the readers to “question.” Similarly, for Kushner, “theatricality” in theatre is “inescapable” and again this theatricality provides the critical distance. “It is a challenge for the artist and a challenge for the audience, and that challenge is productive of an important way of understanding the world because theatre teaches critical consciousness. In theatre, everything that you see both is and isn’t what it appears to be” (159). Essentially what theatre does, like most historiographic metafiction, is to “teach one to look at the world as an artificial contraption and as an interpretation. You are never allowed not to see that when you are watching a stage play because it always fails in its task of creating illusion” (160). Thinking very much in the same frame with Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives,” Kushner asserts that “credulity is the antithesis of the theatrical” (160).

If theatre is already so aware of its own theatricality, then, metadrama, and specifically historiographic metadrama, may be at least as appropriate a medium for postmodernism as historiographic metafiction is. While applying the term to a group of Canadian plays,

Richard Knowles first talks about postmodernism's effects on history and Hutcheon's theory. He, then, moves on to analyze the plays, taking it for granted that the connection is obvious; he does not spend much time with theoretical explanations. However, it is important to note that there are two entirely different genres in comparison here – novel and drama. Although their aims in using self-reflexive devices are the same, their techniques for doing this are entirely different. Hence, a thorough study of metadrama inevitably requires taking Richard Hornby's analysis of the subject, as stated in his seminal book *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, into consideration.

Quite similar to Hutcheon's definition of metafiction, Hornby defines metadrama as "drama about drama," meaning that metadrama occurs "whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself" (31). Hornby starts his book by talking about the age-old tendency to talk about drama in the terms of binary oppositions of "realistic" and "unrealistic." This tendency for him is "largely false or misleading" (14). While he acknowledges the existence of realism as a dramatic genre, one among many, he rejects it as a "doctrine" because it limits the study of drama and some plays just do not fit either of the poles. Thus, in order to demonstrate the much more complex system that drama works in, he lists the following aspects:

1. A play does not reflect life; instead, it reflects itself.
2. At the same time, it relates to other plays as a system.
3. This system, in turn, intersects with other systems of literature, nonliterary performance, other art forms (both high and low), and culture generally. Culture, as it centers on drama in this way, I shall refer to as the 'drama/culture complex'.
4. It is through the drama/culture complex, rather than through individual plays, that we interpret life. (17)

Hornby's term of drama/culture complex, his awareness of drama as working in relation to the broader system of culture, his assertion that drama is essentially about "itself" all remind the readers of the workings of postmodernism, its blurring of the boundaries, its tendency to think about every field in relation with one another and with everyday culture, and its awareness of the constructed nature of each system and study. A play, in addition to being self-reflexive, "operates within a system of drama as a whole, and, concentrically, also within the systems that form culture as a whole" (22). In addition, much like Hutcheon's view of historiographic metafiction, according to Hornby, plays

and performances are not just entertainments, they “may very well effect how people behave” (22).

If parody is “a perfect postmodern form” for Hutcheon, then, for Hornby, “all great drama is *parody*, but it is a parody of a complex and serious nature. In parodying the received dramatic tradition, the serious playwright is attacking and ultimately altering the means by which people think, behave, and decide” (25). In order to do this, however, the playwright also has to inscribe in his text the very thing he aims to alter, creating, as a result, a paradoxical double voice and for Hornby, “this ‘seeing double’ is the true source of the significance of metadrama” (32).

If all drama is parody, then, it is not surprising that “*all* drama is metadramatic” (31). For Hornby, metadrama is “not a narrow phenomenon;” it “is always occurring” (31-32). However, the “manner” and the “degree” of metatheatricality can “vary widely” (32). To be able to analyze those different manners and degrees, Hornby sets up five different metatheatrical devices used in plays: the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self reference (32). He also warns the readers against seeing these categories as “passive;” they are rather “instrumental.” “They are rarely found in pure form, but often occur together or blend into one another” (32).

As a result, historiographic metadrama, blends Hornby’s metatheatrical devices, and, in addition, any strategy that points to its theatricality, with a firm historical grounding. Knowles defines historiographic metadramas as

the dramaturgies that concern themselves with theatrical process (rather than product) as attempts at democratization; with explorations of history and historiography as themselves self-reflexive probings into present constructions and reconstructions of an unfixed and ever-changing past through which we (continually) remake what we ‘are,’ and with various forms of contestation of the control of time and history and therefore of the forces that constitute ‘us’ as us in the present, from the perspectives of local community, class, gender and race. (77-78)

Such plays, in addition to being self-theatrical, are “frequently rooted in a historiographic tradition that is necessarily connected with ‘actual people’ in actual historical, social, and

cultural contexts” (Knowles 124). They are designed to “raise questions about the ownership of history” (Knowles 128). Maybe the reason why drama works perfectly in raising such questions comes from its “present-ness,” a significant feature also emphasized in historiography today. Catherine Belsey defines history as follows:

History is always in practice a reading of the past. We make a narrative out of the available ‘documents,’ the written texts we interpret in order to produce a knowledge of a world which is no longer present. And yet it is always from the present that we produce this knowledge: from the present in the sense that it is only from what is still extant, still available, that we make it; and from the present in the sense that we make it out of an understanding formed by the present. We bring what we know now to bear on what remains from the past to produce an intelligible history. (1)

Probably to do such a reading, essentially from the present, theatre is the perfect form since “theatre is the only genre which habitually operates in the present tense and which makes that presentness an acknowledged part of its own methodology” (Biggsby 1992: 6).

As a playwright who loves, enjoys and respects theatre’s theatricality, its plural meanings, its elusiveness and its ability to create a critical (and probably political) consciousness, Tony Kushner has written many metatheatrical plays up to day. In addition, in most of his plays one also comes across historical personages, events and significant periods of history. In reading those plays, however, it becomes clear that they are not just “historical”—the historical elements are not there to lay a claim to a factual, objective reality. History in Kushner’s plays is rather something to be constantly evoked and questioned, and it is always from the present that he questions history; the past and the present are rethought in each other’s light. His plays combine a supernatural, fantastic world with the historical, actual one; his characters and the devices he uses never let the audience forget that what they are reading/watching is a play. And finally, to be a reader of Kushner means always to be active, to think critically, to question and to participate in the meaning-making process.

This study, applying the term “historiographic metadrama” to Kushner’s theatre, will focus on two of his plays. While analyzing Kushner, his worldview and his plays, this study will borrow heavily from Linda Hutcheon’s theory of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction, and will use Richard Hornby’s devices of metadrama in

appropriating the notions of postmodern self-reflexivity to drama. In addition to Hornby's devices, however, any other strategy or device that hints at or demonstrates self-theatricality will also be highlighted in Kushner's plays.

The two plays to be focused on—*A Bright Room Called Day* (1985) and *Angels in America* (1992)—stand out among Kushner's other plays because of their subversive ideological/political power. In both plays, Kushner turns his attention towards specific periods in history and attempts to rewrite those periods from points of view of ordinary characters who are otherwise silenced by the totalizing master narrative of history. Both plays use the playfulness of metatheater to contest this metanarrative. Moreover, both plays, in different ways, demonstrate how Kushner's understanding of history has been influenced by the prominent Marxist scholar Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," a work that advocates that the totalizing flow of history should be disrupted in order to bring forth the stories of the oppressed.

The first chapter will focus on Kushner's 1985 play, *A Bright Room Called Day*. The chapter, while dealing with the play in a linear manner, will demonstrate how Kushner manages to crack open the continuum of history in a Benjaminian manner. In the chapter, the dramatic style Kushner uses for this purpose, Brechtian epic theater, will also be analyzed and its relevance to the postmodern historiographic self-conscious fictionality will be underlined. Finally, it will be claimed that by drawing parallels between Germany in the 1930s and America in the 1980s, Kushner renders an otherwise monumentalized period in history relevant to his times and country; he manages to dramatize, in Linda Hutcheon's terms the "presence of the past" (1988: 19).

The second chapter will deal with Kushner's grand project, *Angels in America*. In analyzing this seven-hour epic, however, this chapter, instead of following a linear pattern, will follow an approach that groups the play's thematic and structural features separately. In this chapter, all the different historical metanarratives Kushner contests in the 1980s America will be discussed in depth and the play's metatheatrical structure will be analyzed in relation to its "gay sensibility." Walter Benjamin's specific influence on the play will also be discussed in relation to its challenge towards unifying historical

narratives. As a result, this chapter will shed some light on how Kushner aims to rewrite the grand historical narratives of America through the eyes of the marginalized people in the society—the “ex-centrics” (Hutcheon 1988: 60).

By analyzing how these two plays deal with history and by underlining the fact that they are products of a self-conscious theatricality, this thesis will demonstrate how, in relation to Hutcheon’s theory of “historiographic metafiction,” Kushner questions the supposedly “natural” distinctions between notions like fact and fiction, history and narrative, and unity and difference. In these two plays, Kushner proves fiction to be historically grounded and history to be fictionally constructed, thus creating two unique examples of the genre of “historiographic metadrama.”

CHAPTER 1

“Present-ification” of the Past – *A Bright Room Called Day*

Antony Robin Jeremy Kushner was born to Jewish American parents, Sylvia Deutscher and Bill Kushner, in New York City on July 16, 1956, and shortly thereafter the family moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana. His parents were both classically trained musicians (they named him after Tony Bennett) and encouraged Kushner to pursue his interest in art and literature. Kushner stated that from his parents he also inherited “a healthy appetite for politics, for history, for political theory” which later shaped his vision as both a human being and a dramatist (“Notes” 20).

Kushner spent most of his childhood in Lake Charles, Louisiana where his mother, a musician and an amateur actress, frequently performed in local plays including *Death of A Salesman*. In Louisiana, Kushner discovered the great emotional power of theater and arts through his mother. In an interview with Rabbi Norman Cohen, Kushner acknowledges the different experience and the advantages growing up in the South brought to his formation as a person and a writer. “I’ve benefited from growing up in the deep South ... I grew up in a more integrated society, paradoxically, because so much effort was put into integrating the South” (224). Growing up among people from various ethnic backgrounds probably shaped Kushner’s all-inclusive, non-segregative approach evident in his works. He also inherited “a certain conviction about the efficacy of political action” and “a very lively mix of linguistic traditions” (225) from the region. In the later years Kushner would return to Louisiana, the scene of his childhood, in a semiautobiographical libretto, *Caroline, or Change*.

However, Kushner’s childhood was not all fun and games. Feeling that he was different from others at a very early age, Kushner struggled with his homosexuality until his 20s. He once confessed to David Savran; “I grew up very, very closeted” and explained how this secret life of his was strongly attracted to something innate in the nature of theater, “I’m sure that the disguise of theater, the doubleness, and all that slightly tawdry stuff interested me” (“Speaking” 293).

Kushner moved to New York in 1974 to start his college education at Columbia University where he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature in 1978. During his college years he immersed himself in the New York theater scene. Two productions had great influence on him, namely Richard Schechner's production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Richard Foreman's production of *The Threepenny Opera*, both of which were by Kushner's greatest dramatic influence, Bertolt Brecht. It was also during these years that he started to be involved in liberal politics, fueled by his readings of Brecht and the prominent Marxist scholar Walter Benjamin. He was also drawn to medieval literature, finding "magic and the darkness of it very appealing;" probably because of his "fantastical, spiritual side" always present in his plays ("Speaking" 295). At the same time he was trying to come to terms with his homosexuality and sought release in therapy. Until he could at last embrace his sexuality he had to deal with disapproval from his father and went through many painful experiences. One such instance involved his calling his mother from a New York City phone booth to tell her that he was gay, a scene he later recreated in *Angels in America* (which will also be referred to as *Angels* from now on).

Upon graduation, Kushner (for some time) worked as a switchboard operator at the United Nations Plaza Hotel, at the same time trying his hand at directing through small-scale theater productions of important dramatists such as Shakespeare and Brecht. Apparently satisfied with what theater had to offer, Kushner enrolled at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree in directing in 1984. At school he was trained under the guidance of Brecht specialist Carl Weber who had a great influence on his dramatic work and personality. During his education at Tisch, Kushner also worked at a school for gifted children in Louisiana, writing plays for them to perform. He also wrote some plays which he put into production with some of his fellow students at Tisch. His plays from this period foreshadow Kushner's later virtuous playwriting, including a wide range of genres and styles; an opera, some children's plays, one-act and full-length plays and an adaptation.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, as a director and playwright, and as the artistic director of the Heat & Light Company—a political theater group—, Kushner received many awards

and prestigious grants, including the Seidman Award in Directing from the New York University Tisch School of Arts in 1983-84; a Directing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1985; the Princess Grace Award in 1986; a Playwriting Fellowship from the New York State Council for the Arts in 1987, and a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1988. In 1985-86, Kushner became assistant director of the St. Louis Repertory Theater, and in 1987-88, of the New York Theatre Workshop. He also worked as Director of Literary Services for the Theatre Communications Group during 1989 and regularly taught at universities, finally joining the faculty of the Tisch School in 1996. Kushner settled in Brooklyn and married his long-time partner, *Entertainment Weekly* editor Mark Harris in 2003.

While he was studying at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Theatre Program, Kushner founded, with twelve other people involved in theatre production, a collective theater company called 3P Productions. Three Ps stood for politics, poetry, and popcorn. These three "Ps" are significant in that they embody some essential elements in Kushner's theatre, namely, his "political" theater, his "lyrical" language and his conviction that theater, at least his theater, should always "function as popular entertainment" (Cunningham 63). In a highly postmodern spirit Kushner states that "the distinction between high culture and low culture is – and it's already been said many, many times – an invidious distinction, and I don't think that in point of fact it's really legitimate at all" (Cunningham 64).

For Kushner, "the theater is a collective enterprise" (Jonas 162). He values both the communal experience of theater and the collective companies in the profession. He states that "all of the theater that is historically significant and generative of other kinds of theater comes out of some sort of collective movement" (Myers 235). The goal of Kushner's collective was "to build a working community of theater artists in microcosm that could generate material" (Myers 233). The company raised its own money for productions and staged them in small theaters. Most of the plays of this period remain unpublished to date. The first play of Kushner ever produced was *The Age of Assassins*, a play about anarchist assassinations at the turn of the century. The play was staged at Newfoundland Theatre in New York in 1982. *La Fin de la Baleine: An Opera for the*

Apocalypse was produced at New York's Ohio Theatre in 1983. Two plays, *The Umbrella Oracle* and *Last Gasp at the Cataract* were produced at Martha's Vineyard in 1984. *Yes, Yes, No, No*, a play for children, was written for and produced at Repertory Theatre of St. Louis in Missouri in 1985, the play was later published in a collection called *Plays in Process* in 1987. 1985 saw the productions of two Kushner plays, namely, *The Protozoa View* and *Historiomax*. There is not much information about the plays from this early period because they are unpublished and they were not reviewed by many critics.

3P Productions disintegrated in the mid-1980s and some of its members, including Kushner, founded Heat and Light Company. *A Bright Room Called Day* (which will be referred to, from now on, as *Bright Room*) was one of the earlier productions of this company, and the play Kushner calls his first play. It was first produced on the twenty-second of April in 1985 in New York City's Theatre 22. Later, the director of the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, Oskar Eustis, took the play to San Francisco, where it had its official premiere in October 1987 (It was also Eustis who commissioned Kushner to write *Angels*). The play also traveled to London and was staged at the Bush Theatre in 1988. One of the most memorable productions of the play took place in January 1991 at Joseph Papp Public Theatre by the New York Shakespeare Festival. The play was published first in 1991, and later in 1994.

Before proceeding with an in-depth analysis of the play, it is essential to shed some light on one particular influence in Kushner's art: Bertolt Brecht. Kushner wrote *Bright Room* as an attempt to use and transcend Brecht's theatrical methods. Thus, a brief discussion of Brechtian epic theater and its significance in the postmodernist discourse is imperative at this point. Along with Brecht, the influence of Marxist critic Walter Benjamin on Kushner will also be mentioned since Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" affected Kushner's understanding of and approach to history.

Tony Kushner has admitted that he is a playwright hugely influenced by many other artists and theoreticians. In an interview, when asked who his influences were, he set out to create a "huge list" (Myers 235). Among his list of names are William Shakespeare,

Anton Chekhov, Samuel Beckett, Henrik Ibsen, Ben Jonson, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and more contemporary writers from both England and America like Caryl Churchill, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, David Hare, John Guare, Maria Irene Fornes, David Mamet, Mac Wellman, and Suzan-Lori Parks. The list which is actually much longer as Kushner states in his interview with Myers, shows that Kushner, as Bigsby notes, "is a man wandering through a snowstorm of influences, his face tilted back to the sky" (1999: 86). However, Bertolt Brecht is the one name in that list which probably impressed and affected him more than any other artist. Kushner, while attending New York University, studied the theatre of Bertolt Brecht with prominent Brecht scholar Carl Weber. Years later, when interviewed by Weber, Kushner talked about Brecht's great influence on his theater. The first time he read Brecht was a turning-point for Kushner's career;

It was the first time I believed that people who are seriously committed political intellectuals could have a home in the theater, the first time that I believed theater, really good theater, had the potential for radical intervention, for effectual analysis ... I became very, very excited about doing theater as a result of reading Brecht. (106)

Brechtian epic theater—created during 1920s in Germany—interprets the teachings of Erwin Piscator and defies conventional, Aristotelian notion of drama. The myth of the coherent, unified individual outside history was one of the first aspects that Piscator and Brecht fought against. For them, as Piscator suggests, "man portrayed on the stage is significant as a social function. It is not his relationship to himself, nor his relationship to God, but his relationship to society which is central" (Bentley 1955: 212). Rejecting the Aristotelian distinction between epic and drama as separate genres, Bertolt Brecht set out to create a theater that incorporates epic qualities. Thus, Brechtian epic theater is based on narrative rather than the conventional plot. Brecht's theater was essentially political, social and historical, using the method of dialectical materialism. This method "treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself" (Brecht "Short Organum" 193).

Epic theater rejects the idea of illusion since it is a part of the dominant bourgeois theater. Creating a fake representation of reality, ignoring the constructed nature of theater and

creating a fourth wall as to foster emotional identification between the audience and the characters, are all aspects of traditional drama that Brecht sought to defy. As Norris Houghton notes, “for the catharsis that drama since Aristotle had been expected to provide, Brecht substituted intellectual stimulation” (78). To do this, Brecht created *Verfremdungseffekt* – alienation effect, defamiliarization, or estrangement. Brecht’s theater aims to break the illusion, to prevent the audience from empathizing with the characters and instead supplement distant critical, analytical thinking; “[w]hat was needed instead of a hypnotic trance was alertness” (Bentley 1973: 207). The alienation effect

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. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. (Brecht “New Technique” 143-144)

The spectators are made aware that they are in a theatre, watching a play. The illusion is broken. The theatrical becomes metatheatrical through this alienation effect. Brecht “does not want you to get involved subjectively but to view his drama dispassionately, to understand his points quite clearly, to remember at all times that this is theatre, not life” (Houghton 78). In order to achieve this desired effect, Brecht made use of many different stage devices and thus made many formal innovations for theater. He used a highly episodic structure to break the narrative flow, and to make the audience stop, distance themselves and think critically about the action. Brecht states that

The individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement...The parts of the story have to be carefully set off one against another by giving each its own structure as a play within a play. (“Short Organum” 201)

What we are faced with is not a chronological timeline but loosely connected episodes, each of which can be analyzed separately. Brecht also used titles for each episode to comment on and alienate the event presented. Another way to break the illusion for Brecht was to have the performers address the audience directly, thus breaking the fourth wall illusion and forcing the audience members to remember that they are watching a play performed by actors, not an imitation of real life. Epic theater, as Eric Bentley

suggests, seems to be saying, “The actual world exists and it is our subject. But this play and this stage are not identical with it” (1955: 217). Brecht also made use of technological devices like films, projections, slides, recordings to give the background “an attitude” towards the events on stage. The stage did this “by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations” (Brecht “Theatre for Pleasure” 71). These devices make the Brechtian stage highly “artificial” (Bentley 1955: 217) and function as a part of the alienation effect, blocking the spectator’s empathy and making an indirect impact rather than a direct one.

Other devices Brecht made use of were; showing all the mechanical apparatus of theatre openly, and using songs to comment on or contradict the events. These songs also contribute to the alienation effect since the stage action “halts while an actor advances toward you and sings some verses that are likely to make a comment on what has just transpired; at the same time it reminds you that everything you are witnessing is a theatrical fabrication” (Houghton 79). Brecht also developed a method of acting that requires the actors not to *represent* characters but merely to *present* them. The actors, without ever forgetting their own presence as actors, were using a technique of imitation based on the repetition of actions – they were *quoting* the characters. As Eric Bentley also states, “Brechtian acting is anti-illusory. The actor must not pretend to *be* the character. He must play the role from the outside” (1955: 217). Brecht also created other terms like *fabel* and *gestus* to refer to social feelings that theater had to convey¹. Another aspect of the epic theater was that along with its instructive, didactic purposes, epic theater also had to be pleasurable and enjoyable.

However, Brecht’s use of *historification* – in addition to the alienation effect – is probably most significant for the postmodern context. In order to create a further distance between the audience and stage events, Bertolt Brecht turned to specific historical periods and personages in his drama. Brecht did this because he thought that if the play told a story contemporary to the audience, the audience would not be able to maintain the desired critical perspective. He chose to focus on historical stories that had parallel

themes to the social problems he was hoping to illuminate in his own time. In witnessing these past problems critically, the audience would be able to see their present condition with the same critical eye; and realizing the possible actions that could have been taken in the past would, hopefully, encourage them to make the same analysis for their own condition. When analyzed from the postmodern frame of “historiographic metafiction,” Brechtian theater, especially through *historification*, aims to create a metatheatrical dialogue between past and present, aiming to judge them in each other’s light. In a play which is intensely aware of its status as a piece of theater, a certain period from the history is taken out from the continuum of history, singled out and revisited to see if there was anything worthy of our attention that will contribute to our critical awareness of our present situation.

Brecht’s epic theater holds a unique place in literary history in that, in the peak of high modernism, it offered a theatrical model for postmodern art. As stated earlier, Brecht’s theatre was highly metatheatrical, emphasizing process over product, theatricality over illusion. Brecht stated that “the theatre ... should stop pretending not to be theatre” (“Street Scene” 121). As Elizabeth Wright states in her book *Postmodern Brecht*, Brecht was always sceptical of “the great narrative, the great danger, the great hero, the great wrong, the great goal” (1). She also stresses that for Brecht reality, the world, and even its contradictions are “not fixed and given,” human beings produce them (Wright 2). Wright also reminds the essentially political nature of the Brechtian alienation effect since the spectator is not just a receiver but a participant, and even his/her own self-image is disrupted, theatricalized and fictionalized (Wright 19-20). In addition, as Robert Brustein states, *Verfremdung* “is really an instrument of the ironic mood, since it removes the observer from the thing observed” (260). Most importantly, in Brechtian theater we are offered a model which shows “the fictionality of life [and] the rewritability of the text of history” (Wright 31).

Brecht’s efforts to demonstrate the contradictions in the objects and incidents also parallels the contradictory nature of postmodernism for these contradictions “are not fundamentally opposed;” there is “no unity or univocal meaning” since it is again human beings who create those contradictions (Wright 37). Although he was known to be a part

of the Marxist discourse, Brecht was different from most Marxists and Communists in that he was “a Communist who does not believe in the perfectibility of man” (Houghton 76). He was split by his nature: “he is committed and he is alienated; he is active and he is passive; he is hopeful and he is cynical; he is a poet and he is a propagandist” (Houghton 77). What brings Brecht closer to postmodernism was that, unlike other Marxists, Brecht could never reach a harmonious synthesis. As Brustein suggests,

Unable to resolve his contradictions, Brecht fails to create unambiguous political ideology ... Yet, his failure to be a Utopian ideologist is his triumph as a dramatic poet; like all the great rebel dramatists, he draws his power from the clash of thesis and antithesis, always skirting a fake harmonious synthesis ... he almost invariably concentrates on the opposition rather than the resolution of his terms (257)

In Brecht’s theater, like in most historiographic metadrama, this contradictory and irresolvable nature brings out a parodic stance:

Brecht seems constitutionally incapable of creating a positive idea without somehow undermining it. Making parody a crucial element of his art, he finds his function in ridiculing the positive ideas of others – and himself; playing on incongruities, he invariably hedges his own commitment with a mocking, derisory, deflating irony. (Brustein 257-258)

In addition to its inherently contradictory nature, fundamentally, what Brechtian epic theatre aspires to do is to demystify the inherent power in systems and institutions by opening them up to critical evaluation. Epic theater strives to

reveal the hidden strategies of power implied in ... drama [and life] and to show how the autonomy of art unwittingly supports and canonizes the institution ... the V-effect is to reveal how the laws of society operate, demonstrating that nothing is normal and natural for all time, and thus intervening in the process. (Wright 39)

Like most postmodern art, Brechtian theatre doubts all codes and representations and “reveals the contradictions of history” (Wright 73) by playing with the form of theatre. Brecht presents the world as “fragmented and infinitely transformable” and “force[s] the audience into a continuous process of rewriting it” (Wright 75). Brecht, and Walter Benjamin, his close friend as well as the man representing the theoretical side of these arguments, hoped to break up the continuity of the historical world with the help of

formal techniques, their main aim being “to undermine the supposed totality” of such systems (Wright 76).

It was also difficult for Linda Hutcheon to ignore Brechtian epic theatre while trying to establish a discussion of postmodern art. Bertolt Brecht and his epic theater is perhaps the only point in Hutcheon’s study where she talks about drama. Though Hutcheon argues that Marxism and its dialectics remain inadequate in the discussion of postmodernism – because of its ignorance of ex-centrics other than the ones created by class - for her Bertolt Brecht “tried to go beyond the power of negative dialectics by self-reflexively acknowledging his own implication in, as well as reaction against, the dominant values of bourgeois capitalism” (1988: 218-219). Brecht and his theatre, like postmodern art, is always aware of this contradictory “inside-outsider” role. Epic theatre’s “self-conscious didacticism” and alienation effect parallels postmodernism’s “attack on the seemingly transparent and seamless unity of the work of art.” For Hutcheon, Brecht is the first artist who “made it possible for self-reflexivity to be considered as potentially politically progressive, rather than having a formal function” (1988: 219) and she moves on to state the similarities between epic theatre and works of historiographic metafiction:

[B]oth place the receiver in a paradoxical position, both inside and outside, participatory and critical: we are to be thoughtful and analytic, rather than either passive or unthinkingly empathetic ... both are equally accessible and entertaining, and equally didactic ... [they] also share challenges to the concepts of linearity, development, and causality which, Brecht argued, all work to reinforce the dominant ideology in power ... [they both demonstrate] contradictions in character portrayal, contesting the notion of the coherent unified subject ... there is no masking of ideology, no smoothing out of contradiction, either in character or plot. The subject is an object of inquiry – and problematization. It is not taken for granted; it is not unchanging or unchangeable ... Both parodically rewrite the historical events and works of art of the past, thereby questioning the stability of the meaning of both. By incorporating known historical events and personages within their texts, both manage to problematize historical knowledge and to break any illusionist frame. (1988: 219-220)

When asked what attracts him most in Brechtian epic theatre, Kushner mentions that he likes the fact that Brechtian theatre incorporates other popular art forms, and probably the most attractive aspect is “the multifocal, the multiple perspective of it” (Weber 107). Epic theatre, which he calls “the form I am wedded to” (Weber 123), has taught Kushner “the necessity of having a deep ... political understanding of history” (Weber 110).

This understanding of history was also very much shaped by Walter Benjamin's "Theses On Philosophy Of History" which was also one of the sources of inspiration for *Angels*. "Theses" consists of twenty short theses – one or two paragraphs long – where Benjamin explores history from "a historical materialist" outlook. In his work Benjamin talks about "a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones," thus, reminding that almost always the chronicler "distinguishes" (254). He also acknowledges that "the true picture of the past flits by." He does not reject the existence of the past but states that it "can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (255). Benjamin articulates the postmodern spirit when he emphasizes that the past should not be dead, fixed, set in stone; "for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (255).

One of the most important observations that Benjamin makes is the fact that "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'(Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). He talks about the immediate need in every era "to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (255). This is exactly what postmodernism is trying to do, not rejecting tradition, but turning back to it to open it up, to revisit it with a critical outlook. This is what saves tradition from being a fixed, rigid, exclusive canon. He asserts that it must be recognized that "the adherents of historicism" empathize with "the victor," and history is also another system defined by power relations and it is evident in its documents: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256). For him, "history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (261). As a result, it appears that past and present should be evaluated under each other's light, the task postmodern historians and artists like Brecht and Kushner undertake. For Benjamin, a historical materialist's task is "to brush history against the grain" (257).

With Brechtian structure of epic theatre at his disposal, this is the task Kushner takes on in *A Bright Room Called Day*; he brushes history against the grain. In his play, Kushner turns to Germany in the early 1930s and enacts the lives of a group of friends, all artists

of some sort, during the period when Nazis started to gain power. That specific period in history is taken out of the continuous, homogenous history and used to draw parallels with the present in a highly Brechtian sense. *Bright Room* was “the first deliberate attempt” of Kushner “to write a ‘Brecht play’.” However, it is significant that Kushner chose a play of Brecht, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, which he had “very little respect for” (Weber 111) and opened it up to the discussion in the present. In *Fear and Misery*, as Bentley notes, “[i]n a series of over twenty scenes, unconnected by characters or plot, connected only by theme, the people of Hitler’s Germany are revealed;” the play is “a portrait of one cell after another in the social organism” (1955: 221). In *Bright Room*, Kushner, while adopting Brechtian structure and subject matter, manages to make it his own, to make it relevant for his own time. In this “attempt to deal with Brecht,” Kushner struggled with the powerful influence of Brecht on him while trying to find his own voice; he was very much aware of “the necessity to make a writer one’s own, or one’s country’s own” (Weber 112-113).

In her book on Brecht, Elizabeth Wright asks the question “Would it not be better to read, teach, and stage Brecht as a source of discontinuous insight, extracting from his theory and practice what seems most valuable at the time ... would it not also be better not to take his theory canonical?” (21). She reminds the readers that “to use Brecht without criticizing him is a betrayal” (122), and Kushner is criticizing Brecht while acknowledging his huge power on him. Instead of different social settings and different characters, what we have in *Bright Room* is one room and the same group of characters. While the short, interruptive episodes are still there, there is a chronological movement. However, all these seemingly realistic elements are added to the play to create the desired effect on the audience – a chronology which is not going anywhere, an immobility which becomes a trap, a group of people that disintegrates.

When compared to *Angels*, *Bright Room* appears as a somewhat darker play, and the humor is more subtle. The circumstances under which the play was written plays a big role in this gloomy atmosphere. Kushner wrote the play during the winter of 1984-85. In the play’s afterword, he explains the time as follows: “The desolate political sphere mirrored in an exact and ugly way an equally desolate personal sphere ... every day

brought the news of either global failure or some intimate loss” (173). He talks about five separate events that had a great impact on the writing process of the play. His mentor, a Brecht scholar, Carl Weber was leaving New York and he “felt abandoned” (172). 3P Productions had just fallen apart – reflected in the disintegration of the group of friends in the play – and “the alternative, life in the mainstream commercial theatre, looked appropriately grim” (173). Kushner’s best friend and collaborator, Kimberley Flynn, was seriously injured in a car accident. His great-aunt died, and Ronald Reagan was reelected (173). After finishing the play, Kushner dedicated it to Weber, Flynn and his aunt.

Also in the afterword, Kushner talks about how the play’s title was created. The title of the play came about when, one day, in a party, while Kushner was trying to listen to a video in which Agnes DeMille was describing a new dance that she was choreographing, he heard the name of the dance as “A Bright Room Called Day,” and liked the name immediately to find out later that it was actually “A Bridegroom Called Death.” However, the misunderstood name stood with him and he used it as a title – ironically – for maybe his darkest, gloomiest play (173-174).

Bright Room does not have any historical personages as its characters but it returns to a specific historical period – the transition period during which the Weimar Republic started to lose power and the Nazis started to rise. It is significant that Kushner chose to write about this transition period instead of the Holocaust or World War II since the latter two stand out as the first choices of people who write on the history of Germany. Instead, Kushner turns to a period of time that is probably mentioned in history books with one or two sentences, if at all. Kushner invokes those passing sentences and sets out to rewrite them with his own narrative. He talks about his reasons in choosing that period as follows:

I concentrated on the history of the last phase of the collapse of the Weimar Republic, rather than on the crimes of the Third Reich, intending to rescue the play from hopelessness by showing a period of choices when things might have turned out very differently if only ... The play’s story ends before the worst nightmare begins, but its ending looks to the camps, the bombings, and even to the Bomb. (1994: 180)

In this “most Brechtian of Kushner’s plays” (Fisher 21), Kushner creates a group of five bohemian artists, all friends, who live in Berlin in the early 1930s. The main character, Agnes Egging (her name was given as a tribute to Agnes DeMille) is an actress like some of her other friends. The action takes place mainly in Agnes’s apartment, in its living room. However, the play not only highlights Germany in the early 1930s but also America in 1985, the height of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Kushner creates a “bold collision of past and present” (Fisher 21) by inserting a contemporary American character, Zillah Katz, to the play. Throughout the play Zillah, a Jewish political activist “with Anarcho-Punk tendencies,” interrupts the flow of the play with her politically charged speeches and points out parallels between the Nazi era in Germany and the mid-1980s in America. The play is further problematized with characters like Die Alte (the old one), a very old woman “somewhere between 70 and dead-for-20-years” wearing an old, soiled, white gown, and the Devil himself, who both visit Agnes’s apartment on various occasions. Gradually, we witness the disintegration of Agnes’s group in the face of impending doom. Kushner said that the play is “about Germans, refugee and otherwise, caught on the cusp of historic catastrophe about to engulf them (1994: 174). At the end, we find Agnes alone in her apartment, “unable to cope with a social madness she can barely comprehend” (Fisher 21).

When staged for the first time, *Bright Room* created considerable controversy and critical division. The play was mostly either bitterly condemned or scoffingly dismissed by the critics. The most important reason of this response was the character Zillah and her open, bold comparison between Reagan and Hitler. Most critics found this comparison, which Kushner himself calls “outrageous”(1994: 176), childish. Roy Sanders stated that the play demonstrated “an intellectual shallowness that has given sophomores a bad name and the caliber of writing that can give play selection committees a bad reputation” (48). Frank Rich called *Bright Room* “the most infuriating play of 1991” and criticized Kushner’s “indiscriminat[e] dumping [of] all present-day ills into Zillah’s diatribes until all moral distinctions are blurred and history is rendered meaningless” (11). However, it is worth noting that most of these critics made a complete turnabout on Kushner when *Angels* appeared. The productions of the play have also increased in recent years in regional theatres and university theaters since the success of *Angels*.

Some critics have seen the potential in *Bright Room* from the start. Linda Winer called it “a big, dense play of ideas – a welcome rarity after an era of apolitical American isolationist theater” (44). Jack Helbig asserted that even if Kushner had not written *Angels*, “this earlier work would guarantee him a place in the pantheon of noteworthy living playwrights ... the play is as compelling on the page as on the stage” (87). Prominent drama critic Christopher Bigsby calls the play “a startlingly original work,” pointing out the similarity between Brecht and Kushner in their urges to draw parallels between past and present. He states that Brecht “avoid[ed] addressing contemporary events directly, and this is what Kushner sets out to do here.” Bigsby also acknowledges that “*Bright Room* offers a great deal more than a simple invitation to compare and contrast historical moments” (1999: 92).

Probably the most important aspect of the text of *Bright Room* appears again in the character of Zillah. In the play’s production notes, Kushner maintains that “there should be continual updating of the specifics of Zillah’s politics of paranoia, in the form of references to whatever evildoing is prevalent at the time of the production” (x). Therefore, the text requires constant revision to make the references contemporary. After the initial production with Reagan holding the contemporary reference spot, additions and revisions were made in the text in each of its productions. Some of these revisions were made by Kushner himself but he also gave other directors license to revise the lines of Zillah according to their point of comparison. At one production George Bush was added to the play; in London it was Margaret Thatcher; and in the New York Shakespeare Festival version Zillah moved to the Berlin apartment where Agnes used to live. This aspect of the text makes it almost “an unfinished play in a permanent state of flux” (Bigsby 1999: 92). As Bigsby comments, “it is designed never to have a definitive text or, therefore, a definitive production” (1999: 92). This non-definitive nature of the play questions notions like a fixed text and unified authoritative voice since Kushner gives others the chance to write their own narratives in his play, though still with his permission.

The play starts with a brief historical note outlining how the Weimar Republic was first established in Germany and how it worked. The note also talks about how “the main

powers of the German Left” failed to form “a United Front” against Fascism. Consequently, The National Socialist German Worker’s Party (the Nazis) “grew from political obscurity to prominence in the early 1930s.” Although the Nazis lost power momentarily, through their power relations held behind closed doors, they were able to “secure from aging President Hindenburg the appointment of their leader, Adolf Hitler, to the post of Chancellor of the German Reich” (xii-xiii). Thus, with this brief note Kushner gives us the time frame of the play – the period until the Nazis became the major power in Germany. Kushner uses this almost textbook historical note to juxtapose it with his own narrative, the one that really matters for him, the one that has been overlooked by historians and history books. As a result, the play, like most historiographic metafiction, “juxtapose[s] what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge. Which ‘facts’ make it into history? And *whose* facts?” (Hutcheon 1989: 71). Kushner continues this juxtaposition all through the play with projected slides eliciting historical events that take place along with the stage action.

As Bigsby comments, “If this prefatory note should create expectations of a straightforwardly realist historical drama, however, such is not forthcoming” (1999: 93). This is immediately evident in the setting of the play. Kushner states;

a detailed, realistic apartment set will weigh the play down and give the audience the wrong signals (that this is a realistic account of a period in history). There should be something wonderfully warm and inviting about the place, and something verging on the fantastical. We should be able to recognize it as an apartment, but not in any sense an ordinary one. (ix)

Simultaneously with the apartment in Berlin, Zillah’s room and table full of books in America in 1985 can be seen. The stage gives a new meaning to fragmentary setting because the two settings are further distanced by location and time. In the play, Kushner will try to abolish that distance with his theatre. Kushner further hints at the self-acknowledging theatricality of his play in the three epigraphs he uses before the text. One is from Goethe’s *Faust*; one is a quote from Heinrich Mann, claiming that instead of politics, “the people wanted theater;” and the last one is – ironically – a quote from Reagan saying “You’d be surprised how much being a good actor pays off” (xiv). This

quote embodies the play's ironic stance towards its own theatricality. Kushner uses this quote, apparently because he does not approve of Reagan's politics, but in a play in which most of the characters are actors, this quote destabilizes their actions further. As Bigsby suggests, "the play ... stages history less as a narrative than an unfolding theatrical event" (1999: 93).

The overall structure of the play takes the Brechtian episodic, interrupted structure one step further. The play is composed of twenty-five scenes, a prologue and an epilogue and it is divided into two parts. The flow of the intensely fragmented scenes is further disrupted by Zillah's "interruptions." Calling Zillah's scenes "interruptions," Kushner may be emphasizing the self-consciously didactic tone of those scenes. There is no symmetrical logic behind Zillah's interruptions; in part one there are three interruptions, in part two there are five; sometimes there are eight scenes between the interruptions, sometimes there is only one. Moreover, twice in the play, Kushner breaks the scenes by inserting "a scene within a scene" and giving them separate titles: "scene three-a" and "scene five-a." What is more, one of the scenes is divided into two parts in a different manner: as part one and part two. In short, the structure of the play is specifically designed to break the theatrical illusion to the extreme.

The play opens with a prologue in which we see Zillah reading in her room and our five main characters celebrating New Year – 1932. A huge photograph of a crowd at a Nazi rally giving the Nazi salute is projected on the screen. Among the crowd there is only one woman, clutching her purse, who does not give the salute and stares helplessly at the camera. This photograph is an actual photograph, Kushner states, taken from a book about Hitler (xi). The characters are celebrating New Year in a relaxed manner, not yet aware of the impending doom; "We live in Berlin./It's 1932./I feel relatively safe" (5). Vealtninc Husz, a one-eyed Hungarian cinematographer and Agnes's lover, raises a toast to Agnes, calling her "occupant prima of our affections, immovable tenant of this small, solid room: health, happiness and relative safety on this fierce and splendid night and for many years to come" (6). Thus, "Agnes appears to be the guarantee of continuing safety" (Fisher 98). She is almost the center of this group but later on this center will fail to keep the group together. The group starts creating a story with a man left in the chilling wind,

trying to beat it but the wind gets angry and the story ends with the wind's words – “Just you wait” (8). Everyone laughs goodheartedly but this actually appears as an omen for the things to come. Moreover, it is significant that Kushner inserted a mini narrative, created on stage by the characters, in his own created narrative of the past, thus referring to the play's own constructedness. Such a device, a character or characters creating a story, a narrative in a fictional work, is one of the trademark devices of “metafiction.” Although metadrama is thought to refer to more theatrical devices like “play within a play,” in *Bright Room*, there are other works of fiction created on stage. Thus, Kushner seems to incorporate in his play a form of self-reflexivity originally used in the novel form.

The effect of this scene relies on the spectator's watching the play with the knowledge of what happened in history. “The irony ... derives from our knowledge of the future which they toast, a future that is our past. It is a play, therefore, which relies on our knowing the end of the story whose beginnings are here explored” (Bigsby 1999: 98). Hence, not only the present is judged in the light of the past—with Zillah's comparisons—but also the past relies on our present situation to be judged properly. This return to past is not a nostalgic one. Linda Hutcheon's claims about postmodern art also hold true here: “In direct reaction against the tendency of our times to value only the new and novel, it (postmodernism) returns us to a re-thought past to see what, if anything, is of value in that past experience. But the critique of its irony is double-edged: the past and the present are judged in each other's light” (1988: 39).

In the New York Shakespeare Festival (NYSF) version of the play, the prologue starts with Zillah entering the Berlin apartment with a suitcase in her hands. In her monologue Zillah makes important comments on history and memory. She states “the way I remember is usually in fact a way of forgetting. Memory easily becomes memorial: a blank stone marker denoting: Event” (154-155). Zillah points out another way that the past is being distorted, through memory which also plays a big role in the official writings of history. Since the past as it actually happened is gone forever, memory also reshapes it for its own purposes. Zillah's strategy remains purely a theatrical one: magic. She cries: “Time now to remember, to re-call: / dismantle the memorial, disinter / the

dead: ... To call into the Now / other people, not my own; / an other city, not my own, an other people, not mine / History. As I conjure it" (155). Thus, in this version, Zillah's interruptions appear as a ritual conducted by her to conjure the past, history. What she does is almost a loose "ceremony within a play." Hornby states that "the ceremony within the play is metadramatic in the sense of examining a cultural phenomenon that is closely related to theatre via the medium of performance, and thus ... stimulates an interest in the nature of human 'performing' generally" (55). In addition, "the space between 'an' and 'other' [in Zillah's speech] suggests the gap which is to be closed by the play and by its methodology of weaving past and present together" (Biggsby 1999: 97).

Zillah's insistence on "dismantling" the memorial status of history and memory, in this case, of Hitler's Germany, is a postmodern one. As James Young suggests, "once we assign monumental form to memory, we have, to some degree, divested ourselves of the obligation to remember" (qtd in Malkin 11). The monuments, and the fixed, canonized memory, as Jeanette Malkin suggests, tend "to immobilize their spectators, turning the object of commemoration—the remembering community—into passive receivers of meaning" (11-12). By trying to rescue the past of its taboo status, Zillah, through her interruptions, manages to "dismantle" the monument and make it relevant for the needs of the present.

In the first scene of the play we see Agnes and Husz in the apartment, and we learn more about Husz. He is a Hungarian exile who was expelled from Russia and who hates Germans. The anxiety of the two characters prevents them from having sex. The scene also demonstrates the contradictory nature of human beings since Agnes wants to have sex because of her anxiety and Husz does not want it precisely because of the same reason. The second scene properly introduces us to Paulinka, also an actress like Agnes. Paulinka is an opium addict who is in therapy; she prefers to "explore her own psyche rather than engaging [in] the public world" (Biggsby 1999: 98). She asserts that to her, "psychoanalysis makes more sense than communism" (14). Agnes is attracted to communism and plans on joining the party; she is very hopeful about what it can offer. She is working on an agit-prop piece for the Communist Party, a never staged play within

a play whose preparation process the audience witnesses. Paulinka is very apolitical since she says that she would join the Nazis if they made good movies.

At this point Zillah interrupts the already-interrupted narrative, in a scene entitled “The Small Voice.” The title is significant in that even though Zillah’s “small voice” is made inaudible by the larger metanarrative of history, she keeps writing hate letters to Reagan, ironically signed “Love, Zillah.” In this scene she appears writing such a letter. She is totally aware of the fact that her letters will probably never reach Reagan. However, she thinks her letters and their toxin will eventually destroy him. She claims “Because the loathing I pour into these pages is so ripe, so full-to-bursting, that it is my firm belief that anyone touching them will absorb into their hands some of the toxic energy contained therein” (17). Since “it is the nature of bureaucracies to pass things vertically” (17), this toxin, through the hierarchical handshaking, will reach Reagan and will be “rubbed into” his flesh. (18). Thus, Zillah is portrayed as a determined political activist, determined to make her “small voice” heard. As Hutcheon states, “those in power control history. The marginal and ex-centric, however, can contest that power, even as they remain within its purvey” (1988: 197). This is exactly what Zillah, and more generally the play itself, aspires to do – making *their* stories heard.

The third scene is a highly metatheatrical one since Agnes is seen alone in her apartment, working on her skit. The play’s name will be “The Red Baby,” apparently symbolizing the hopeful birth of communism as an alternative. Agnes is seen struggling with the lines, enacting a writer’s block. Similar to the scene where the characters created a story on stage, this scene presents Agnes creating a piece of theater; she, herself is a part of a piece of theater. Scene Three is followed by Scene Three A, a scene within the scene, in which the audience is introduced to the character of Die Alte. Agnes is sleeping at the table and Die Alte, a figure from a nightmare with her “grave clothes” (Biggsby 1999: 99), enters the apartment through the window. Thus, as Fisher observes, “the ironic juxtaposition of the two worlds of Agnes and Zillah is now given a third dimension” (27). Die Alte is, Biggsby suggests, “a recurring presence sometimes acknowledged ... sometimes no more than a spectre, a disturbing memory” (99). She “haunts the text, like a decaying Mother Courage” (97). In this scene, while Agnes is sleeping, Die Alte “pours

her thoughts into her dream, shaping her memories into a poem” (Bigsby 1999: 99). She talks about past glorious times when there were also wars and when they used to wear corsets – “a wonderful time” when she used to hear “the snap of flags” (22). She compares those times with the current situation saying, “not now ... Now. Hungry. Always. Never Enough” (22). Her comment on Agnes’s times ironically will be valid at any current production of the play. She appears as “an embodiment, not only of the past, but a symbol of the grimly isolated present and futures of Agnes and Zillah” (Fisher 27).

According to Bigsby, Die Alte’s speech about the past times, which appears to be about “the denial of violence, the innocence of death [and] the celebration of militarism” is subverted and reincorporated “through words that seem to move, like a current, against the flow of the sense, creating a counter-narrative” (1999: 99). The monologue is full of words like “drowned,” “chill,” “rigid,” “dense,” “pinches,” “bruises,” “blood,” “snap,” “crack,” “hot,” “through me” and “through the ribs” (22). This dark “counter-narrative” hidden in the seemingly-celebratory vision of the past times questions and problematizes the narrative’s intention, working almost like its own deconstruction.

Scene four serves as the introduction of two more characters – completing the group of five – Baz and Gotchling. Baz is a homosexual working for the Berlin Institute for Human Sexuality and Gotchling is a woman who is a devoted Communist graphic designer. At the opening of the scene Agnes is seen struggling through the pages of *Das Kapital*. Baz and Gotchling have just returned from a Nazi rally where they saw “devout communists” converting to Nazism “wearing swastikas” (24). The personalities of Baz and Gotchling are demonstrated in contrast to each other. For Baz, what is important is “human sexuality” and he believes that Communists, Nazis or any other political group seeking power is actually going through a major sexual frustration. His notions are infuriating to Gotchling who is one of those devoted Communists. She believes that Hitler’s power will be diminished when the working class discovers what he is up to. Maybe the most correct analysis comes from Baz at this point. He claims that people behind Hitler do not care about any big theories, they want “a means of release,” a leader – “a fatherly boot heel to lick;” they want “bloody things” (26). Baz correctly identifies these people as masses, not overly thinking intellectuals but obedient followers. Baz, like

a prophet, states that “once he’s chancellor he’ll build an army and start looking for a war” (27). Next to his observations, Gotchling and Agnes’s claims on behalf of Communism and the working class appear as childish, failing to see what’s coming. Baz criticizes them for not knowing anything about the working class. He sleeps with the working class and is able to see more clearly because he is not dwelling in the world of big theories, or “great metanarratives.” Hence, the play ironically criticizes the validity of any great political metanarrative in the face of evil while still trying to contest them in its own time. The play is highly political but criticizes the workings of political theories. It “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (Hutcheon 1988: 3). Seen from this point of view, the play is very similar to postmodern works which “know [they] cannot escape implication in the economic and ideological dominants of [their] time. There is no outside. All [they] can do is question from within” (Hutcheon 1988: xiii). At the end of the scene Baz ironically warns Agnes that “prophecy is sorcery, sorcery is a sin” (29) when actually he himself is doing the prophesizing. The scene ends with another series of slides enunciating the Nazi Party’s success in the elections. In spite of the loss of some seats to communists in a second election, the Nazis remain the majority party.

The following scenes cover the time span specified by the slides and enact the ordinary lives of these ordinary citizens. In one scene Agnes and Paulinka are seen gossiping about Hitler’s sex life, which leads to a discussion about the Devil. Asking Agnes if she believes in the Devil, Paulinka recites an event from her life in which she claims to have met the Devil. Paulinka’s recitation of the event appears as another scene-within-a-scene in which the theatricality of this recitation is further emphasized with “a sudden change of lighting” (34). The room grows dim and a spotlight hits Paulinka. She “warms to it immediately and begins to address the audience” (34). Kushner makes use of these strategies to create the Brechtian alienation effect which creates a “self-reference.” As Hornby argues, “with self-reference, the play directly calls attention to itself as a play, an imaginative fiction. Acknowledging this fiction of course destroys it, at least temporarily ... the play stops. The audience is made to examine the play as a play” (103). This part can also be seen as a separate play within a play since it is set apart from the general flow of narrative. One night, Paulinka, after leaving the set of *Faust* in which she was starring,

sees a black poodle and thinks that it is the Devil who came to offer her fame in exchange for her soul. At that moment Paulinka realizes that if it were true, she would not be able to resist the offer. Her telling the story while looking directly at the audience makes the audience question themselves and similar motives in their souls. Through the alienation effect, “the spectator-subject is also being theatricalised, for he is made to play a role, that of being seen seeing” (Wright 56).

In the next scene two members of the Communist Party pay Agnes a visit, asking her to change certain aspects of her play, to smooth it out. The two members are in disagreement about the Party’s policies but they have to adhere to it. The Party does not want to unite with the Social Democrats since the latter also do not want to unite with them. These policies appear as childish power struggles with our knowledge of the subsequent evil. This is another reason why Kushner returns to the transition periods in history, to show the many mistakes that were made along the road to disaster. As Walter Benjamin states, the epic dramatist will “tend to emphasize not the great decisions which lie along the main line of history but the incommensurable and the singular” (qtd in Bigsby 1999: 102). Later, the group is seen celebrating the success of the Communist Party in the elections, which is only a momentary victory. During their celebration, an almost drunk Husz pretends that he is making a movie about his life and the Communist Revolution. In this scene, Husz does not only, metatheatrically, (pretend to) create another work of fiction on stage—this time a movie—but he also makes curious comments on the nature of film-making. His words about the genre of film are worth quoting at length at this point: “Film is the perfect medium, the only medium for the age of machines, because it is mechanically made, uses mechanical construction, montage, juxtaposition, not focused on the small inner life but on the grand scale, capable of recording an entire revolution!” (49). Even though Husz appropriates the film medium for his own revolution, the audience probably knows how Hitler and the Nazi Party used movies as a tool of propaganda for their own purposes.² Film appears as the perfect medium to influence masses with its availability and its commodity status. The movie genre aims at giving us a piece of narrative as realistically as possible; on the other hand, as Kushner says, in theater, “there is no way to escape [the] conflict between reality and illusion” (Weber *Upstaged* 159).³ It is significant that Kushner, in *Bright Room*, pays a

certain attention to the movie genre and its implications; most of the characters work in the film industry; throughout the play their imaginations seem to work through the lens of a camera, like Husz in this case. On one hand, film medium and the status of the characters as actors create another layer of metatheatricality; on the other hand, especially through Husz's speech, Kushner is commenting on the nature of film and theater; the former is the perfect tool of propaganda for "great metanarratives," be it Nazism or Communism, with its commodity status and its claim to represent the reality "on the grand scale," the latter is essentially *about* the conflict between reality and illusion and the medium Kushner chooses to express "the small inner life."

In Scene Eight, after the audience is informed, through slides, that the victories of the Left do not continue, Agnes sees Die Alte for the first time. Die Alte asks for something to eat and Agnes, taking her for a homeless woman, gives her some food. There is a loud banging noise coming from the water pipes that makes Die Alte recite a riddle about the "little penny man:" "Just before I fall asleep, / After God has heard my prayers, / Things below begin to creep: / The penny man is on the stairs" (53). The scene appears as "an omen, a reminder of a childhood rhyme that will become an adult nightmare" (Bigsby 1999: 100), denoting the arrival of Hitler, "the penny man."

In the second interruption, Zillah talks about the fact that she used to be "a normal human being" and "thrive on governmental scandals." She says, "Watergate was one of the happiest times of my life, really well-done, dramatic and garish and incredibly funny" (54). A big scandal in American history is invoked as a theatrical event at this point. It was not about shocking facts but about the impressive performances of people like Nixon, seen in the media. But things have changed since. Zillah moves on to tell that now she is a "humorless paranoiac" because of the "bone-naked terror" of her days and is ready to believe any conspiracy theory no matter how outrageous it is. On the other hand, she also emphasizes the fact that being paranoid may save one's life as it saved Hannah Arendt's.⁴ She says, "I believe. I read the histories of Germany. I read the Book of Revelations. I read the *Times*. I sense parallels. Just call me paranoid" (55). Thus, this interruption seems to be preparing us for the shocking next interruption in which the "parallels" Zillah senses will be articulated to their full power.

In the next scene Agnes is in her apartment again. This time *Das Kapital* is face down on the coffee table; she is gradually losing hope in Communism. Huzs enters and wants to have sex because he feels anxious, and this time Agnes rejects because of the same reason. By showing these two characters in opposite situations twice, Kushner tries to demonstrate the contradictions in human beings, and, thus, their capability to change. However, the two dialogues, spoken by the same characters twice in the reverse order, also reminds us of *Waiting For Godot*, Samuel Beckett's most famous absurd play, in which the two characters, Didi and Gogo repeat some of the dialogues throughout the play in reverse order. This slight sense of the absurd and existential nature of the characters' lives will be reproduced in the play as Agnes will gradually abandon conforming to the requirements of a social existence. At this point in time, Hitler is expected to become Chancellor. Agnes talks about feeling as though she is in a film lately: "I see all these events already on film, not just Hitler, but us: no sex, eating and crying. All public events. There is a title: 'PERCHED ON THE BRINK OF A GREAT HISTORIC CRIME'" (57). Agnes seems to be aware that they are a part of a great historical moment. This can just be seen as a foreshadowing of the events, but it can also be taken as the repetition of history. Seeing all these events in a newsreel immediately makes these characters part of a formerly created "narrative" – history. The part in the title, "on the brink," shows that though the main narrative has not happened yet, it cannot be prevented from happening. It appears as if the narrative, the history, is "The Misery of Man Kind" in which the story is always the same and only the lead actor changes. Such an outlook is problematic in a political theater which tries to show that change is possible. At this point, Robert Brustein's comment on Brecht seems to apply to Kushner too; "His point is that the world must be changed; his counter-point is that 'the world will always be the same'" (267). This part further demonstrates how these characters' imaginations work through the lens of a camera.

The next scene works almost like an interruption since Agnes is alone through the scene and talking to the audience, explaining them why she cannot leave her apartment. While she is talking, "beautiful, intense sunlight" (58) comes in through the windows of the otherwise dimly lit apartment. This light does not actually symbolize the good, hopeful days to come but is used as an ironic device to call our attention to Agnes's

misconceptions, excuses and her desperate effort to fool herself. For Agnes, what is coming is “not unlivable,” “not eternally.” She cannot leave the apartment: “You would not believe how low the rent is” (59). The excuses Agnes comes up with and her reluctance to leave her apartment is actually “habit,” an element in life which is frequently addressed also in the Theatre of the Absurd. As Martin Esslin notes, the habit “prevents us from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being” (1980: 59). In this case, Agnes seems to be using *her* habit as a weapon against realizing the full reality and terror of what is to come. At the end of the scene we learn that Hitler is appointed Chancellor.

Later, Baz and Agnes are seen talking in the apartment. Baz seems to have accepted what history has thrown at them and sees it as inevitable. He says, “Seasons of History. Does it matter if we know why it rains? It just rains. ... Life is miserable. Or not. ... You can explain these things, ... but it won’t stop the weather, or that feeling of being overwhelmed. Because on this planet, one is overwhelmed” (61). Agnes still seems to think that there should be something to be done. She questions Baz’s giving up by saying “How do we know? What if we lie down and give up just at the moment when ... the whole terrible thing could somehow have been reversed?” (60-61). Saying this, however, she does not act; she probably does not believe in what she says herself. Gradually, the audience is made aware of the mood that starts to trap Agnes; “I’m overwhelmed. I feel no connection, no kinship with most of the people I see. I watch them in the underground come and go and I think, ‘Are you a murderer? Are you?’” (61-62). This feeling of no connection prepares the end, the hopeless alienation leads to inertia. Gradually losing her sense of connection, Agnes will also lose her ability to move, to act.

In the next scene, all of the friends are in the apartment despairing over the bad news. The audience again witnesses the differences between the characters, especially Husz and Gotchling, the latter thinking that progress is inevitable and they have to accept the inevitable. However, Husz, “having had one eye put out by progressives, ... sees an altogether different world” (Bigsby 1999: 102). Thus, Husz starts delivering a poetic “aria,” asking the others to listen carefully to the voice calling them. The voice is not strong, it is like “a cow in a slaughterhouse,” calling them “to stand against the calamity,

/ to spare nothing, not [their] blood, / not [their] happiness, not [their] lives / in the struggle to stop the dreadful day / that's burning now / in oil frames on the horizon" (67). However, Husz is aware of the fact that they are not strong enough to do any of these. His aria continues: "This Age wanted heroes. / It got us instead" (67). He expresses their ineffectuality as follows: "The best of us, lacking. / The most decent, / not decent enough. / The kindest, / too cruel, / the most loving / too full of hate, / the wisest, / too stupid, / the fittest / unfit / to take up / the burden of times" (68). Like many other moments in the play, Husz's speech is where Kushner transcends the boundary between two genres: theatre and poetry. The layout of the lines and the feeling in the speech takes lyrical realism – one of the traditions Kushner is heir to – one step further. At the end of his speech Husz wishes that the time would stop so that they would "all be spared more than telling" (69). The time does not stop as time never does; however, Kushner manages to contort the time according to his needs in his play.

After witnessing the helplessness these characters feel, the audience is now ready to face the most shockingly controversial scene of the play, Zillah's third interruption. Zillah is seen holding a German textbook and translating some German phrases like "mass grave," "times were bad," and "millions of people were dead" (70). She is preparing the audience for the parallelism that she is going to draw. However, her holding a textbook and her almost teacher-like attitude is maybe too obvious. This can be seen as another ironical strategy that Kushner uses to overemphasize the play's didacticism. Zillah herself points out to the fact that what she is doing is purely a strategy: "Overstatement is your friend: use it" (70). She is, once again, trying to rescue the past from its "tombstone-like" quality. This time, it is Hitler and the Holocaust: "the problem is that we have this event – Germany, Hitler, the Holocaust – which we have made in to THE standard of absolute Evil ... but then everyone gets frantic as soon as you try to use the standard, *nothing* compares, *nothing* resembles" (70). Kushner himself talks about the same issue in an interview: "the Holocaust is only useful as a standard of evil if you're actually willing to apply it, and if you don't apply it, if it's set up as a unique metaphysical event that has no peer, then those people really died for nothing" (McLeod 78).

After this statement comes the “outrageous” comparison. At this point, it is worth quoting Zillah’s speech at length since it is the single most shocking part of the play:

I mean just because a certain ex-actor-turned-President who shall go nameless sat *idly* by and watched tens of thousands die of a plague and he couldn’t even bother to say he felt *bad* about it, much less try to *help*, does this mean he merits a comparison to a certain fascist-dictator anti-Semitic mass-murdering psychopath who shall also remain nameless? OF COURSE NOT! ... I never relax. I can work up a sweat reading the *Sunday Times*. I read, I gasp, I hit the streets at three a.m. with my can of spray paint: REAGAN EQUALS HITLER! RESIST! DON’T FORGET, WEIMAR HAD A CONSTITUTION TOO! (71)

Because of this parallelism, Kushner was called “immature,” and he accepts the charges: “I’m highly susceptible to charges of immaturity; I suspect myself of it in so many ways ... I admire and yearn for wisdom ... It has always seemed to me that wisdom implied a kind of balance” (177). Notions like balance, harmony or unity are not the ones that Kushner is after; he admits that he has always “intended Zillah’s speeches to polarize an audience” (178). In the play’s afterword he explains that the main reason he used a character like Zillah was that he was really tired of the need to hide the political content in the theatre: “Why, I wondered, shouldn’t audiences hear an unapologetically didactic, presentational voice as well as representational scenes?” (x). To what extent Kushner’s own rhetoric is presented in Zillah remains open to discussion. Even though Kushner repeatedly stated that Zillah “is not the playwright” (x), the political positions of the character and the playwright remain pretty close. However, what is important is not actually how much Kushner lets his own rhetoric be inscribed in the play. Although we see a strong rhetoric, Kushner, by creating a character who is aware of her own strategies, creates a highly “self-conscious” didacticism, one of the elements of both the Brechtian epic theater and historiographic metafiction. This fact prevents the rhetoric from being a definitive one. One other important aspect of Zillah is that she is, as Bigsby argues, “a source of questions rather than answers” (1999: 98). Linda Hutcheon asserts that postmodernism “has little faith in art’s ability to change society *directly*, though it does believe that questioning and problematizing may set up the conditions for possible change” (1988: 218). In a similar vein, Kushner maintains that his job “as a playwright is not to necessarily change people ... [he doesn’t] actually believe that people do change that way in the theater.” What is important for him, at the end, is that he was “unafraid to ask difficult questions” (Kinzer 194). Probably the only direct lesson Zillah gives to the

audience is that they should not “put too much stock in a good night’s sleep;” she wants them to “eat something indigestible before [they] go to bed, and listen to [their] nightmares” (71).

In the last scene of part one, the play is further complicated with the entrance of the Devil. While Agnes, Paulinka and Husz are talking about the Devil, Husz claims that he knows him and, upon the others’ insistence, he calls the Devil to join them. This is another instance of the play within a play as Husz cries “Lights! Camera! Action!” (74). The magic of theater is overtly expressed and Kushner shifts “into a distinctly phantasmagoric mode” (Fisher 30) when the lights and the arrangement of the furniture completely changes with the Devil’s entrance. His name is Gottfried Swetts, a distinguished, blonde, Aryan “importer of Spanish novelties” (81). He is dressed elegantly, walking with a cane since he has a clubfoot, and he appears to have a respiratory problem like asthma. Swetts announces that he has “taken up temporary residence in this country” (75). When asked about the “great mystery” of life, the Devil admits that he knows nothing. He confesses: “My ignorance is beyond calculation ... I do not know the Workings of the Universe. I only know myself” (77). This admittance of the Devil is a genius strategy on Kushner’s behalf. Instead of using didactic lines like “selfishness and ignorance is evil,” Kushner creates an ignorant and selfish Devil whose qualities ironically turn to his definition. He is the parody of himself. While giving his autobiography, the Devil “rehearses the history of mankind through the ages” (Biggsby 1999: 103). When he reaches this century, “when questions of form seems to be contested,” he has “no form at all” (79). He is “unbelievable. Nonobjective. Nonexistent. Displaced. Stateless” (80). He warns the characters saying, “It’s not the danger that you see that’s the danger” (80). This way, Kushner ends the first part trying to show the audience that the evil doings of the world is most dangerous when they are not seen clearly, when they have successfully hidden themselves from the eye.

In the second part of the play, the spectators witness the characters leave the country one by one and the stage becomes more and more empty. The second part starts with another interruption in which Zillah – ironically – sings a love song called “Memories of You” with Hitler’s photographs flashing up behind her. Die Alte and Agnes meet again on the

night when the Reichstag – the government building was burning. The impending doom is further emphasized with the continuing “penny man” riddle. In the fifth interruption, Zillah talks about the woman in the photograph who came to her dream and she continues her magical act: “I’m calling to her: across a long dead time: to touch a dark place, to scare myself a little, to make contact with what moves in the night” (90).

After this speech, the two party members who previously came to Agnes’s apartment pay her another visit. They bring Agnes’s stuff back from the Party since the Party is being closed and they are going to run away. They tell Agnes that she is lucky she was not a member yet because “they have members list,” and they advise her to “burn everything” (95). Slowly, the news of people running away starts to increase as we learn that Paulinka’s Jewish psychiatrist ran away. In the next scene, Gotchling asks Agnes if her apartment can be used as a “way station” for people trying to run away from the country. Agnes refuses to help because of her immense fear for her own life. In this scene, Gotchling, as an artist, articulates Kushner’s own thoughts on art when she says “Art ... is never enough, it never does enough” (105). In a play, itself an artwork, such statements are bound to have an ironical effect. However, James Fisher believes that Kushner’s theater at least “does, at its best, possess the power to pose questions, change attitudes, and inspire action” (32).

While Zillah continues to interrupt the play with more paranoid comparisons, the audience start to feel the oppression being formed in the society when Baz talks about how Nazis came to the Institute, arrested people, and interrogated them. Baz decides to commit suicide after his interrogation but after having sex with a random stranger in the street, he chooses to live. Instead, he decides to leave the country. He also confesses to Agnes and Husz that he, coincidentally, ended up in the same movie theater with Hitler with a gun in his pocket (Hitler loved movies). He could not shoot Hitler because he could not give up his own life. As mentioned earlier in Husz’s speech, none of the characters are fit to be heroes or to sacrifice their own lives. What’s interesting, however, is the fact that the play does not condemn them for being unheroic; it just demonstrates the situation and leaves the decisions to the audience. At the end of this scene we are

informed that the Dachau Concentration Camp is opened (the camp where homosexuals were sent).

The seventh interruption of the play is significant in that the boundaries of time and place between Agnes and Zillah begin to be blurred. As both of them are simultaneously on stage, Zillah talks about how she hears the woman from her dream moving around at nights, “looking for some lost object.” Agnes is seen moving around in the apartment. When Zillah says “I ask her what her name was,” Agnes starts to sense something. Zillah continues: “She stops moving, so I know she hears me. No answer. I ask her how she died” (117). As Agnes gets more and more frightened, Zillah gives the answer to her own question: “Not in the camps, and not in the war, but at home, in front of a cozy fire, I died of a broken heart.” The audience never learns if this ending is actually the fate of Agnes since the play ends before we see the ultimate fate of Agnes. At the end of the interruption Agnes cries out, “Hello? Hello? Who’s ... Oh Dear God I need to sleep” (118). In this scene where the two women start to hear and feel each other across the continents and years, Zillah’s ritual of conjuring seems to be working. Thus, Kushner, once again defies the traditional boundaries of time and place in the theater.

As Agnes starts to form a transcendental bond with Zillah, she also starts to merge with Die Alte in the next scene. When Die Alte comes again, Agnes asks her who she is, and she responds “a bad dream” (121) and rejects to leave the apartment claiming that this is her apartment too. While the two struggle physically, their struggle transforms into a hug in which Die Alte rocks Agnes in her arms like a baby, soothing her. She says; “Time is all that separates you from me” (122), though they transcend the time in the play. Magically, the radio starts to play Bach and Die Alte comments that “It’s bad to be too much alone” (122). The bad dream and the person, the alter ego and the ego, the transcendental past and present merge in this scene, problematizing notions like unified individuality and separation between past and present further. Is Die Alte the alter ego of Agnes? Is she an archetypal figure of all the past wars? Is she a separate character or is she a ghost? Gradually the audience is forced to draw parallels between Agnes and Die Alte, thus, Agnes’s character turns out to be more and more fragmented and divided. Bigsby notes that

as the membrane that they believed separated them from the realities of the street begins to become permeable so, too, does that between past and present as Zillah feels the presence of Agnes and Agnes converses with Die Alte, time collapsing, bringing separate experiences together into the metaphor that constitutes the play. (1999: 103)

After this incident with Die Alte, we learn that Paulinka and Husz had a confrontation with Nazi soldiers and Paulinka saved Husz's life by giving "the performance of [her] career" (124). It is significant that what saved both their lives is again acting, theatricality. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Paulinka originally went to the studio to talk about possible jobs within the Nazi film industry. Ironically, she ends up saving Husz. The essentially contradictory nature of mankind is embodied in the character of Paulinka since one moment she was ready to sell her soul for fame, but the next she became a hero. The incident leads the two to decide to leave the country. When Husz asks Agnes to come with him, she responds by saying "I can't move. I can't move. I'm sorry. Later, maybe ..." (129). The inertia is irreversible at this point. Husz leaves without Agnes. Later, Baz and Paulinka come to say goodbye to Agnes as the former prepares to leave for Paris and the latter for Russia. Paulinka makes significant observations about their lives and blurs the boundaries between life and theatre: "Frightening, isn't it? What an actor does? Assume the mantle of truth, of courage, of moral conviction, and wear it convincingly, no matter what sort of chaotic mess there is inside" (136). Bigsby suggests that "the actors are finally forced to perform their lives with true conviction" and what we are faced with in the play is "life transformed into pure performance" (1999: 103). Thus, history and life are reflected as pure theatre, nothing else. Agnes feels an extreme sense of loss and sadness as she says, "You'd think, when a person goes, a whole person just goes away, it would leave a hole, some empty place behind, that's what I thought ... but ... it doesn't. Everyone's going but it isn't like the world has gotten emptier, just much smaller. It contracts, the empty places ... collapse" (136). This image of a contracting universe is what we are witnessing as Agnes, Zillah and Die Alte's worlds are brought together. Baz and Paulinka leave at the end of the scene and a series of slides inform us that all legislative work for the foundation of the Third Reich has been completed – it is July 1933. "The Fascist Machinery created in six months would function efficiently for the next thirteen years" (138).

Later, Gotchling revisits Agnes – she has officially escaped for Switzerland – and asks for her help one more time. When Agnes tries to reject again, Gotchling says; “If you say no to this, Agnes, you’re dead to me. And we both need desperately to keep at least some part of you alive. Say yes, and I promise to carry you with me, the part of you that’s dying now” (141). As this statement also shows, the myth of the unified individual in itself is just what it is – a myth. Agnes only has meaning as an individual in her community. As her community disperses, she also loses ground and sense of reality, hence her getting closer to Die Alte and Zillah. As she is losing her community, she is “dying.” At the end of this scene Agnes agrees to help.

In her last interruption entitled “Lullaby,” Zillah gives her final warning: “Revelation: We / are in danger. / It catches us by surprise, / on sweet evenings / when we’re most thoroughly / at home / and says look / for the cracks / where the seams don’t meet, / look where the walls have moved slightly apart, / try to see, stay awake, ... Before the sky and the ground / slam shut ... Now” (142). Kushner himself also states that this is one of the greatest lessons of history: “one of History’s lessons, taught as eloquently and awfully through the Holocaust as any other event in human history, is that we must be wary of our attachment to the illusory comfort of our rooms, the enormous familiar weight of everyday life – we must be wary of overvaluing stability” (179). Thus, Zillah is more of “a warning signal, not a prediction” (Kushner 1994: 180).

In the last scene of *Bright Room*, one of the members of the Party who previously visited Agnes comes to her house as a refugee to hide for one night. Agnes is feeling paranoid and scared. She has almost died inside, lost her sense of self. She says, “I’m not really worth much, I suppose ... the fear is too great, it makes me stupid” (145). Malek, the refugee, talks about a house on the border which Agnes can use as an escape when she wants. She notes that “there are many little holes like this” (146). However, at the end of the scene the audience is aware that Agnes is too far dead inside to try to escape. The last series of slides almost announce the future war: “October 14, 1933 – Germany withdraws from disarmament talks and from the League of Nations / November 12, 1933 – Reichstag elections and a national plebiscite. A 95 % popular vote of consent” (147). This is the historical point where the play ends. The period when something could still be

done is over, the rest of the crimes of the Third Reich are the results of the ineffectuality of this period.

The audience is made to revisit Agnes one last time in her apartment in the play's epilogue. Now, Agnes, Die Alte and Zillah share the same dimension and it is not a realistic one. Fisher comments that "alone in a dark corner of her apartment, Agnes is little more than a trapped animal" (34). Agnes starts to deliver her last monologue to the audience: "I live in a modern flat. / On one side lives nightmare, / on the other despair. / Above me, exhaustion, / below me, a man / with the pale face / and red hands of a strangler" (148). While Die Alte interrupts Agnes's monologue with her own about the desperate war times, Agnes continues to announce her final position: "I fear the end / I fear the way / I fear the wind / Will make me stray / Much farther than / I want to stray / Far from my home / Bright room called day; / past where deliverance or hope / can find me" (150). The room begins to grow dark as we hear Zillah echoing the warning, the slim possibility of survival: "Now. / Before the sky and the ground slam shut. / The borders are full of holes" (151). Agnes's last words remind us of the depiction of the Devil as she officially welcomes us to her country: "Clubfoot. / Smell of sulphur. / Yellow dog. / No shadow. / Welcome to Germany." (151). The audience leaves Agnes while she is waiting for the hellish horror to come.

Agnes becomes more and more emotionally paralyzed, closing her heart and mind to the events around her. The epilogue creates a unique hybridization of past and present. Zillah, as a character who is both part of the play and not, who is both outside and inside, now sees Agnes clearly and acts as a segment of both Agnes's and the audience's brains, reminding us there is still a possibility of survival. Die Alte delivers "ominous poetic statements suggesting she may be an image of what Agnes is to become" (Fisher 26). It is as if she is the merging result of the dimensions of Agnes and Zillah. In the epilogue, when the three finally appear together, time literally collapses and we witness the presence of the past, the pastness of the present and a hybrid form of three dimensions merged into one another. The intact, integrated individual self appears as divided, fragmented. Michel Foucault states that, in the new age, instead of trying to keep the myth of the integrated individual, "[w]hat is needed is to 'de-individualize' by means of

multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations” (“Preface” xiv). The epilogue of the play, by breaking the boundaries of time and space, and by blurring the separating lines between the three characters, creates such a multiple and diverse combination Foucault asks for.

What is also significant in *Bright Room* is Kushner’s usage of space. Different from many Brecht plays, Kushner’s Brechtian play takes place in only one room throughout the whole play. The room itself goes through a transformation in the play; it “at first is an expression of stolid continuity, then the base for revolt, then a refuge and finally a cell” (Bigsby 1999: 96). In his book, Knowles talks about Michel de Certeau’s distinctions in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, between

‘places,’ the established positions from which the currently dominant *strategically* defend their authority, resisting the temporal dimensions of chance and change, and ‘space,’ the undefined geographies through which the disempowered *tactically* shift ground, seize the moment, respond improvisationally to whatever they are presented with, and resist the solidification of time into an unchanging and stable spatial realm of universal structures and values. (161-162)

In *Bright Room*, the audience is faced with the transformation of a “place” into a “space.” While Agnes’s apartment was the safe “place” for her, embodying her desire for stability and her resistance for change, at the end of the play, in the epilogue, the room becomes a “space,” unstable and hybrid. It is maybe Agnes’s tactic to cope with her new “disempowered” and marginal status. This theatrical “space” also demonstrates a “spatialization of time” (Schmidt 74) since the past, the present and the archetypal meet in the same dimension. As Kerstin Schmidt suggests, postmodern theatre “deconstruct[s] time as a continuum and a linear progressive movement. Time is predominantly rendered as discontinuous and relative” (76). Similarly, in the play’s epilogue, all three characters’ dimensions of time are taken out of their continuous path and put together in relation to one another.

In the character of Agnes, Kushner seems to have created a character who gradually resembles an absurd character rather than a Brechtian one. Robert Brustein, naming the Theatre of the Absurd “the existential revolt,” states that, “[a]lone in a terrifying emptiness, the central figure of existential drama is doomed, as it were, to a life of

solitary confinement” (27). At the end of the play, Agnes’s revolt resembles the revolt of an existential character: “It is the revolt of the fatigued and the hopeless, reflecting – after the disintegration of idealist energies – exhaustion and disillusionment” (Brustein 27). Exhausting all her beliefs in any type of ideology, Agnes, at the end, is disillusioned with life itself. Like other characters of the absurd drama, she “subsides into a kind of resignation – an acceptance of waiting, patience, and ordeals” (Brustein 30). Moreover, this waiting, used in the Theatre of the Absurd “as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition” (Esslin 1980: 50), brings out the flow of time. As Martin Esslin suggests, “it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of *time* in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, we *pass* the time, but if we are passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself” (1980: 50). Thus, in her act of waiting, Agnes experiences the flow of time and the epilogue breaks that flow as it brings different time frames together. As Agnes becomes more and more disconnected with the social world – the Brechtian world – she seems to be slipping into a more existential one – the Beckettian world. Thus, by incorporating some elements of the Theatre of the Absurd in his Brechtian play, Kushner manages to bring together two seemingly opposing world views, the social and the existential. As Martin Esslin notes, any theatre that accomplishes the task of bringing these two traditions together becomes “a *liberated* theatre ... in which everything is possible” (1963: 47). In his article, “Brecht, the Absurd, the Future,” Esslin states that in such a theater, “realistic décor can alternate with the most fantastic, verse with prose, spoken dialogue with song ... the audience can be kept at a distance or drawn into the action” (47). This type of theater, for Esslin, would be

A fluid, theatrical kind of drama, that uses the stage with the utmost freedom and is able to move from realism to a heightened expressionist, stylized version of external reality, and from there to an internal reality of introspection, dream, nightmare and obsession; a theatre that would be able to combine direct statement and direct address to the audience with all the Brechtian techniques of *distanciation*; a theatre that would rely on the poetry of the stage image as much as on the freest possible use of language. (50)

According to Esslin, what makes an integration of the two forms possible, their common ground, is their metatheatricality: “*the stage acknowledges that it is a stage rather than pretending to be reality itself*” (47). Thus, relying on this metatheatricality, Kushner is able to insert an existential point-of-view in his Brechtian play.

In *Bright Room*, Kushner, in a way, shows us a dimension of the world which tends to be overlooked in Brechtian epic theatre. Elizabeth Wright suggests that “the task of refunctioning Brecht is already part of a Brechtian reading of postmodernism, turning it back from a consumer culture to a culture which can collect the marginal individual” (139). To Brecht’s theatre about the bourgeois society and consumer culture, Kushner adds the realm of the marginal subject. As Heiner Müller does, Kushner “shows how the average citizen was implicated in the horrors of fascism” (Wright 123). This may be seen as a part of what Wright calls “the project of reclaiming the subjective factor from its repression,” however, this “does not mean a new retreat into the private and personal” (124). Subjectivity, now is seen as an important factor of politics. Kushner is also “not afraid to reveal the violence of individual experience as the subject is caught up in the historical process” (Wright 125) and he does this by “finding forms by means of which subjective levels of everyday experience can be traced and held, [and by] showing their historical significance, though without reducing such experience to a particular historical plight, such as effects of capitalism” (Wright 124).

As Fisher suggests, for Kushner, “history is not merely a simple recounting of facts” (25). He uses theatre as “an arena for debate, for exposing the mechanics of history” (Bigsby 1999: 87). In *Bright Room*, by appropriating Brechtian epic theater, Kushner demonstrates “a historical consciousness mixed with an ironic sense of critical distance” (Huchon 1988: 201). The play also demonstrates the Benjaminian “view of the past as a formless potential that responds to, and emerges from, the needs of the present” (Malkin 25-26). Jeanette Malkin, talking about the Benjaminian notion of *Jetztzeit*, states that, “the present dictates the past we use and remember; the past is called forth and ‘saved’ by the needs of ‘now’.” Zillah, in her conjuring up the past and in her insistence on drawing parallels and making the past relevant for the present, is essentially a Benjaminian character. The historical period Kushner chooses to conjure up and rewrite, and the marginal characters he creates fits Benjamin’s understanding of history:

The “needs” of the present – especially in times of crisis and change – determine the past that the present remembers. By recalling the past to memory, the (repressed, often marginalized) past is saved from oblivion and becomes an extension of the present it illuminates ... Since the past is created through the needs of the present, history cannot be seen as a linear continuity, as a narrative fixed on casual episodes.

... The continuum, that closed and causal narrative of the past, silences the memory of the defeated and powerless for whom the past is an uneven succession of fragmented and interrupted moments. (Malkin 26-27)

Thus, Kushner takes out a fragment out of the continuum of history and tells us a story about “the defeated and powerless,” but the essential need to tell that story comes from the needs of the present, in this case, Reagan’s America. What is probably the most important in the case of *Bright Room* is that the play tries to keep up with the needs of the present, since Zillah’s interruptions are revised and kept up to date.

Through Zillah, *Bright Room* demonstrates the postmodernist obsession with memory and the past. As Malkin suggests, “postmodernism is crucially bound up with agendas of remembrance and forgetting, serving, at least in part, to re-call the past from repression or from its canonized “shape” in order to renegotiate the traumas, oppressions, and exclusions of the past” (1). In this vein, the play can also be seen as a part of what Malkin calls “postmodern memory-theater.” According to Malkin, this theater’s intent is a serious one: “the intent to evoke erased memories of national pasts, to recontextualize, reopen canonized memory-“narratives,” rethink taboo discourses, intervene in the politics of memory and repression, and to engage (and occasionally enrage) the memoried consciousness of its audience – with whose memory, and repression, these plays are in constant dialogue” (3). In addition to rethinking a taboo discourse, *Bright Room* also manages to “enrage” its audience through Zillah’s “outrageous” comparisons. Moreover, in the image of Die Alte, the play also gives the audience the sense of a “traumatized memory” of the past; “the images [in postmodern memory-theater] often reach back into the pasts of a society, but their arrangement does not suggest historical reconstruction; rather, chaotic memory – perhaps even *traumatized* memory – seems to be at work” (Malkin 29 emphasis in the original).

Bright Room’s revisiting the past is a highly “knowing” one. While questioning the “set-in-stone” quality of history, the play never forgets its own status as a theatrical piece. In the play, “self-reflexivity takes various forms, but it almost always entails an extravagant and overabundant theatricality” (Malkin 28). The audience feels that overabundant theatricality at its best when characters like Paulinka, Agnes and Husz step out of the play’s flow knowingly and give mini performances within the play. Their direct

addresses to the audience members break the fourth wall and force the spectators to acknowledge their own status as spectators of a play. The fragmented, episodic Brechtian structure of the play, taken one step further with Kushner's "scenes within scenes," breaks the flow and the illusion of the theater. Moreover, from a subtler level, the play refers to its own fictional status since its characters are actors, cinematographers and artists. These fiction-makers are constantly seen in the play producing other works of fiction such as plays, movies and collages. This fiction-producing activity, when implanted in another work of fiction, adds another metatheatrical level to the play. As a result, there occurs not a factual but "a theatrical history of the victims of fascism" (35). According to Bigsby, what Kushner set out to do "was to transcend writing by exploring the theatre's capacities to celebrate its own exuberance, its ability to expand possibilities, stylistically and politically" (1999: 106).

Kushner, as one of the "ex-centrics whose marginalization has taught them that artists indeed have inherent political status" (Hutcheon 1988: 179), creates such ex-centrics and artists in his play. Through Zillah, with Benjaminian historical consciousness, *Bright Room* achieves the "present-ification" of the past. Linda Hutcheon states that postmodernism "suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present. We could call this ... 'the presence of the past' or perhaps its 'present-ification'" (1988: 19-20). *Bright Room*, as a piece of historiographic metadrama, is a knowing revisit, a "provocation that challenge[s] the usual representations of [the] past, or of the present in its light" (Malkin 20).

After *Bright Room*, Kushner's theater continued to take a subversive historical stance. Most of his plays demonstrated the metatheatrical sensibility Kushner learned from Brecht and more and more returned to significant historical periods from history to question their subjective value for the ones who had usually been excluded from the official records. Though Kushner would never achieve again to make the past more present than he did in *Bright Room*, his masterpiece was yet to come. It was in 1992 that Kushner finished his grand project which made him a world-famous playwright—a play

that, once again, successfully made people question the totalizing narratives of history through its playful spirit.

ENDNOTES

¹ This chapter aims to demonstrate the inherently metatheatrical nature of Brechtian epic theater and its relevance to historiographic metadrama. Thus, other terms, devices and strategies that Brecht created (such as *gestus* and *fable*) are not relevant to the issues taken up in this chapter and will not be discussed at length.

² It is known that Adolf Hitler and his head of the Ministry of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, both had an interest in the movies. David Weinberg states that, “As a regime committed to an irrational ideology, the Third Reich was drawn naturally to a medium whose appeal lay in its ability to alter reality to create the proper emotional effect. Not surprisingly, the *Reichsfilmkammer* or State Film Agency was one of the first bodies established by the Ministry of Propaganda soon after the nazis’ accession to power in 1933” (105). Goebbels, in a speech given on the 9th of February 1934, stated, “We are convinced that in general film is one of the most modern and farreaching methods of influencing the masses. A regime thus must not allow film to go its own way” (qtd in Weinberg 105). Thus, movies appear as ideological tools open to the manipulation of “great metanarratives”. “The ability of totalitarian governments to manipulate culture meant that shifts in nazi goals and programmes could be transmitted easily to the German masses through state-sponsored or controlled movies” (Weinberg 112). Although the exact number of movies made under the Third Reich is not known, it is estimated that the figure is somewhere between 1150 and 1350 (Weinberg 111). As film historian Eric Rentschler puts it, “Hitler’s regime can be seen as a sustained cinematic event ... the Third Reich was movie-made” (1).

³ In an interview with Anne Nicholson Weber, Tony Kushner elaborated on the differences between the genres of film and theater. For the movies, he commented that a certain number of viewers “is going to find that degree of successful illusion nervous-making ... it is in a sense psychotic, because you literally cannot tell the difference between illusion and reality at all” (151). For him, a movie “is a commodity, it is a fetish object, it does not change, it is not organic, it will never be different one day to the next” (153), whereas “the theatre is anti-fetishistic because it doesn’t ever finish, it’s never complete, it doesn’t present you with a product you can ever pocket” (152). This is especially true for a play like *Bright Room* since each production of the play is performed with different interruptions. If the movie genre tries to close the distance between reality and illusion, for Kushner theater is essentially about the conflict between the two. He says, “the greatest workers in the theatre are the people who embrace [the conflict between reality and illusion] because it’s actually not a limitation of the form, but is rather the form’s absolute strength and, in fact, its heart” (159). Thus, a theater which embraces that conflict appears as metatheater, aware of its own status as an illusion, not reality. For Kushner such a theater, “is a challenge for the artist and a challenge for the audience, and that challenge is productive of an important way of understanding the world because theater teaches critical consciousness ... It teaches one to look at the world as an artificial contraption and as an interpretation. You are never allowed not to see that when you are watching a stage play because it always fails in its task of creating illusion” (159-160).

⁴ Hannah Arendt was a German-Jewish political theorist who lived between 1906 and 1975. While making a research on anti-Semitism in Germany, Arendt was interrogated by the Gestapo. Upon this event, she fled Germany for Paris where she befriended Walter Benjamin. Although she was put in a concentration camp during the war, Arendt was able to escape after a few weeks. She fled to United States during the war and came back to Germany after the Nazis were defeated.

CHAPTER 2

An “Ex-centric” Approach to America – *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*

After the first production of *Bright Room* in 1985, Kushner continued to write and produce plays incessantly. His *The Heavenly Theatre* was produced at the New York University, Tisch School of Arts in 1986. In the same year, Kushner also wrote and produced *In Great Eliza’s Golden Time* for the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis in Imaginary Theatre Company in St. Louis, Missouri. 1987 saw the production of the first of Kushner’s many adaptations, *Stella*, a play he adapted from Goethe’s play of the same name. Two other adaptations appeared during this period, namely, *The Illusion*, in 1988, adapted from Pierre Corneille’s play *L’Illusion Comique*, and *Widows*, in 1991, in which he collaborated with Ariel Dorfman for the adaptation of her book of the same name. During the later years of his career, Kushner added many other adaptations to these plays. Writing on Kushner’s adaptations, James Fisher suggests, “Kushner contemporizes these works by emphasizing their aspects pertinent to modern audiences and, in most cases, he succeeds in making them his own while honoring their individual qualities” (2002: 111). Kushner’s inclination to “adapt” demonstrates not only his interest in past times and in the theater tradition but also his “postmodern” drive to evoke those times and styles and to give them his own personal twist. Both in his adaptations and his other plays, Kushner evokes past moments from the history, opens them for reevaluation and writes his own version of them.

Kushner’s interest in past times and also in historical personages is further evident in his 1987 play, *Hydriotaphia, or The Death of Dr. Browne*, in which Kushner dramatizes the last days of Thomas Browne, a famous seventeenth century English author. The title of the play was taken from one of the books Browne wrote about the ancient and current burial customs. The play, however, is not just a piece of historical drama; as Kushner himself warns, “this play is not intended as a portrait of the historical man, any more than it is an accurate portrait of late-mid-seventeenth-century England” (2000: 34). The play is a highly metatheatrical farce in which slap-stick comedy meets philosophical ponderings

on the nature of death. Death himself appears as a character along with Browne's soul who hides behind his deathbed, too eager to attain the peace of afterlife. Throughout the play, Browne's family, workers and friends try to benefit from his will; their efforts to change the document appear as pure caricaturistic comedy. In *Hydriotaphia*, Kushner manages to create a purely "theatrical" account of the last days of Browne, which paves the way for his later theatricalization of the last days of another historical character, Roy Cohn.

In 1989, Kushner wrote another play to be produced at Tisch, *In That Day (Lives of the Prophets)*. However, all the while, since *Bright Room* was produced in San Francisco's Eureka Theater, Kushner was working on the biggest project of his career, a play commissioned by Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of Eureka, and funded by the National Endowment of the Arts committee. It took Kushner three years to finish the first part of the play and another two years to finalize the second part. The result was a seven-hour epic, *Angels in America*, which Jack Kroll calls "the most ambitious American play of our time" (83). The first part of the play, *Millennium Approaches*, was first produced in a workshop performance at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in May 1990. The play received its official premiere at San Francisco's Eureka Theater in May 1991. The second part, *Perestroika*, also received its first reading during the staging of the play in San Francisco. Part Two was produced independently in New York in 1992. From that time on the two parts have been produced both separately and jointly. The play also moved to London in a production at Royal National Theatre of Great Britain in January 1992. Probably one of the most successful runs of the play was on Broadway at Walter Kerr Theatre, which started on the fourth of May 1993. Since its first sensational appearance on American stage, the play has been produced all over America and in several other countries; it appeared in Australia, Denmark, Germany, Canada, Israel, Holland, Japan, France, Switzerland, Brazil, Uruguay, Italy, Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Spain and Romania.

The play has received a considerable amount of critical and scholarly attention. Harold Bloom included the play in his *Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (1994), and many have praised *Angels in America* as a milestone not only in gay theater

but in the history of American drama.¹ *Angels* also achieved a great success among the mainstream audience, which was quite ironical considering the issues it tackles. James Fisher states that, “One of the great ironies of the success of *Angels* has been the enormous mainstream audience that has embraced it despite the fact that its politics, moral universe, and sexuality are, at least as measured by many of those elected to public office in the United States, incompatible with the beliefs of American society.” (2002: 9-10). However, it should be added that the play also caused a considerable amount of controversy when it was staged in more rural parts of America where the audience was not too eager to embrace its subversive politics.²

Angels in America can be seen as the summary of Kushner’s theater in general. Kushner’s obsession with history and with creating his own accounts of it rather than capturing it “the way it really was” seems to be the driving force of the play. His characters are all situated in very specific subject positions in the society and none of them appears to be “universal types.” His skill of opening up systems, narratives and myths – all American – to scrutiny, and of showing the constructed nature and inner working logic of these systems meets with his stage, itself highly aware of its own constructed nature, celebrating theatricality more than anything and situating itself in the broader culture with references to other texts and popular culture. *Angels in America* seems to be a perfect example of what Hornby calls the “drama/culture complex” (17).

Unlike *Bright Room*, *Angels in America* does not return to a distant historical period, but it takes out a very specific period in American history and situates itself firmly in the sociopolitical circumstances of that period. The play starts in 1985 in America when Ronald Reagan was in power and “his shaping of the Supreme Court seem[ed] likely to determine the nature of American society and its response to minorities and liberal causes for the foreseeable future” (Bigsby 1999: 110). Kushner started thinking about the play during the mid-80s and there were many things that were making him uncomfortable in the society: the AIDS crisis and its impact on the gay community, the slow response of American government and society to the epidemic’s tragic consequences, and the nation’s political swing toward conservatism. Thus, the actions of the Reagan administration seem

to be the triggering events in the creations of both *Bright Room* and *Angels*. Deborah Geis identifies the historical moment in which the play is set as

a moment when, indeed, ‘millennium approaches,’ when, with a sense of an impending ending, global politics stands between the Cold War and its vaguely glimpsed sequel, when the domestic political scene is embroiled in a contentious debate over ‘identity,’ and particularly over the relations of race, gender, sexuality, and class to an overarching ‘national identity,’ when the AIDS crisis has rewritten a sense of the past, present, and future. (“Introduction”1-2)

As a result, 1980s in America appears as a critical transition period in American history in which important questions about the future of the nation are raised and the play “is charged with a potent mixture of the angers, fears, absurdities, and hypocrisies of the times in which it is set” (Fisher 2002: 60).

The debate still continues whether to think of *Angels in America* as one play or as two. This chapter, nevertheless, will approach the play as one big, all-encompassing project in its discussion of the play’s various themes and structural patterns. In other words, unlike the previous chapter that had dealt with *Bright Room* in a rather linear manner, this chapter analyzes *Angels* thematically and structurally. Thus, the numerous titles of the play are extremely relevant to its grand project. The main title – *Angels in America* – came into being when Kushner had a magnificent dream while working on the play: “Right after the first person that I had known closely died of AIDS, I had a dream of an angel crashing through somebody’s bedroom ceiling. ... then everything followed from that” (Kinzer 197). Later, however, the “angels” in the play’s title gained many different meanings as the play proceeded. The subtitle of the play, *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, specifies its thematic and structural concerns. The play is “gay” both in the sense that it makes use of witty humor and in the sense that its sensibility is a specifically homosexual one. However, the issues of homosexuality and the AIDS epidemic are not the only issues this play tackles; its themes are “national:” ranging from more sociopolitical concepts as conservative and liberal politics, the situations of “ex-centrics” in American society, how organized religion and other American myths perpetuate the position of the marginalized individual; to more universal questions such as the problematic notions of the possibility of spirituality, love, forgiveness, connection, community and change in this “America that announces itself as a utopia and then defers

the utopian moment” (Biggsby 1999: 113). The word “fantasia” in the subtitle hints at the play’s organizing structural principle. As Alisa Solomon states,

in musical works that bear this name [fantasia] the composer’s imagination takes precedence over conventional styles and forms, often allowing for a number of themes to develop contrapuntally. Indeed, Kushner’s dramatic structure is itself pleurably polymorphous. Constantly introducing new layers of irony, Kushner places each scene, no matter how domestic, within a complex psycho-sexual-political landscape. (118)

The titles of the both parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*—Mikhail Gorbachev’s term for the political changes initiated in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s—show Kushner’s conviction that massive transformations on a global scale are under way and also his preoccupation with the possibility of change in this postmodern world where people no longer trust any unifying theories and metanarratives that would guide them during this process of change.

The first part of the play, *Millennium Approaches*, proceeds in the form of different storylines overlapping one another. The play introduces us to two couples, one gay; Prior Walter and Louis Ironson, and one straight; Joe and Harper Pitt. Prior is a WASP ex-drag-queen and Louis is a Jewish word processor working for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. Joe and Harper are Mormons and Joe also works in the Second Circuit Court of Appeals as Judge Theodore Wilson’s chief clerk. Both relationships seem to be at crisis points: Prior breaks the news to Louis that he has AIDS and Joe is actually struggling with his homosexual tendencies, which, in turn, leads his wife Harper to seek solace in Valium-induced hallucinations. The lives of these four characters also intersect with one of the play’s historical figures, Roy Cohn. Cohn, a Republican lawyer, himself a closeted homosexual, also learns that he has AIDS. In addition, he is facing disbarment as a result of his borrowing money from one of his clients. Roy is trying to persuade Joe, his “Royboy” (70), to take a position in Washington in the Justice Department and operate as Roy’s interfering hand in the disbarment committee. Another character, Belize, an African-American former drag queen and former lover of Prior’s, joins the cast of characters when he becomes the nurse taking care of Roy at the hospital. Belize also helps Prior both as a caretaker and a friend through his horrible ordeal. Not being able to face the responsibilities and pain to come, Louis leaves Prior. Similarly, Joe abandons Harper,

deciding to live for his own happiness rather than for others'. Louis and Joe feel drawn to each other after they meet for the first time in their workplace, and Prior and Harper appear in each others' dreams and hallucinations. Towards the end of *Millennium Approaches* Hannah, Joe's Mormon mother living in Salt Lake, enters the picture as she sells her house in Salt Lake and moves to New York out of worry for her son and daughter-in-law. In the meantime, the abandoned Prior starts to hear an angelic voice enunciating her arrival. Likewise, as his illness worsens, Roy Cohn starts to see the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, another historical character of the play, for whose execution in 1953 Roy was mostly responsible. Part one ends with the Angel crashing through Prior's bedroom ceiling, announcing that "The Great Work Begins!" (125).

Thus, the first part of *Angels in America* demonstrates how vulnerable and constructed the relationships, subject positions and boundaries are. The seemingly separate lives of many characters intersect and their subject positions change radically, showing the shaky ground on which the society sets that subject positions. The identities established at the beginning of the play break down, demonstrating how "systems of identifications prove to be as vulnerable as immune systems" (Cadden 84). As Bigsby suggests, "Character dissolves, resisting the very categories that had seemed essential to survival" (1999: 110). Kushner himself talks about this aspect of *Millennium Approaches* when he says, "It is all neatly set up, but then it doesn't work out because of all sorts of internal stresses. ... So within that seemingly homogenous unit there is enormous conflict and potential for eruption" (Cadden 84).

When compared to the first part of the play, the second part, *Perestroika*, is more progressive, and "radically forward-looking" (Miller 68). As Bigsby suggests,

There is a wind blowing from the future, but it is a future that has to be constructed, a future compromised by present evil and suffering. The disassembled, the fragmented, the damaged, the marginal have to be drawn together. *Perestroika* is a fable which stages this centripetal move, a carnival of reconciliations which, like all carnivals, acknowledges the power of death but celebrates resurrection. (Bigsby 1999: 118)

This highly compromised progression towards a scary future in the characters' lives is framed with the play's epigraph, taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "On Art;" it

says, “Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole” (145). In *Perestroika*, however, we see that the “progressive” nature of the human beings is far from being unproblematic. All the characters unwillingly move towards a blurry future, not knowing how to cope with their new positions. Roy is admitted to the hospital where he meets his nurse, Belize, who stands for everything Roy despises. The exchanges between the two are probably the most verbally powerful and cruelly witty dialogues of the play. Towards the end, Roy Cohn dies at the hospital after learning from Ethel that he has been disbarred. Joe and Louis end up together and have a short relationship until Louis learns that Joe is a “Royboy,” who, as a clerk of a highly incapable old judge, has put his signature under many discriminative court decisions against marginalized members of the society. Consequently, Louis leaves Joe and wants to come back to Prior, who rejects this offer, admitting, still, that he also loves Louis. Harper continues her Valium “travels,” painfully shaping her own reconciled future and leaving Joe and New York for San Francisco at the end. Hannah also changes radically as she coincidentally meets Prior and helps him through one of the attacks of his illness. At the end of the play, she appears as a very modern New Yorker, having left her rigid notions about life. Yet, probably the most interesting and significant storyline in *Perestroika* is Prior’s. The Angel crashing through Prior’s ceiling at the end of *Millennium Approaches* introduces herself as “the Bird Of America, the Bald Eagle, Continental Principality” (170). This Angel of America announces that Prior has been chosen by the Angels as the new “American Prophet” (170). The Angel is a hermaphrodite with eight vaginas and “a Bouquet of Phalli” (175). After the Angel and Prior have an orgasmic moment, she explains the reason of her appearance: When God created human beings he also created “the Virus of TIME” (175) embodied in human beings’ potential for change and forward movement. The human compulsion for movement and progress has sent shock waves through Heaven, driving God away and leaving it resembling the ruins of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. In order to lure God back and to prevent earthly apocalypse, the angels bring the message to Prior that human beings “MUST STOP MOVING!” (178). This is the new law the Angel wants Prior to create on earth; human beings need to “Turn Back. Undo” (179) and stop moving till God returns again. The Angel states that they have written “on [him] in [his] blood ... STASIS! The END” (180)

Throughout *Perestroika*, Prior struggles with his visions, trying to find a way out of his new position as a prophet. Scared that his visions might be the results of dementia induced by AIDS, Prior, nevertheless, asks Hannah for guidance on how to handle the situation with the Angel. At the end, Prior wrestles with the Angel, like Jacob in the Bible, and gains entrance to Heaven. He ascends to Heaven to return the book they have implanted in him and rejects his mission, stating that human beings, no matter what horrible nightmares they face, cannot just stop moving. Even though Prior is fully aware of the painful future lying ahead of him, he says, “Even sick. I want to be alive” (265). Thus, Prior’s rejection of stasis and end stands for all other characters’ courage in the face of the fearful future waiting for them. Even though changing and moving ahead is incredibly scary in these painful times, it is also inevitable. In the epilogue of the play, in 1990, four years after Prior rejected his mission, Prior, Louis, Belize and Hannah are seen sitting together at the Bethesda fountain in Central Park, discussing the current political events of the times. At the end of the play, Prior gives the same blessing he demanded from the angels to the audience: “The world only spins forward. ... And I bless you: *More Life. The Great Work Begins*” (280).

Angels in America, however, presents much more than these basic storylines, as the characters share ideas and visions, history, politics, religion, race, sexuality and gender in the great American narrative is represented as highly complex issues layered with many contradictory aspects. *History* seems to be the dominant issue in the play as in most of other Kushner plays. Matthew Smith seems to have summarized *Angels* when he said:

Outside of Chekhov, I can think of no playwright whose characters *philosophize* so much about history as Tony Kushner's do; Kushner's characters are forever musing upon, arguing about, engaging with history. But while in Chekhov's plays such philosophizing talk is generally just that--talk, *mere* talk--in Kushner's it is urgent, of the essence. Which is to say that, for Kushner, talking about history functions not as a screen behind which the real but unstated (largely private, domestic) drama takes place, but rather *is* the "real drama," in surface and subtext ... in Kushner's plays the political *is* the historical *is* the drama itself; we witness, in these plays, individuals and groups thrown into the midst of history, arguing the direction of the tide even as it pulls them under or along. (152-165)

Angels in America, as Hutcheon comments on historiographic metadrama, is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political” (1988: 4).

The play opens different historical discourses to scrutiny and even parodies some others. Thus, Kushner's attempt is essentially to rewrite history. History, in *Angels*, is not made "obsolete" but being rethought as a "human construct" (Hutcheon 1988: 16). Linda Hutcheon suggests that "the act of telling about the past, of writing history, makes the 'given' into the 'constructed'" (1988: 146). In its "postmodernist ironic rethinking of history" (Hutcheon 1988: 39), *Angels* "suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon 1988: 110).

The play exerts its preoccupation with history and culture from its first scene. In the scene Louis and Prior are at the funeral of Louis's grandmother, Sarah Ironson. The words of Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz are worth quoting at length here since they emphasize the importance of history and culture in one's identity formation:

This woman. I did not know this woman. I cannot accurately describe her attributes, nor do justice to her dimensions. She was ... not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania—and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America ... You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes—because she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, ... and she worked that earth into your bones ... You can never make that crossing that she made, for such Great Voyages in this world do not any more exist. But every day of your lives the miles of that voyage between that place and this one you cross. ... In you that journey is" (16-17).

With this speech, Kushner introduces his theme of a "journey." The rabbi, by giving a detailed account of the dead woman's journey and by calling her "a whole kind of person," situates her in a specific history and heritage, in this case Jewishness. Even though the rabbi did not know Sarah Ironson, he is able to contextualize her identity with relation to a specific history and community. Sarah Ironson's account of history, different from the official history of America, will live only if her descendants will keep it alive because, as Bigsby suggests, the rabbi "is simultaneously burying history" (1999: 109). Hence, the importance of creating a counterhistory distinct from the official history of America is stressed in the speech. As Arnold Aronson suggests, "America is a fantasy, a

chimera, made up of the individual perceptions, expectations, and projections of hundreds of millions of individuals whose true roots are elsewhere” (214). Thus, right from the first scene, the play declares that the location that appears in its title is nonexistent, “a state of mind” (Aronson 214).

The notion that America is nothing more than “a state of mind” makes it the perfect country for individuals like Roy Cohn who create their own myths and rules to live by and who reject any connections to bind them down. The character of Roy Cohn has been one of the most celebrated elements of *Angels in America* by the critics. Harold Bloom states that “Roy Cohn, to date, is Kushner’s best creation” (2). Kushner’s Roy Cohn is based on the real Roy M. Cohn, who epitomized everything conservative and Republican, who was partly responsible for the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 and who was a key figure in Joseph McCarthy’s communist witch-hunt committee during the 1950s.³ Kushner’s representation of Cohn, however, even though it stays loyal to basic facts in Cohn’s life, is a product of fiction and theatricality. In the play’s notes, Kushner includes a disclaimer:

Roy M. Cohn, the character, is based on the late Roy M. Cohn (1927-1986), who was all too real; for the most part the acts attributed to the character Roy are to be found in the historical record. But this Roy is a work of fiction; his words are my invention, and liberties have been taken with his story. The real Roy died in August of 1986. For purposes of the play my Roy dies in February. (144)

Creating a character like Roy Cohn gives Kushner the chance to explore many different narratives and myths white conservative America created and to open those narratives to new critical reviewing. Framji Minwalla suggests that

Roy epitomizes bigoted, closeted, white America, the America that holds the voices of difference at (or preferably outside) its borders, that invests power in the inheritors of a predominantly Christian culture. He has delivered himself wholeheartedly to this cause, erasing his cultural heritage in favor of assimilation because he knows that assimilation brings authority. (107)

For Roy, connectiveness, community and cultural heritage are just chains that prevent the individual from fulfilling his full potential; potential for power, that is. Roy is Jewish but he has lost or forsaken all the ties that connect him to his cultural heritage. At one point in

the play, he tells Joe about how he had a surgery when he was a child to get the bony spur on his nose removed: “See this scar on my nose? When I was three months old, there was a bony spur, she [his mother] made them operate, shave it off. They said I was too young for surgery, I’d outgrow it but she insisted. I figure she wanted to toughen me up. And it worked. I am tough. It’s taking a lot ... to dismantle me” (215). The surgery is highly symbolic since it is a genetic trait of most Jewish people to have a bony nose, and Roy’s nose has been altered to conform to the general white American standards.

The religion Roy adheres to and worships is not Judaism but power, and politics—the game of power. When Joe says that what Roy asks of him to do is “unethical,” Roy tries to introduce him to the facts of life and politics: “Boy, you are really something. What the fuck do you think this is, Sunday School? ... This is ... this is gastric juices churning, this is enzymes and acids, this is intestinal is what this is, bowel movement and blood-red meat—this stinks, this is *politics*, Joe, the game of being alive” (74). Roy’s vision of life is very dark; he knows how cruel life is and his way to stay alive is his “clout,” his power in politics. He was “unafraid to look deep into the miasma at the heart of the world, what a pit, what a nightmare is there” (213). In this chaotic America, power is the only thing that counts; one either makes the rules or is subject to them. He constantly tries to provoke Joe to break the laws and live by his own rules; “Transgress a little, Joseph. There are so many laws; find one you can break” (116). When Joe rejects Roy’s job offer, Roy tells Joe that the best thing he did in his life was to make certain that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg got what they deserved:

Every day, doing what I do best, talking on the telephone, making sure that timid Yid nebbish on the bench did his duty to America, to history. That sweet unprepossessing woman, two kids, boo-hoo-hoo, reminded us all of our little Jewish mamas—she came this close to getting life; I pleaded till I wept to put her in the chair. Me. I did that. I would have fucking pulled the switch if they’d have let me. Why? Because I fucking hate traitors. Because I fucking hate communists. Was it legal? Fuck legal. Am I a nice man? Fuck nice. They say terrible things about me in the *Nation*. Fuck the *Nation*. You want to be Nice, or you want to be Effective? Make the law, or subject to it. Choose. (114)

There is no room for compassion in Roy’s world; he has no interest in being liked. As Charles McNulty states, Roy “is forever trying to position himself beyond good and evil.” He “refuses to be roped into traditional categories. Identity and other regulatory fictions

are decidedly for other people, not for Cohn” (49). This is most obvious when Henry, Roy’s doctor, first gives him the news that he has AIDS, which also makes it obvious that Roy is a homosexual. Roy, however, refuses to be “labeled” as a homosexual:

Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don’t tell you that. ... Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry? (51)

Roy claims that he is “a heterosexual man who fucks around with guys” and that his diagnosis is “liver cancer” (52). The real Cohn also died because of “liver cancer” and was a closeted homosexual.⁴ However, what interests Kushner most is not how the real Roy was a homophobic homosexual but how, in Cohn’s character, Republican America perceives the labels as signifying power. As Nicholas de Jongh suggests, “Cohn’s outrageous, constructionist interpretation of himself as a heterosexual depends upon his fascination with worldly power—that attribute by which the male sex has defined its value and ascendancy. ... A man is defined not by what he does in bed but by how much power he accumulates out of it” (268). Thus, Roy empties homosexuality from its positive content as an identity and equates even sexuality with power—the thing that white male patriarchal America worships.

In Roy’s character, Kushner gets the opportunity to explore the white Republican America’s many narratives; the love for power, how even identity labels are linked to that power, and how the laws are never “givens” but “constructions” that each individual can shape according to *his* need. Patriarchy is the essential pattern to this white America and it is also explored in Roy’s narrative about Republican “father and sons:”

Everyone who makes it in this world makes it because somebody older and more powerful takes an interest. The most precious asset in life, I think, is the ability to be

a good son. You have that, Joe. Somebody who can be a good son to a father who pushes them farther than they would otherwise go. I've had many fathers, I owe my life to them, powerful, powerful men. Walter Winchell, Edgar Hoover. Joe McCarthy most of all. He valued me because I am a good lawyer, but he loved me because I was and am a good son. ... The father-son relationship is central to life. Women are for birth, beginning, but the father is continuance. The son offers the father his life as a vessel for carrying forth his father's dream. (62)

Stanton B. Garner reminds us that “The word *fathers*, of course, resonates deep within the American historical imagination, and the sense of male power as something handed down through a cruel but loving struggle.” Roy Cohn stands for “the masculinist tradition of America against which Kushner writes” (Garner 181). Kushner's strategy in this scene is to undercut this father-son narrative with a raw homosexual act. While Roy and Joe are talking about the difficult but loving relationship between fathers and sons, in a split scene, we see Louis, driven by the guilt he feels for leaving Prior, having sex with a man in the park. Thus, Kushner demonstrates how the father-son narrative is coded with homosexual inclinations:

As embodied in Cohn and his Royboys, homosexual desire is disclosed as countercurrent to the conservative discourse of male inheritance. This current is at once a culmination of this discourse's fixation on male relationship and its subversion. ... the official narrative of heterosexual male hegemony reveals the rival narrative—silenced, disowned, the site of surreptitious sexuality—at its heart. (Garner 181)

Roy Cohn, the character, is a goldmine for Kushner—a perfect example of white *heterosexual* male conservative America, and Kushner uses this opportunity to the fullest, opening up crucial narratives of that America and showing his audience the latent hypocrisy and cruelty in them. However, Kushner's Roy Cohn cannot be easily dismissed as *the villain*. He is incredibly intelligent, extremely witty and, most of the times, cruelly funny. His encounters with Belize and Ethel, in addition to showing his inherently racist and homophobic nature, also demonstrate his cruel but, nevertheless attractive, wit. At one point in the play, when Belize does not believe that Roy's doctor let him stay awake during his facelift surgery, Roy answers:

I can get anyone to do anything I want. For instance: Let's be friends. (*Sings*) “We shall overcome...” Jews and coloreds, historical liberal coalition, right? My people being the first to sell retail to your people, your people being the first people my people could afford to hire to sweep out the store Saturday mornings, and then we all

held hands and rode the bus to Selma. Not me of course, I don't ride buses, I take cabs. But the thing about the American Negro is, he never went Communist. Loser Jews did. But you people had Jesus so the reds never got to you. I admire that. (157-158)

Even Roy's death scene demonstrates his cruelly comic performative nature. After the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg comes to inform Roy that the disbarment committee ruled against Roy and that Roy is going to die "defeated" (246), Roy goes in what seems like a hallucinatory state caused by his illness. He calls Ethel "ma," acts like a small boy and talks about how he feels bad, scared and sorry. Feeling sorry for Roy, Ethel sings him a Yiddish song. At the end of the song Roy seems to have died and Ethel also assumes so. However, Roy comes back from death to mock Ethel and the audience who feels inclined to feel sorry for him: "I fooled you Ethel, I knew who you were all along, I can't believe you fell for that ma stuff, I just wanted to see if I could finally, finally make Ethel Rosenberg sing! I WIN!" (247). Alisa Solomon notes that "Shamelessly mawkish, the scene invites us to feel sorry for Roy then jolts us out of the schmaltz, allowing us to regard our own will to embrace Roy. Ethel becomes Ethel again and Roy her executioner" (128). This scene is just the first of Roy's many resurrections; after his death, Roy continues to haunt the play, he appears to Joe in his apartment and kisses him on the lips, and towards the end we also see Roy, waist-deep in a smoldering pit in "Heaven, or Hell or Purgatory" talking to God on the phone. We learn that he is going to be God's lawyer in the lawsuit the angels filed against him for abandoning them. Roy does not appear to be defeated at all; he is doing what he does best and he is enjoying it: "I gotta start by telling you you ain't got a case here, you're guilty as hell, no question, you have nothing to plead but not to worry, darling, I will make something up" (274).

The powerful and witty character of Roy Cohn, who practiced an act of self-making all his life and who knew no rules, is a perfect character for theatrical representation. Ross Posnock maintains that "Legendary at working all the angles, Cohn possessed an insatiable appetite for the pleasures and perils of wheedling, welshing, cajoling, extorting. His was a life of sheer performativity, free of legal or moral qualms" (64-77). Thus, Roy Cohn, "a fluent liar and hypocrite who never apologized and never explained" (Posnock 64-77) was a performer constantly creating his own rules and his own self, and power was the key element in his act of self-making. Moreover, Roy embodied performativity also in

the fact that he was a closeted homosexual: John M. Clum suggests that “closeted individuals are always actors, performing for a reward and approval they don’t think they would receive if they were known to be homosexual” (140). By creating such a performative historical character in a theatrical representation, Kushner gives his historiographic play a metadramatic dimension. Roy already lives on a stage in his life; thus, putting him on a theatrical stage makes his performance doubly theatrical. Talking about Shakespeare’s historical plays with historical personages as characters, Richard Knowles states that “these plays have often included explorations of the concept of the historical persona as one whose historical ‘acts’ and whose ‘role’ in history gain their significance from their audiences and from their self-conscious theatricality rather than from essentialist or individualist notions of human character” (123). Roy is always aware of his audience; everything he does is to gain more clout, more power and it is other people that will give him this position. Thus, in Roy’s character, Kushner achieves to highlight, as Knowles states, “the relationship between the historical act and theatrical enactment, by focusing in metadramatic ways on the tension between the ‘role’ and the man who performs it” (229). Showing us the inner working logic of the narratives Roy dedicated his life to perpetuate, Kushner makes us notice how the man performed his role in history. It is not surprising, then, that critic Anne Marie Welsh called Roy Cohn “surely the most Shakespearean stage creation of the 1990s” (E7). In Roy Cohn’s character, Kushner creates what is a significant element in historiographic metadrama—a performative historical character.

Furthermore, in Roy’s character Kushner explores the discourse of history seen as a power struggle. Roy claims that he is “immortal” and he has “forced [his] way into history” and that he is never going to die (118). History for Roy is the record of the powerful, of the victorious, and eventually, it is just the site of politics. Charles McNulty notes that “For Kushner, politics is an intricate spiderweb of power relations. His most singular gift as a dramatist is in depicting this skein, in making visible the normally invisible cords that tether personal conscience to public policy” (48). Kushner’s depiction of Roy proves that Kushner is aware of the fact that “the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’”. This is not a ‘dishonest refuge from truth’ but an acknowledgement of the meaning-

making function of human constructs” (Hutcheon 1988: 89). Though it is true that Kushner opens Roy’s discourse of history and politics to criticism, it is also true that Roy never really dies in the play. He is probably one of the happiest characters in the play at the end, doing what he does best, continuing his manipulative power games. The play does not judge Roy’s views directly but shows the way they work and leaves the judging to the audience. This can also be seen as a contradiction on the play’s behalf since it does not punish the character which it seems to think as the most evil.

On the opposite side of the American political spectrum is Louis, and his abstract, rationalist, progressive liberal view of history is no less dangerous than Roy’s. Just as Roy traded connection for power, Louis’s idea of freedom and progress also rejects any connection or compassion. Early in the play, Louis explains why he is considering leaving Prior:

Maybe because this person’s sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time...maybe that person can’t, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit...and sores and disease...really frighten him, maybe...he isn’t so good with death. (31)

In his article entitled “Stonewall, ‘Constant Historical Progress,’ and *Angels in America: The Neo-Hegelian Positivist Sense*,” David Krasner points to the fact that throughout the play, Louis tries to live by Hegel’s notion of rational subjectivity. Very simply put, rational subjectivity “encourages the individual’s autonomous freedom” (101) but its emphasis is on “abstraction” (100). Thus, Louis’s idea of progress is one “that rejects the past ... and marches ahead unencumbered by past consequences and responsibilities” (101). Notions like death, sickness, blood are also antithetical to Louis’s understanding of freedom and progress. Krasner suggests, “Louis initiates his drive towards freedom, which entails abstracting or extracting freedom from any association with the body – in short, blood, as well as human bonding – and thus rationalizes his abandonment of his lover during the time of his greatest need” (102). Striving towards absolute freedom and “spiritual enlightenment” (Krasner 100) requires one to be removed from all the responsibilities and connections that will prevent them from reaching their potential.

Thus, throughout the play, Louis's rationale behind his actions always seems to be highly abstract. At an early point in the play, Louis talks to Prior about the notion of justice:

PRIOR: You could never be a lawyer because you are oversexed. You're too distracted.

LOUIS: Not distracted; *abstracted*. I'm trying to make a point:

PRIOR: Namely:

LOUIS: It's the judge in his or her chambers, weighing, books open, pondering the evidence, ranging freely over categories: good, evil, innocent, guilty; the judge in the chamber of circumspection, not the judge on the bench with the gavel. The shaping of the law, not its execution.

PRIOR: The point, dear, the point...

LOUIS: That it should be the questions and shape of a life, its total complexity gathered, arranged and considered, which matters in the end, not some stamp of salvation or damnation which disperses all the complexity in some unsatisfying little decision—the balancing of the scales...

PRIOR: I like this; very zen; it's...reassuringly incomprehensible and useless. We who are about to die thank you. (44-45)

The passage, apart from giving us Louis's abstract notion of justice as “the balancing of the scales,” also constitutes the excuse Louis is trying to create for leaving Prior—a person should not be judged just by one of his actions, it is the total sum of actions that counts. Prior, recognizing how abstract and “useless” Louis's discourse is, makes fun of it with his typical campy humor. Nevertheless, the scene also shows us Louis's cynical self-awareness: he claims he is “*abstracted*.” Louis is a very complex character who has very abstract notions about life but also a cynicism and self-awareness; that's why he appears very ambivalent and indecisive throughout the play. At one point he rationalizes his behavior by saying “Land of the free. Home of the brave. Call me irresponsible;” in the next he admits freedom is “heartless” (78). Joe seems to be a perfect mate for Louis to test the limits of freedom; Joe says: “I just wondered what a thing it would be...if overnight everything you owe anything to, justice, or love, had really gone away. Free. It would be...heartless terror. Yes. Terrible, and...Very great.” (78). The two, abandoning all their responsibilities to their loved ones, experience what “heartless freedom” entails.

Louis's notions about life are just that—*notions*: though highly intellectual, they are abstract, ambivalent, unsure. Belize tells Louis that he is “ambivalent about everything” (101), and Joe criticizes him at one point by saying, “You believe the world is perfectible and so you find it always unsatisfying. You have to reconcile yourself to the world's

unperfectibility by being thoroughly *in* the world but not *of* it” (204). Even though Joe’s conservative views about his country are foolishly optimistic, in this case, Kushner makes sure that the audience realizes he has a point. Louis is a liberal-rationalist who subscribes to the myth of a progressive, enlightened America. When compared to Roy, Louis represents “the liberal side of the political spectrum as self-righteous, mostly impotent, and, finally, nearly equally hypocritical” (Fisher 2002: 69). Thus, in Louis’s character, Kushner also presents a criticism of the extremely idealist liberal political stance.

In one of the most frequently quoted scenes of the play, the audience sees Louis’s abstract worldview, his ambivalent position towards everything and his pessimistic vision of America. He is talking to Belize about democracy and race:

LOUIS: Why has democracy succeeded in America? Of course by succeeded I mean comparatively, not literally, not in the present, but what makes for the prospect of some sort of radical democracy spreading outward and growing up? ... *Power* is the object, not being tolerated. Fuck assimilation. But I mean in spite of all this the thing about America, I think, is that ultimately we’re different from every other nation on earth, in that, with people here of every race, we can’t. . . Ultimately what defines us isn’t race, but politics. ... where race is what counts and there’s no real hope of change—it’s the racial destiny of the Brits that matters to them, not their political destiny, whereas in America...

BELIZE: Here in America race doesn’t count. ...

LOUIS: It’s—look, race, yes, but ultimately race here is a political question, right? Racists just try to use race here as a tool in a political struggle. It’s not really about race. Like the spiritualists try to use that stuff, are you enlightened, are you centered, channeled, whatever, this reaching out for a spiritual past in a country where no indigenous spirits exist—only the Indians, I mean Native American spirits and we killed them off so now, there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political. (95-98)

With his highly abstract “pale white polemics on behalf of racial insensitivity” (101), Louis offends Belize, who calls him “an honorary citizen of the Twilight Zone” (101). This time it is Louis who empties an identity category of its positive meaning—race. He is able to claim “Fuck assimilation” because he is unaware of his own assimilated nature as a white gay man; when compared to Belize his position in society is much more privileged. Thus, Louis is unaware of “his own complicity in the disenfranchisement of individuals who are racially other” (Minwalla 110). David Savran notes that Louis’s “rhetorical strategy is to stake out a position from which he immediately draws a guilty

retreat, thereby making Belize look like the aggressor ... Alternating between universalizing and minoritizing concepts of the subject, he manages at once to dismiss a politics of race (and insult Belize) and to assert its irreducibility” (1997:30). Belize, on the other hand, “know[s] all too well from his experience as a gay African American drag queen that history is not simply some dry-as-dust abstraction” (McNulty 46). At a later moment in the play, Belize gives Louis the answer he deserves:

Up in the air, just like that angel, too far off the earth to pick out the details. Louis and his Big Ideas. Big Ideas are all you love. “America” is what Louis loves. ... Well I hate America, Louis. I hate this country. It’s just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you. The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word ‘free’ to a note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me. ... I *live* in America, Louis, that’s hard enough, I don’t have to love it. You do that. Everybody’s got to love something. (228)

Because Louis loves his country very much he always believes that America can be made more perfect in one way another. Ironically this makes his vision of America more pessimistic; he believes there are “no angels in America.” The play, although critical of a lot of discourses and systems America has created and still perpetuates, proceeds to prove Louis wrong: there *are* angels and spirits in America, both literally and figuratively. Among the literal ones are the Angel and Ethel, and figurative ones are all marginalized and victimized “ex-centrics.”

Louis’s vision of history as a progress towards a perfect state with the help of freedom is another interpretation of history Kushner criticizes. Although Louis’s intentions may be pure and good, his vision is too idealistic, too abstract, and, finally, impossible to realize. As “a literal and figurative word processor” (Fisher 2002:69), Louis gets lost in his own ideas and loses connection with the concrete realities of the society and living conditions in America. Kushner, even though he is closer to Louis’s political position than any other characters’, demonstrates the hypocrisies and falsehoods in Louis’s discourse. At the end, what matters is “connection,” and both Roy’s and Louis’s views of history fail to establish any connection. On talking about freedom, Kushner himself suggests that, “the truest characteristic of freedom is generosity, the basic gesture of freedom is to include, not to exclude” (*Thinking* 7). Kushner is highly aware of the fact that history for different Americans has different meanings: “American history is the source for some people of a

belief in the inevitable triumph of justice; for others it is the source of a sense of absolute power and ownership which obviates the need to be concerned about justice; while for still others American history is a source of despair that anything like justice will ever come” (*Thinking* 8). If Louis fits in the first category and Roy in the second, they both fail to include the third—the view of history from the eyes of the truly marginalized.

The political narratives of American history are not the only American narratives that attract Kushner’s attention. In *Angels in America*, Kushner also sets out to explore a truly American religion: Mormonism. David Savran notes that “both in its origins and doctrines Mormonism insisted on the peculiarly American nature of its fundamental values and on the identity of America as the promised land” (1997:24). Probably one of the reasons Kushner was intrigued by Mormonism was its truly American nature: as Christopher Bigsby suggests, the creation of a whole new religion in America “suggested the possibility of re-invention, the American notion of creating your own mythology unconstrained by models from the past” (1999: 112). During the first part of nineteenth century, Mormons, led by their prophet Joseph Smith, established a religion that holds America to be the promised land, and Mormons to be the chosen people. Early Mormons were mostly poor farmers—themselves marginalized individuals of the society—and their doctrine was communitarian in nature and “presented a significant challenge to the principles of individualist social and economic organization” (Savran 1997:25).⁵ Because they constituted a threat to American individualistic society and economy, during 1830s and 1840s, Mormons were “attacked by mobs, arrested on false charges, imprisoned, and murdered” (Savran 1997:25), which makes them a lot similar to lesbians and gay men in the twentieth century.

By way of the play's Mormon characters (Hannah, Joe and Harper), however, we witness how Mormonism turned out to be a rigid doctrine like all other religious discourses. Joe’s mother, Hannah is a “dryly repressed” (Fisher 2002: 87) woman living in Salt Lake, Utah—the center where most Mormons live in United States. After she comes to New York, Hannah is forced to face her prejudices about homosexuals (in her encounters with her son and Prior) and her rigid ways of living. Throughout the course of the play, Hannah “comes to a deeper understanding of herself when her stiff propriety and lonely

despair give way to a fully transformed woman capable of opening herself to those who are different” (Fisher 2002: 87). As a character, although a Mormon, Hannah was not a typical one and had a potential for change. Joe, even though his conduct with Harper seems unfair at best, also has his own fierce struggle to deal with. His suppression of his homosexuality is a product of both his religion and his conservative political view. His pain is obvious when he says: “Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me? ... More than that? For God’s sake, there’s nothing left, I’m a shell. There’s nothing left to kill” (46). Joe is struggling profoundly to be a good Mormon, but he is also failing miserably. Harper, also, is not a typical Mormon any more than Hannah and Joe are. While she was growing up, Harper had to put up with a lot of drinking and physical abuse in her home. Talking about her, Joe says, “Everyone thinks Mormons don’t come from homes like that, we aren’t supposed to behave that way, but we do. ... Everyone tries very hard to live up to God’s strictures, which are very ... strict” (59). Thus, Harper grew up to be the worst example of a Mormon; “she was always wrong, always doing something wrong” (59). All three characters struggle to live up according to God’s standards, but the doctrine is too harsh to include any category of difference or any potential for change.

More important than Mormonism’s strict nature is its interpretation of history in relation to theology. Mormons believe that the Garden of Eden is sited in America, but also—as it is a sect of Christianity—that with the Millennium (or the Judgement Day) the utopia will be realized in America. Thus, Mormons “construct America as both origin and meaning of history” (Savran 1997:25). *Angels in America* inscribes the “millenarian” view of history in its discourse. Millenarian discourse, with its belief that the current situation on earth is corrupted and it will *end* with the Millennium, leaving its place for the utopia, is also strongly tied to apocalypticism. Since *Angels* is firmly set in 1980s America, it also makes use of the apocalyptic atmosphere and end-time narratives of the period: the AIDS crisis, the ascendancy of Reagan, the notion that “God is dead” (or missing, as in the play), and, of course the destruction of the environment. As Stanton Garner suggests, *Angels* is full of “apocalyptic iconography” (177): angels crashing through the roofs, flaming Hebrew letters, a heaven covered in rubble, resembling San Francisco after the

earthquake of 1906. Moreover, Harper, with her catastrophic visions of the world, embodies the apocalyptic discourse. She constantly reminds us that “everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving away” (23). She envisions an end which is uncertain:

I’m undecided. I feel...that something’s going to give. It’s 1985. Fifteen years till the third millennium. Maybe Christ will come again. Maybe seeds will be planted, maybe there’ll be harvests then, maybe early figs to eat, maybe new life, maybe fresh blood, maybe companionship and love and protection, safety from what’s outside, maybe the door will hold, or maybe...maybe the troubles will come, and the evil will come, and the sky will collapse and there will be terrible rains and showers of poison light. (24)

Harper’s obsession with the ozone layer and “systems of defense giving away” reflects “anxieties particular to this century’s end: global warming, nuclear war, and AIDS” (Garner 177)—nightmare of ecocatastrophe, Cold War anxiety over atmospheric nuclear attack and the image of a body’s immune system collapsing. It is not surprising that Kushner inscribes these apocalyptic versions of history in his play; postmodernism itself has been highly influenced by the end-narratives. Linda Hutcheon suggests that “the advent of the postmodern condition has been characterized by nothing if not by self-consciousness and by metadiscursive pondering on catastrophe and change” (1988: 75). However, Garner reminds us that postmodernism’s approach to apocalyptic narratives are highly ambivalent:

Even as postmodern theorists and writers borrow the rhetoric of rupture and transformation, and even as their writings reflect a culture profoundly oriented in terms of the threat (and promise) of endings, most retain a skepticism concerning the master narrative of millenarianism, with its totalizing temporal structures and its sense of ultimacy. Rupture, destruction, and the violent emergence of the new are also, we should remind ourselves, tropes of modernism. (175)

Apocalypticism and millenarianism, after all, are also narratives about history and work very much like historiography. “By positing end-times, millenarian discourse seeks a shape in history, and in its attempts to contextualize the present it is as much about beginnings as it is about endings” (Garner 179). It should be noted that the millenarian narrative inscribed in *Angels* shows Kushner’s awareness of the historiographic nature of millenarianism. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that “Historiography is always teleological: it imposes a meaning on the past and does so by postulating an end (and/or origin). So too

does fiction” (1988: 97). The millenarian metanarrative has also been used by the mainstream culture as “the discursive pretext for the demonizing of otherness and the persecution of minority groups” (Garner 179).⁶ Thus, inscribing the millenarian narrative is a politically charged act for Kushner.

In fact, while *Angels in America* uses the millenarian narrative, it also *abuses* it. Harper’s last vision she mentions on the plane to San Francisco appropriates the vision of the end-time “Rapture” not as a discriminating, frightening narrative, but as an inclusive and peaceful one:

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. (275)

In most religious texts, it is said that on the Judgement Day, there will be a Rapture and the souls will be called from the graves along with the living. Garner states that “the Rapture is conventionally figured in terms of the Saved and the Damned, with the emphasis on punishment and retribution” (182). However, the emphasis in Harper’s vision is on healing and repair.

Another way in which the play subverts the millenarian discourse is the fact that the referred “millennium” or catastrophic end never comes in the play. At one point, Prior tells Louis “While time is running out I find myself drawn to anything that’s suspended, that lacks an ending” (48). Thus, at the end, when Prior claims “more life” and when the play concludes by Prior’s assertion that “The Great Work Begins!” the play points beyond its moment of closure, presenting a willingness to *continue* living beyond “the undeniable certainties of death and the end-time narrative of AIDS” (Garner 178).

Most importantly, the play uses a typically postmodern parodic self-consciousness to undercut the metaphysical arrival of the Angel. Angels usually bring news of great beginnings or terrifying ends. The scene where the Angel arrives appears as a postmodern parody of religious enunciations. Right before the Angel crashes through the ceiling,

Kushner creates an awe-inspiring atmosphere fit for an apocalyptic entrance; the stage settings read as follows: “*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*”. In this spectacular atmosphere, Prior disrupts the moment with a typically postmodern aside: “God almighty...*Very Steven Spielberg*” (124). Prior is sharing with the audience his awareness of the fact that what he is watching is illusion, fiction at its best.

After the Angel crashes into the room in all his/her magnificence by the help of theatrical illusion at its best, the parody proper starts. The Angel greets Prior in all his/her holiness, and announces him as the new prophet. All the while Prior responds with remarks like “Go away,” “Oh God there’s a thing in the air, a thing, a thing,” “I’m not prepared for anything, I have lots to do,” “You’re scaring the shit out of me, get the fuck out of my room” (170). When the Angel commands Prior to “Remove from their hiding place the Sacred Prophetic Implements” (170), Prior says “The *what?*” (171). When the Angel learns that Prior did not have any dreams that revealed him the place of the implements, she tells him that they are in the kitchen, under the tiles under the sink. Prior responds, saying “No fucking way! The ceiling’s bad enough, I’ll lose the lease” (171). Getting more and more frustrated by Prior’s uncooperativeness, the Angel blows up the kitchen ceiling herself and revises the *text* she is enacting: “Revision in the text: The Angel did help him to unearth them, for he was weak of body though not of will” (172). From an ancient leather suitcase, Prior takes out a pair of bronze spectacles with rocks instead of lenses. When Prior puts on the spectacles he sees horrible things and takes them off immediately. After the Angel tells Prior to remove the Book from the suitcase and read it with the spectacles, Prior, instead of doing so, asks her how come he has an erection. The Angel says, “The stiffening of your penis is of no consequence” (173). The two, however, experience an orgasmic moment which the Angel calls “Plasma Orgasmata” (174). Then, we learn that the Angel is a hermaphrodite and it is actually the angels’ desire that runs the universe; they “copulate *ceaselessly*” (175). The scene goes on with the Angel revealing Prior’s mission to make human beings “stop moving.”

The entire scenario of the angelic visitation, the command to unearth the sacred book, and the donning of magical glasses in order to read it are actually influenced by Joseph Smith's account of the discovery of the Book of Mormon. Kushner himself admits that the scene plays on that specific religious/historical moment:

The Angel Moroni led Joseph Smith to the Hill Cumorah, the burial site of the plates on which the Book of Mormon was inscribed. Smith unearthed, along with the plates, 'bronze bows' with stones set in them. These I take to have been Bible-era spectacles with rocks for lenses, the Urim and the Thummim. Before he became a prophet, Smith was known in upstate New York for his ability to locate buried treasure with the use of 'peep-stones'. These stones assisted him, as they assist Prior in *Perestroika*, in the act of translating ancient writings. (Geis "Delicate" 205-206)

By creating a campy prophet who is not so eager to accept the visitation of the Angel, by depicting an Angel who is well aware that she is a part of a text and by presenting a sexual act instead of the expected interpretation of a book, Kushner, in this scene, manages to establish a parodical rewriting of a millenarian moment in history. Kushner's angels live by desire and his prophet is a homosexual: Kushner subverts the hegemonic narrative of millenarianism by parodically inscribing it. Parody, after all, as Hutcheon describes it is "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity. ... this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity" (Hutcheon 1988: 26). Kushner *continues* to apply the millenarian narrative of history but also *changes* it. According to Stanton Garner, Kushner's is an "attempt to rewrite apocalypse, to borrow its urgency and its transformative imagination while challenging its exclusions and maintaining an awareness of its precarious fictionality" (182). Thus, in a profoundly postmodern attitude, Kushner *uses* and *abuses* the millenarian/apocalyptic narrative of history, "challenging totalizing forms of historical narrative while seeking to find spaces within these narratives for marginal and emergent lines of historical inheritance" (Garner 179).

The depiction of the angels and of heaven in *Angels in America* also inscribes religious/metaphysical narratives but problematizes them. As James Fisher notes "Angels have traditionally been viewed as symbols of spiritual significance. Residing in a realm somewhere between the Deity and His creations, they watch over humanity as unspeakably beautiful harbingers of hope and death" (2006: 5). In the play, however, the

angels are not divine heralds of change, they are, instead, “associated with stasis and with the power of ancient spirits to resist change” (Frantzen 144). They might be seen as embodying the anti-progressive, anti-modern impulse. Matthew Smith maintains that “consumed by a terror of progress and the modern world, hurling versified warnings of the End from on high, the Angels come across as virtual parodies of modernist prophets of apocalypse ... For the sake of humanity, they urge humanity to cease being human” (152-165). However, the anti-modern sensibility of the Angels is problematic in itself. When Prior ascends to Heaven to return the book to the Angels, he arrives at a Heaven looking “*mostly like San Francisco after the Great 1906 Quake. It has a deserted, derelict feel to it, rubble strewn everywhere*” (252). The Council Room of the Angels in Heaven is depicted as follows:

The Continental Principalities sit around a table covered with a heavy tapestry on which is woven an ancient map of the world. The tabletop is covered with archaic and broken astronomical, astrological, mathematical and nautical objects of measurement and calculation; heaps and heaps and heaps of books and files and bundles of yellowing newspapers; inkpots, clay tablets, styli and quill pens. The great chamber is dimly lit by candles and a single great bulb overhead, the light of which pulses to the audible rhythmic surgings and waverings of a great unseen generator.
(260)

Thus, although the angels are trying to stop time and forward movement, the heaven they inhabit is the product (or maybe the victim) of that forward movement. As David Savran suggests, “conflating different moments of the past and distinct (Western) histories, Heaven is a kind of museum, not the insignia of the Now, but of *before*, of an antique past, of the obsolete” (1997:20). The Heaven of *Angels* does not embody a divine utopia but “disaster, despair, and stasis” (Savran 1997: 20). The irony of the situation comes to full realization when we see the Angels, sitting around the table, intently listening to the news of the upcoming Chernobyl disaster on “*a bulky radio, a 1940s model in very poor repair*” (260). Instead of learning the news by divine inspiration, the Angels seem to need the tools of the progressive mortal world for the purpose. Thus, they “appear to be complicit in the very systems of progress they condemn” (Smith 152-165).

Allen Frantzen claims that “Kushner’s Hollywood-derived, Oz-like, Broadwaysque version of heaven (and hell, for that matter: Roy Cohn making more deals) shows how irrelevant religious belief is to a vision of life at the millennium” (147). Although it might

be said that Frantzen's view has some credibility, Kushner's angels and heaven serve a quite different purpose. The play's invocation of millenarian imagery and its distortion of that imagery makes it obvious how much Kushner's obsession with all kinds of histories, official or unofficial; main or counter; personal or cultural; real or theatrical is highly informed by Walter Benjamin and his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In his "Theses," Benjamin also uses millenarian images to communicate his radical vision of history; he talks about "the angel of history:"

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 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. This 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. (257-258)

Martin Harries claims that "There are many links between Broadway's postmodernist, pre-Raphaelite Angel and Klee's more modest, bewildered new angel" (192). Benjamin's angel is a strange one, "most unlike the romantic Hollywood messengers who can restore or teach or bring hope to the suicidal on Christmas Eve" (Malkin 25). He is a passive observer, caught between past—catastrophe—and an unknown and terrifying future, in an eternal present. He cannot act, but only contemplate the disaster which is the history of mankind. Thus, Benjamin's angel "embodies both the inconceivability of progress and the excruciating condition of the Now" (Savran 1997:17), which makes it a very suitable icon for the issues *Angels* tries to evoke. Kushner's bureaucrat angels seem to present the same desire to act coupled with an inability to do so. The Angel in the play is also surrounded by wreckage—both physical and spiritual—as Benjamin's angel is. Harries claims that "The rubble contemplated by the angel in *Millennium Approaches* includes, along with Prior's bedroom ceiling, the debris of faulty, incomplete angelologies, storm warnings, and ideologies" (191).

The storm that is hurling the unwilling angel towards the future is also echoed throughout the play. At the beginning of the play, Roy explains Joe his vision of the universe: "I see

the universe, Joe, as a kind of sandstorm in outer space with winds of mega-hurricane velocity, but instead of grains of sand it's shards and splinters of glass" (19). The fact that the Heaven in the play resembles Roy's vision of chaotic universe makes the issues more complicated. Nothing in the play can be put in distinct, clear-cut categories; ideas and visions overlap, making the play celebrating chaos rather than order. The play seems to enact Roy's celebration: "God bless chaos" (21). Belize and Harper also echo the ambivalent, blurry nature of the play: "you're ambivalent about everything" (101), "I'm undecided" (24).

In "Theses," Benjamin also asserts that "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (255). Kushner is highly aware of the fact that his mission is also highly indebted to the dead—*Angels in America* is frequently haunted by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg who arrives to have her final confrontation with her executioner, a confrontation that was prevented by the continuum of history. In a surreal theatrical landscape, Roy and Ethel experience a different kind of historical interaction uninhibited by temporal history and mortality. As Charles McNulty states, the play is "the dead's battle-cry as well as that of the living" (50). The surrealist plane facilitates a break within the history and helps Kushner to give voice to the marginalized and silenced. In Ethel, Kushner manages to create a counterhistorical image that cracks open the continuum of history in Benjaminian fashion. Benjamin states that "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" (261). However, it is not only in the act of resurrecting Ethel that Kushner blasts the continuum of history; the whole play can be seen as Kushner's realization of "the revolutionary chance to blast open the oppressive continuum of history and steer clear into the next millennium" (McNulty 44). As it is for Benjamin, Kushner thinks that the present is a crisis point which provides him with the opportunity to disrupt the homogenous continuance of history, take a specific era out of it and reveal the way various narratives of history work in that specific era. As Ethel warns Roy towards the end of the first part: "History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches" (118).

Benjamin's notion that a *weak* messianic power is latent in each generation is also relevant for the task *Angels* aims to accomplish: "There is a secret agreement between the past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply" (254). This is the *expensive* lesson Prior has to learn in *Angels*: his prophetic position is actually endowed on him by the past generations of gay men and people with AIDS and at the end, he needs to claim "life" for all the others for whom "life" is just "wreckage upon wreckage." Prior—and Kushner for that matter—is, then, the historian Benjamin thinks the world needs: "Historical materialism wishes to retain [the] image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes" (255). The fact that Prior is a Benjaminian character is indicated even in his name—Prior Walter—commemorating "Walter before this one." Kushner recognizes "the moment of danger" and uses it to his advantage: he uses it to subvert the traditional narratives of history and to prevent history from becoming "a tool of the ruling classes." It seems that Kushner has learned Benjamin's lesson by heart: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight" (257).

Benjamin has also stated that "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'" (255), instead, he wanted the new historian to "brush history against the grain" (257). Thus, his "angel of history" appears as "one of the most ubiquitous icons of postmodern historical consciousness and of its cultural forms" (Malkin 25). In this vein, Kushner's view of history as exemplified by *Angels* is a postmodern one. First of all, Kushner invokes many different kinds of histories in *Angels*—personal, sexual, racial, medical, national, political and biblical—and sets out to explore the inner mechanical structure of these narratives. According to Gregory Bredbeck, in *Angels*, "history is an inchoate and incremental layering. ... [it] appears as an eclectic mix of potentialities ... This is not about the end of history but about its inability to hold a monolithic and unified aspect, its inability to conceal the cacophony of

histories that will never appear” (285). Bredbeck sees the play as representing “the end of the history of America that obscures the *histories* of America” (285). Furthermore, as David Roman suggests “*Angels in America* calls into question the concept of an official history. The play asks us to make distinctions between official and lived history, to notice what is documented and to bring forth into the public sphere what is not. In this sense Kushner puts pressure on the naturalization process imbedded in official history” (42). As a piece of historiographic metadrama, *Angels* “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 1988: 89).

In *Angels*, Kushner does not have any other historical theory (or metanarrative) to offer; his aim is to “brush history against the grain” by giving insights into the workings of history. Kushner is highly aware that depending on one single theory is impossible in this postmodern age. The first scene of *Perestroika* presents us a character who is nostalgic about good old times when one single theory gave people a sense of safety. In a very odd scene which seems out of place in the general context of the play, we travel to the Hall of Deputies in Kremlin. It is 1986 and Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the World’s Oldest Living Bolshevik, who is “*unimaginably old and totally blind*” (147) talks directly to the audience about the difficulty of change in this new era:

The Great Question before us is: Are we doomed? The Great Question before us is: Will the Past release us? The Great Question before us is: Can we change? In Time? And we all desire that Change will come. And *Theory*? How are we to proceed without *Theory*? What System of Thought have these Reformers to present to this mad swirling planetary disorganization? ... Do they have, as we did, a beautiful Theory, as bold, as Grand, as comprehensive a construct? ... Change? Yes, we must change, only show me the Theory, and I will be at the barricades, show me the book of the next Beautiful Theory, and I promise you these blind eyes will see again, to devour that text. Show me the words that will reorder the world, or else keep silent. If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready, naked he will be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without his skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence and die. Have you, my little serpents, a new skin? ... Then we dare not, we *cannot*, we MUST NOT move ahead! (147-149)

Kushner is aware of the fact that moving ahead without a single theory to guide someone is a very difficult task but this age propels its members towards an unclear future without offering them any theory. Furthermore, it forces them to be skeptical toward any such totalizing narrative. By creating a character that yearns for a totalizing system to guide

him, Kushner also demonstrates the postmodern approach towards those systems. Postmodernism “argues that such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any the less illusory” (Hutcheon 1988: 6). In the play’s epilogue Belize, Louis and Hannah discuss the current situation in which people strive to move ahead:

LOUIS: You can’t wait around for a theory. The sprawl of life, the weird...
 HANNAH: Interconnectedness...
 LOUIS: Yes.
 BELIZE: Maybe the sheer size of the terrain.
 LOUIS: It’s all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now.
 BELIZE: The world is faster than the mind.
 LOUIS: That’s what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur.
 BELIZE: But that’s a theory.
 HANNAH: You can’t live in the world without an idea of the world, but it’s living that makes the ideas. You can’t wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory.
 (278)

According to Roger Bechtel, “Kushner here offers a theory that is also a non-theory: interconnectedness. What he avoids are the grand narratives, the unified theories that have come under such harsh scrutiny, in favor of a praxis of plurality that will, in dialectical fashion, generate its own theory” (99-121). In the epilogue, Louis celebrates the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the fall of Ceaușescu, and Hannah warns of the fate of Yugoslavia. “Evil has not been banished but there is flux, a flux that can no longer be contained or explained by a single encompassing and deterministic theory” (Bigsby 1999: 118) since “*no* narrative can be a natural ‘master’ narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct” (Hutcheon 1988: 13). It is also not surprising that when historical master narratives leave, God leaves too, since, as Bredbeck suggests, “it is only a faith in a unified history that enables a faith in a unified God, some *primum mobile* that infuses experience with coherence and congruence” (286). Thus, the discussion among Hannah, Louis and Belize demonstrates the postmodernist approach of the play towards theories and historical metanarratives. Linda Hutcheon suggests that

Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy. It acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities. ... The postmodern is in no way absolutist; it does not say that ‘it is both impossible and useless to try and establish some hierarchical order,

some system of priorities in life'. What it does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world—and that we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation. They do not exist 'out there', fixed, given, universal, eternal; they are human constructs in history. (1988: 42-43)

With no God to believe in and no theory to guide one, Kushner, nevertheless, creates a new kind of community in his epilogue. This new community is the point the play aims to reach and it embodies Kushner's non-theory—interconnectedness. Male, female; straight, gay; black, white; agnostic, Mormon, Jew, all get together and form a new inclusive family based on difference. Composed of various forms of otherness, this new community invokes a new era in which solidarity replaces repressive hierarchies. Although Prior's blessing at the end sounds optimistic, it is, as James Fisher suggests, "a guarded optimism, won through terrible personal ordeals and a belief in the power of humanity to survive its own failings" (2002: 58). Much like Benjamin's angel, Prior is moving towards the future with his eyes fixed firmly on the past ordeals.

The new community at the end of *Angels* shows us that the play has been contesting the order-imposing historical master narratives through the eyes of the "ex-centrics." The play, from the beginning, has treated the issue of the "subject" in a very postmodern manner. The characters in postmodern works, as Hutcheon describes them, are

anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history ... Even the historical personages take on different, particularized, and ultimately ex-centric status ... a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference; 'type' has little function here, except as something to be ironically undercut. ... The protagonist of a postmodern novel ... is overtly specific, individual, culturally and familially conditioned in his response to history, both public and private. (1988: 114)

Angels, similarly, creates culturally specific characters situated in society. Situating the subjectivity in specific subject positions is crucial to historiographic metadrama since "to situate it, as postmodernism teaches, is to recognize differences—of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on. To situate is also both to acknowledge the ideology of the subject and to suggest alternative notions of subjectivity" (Hutcheon 1988: 159). By reinserting the subjects in their specific ideological and social worlds, *Angels* attempts at "a redefinition not only of the subject but of history as well" (Hutcheon 1988: 159), history seen from the eyes of those subjects, that is.

The epilogue of the play, in addition to presenting us with the new type of community the play strives towards, also reminds us that the crisis point of the play is the AIDS epidemic and visions of healing is central to the play's project. The four characters tell us the story of angel Bethesda as told in the Bible. One day, this angel descended from Heaven and landed in the Temple square in Jerusalem and where she landed a fountain shot up from the ground. If anyone suffering from any kind of ailment—physical or spiritual—bathed in the waters of the fountain, they were healed. Although the fountain dried up, it is believed that with the Millennium it will run again. With this image of healing, Prior closes the play as follows: "This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come" (280). Thus, Prior also talks as a spokesperson of a very specific marginalized group—gays and people with AIDS. However, Prior's and the play's position should not be seen as exclusive of other marginalized people. Rather, the play perceives homosexuals as representing all other forms of otherness. As Framji Minwalla suggests, when Prior talks about being "citizens," he is talking about "a new kind of citizenship in the world, one that embraces both the legal and spiritual notion of the word but one that also knows no national, racial, sexual, or economic boundaries" (116). *Angels* announces itself as the mouthpiece for all the ex-centrics by "asserting the plurality of the 'different' and rejecting the binary opposition of the 'other'" (Hutcheon 1988: 196). Like all other oppressed groups, gay people are also on the move, looking for a home which does not exist, but, different from the other groups, they are "a *political* people, not bound by nation or race" (Frantzen 146). Seen from this perspective, homosexuals appear as the perfect tool for the interconnected, all-inclusive mission of the play, and it is a homosexual who carries the prophetic mission of the generation.

As a matter of fact, all the major male characters in the play are either overtly or covertly gay—Prior, Louis, Belize, Roy, Joe—and all are with different backgrounds, different ethnicities and different political and religious views. In doing so, Kushner also demonstrates that the identity category of "homosexuality" is not unitary. These characters are by no means easily unified or unifiable under one single title. The way "labels" work is by reducing the differences among people and representing them as all

the same. Kushner shows us that gay identity—or any identity category—should work by embracing difference before anything else. As Hutcheon suggests, “Postmodern art is always aware of difference, difference *within* any grouping too, difference defined by contextualization or positioning in relation to plural others” (1988: 67). Moreover, the play breaches the boundaries of a “gay play:” it “intersects with and emerges from the wider tapestry of American history, often rereading the more public forms of this history and reconstructing its continuities and lineages” (Garner 180).

However, it is also true that the play reconstructs the forms of history, or “brushes history against the grain” by queering it. First of all, the play queers the religious/millenarian view of history not only by parodically inserting homosexuality and desire in the scene where the Angel arrives but also in the sexuality of the Angel herself. The hermaphroditic Angel serves to undermine the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. As David Savran notes, “s/he represents an absolute otherness, the impossible Other that fulfills the longing for both the maternal and paternal” (1997:19). S/he is also, as she calls herself, Prior’s “Released Female Essence Ascendant” (175). Moreover, the utopic heaven the play embraces is one that contains all types of otherness in itself. Belize—himself containing multiple types of otherness—tells Roy about his vision of heaven: “everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion. And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. Race, taste and history finally overcome” (209-210). Thus, the play queers the millenarian narrative by creating an Angel and a Heaven that celebrate difference and otherness rather than a single God of a single people.

The other historical narrative the play queers is the history of American politics. By creating two conservative, closeted characters—Roy and Joe—and by highlighting the homoeroticization of patriarchy, Kushner “demonstrates the always already queer status of American politics” (Savran 1997:35). Seen from the play’s perspective, Reagan’s America was “not just the background to the play’s exploration of ostensibly personal problems but the very ground on which desire is produced” (Savran 1997:35). Joe, whom Prior calls “the Marlboro Man” (223) embodies the machismo image Reagan’s America celebrated. Kushner shows us that under the tough and masculine exterior of Reagan’s

America, a homoerotic desire was in function. With Roy, Joe and Louis, the usually silenced gay men are depicted to be essential parts of American institutions and American history.

Coming with the territory of homosexuality, the play's usage of the AIDS crisis is also significant for its aims. *Angels in America* is—among other traditions—also heir to the tradition of AIDS plays. Charles McNulty suggests that “AIDS plays have come to be thought of as a phenomenon of the 1980s ... [the genre] has for the most part receded into the paragraphs of theater history textbooks” (43).⁷ However, *Angels in America* has showed the American public that AIDS still has validity and urgency as a subject. AIDS is a highly ideologically charged field for a gay playwright: “the infection has been the focal point of right-wing sexual hysteria, justification for a return to the ‘old ways’ and ‘traditional family values’, which are seen as charms to ward off evil homosexual spirits and as the only true vaccination against AIDS/homosexuality” (Clum 47). The mainstream AIDS discourse has been functioning by creating a set of equations between AIDS and homosexuality. John M. Clum lists the equations as follows: “AIDS-homosexuality / AIDS-disease / Homosexuality-disease / Homosexuality-AIDS / Nonmarital, uncontrolled sex-disease / Transgression of family values-disease” (47). Seen as an essentially homosexual disease, AIDS has been seen as a result of the liberated sexual past of the gay men: “the cause of AIDS becomes not the retrovirus but the mode of transmission: nonprocreative, transgressive sex” (Clum 46).⁸ The conservative society, seizing this opportunity, has used AIDS as an excuse to reinscribe its conservative patriarchal values. Clum suggests that “[f]or a society that sees AIDS as a moral disease, the cure is a return to what Julia Kristeva calls ‘the Law of the Father’, a discourse and a set of values that reinstate patriarchy. Society must be purged of its problem, which is sexual transgression, and the ‘proper’ patriarchal, heterosexist order must be restored” (48).

Angels in America, also situated in the mainstream discourse of AIDS, subverts the hegemonic narratives used in the process of demonizing gay men. Seen from this perspective, the play announces itself as a heir to other AIDS plays written by gay playwrights: “AIDS plays, like many gay plays, ask whether, within the framework of

realistic drama, it is possible for a new order to be established that replaces the Law of the Father with an order that allows the gay man place and power. Can the Law of the Father be seen as the ‘problem’ and thus expunged?” (Clum 48). The way the play expunges “the Law of the Father” is by demonstrating the inherent homosexuality in the patriarchal discourse by creating characters like Roy and Joe. Moreover, *Angels* also does away with the narrative of causality in the AIDS discourse. We are never given the proper explanation why Prior caught the disease, and it certainly is not because of his “liberated sexual past.” At one point in the play Louis talks to Joe about his past: “There used to be guys in the dunes even when it snowed. Nothing deterred us from the task at hand. ... Exploration. Across an unmapped terrain. The body of the homosexual male. ... I fucked around a lot more than he did. No justice” (202). The AIDS virus is indiscriminate in its choices and the issue is too complex to be justified by simple equations.

The AIDS crisis provides the moment of danger that Kushner uses to blast open the continuum of history and reevaluate its narratives. For Kushner, AIDS epidemic holds a great potential source of social change and it forced gay playwrights to assume a more politicized view in the society. He claims “It’s incumbent upon us to examine history and be aware of history, of where we’ve come from and what has given us the freedom to talk the way we do now ... what AIDS forced on the community was the absolute necessity ... of maintaining a queer identity and still being able to talk seriously about treatment protocols and oppression” (Fujita 123). This new politicized view, according to Kushner, can be best articulated in a new form of gay theater, one he calls the Theatre of the Fabulous. Fabulousness, for Kushner, is

Irony. Tragic history. Defiance. Gender-fuck. Glitter. Drama. It is not butch. It is not hot—the cathexis surrounding the fabulousness is not necessarily erotic. Fabulousness is not delimited by age or beauty. Style has a dialectical relationship to physical reality. The body is the Real. Style is Theatre. The raw materials are reworked into illusion. For style to be truly fabulous, one must completely triumph over tragedy, age, physical insufficiencies, and just as important, one’s audiences must be made aware of the degree of transcendence, of triumph; must see both the triumph and that over which the triumph has been made. In this the magic of the fabulous is precisely the magic of theatre. The wires show. The illusion is always incomplete, inadequate; the work behind the magic is meant to be appreciated. (1997: 31)

If “the magic of the fabulous” is “the magic of theatre,” then *Angels in America* is the perfect example of this magic: it incorporates this fabulous awareness of history with a typically postmodern structure in which “interconnectedness” and “self-conscious theatricality” become the governing principles. First of all, it should be recognized that the genre of theater is the perfect medium for Kushner’s Benjaminian “historiographic” task. As he has done in *Bright Room*, Kushner, in *Angels*, uses the medium of theater to stop the totalizing flow of history, take a specific era out of it and open it up to scrutiny on stage. The audience now has the opportunity to see the object—history—that is otherwise obscured by the flow of movement and time, clearly and critically. Thus, “history itself, both as a construction and a process of constructing, is dramatically displayed” (Bechtel 99-121).

Made up of two parts, eight acts, fifty-nine scenes and an epilogue, this “historiographic” play is also a “metatheatrical” one that practices a postmodern blurring of distinct boundaries. As Robert Vorlicky suggests, Kushner makes use of “metatheatrical devices, to play with the conceptualization and staging of history” (45). One very important structural device the play uses to defy boundaries is the split scene. The use of split scenes is widespread in the genre of cinema and Kushner appropriates this technique to demonstrate his theme of “interconnectedness” structurally. Throughout the play, in certain scenes, on different parts of the stage two separate conversations occur simultaneously, thereby commenting on each other and illustrating the interconnection of seemingly separate issues or relationships. For example, in act two, scene nine, the audience is able to see the conversations both between Joe and Harper in their home and between Prior and Louis in theirs. Both Louis and Joe are leaving their partners and the dialogues between the two couples overlap:

HARPER: Oh God. Home. The moment of truth has arrived.

JOE: Harper.

LOUIS: I’m going to move out.

PRIOR: The fuck you are.

JOE: Harper. Please listen. I still love you very much. You’re still my best buddy; I’m not going to leave you.

HARPER: No, I don’t like the sound of this. I’m leaving.

LOUIS: I’m leaving. I already have. ... (82)

In this scene, the overlapping emphasizes the fact that the problem in each case is the same—each couple has one partner in serious need and another partner who cannot, or will not, respond. In addition to showing the connectedness of separate narratives, split scenes are also used ironically to undercut one narrative with another one as in the scene when Roy and Joe talk about Republican fathers and sons, we see Louis having a brutally real homosexual encounter in the park. The play seems to know no boundaries of time and place: it makes us see interconnected narratives going on in New York, travel to Heaven, visit Salt Lake and Russia, go forward in time and come back, and take part in the imaginary worlds of Harper and Prior. Thus, *Angels in America* shows its audience that issues have complex interrelations, that boundaries put up by people are artificial and that people need to see the “weird interconnectedness” of things to make the world a better place. As Arnold Aronson claims, *Angels* appears as a “hypertext,” in which “key words or images can transport us from one locale to another, from one world to another” (222). This kind of approach to the world, after all, has been one that is common in our postmodern computer age. Since the theater stage is “a single real space that can hold a multitude of places” (Aronson 223), *Angels* uses this stage very wisely. The layering of the scenes resembles “‘windows’ on a computer screen: multiple locations, some hidden behind others, but any one available to foreground at any moment and in any sequence” (Aronson 223). Kushner, as in the epilogue of *Bright Room*, uses “space” in a very fluid manner throughout *Angels*. The postmodern era, after all, is, in Michel Foucault’s term, “the epoch of space.” His explanation of the driving logic of this era fits *Angels* perfectly:

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (qtd in Aronson 221-222)

Another device Kushner uses to transcend boundaries is the cross-gender casting. In the play, a mere eight actors play a total of thirty-four characters. The same actress, for instance, plays Hannah, the rabbi, a male doctor and Ethel Rosenberg. Thus, Kushner also defies the boundaries of culture and gender. In addition, as James Miller suggests, “the multiple doubling of roles contributes to the effect of overlapping confusions” (67). Hence, Kushner incorporates the homosexual “drag” into the very structure of his play.

Traditionally defined as gay men wearing woman clothing and accessories, and seen as reinforcing gay stereotypes, drag, as Clum suggests, “can be used to unmoor seemingly fixed gender categories” (36). In this play where two main characters are ex drag-queens, Kushner manages to create a redefinition of drag by asking actresses to double as different male characters: drag does not have to reinforce the effeminate stereotype of homosexuals; women can also defy gender boundaries by dressing as men. Furthermore, drag also adds a level of metatheatricality to the play since “it is a theatrical act placed within the context of theater” (Clum 30).

It should be kept in mind that theatricality and performance have been an essential part of homosexuality. “A culture built on the necessity of acting—in which freedom from the constraints of conventional gender roles can mean the possibility of life of the imagination” (Clum 276), the gay community has always kept Tennessee Williams’s character Blanche Dubois’s quote as their motto: “I don’t want realism. I want magic!” Since realistic theater has long been the style of the mainstream oppressive America, “it is in pushing beyond the limits of realism and the expectations and sensibilities of the audience for mainstream theater that gay drama most vividly stages gayness” (Clum 193). Thus, in gay drama we witness a reassertion of imaginative, nonrealistic theatre as magic takes precedence over realism. As a product of “the Theatre of the Fabulous,” *Angels in America* also plays with the restrictions of realism. The play makes use of the realistic portrayal of characters and narratives but frequently undercuts such narratives with dream scenes, hallucinations, angelic appearances. The play’s clever use and abuse of realism can be an explanation for its success. While talking about certain postmodern novels, Linda Hutcheon notes that they

assert and then undermine [the] world of [realistic] novel and [its] constructing. This may explain why postmodern novels have frequently been best-sellers. Their complicity guarantees accessibility. ... Perhaps the most potent mode of subversion is that which can speak directly to a ‘conventional’ reader, only then to chip away at any confidence in the transparency of those conventions. (1988: 202-203)

Prior and Harper—both occupying a somewhat victimized status and both wandering on the line that separates insanity and sanity—embody the play’s preference of magic (imagination) over realism. Especially in the narrative lines of these two characters, *Angels* demonstrates “a (postmodern) metatheatrical sense of the possibility of

performance to blur, cross, and explode boundaries and limits” (Geis 1999). Throughout the play, Harper travels to hallucinatory landscapes that resemble Antarctica with the help of her imaginary travel guide, Mr. Lies. Harper’s inability to distinguish reality is an appealing quality which leads her to have a rich imagination. When, at the end of the play, Harper decides to face the reality of her situation and create a vision of healing for herself, she does not do so by merely rejecting her hallucinatory, imaginary life: she learns to include her visionary abilities in her view of the world rather than pushing herself to go back to normalcy. Similarly, Prior, throughout the play, is going through a reinterrogation of limits and boundaries: “just as the human body fighting AIDS has its defenses pushed to their limits, so, too, are the boundaries of the ‘rational’ challenged and reconfigured” (Geis 1997: 203). For Kushner, in order to achieve the fluid form of theatricality, one needs to be standing on the border of real and fantasy, and the two characters embody the position of “in-betweenness:” “to be insane or to be a prophet is to live on the periphery of society, to inhabit the in-between spaces” (Geis 1997: 200). Moreover, “in-betweenness” is also the position of the marginalized: “The language of margins and borders marks a position of paradox: both inside and outside” (Hutcheon 1988: 66).

When the audience first encounters Harper, she is “*talking to herself, as she often does*” and talks directly to the audience in a monologue: “People who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air, imagining..” (22). Harper’s monologue, apart from being a result of her loneliness, also adds another level of theatricality to the play. Deborah Geis claims that “to speak monologically is a form of insane, or ‘deviant’, discourse, but it is also an inherently *dramatic* act” (1997: 200). The two delusional characters also enter each other’s dreams and hallucinations even if they have never met before. The first time they encounter each other in Prior’s dream, the two are able to see the innermost secrets of each other: Harper knows Prior has AIDS and Prior announces that Harper’s husband is a homo. Harper calls this ability “the threshold of revelation” (39), an ability that they have as a result of the richness of their imaginations. Although throughout the play Prior struggles with his visions and Harper tries to come to terms with her hallucinations, both learn to accept “the uncontrollable realm of the Imaginary” (Geis 1997: 207) despite its perils. Prior and Harper’s acceptance and strategic use of the

world of imagination is not a naively celebratory one, however. The two characters also comment on “the limitations of the imagination” (38): Harper says “Imagination can’t create anything new, can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions” (38). Thus, Kushner also perceives imagination to be constrained by history. As Geis suggests, this is “a postmodern interpretation of ‘imagination’: it depicts a culture in which the new is actually a series of recyclings of the old” (1997: 207).

Thus, Kushner, in *Angels*, blurs the boundaries between sanity and insanity, reality and fantasy: he uses the credibility of the realistic narratives but counterweights them with his usage of the fantastical and imaginary. For Kushner “theatricality is not a means to escape the ordinary or everyday in the traditional sense but, rather, a way to re-encounter it and to transform it into something admittedly crazy, something fabulous” (Geis 1997: 207). When a homeless woman in South Bronx says “in the new century I think we will all be insane” (111), she does not only invoke an apocalyptic vision but also articulates Kushner’s own celebration of insanity and imagination.

Among the many other devices of metatheatricality the play uses is the style of “camp.” Usually identified as the style of gay people, camp is an aesthetic that uses humor, irony and self-conscious performance. As John Clum notes, the “gay sensibility” has always been associated with “flamboyant, ironic theatricalization” (88). This gay sensibility brings with it “an awareness of performance because of the need to perform, and a mockery of the roles one is expected to perform” (Clum 88). Since role-playing and stereotyping has been an essential part of the experience of homosexuals, gay plays, depicting such self-conscious theatricality, become “unabashedly metatheatrical, reveling in their own theatricality” (Clum 200). Harold Beaver defines camp as follows:

the whole gay masquerade of men and women who self-consciously act: who flaunt incongruous allusions, parodies, transvestite travesties; who are sanely aware of the gap between their feelings and their roles; who continue to proliferate a protean, and never normative, range of fantasies in social dramas of their own choosing. (qtd in Clum 153)

Angels in America makes use of “the self-consciously stylized (and stylistically self-referential) language of camp” (Borreca 246) especially through Prior and Belize (and to some extent through Louis) who are self-conscious performers in their own lives. The humor, wit and irony of camp are so much infused into the play that Art Borreca suggests “the play’s stylistic montage itself could be seen as an act of theatrical camp on the playwright’s part” (251). In the play, camp “emerges as a theatricalized mode of social interaction (or a self-referential form of social performance)” (251). It should be recognized that the style of camp is also a perfect strategy for a historiographic metadrama like *Angels*: it “subverts the larger culture’s expectations with respect to sociosexual identity yet also reinforces hegemonic gender stereotypes” (Borreca 251). By using parody, the “perfect postmodern form,” camp “paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (Hutcheon 1988: 11). Since gay men and women are aware of the fact that they are a part of the mainstream culture and cannot escape the stereotypes that culture imposes on them, their strategy is to inscribe those stereotypes and take them one step further by self-consciously performing their stereotypical roles and thus underlining the constructed nature of those roles. In this manner, camp is also a perfect postmodern style: “willfully contradictory, postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic and ideological dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within” (Hutcheon 1988: xiii).

Prior and Belize are the two characters that use camp style in the extreme. They call each other “miss thing,” or “ma cherie bichette” (65) and they flaunt the effeminate stereotype of the homosexual by accentuating that type of behavior. However, their performances are always highly self-conscious. Belize says “All this girl-talk shit is politically incorrect, you know. We should have dropped it back when we gave up drag” (67). In addition, when Hannah asks Prior if he was “a typical homosexual,” Prior says that he is “*stereotypical*” (231). Prior’s survival strategy is his humor and inscribing and then subverting the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual in his behavior. Thus, through its usage of camp, *Angels* seems to have embraced “the subversive potential of irony, parody, and humor in contesting the universalizing pretensions of ‘serious’ art” (Hutcheon 1988: 19).

Throughout the play, Prior also makes “incongruous allusions” that are typical of the camp style: he makes numerous references to the icons, music and expressions of American popular culture and also to numerous other gay playwrights. The name that Prior and Louis gave their cat is “Little Sheba,” taken from the title of another gay playwright—William Inge’s play *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950). Inge’s play claims to narrate the story of a straight couple but throughout the play there are homosexual implications that suggest Inge’s own closeted status. This intertextual reference creates “a chiasmic connection between two similar relationships, the one in *Angels* demonstrably gay, the other in *Sheba* ostensibly straight, the allusion doubles as a critique of how portrayals of gay relationships have changed” (Johnson 29). Thus, this reference not only serves to create humor but also manages a reevaluation of gay drama tradition since it “gives the lie to Inge’s drama being a straight play, liberating it from its critical and historical tomb” (Johnson 29).

There are also other references in the play to the names affiliated with a “gay sensibility.” While Hannah is leaving Prior’s hospital room, Prior asks her to come back and adds “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (271). This line is taken from Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and is spoken by Blanche DuBois. The character of Blanche has been an icon for many gay men in America since she represents Williams’s homosexuality in his seemingly-straight play. Another reference in the play to a gay icon is to Judy Garland, the death of whom inspired the homosexual Stonewall Riot in New York in 1969. After Prior comes back from his trip to heaven he tells others that “some of it was terrible, and some of it was wonderful, but all the same I kept saying I want to go home. And they sent me home” (270). This line is taken from Judy Garland’s 1939 movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, a very popular movie in American culture. The camp references used in the play do not only add humor to the play but also “stave off the sorts of pretentiousness one can fall prey to in attempting to address profound spiritual, philosophical, and political questions” (Fisher 2002: 79) as Kushner does.

There are many other specific references to different fields of American culture in the play. When the Angel descends from heaven in all her divinity, her voice and the power

with which she speaks resurrects Walt Whitman, “the poet of America” with his magnificent celebratory voice. The Angel says “Hiding from Me one place you will find me in another. / I I I I stop down the road, waiting for you” (179). Whitman’s essentially American *Song of Myself* closes as follows: “Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you.” Whitman can be seen as “the Continental Principality of America,” after all. Another popular culture reference in the play occurs when Prior associates the magnificent arrival of the Angel with Spielberg movies, situating this miraculous apparition as a part of culture industry. The play also makes specific references to American political history, such as when Louis confronts Joe after he learns that Joe is a friend of Roy Cohn. Louis uses a specific line from Army-McCarthy hearings that took place during the 1950s⁹: “Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you no sense of decency?” Louis uses this famous line from American history against Joe to remind him that the person he is looking up to is probably one of the most evil people in American history.

References in a play to other works of literature or to real life events and people are essentially metadramatic devices. One of the categories of metatheatrical devices that Richard Hornby has created is “literary and real-life reference within the play.” According to Hornby, “metadramatic literary references are direct, conscious allusions to specific works that are recent and popular. The work or works referred to must not yet be part of the drama/culture complex, but should preferably be avant-garde, or at least somewhat controversial” (90). The literary references in *Angels* are definitely a part of the drama/culture complex. When a work of fiction refers to other works of fiction in its text, “the result is like an inset type of play within the play in miniature; the imaginary world of the main play is disrupted by a reminder of its relation, as a literary construct, to another literary work or works” (Hornby 88). Furthermore, when the play introduces elements of “real life” in its fictive universe as *Angels* does, “two modes of reality, a two-dimensional, virtual one, and a three-dimensional, real-life one, intersect in the same work of art, both complementing and interfering with one another” (Hornby 97). Thus, metadrama, as Hornby comments “produces a special, heightened, acute perception. Taken out of ourselves, we see our world, our culture, for a moment as a whole” (100).

“Intertextuality” is also a significant device historiographic metadrama uses for its postmodern project. By giving specific references to the different fields of American culture, *Angels* situates itself in a specific world. However, as Hutcheon suggests, “the ‘world’ in which these texts situate themselves is the ‘world’ of discourse, the ‘world’ of texts and intertexts. This ‘world’ has direct links to the world of empirical reality, but it is not itself that empirical reality” (1988: 125). Any type of intertextuality in a postmodern work also invokes that work’s relationship to the history of representation and to the past. As Linda Hutcheon notes “the past really did exist, but we can ‘know’ that past today only through its texts, and therein lies its connection to the literary.” She adds that “the present, as well as the past, is always already irremediably textualized for us, and the overt intertextuality of historiographic metafiction serves as one of the textual signals of this postmodern realization” (1988: 128). Thus, postmodern intertextuality

replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself. A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance. (Hutcheon 1988: 126)

Angels owes its subversive power to the fact that it derives its themes and styles from already textualized American discourses of history, politics, religion and drama. By making ironic intertextual references to those fields and sometimes by inscribing their narratives in its own narrative, *Angels* seems to be “willing to draw upon any signifying practice it can find operative in a society. It wants to challenge those discourses and yet to use them, even to milk them for all they are worth” (Hutcheon 1988: 133) because it “clearly acknowledges that it is a complex institutional and discursive network of elite, official, mass, popular cultures that postmodernism operates in” (Hutcheon 1988: 21). Through opening up systems for scrutiny, through parodying some of those systems and through its campy intertextual references, *Angels* is practicing the act of “appropriating and reformulating—with significant change—the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Euro-centric culture. It does not reject it, for it cannot. Postmodernism signals its dependence by its *use* of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic *abuse* of it” (Hutcheon 1988: 130). Hence, in a very parodical spirit, the play both “enshrines” the past and also “questions” it (Hutcheon 1988: 126).

There are also other devices the play makes use of to demonstrate its self-conscious theatricality. In the epilogue of the play Kushner uses Brechtian alienation effect by making his characters directly approach the audience and talk to them. While Louis, Belize and Hannah are talking about the current situation of the world, Prior returns to the audience and says “Let’s just turn the volume down on this, OK?” (278). As the characters keep talking in the background, Prior comes forward and starts telling the story of the angel Bethesda. While telling the story, however, Prior one by one asks other characters to come forward and tell their parts of the story: “This is the angel Bethesda. Louis will tell you her story” and “Belize will tell you about the nature of the fountain, before its flowing stopped” and so on. Here, Prior acts like a stage manager/director directing the speech given to the audience. Roger Bechtel maintains that “By implicating the audience in the dramatic action, this use of direct address creates another level of suspension: the space becomes not just Central Park, but the theatre; the time not just February, 1990, but the present” (99-121). Thus acknowledging the audience and the inherently theatrical act of the speech, the epilogue of the play breaks the fourth wall illusion and refers to itself as a play.

In *Angels*, Kushner again, as in *Bright Room*, creates his version of a play within a play. At the beginning of act two we see Belize and Prior at the funeral of a drag queen. After the funeral, Prior starts telling Belize about the arrival of the Angel. When Prior says “And then She arrived” (169), the scene ends and the stage descriptions of scene two read as follows: “*The Angel and Prior in Prior’s bedroom, three weeks earlier: the wrecked ceiling. Prior moves to the bed (changing into his PJ’s—he should take his time doing this), the Angel in the air. Belize watches from the street*” (169). The arrival of the Angel is enacted as a flashback as Belize watches the whole event from the street and makes comments along with the action. While enacting his scene with the Angel, Prior also talks to Belize, answering his comments. Towards the end of the scene, the Angel leaves and “*The bedroom disappears. Prior stands, puts on his street clothes and resumes his place beside Belize. They are back on the street in front of the funeral home*” (180). Here, Kushner seems to have created an “inset” type of play within a play where “the inner play is secondary, a performance set apart from the main action” (Hornby 33). Hornby suggests that such a play within a play can be “integrated with the main play ... [and is]

capable of standing apart, yet ... is still presented as fully part of the main action” (33). According to him, “the outer play must in some way acknowledge the inner play’s existence” (34) since this would create “two sharply distinguishable layers of performance” (35). In the scene in *Angels*, Belize functions as the outer play’s acknowledgement of the inner one since he watches it from outside and makes comments on the action. Hornby also states that

[t]he difference between us and previous ages is the additional element of breakdown between the layers of the plays within the plays. In the past, the inner and outer plays were clearly distinguishable ... In the twentieth century we find the same characters moving between inner and outer play, the boundaries between inner and outer play becoming blurred and sometimes disappearing. (47)

Thus, as Prior moves from the outer play to the inner one and changes his clothes in front of the audience, the boundaries between the inner and outer play are being blurred. Kushner incorporates the device of play within a play in his narrative but also adapts it to his play’s insistence of blurring the boundaries: he manages to create a postmodern play within a play.

However, there is one single scene in the play that manages to sum up what *Angels* aims to do as a piece of historiographic metadrama. In one single scene Kushner manages to create a reflection of how *Angels* breaks the flow of history, rewrites it and refers to itself as a play in the process. In act three scene three we travel to The Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitor’s Center. While Hannah is doing some volunteer work for the center, Harper is sitting in one of the audience seats in the diorama room. Prior enters the room claiming that he is doing some research on angels. The two sit together and watch the scene of Diorama come to life in front of their eyes. The play explains the stage setting as follows:

The diorama is in a little proscenium theatre ... [there] is a classic wagon-train tableau posed before a painted backdrop: a covered wagon and a Mormon family in the desert on the great trek from Missouri to Salt Lake. The family members are historically dressed mannequins: two sons, a mother and a daughter, and the father (who is actually the actor playing Joe). (192)

When the diorama comes to life, the audience sees the father talking to his sons about their journey and what awaits them at the end of the road. While they are talking,

however, Harper continuously talks to them as if they can hear her. One of the sons asks “When will we arrive in Zion, father? When will our great exodus finally be done? All this wandering...” and Harper says “Never. You’ll die of snake bite and your brother looks like scorpion food to me” (195). As Harper continues to bitterly make fun of the story taking place in front of her, the Mormon father starts to tell the story of their prophet. At that point, Louis magically appears on the stage of the diorama and starts talking to the father who is actually Joe now. As Louis questions Joe about his religion and asks him how come he didn’t tell him about it, Prior, seeing Louis on the stage, breaks down: “WHAT IS HE DOING IN THERE?” (197). When Prior calls Louis’s name he hears him although he never acknowledges the existence of Prior and Harper in the audience: “I thought I heard....Somebody. Prior” (198). After this, Louis calls Joe outside saying they need to talk and the father dummy (Joe) and Louis leave the stage.

After they leave, and Prior, shaken by the experience, also leaves, and Harper says “His wife. His mute wife. I’m waiting for her to speak. Bet her story’s not so jolly” and she directly addresses the wife: “Bitter lady of the Plains, talk to me. Tell me what to do” (201). The Mormon mother comes to life, leaves the diorama stage and tells Harper to follow her. The two get out of the stage and the visitor’s center and go to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade where Harper asks the dummy how people change and she answers:

God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he *insists*, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can’t even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It’s up to you to do the stitching. (211)

The diorama room scene helps Harper to create her own break with history (and maybe with reality) as she experiences a different kind of historical interaction with the otherwise silenced Mormon mother. James Fisher suggests that with the diorama scene “Kushner achieves a transcendent meeting of past and present, a unique realm where the facts and fictions of human history and literature converge with contemporary reality” (2002: 80). Panoramas, or dioramas are “artificially constructed, lifelike replicas of scenes from history and nature” (Bechtel 99-121). Thus, the diorama scene is itself a little theater of history, where the history is theatricalized. Louis, by entering the stage of history and taking Joe out of it, seems to be trying to “pull Joe out of history, to free him

from what he perceives as 150-year-old totalitarian religious dogma” (Bechtel 99-121). Moreover, as Harper talks *to* history, history answers back as the Mormon mother since “both women, despite their historical separation of 150 years, are locked into a similar cycle of stasis and subjugation” (Bechtel 99-121). Roger Bechtel suggests that “Harper must call forth the Mormon Mother from her enforced silence and bid her to speak, but it is the voice of the Mother that beckons Harper away from her own historical entrapment. Together they leave the Mormon Center and all that it symbolizes” (99-121). Thus, the scene also makes a comment of the situation of women in the narratives of history. David Savran suggest that “the play’s deliberate foregrounding of the silencing of the Mormon Mother and Daughter in the diorama is symptomatic of Kushner’s desire to let women speak” (1997:22).

Furthermore, in this little theater of history within a play where the personal mingles with the historical and where history becomes theatricalized and manipulated, the play also metatheatrically refers to itself in the exchanges between Harper and Prior. When the diorama scene first starts to unfold, the voice on the tape gets broken down after a few sentences and Harper says: “They’re having trouble with the machinery” (193). Harper’s comment is actually about the staging of *Angels* itself. In the notes to the play, Kushner warns producers: “If you are mounting a production of the play, and you plan to have an airborne Angel, which is a good thing, be warned: It’s incredibly hard to make flying work. Add a week to tech time” (143). Thus, the scene also treats the technical difficulties in the staging of an epic inspired by an angel. After Prior gets frantic because he saw Louis, Harper also says: “You shouldn’t do that in here, this isn’t a place for real feelings, this is just storytime here, stop” (198), reminding us that what we are watching is not real life, just a story. Actually, her explanation for what happened is also a comment of what has been happening in front of the audience all through the play: “it’s just ... the magic of the theatre or something” (199). Martin Harries comments that “the audience sees and comes to believe in ‘the magic of the theatre’, in angels in America. But the diorama scene also stresses the loss implicit in the staging of angels” (194). Thus, the Diorama Room scene serves as a microcosm of *Angels* itself, embodying its theatricalization, its rewriting of history and its self-conscious theatricality.

It must be also recognized that in its thematic concerns and structural implications, *Angels* is “profoundly *confused*” and seems to be a perfect example of “the postmodern ambiguity” (Smith 152-165). The play is constantly “blurring motives” and “refusing rational development” (Biggsby 1999: 107). Christopher Biggsby comments that, in *Angels*,

Power and vulnerability meet, each suffused with the opposite. Compassion and cruelty dance around each other. Desperation is lifted by humor; deepened by a coy inevitability. The real and the fantastic exchange places as though there were no gulf separating them. Male characters are played by women and vice versa. ... Jew meets Mormon, black meets white, conservative confronts liberal. (1999: 108)

In its general aims, *Angels* “is a play about the difficulties of change. By the same token, however, it is about the possibility of change” (Biggsby 1999: 113). Since the play does not offer a distinct political message and works by blurring boundaries both thematically and structurally, lots of critics have found the play utterly ambivalent. David Savran notes that

The opposite of nearly everything you say about *Angels in America* will also hold true: *Angels* valorizes identity politics; it offers an antifoundationalist critique of identity politics. *Angels* mounts an attack against ideologies of individualism; it problematizes the idea of community. *Angels* submits liberalism to a trenchant examination; it finally opts for yet another version of American liberal pluralism. *Angels* launches a critique of the very mechanisms that produce pathologized and acquiescent female bodies; it represents yet another pathologization and silencing of women. (1997:14)

It is true that the play, structurally and thematically challenges realism, neoconservatism, liberalism and millenarianism; however, it does so first by inscribing them in its own narrative. This is the reason that *Angels* has been such a big hit all across America. Savran, similarly, asserts that

Angels demonstrates conclusively not only the constructedness of the difference between the political and the sexual but also the murderous power of this distinction. Yet, at the same time, *not despite but because of these endeavors*, the play has been accommodated with stunning ease to the hegemonic ideology not just of the theatergoing public but of the democratic majority. (1997: 26-27)

The reason of the play’s ambivalent position is that, as a historiographic metadrama, it “works *within* conventions in order to subvert them” (Hutcheon 1988: 5). Linda Hutcheon suggests that “One of the lessons of the doubleness of postmodernism is that you cannot step outside that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the value, you

choose to challenge. ... To challenge history or its writing is not to deny either” (1988: 223). That is exactly why *Angels* has been so popular but also an object of intense academic study: it challenges both popular and elite culture from within.

Angels, both asserts and then undermines notions like “autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin” (Hutcheon 1988: 57). Its ideological power stems from its inserting the very notions it challenges in its narrative. Hutcheon suggests that “in its very contradictions, postmodernist art might be able to dramatize and even provoke change from within” (1988: 7). The play makes use of all of the conventions of the mainstream culture to challenge their transparency, “in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct” (Hutcheon 1988: 53).

In order to be “historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive” (Hutcheon 1988: 30), *Angels* uses a typically postmodern transgressing of previously set boundaries and contests the totalizing master narratives of history in America by opening them up to reevaluation. It strives to make us aware that those master narratives always work by smoothing out any differences within a community. The strategy of the play in challenging those master narratives is showing their “constructed” nature; those narratives, after all, are all a part of discourse as the play itself is. Metadrama, parody, intertextuality are but some of the devices the play makes use of to demonstrate this “constructedness.” As a historiographic metadrama, *Angels* is “overtly historical and unavoidably political” just because it is “formally parodic” (Hutcheon 1988: 23). As a result, the play “shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured” (Hutcheon 1988: 120).

By showing that what is public and historical is essentially tied to what is personal and biographical, *Angels* aims to bring forth the previously silenced ex-centrics. All of the people in the play are marginalized for different reasons and it is essentially *that* difference the play seeks to embrace. By rejecting the abstract notion of single otherness, *Angels* shows us that any definition of a community in our postmodern age needs to

embrace the different, the multiple, the plural. Aiming to provoke some change from within, the play contests the totalizing narratives of Reagan's America. However, it is essentially through the eyes of the ex-centrics that the play transgresses any boundaries put up by those American narratives. Bigsby claims that *Angels* "is a serious play which begs the audience not to take it too seriously since its very confusions, its disorientations, its sometimes camp ostentation, are a part of the antidote it offers to the somber regularity of those who prefer order to vitality" (1999: 113). Having lived many years in the "order" of the hegemonic American culture, the ex-centrics prefer vitality, theatricality, magic, chaos and confusion.

END NOTES

¹ *New York Times* critic Frank Rich, who was too eager to insult *Bright Room*, called Kushner a “visionary” and *Angels in America* “a fierce call for gay Americans to seize the strings of power in the war for tolerance and against AIDS. But this play, by turns searing and comic and elegiac, is no earthbound ideological harangue” (“Marching” C15). In another article on the play, Rich stated that *Angels* “speaks so powerfully because something far larger and more urgent than the future of the theatre is at stake. It really is history Mr. Kushner intends to crack open. He sends his haunting messenger, a spindly, abandoned gay man with a heroic spirit and a ravaged body, deep into his audience’s heart to ask just who we are and just what, as the plague continues and the millennium approaches, we intend this country to become” (“Embracing” C16).

New Republic’s Robert Brustein praised Kushner’s “balanced historical sense that helps him avoid both self-righteousness and sentimentality” and went on to state “his balanced style helps as well—angry but forgiving, tough-minded but warmhearted, ironic but passionate, mischievous and fantastical. Kushner is that rare American thing, an artist-intellectual, not only witty himself but the gauge by which we judge witlessness in others. His very literate play once again makes American drama readable literature” (“Angels” 29).

Other scholars also praised *Angels in America* profoundly. John M. Clum called the play “the most talked about, written about, and awarded, play of the past decade or more ... a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture” (qtd in Geis “Introduction” 1). For Christopher Bigsby, the play was “a carnivalesque exploration of America in a time of plague, an exuberant, mythic fantasy in which images and ideas collide with promiscuous energy” (1999: 107). Harold Bloom called Kushner “a whirligig of change, unpredictable and unprecedented” (2).

² In his book *The Theater of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope*, James Fisher lists some of the controversies that were caused by the staging of the play in certain towns in America. “Among the first significant controversies was a showdown in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the Charlotte Repertory Theatre, under Keith Martin’s direction, staged both parts of the play. Rev. Joseph R. Chambers, a self-styled antipornography crusader, ... led the charge in Charlotte. Chambers admitted he had not seen *Angels*, but had read some excerpts and condemned the play for ‘blasphemy’ for its depiction of ‘unsafe sex’ and its gay thematic content. Having found a legal loophole, the fact that the scene in which Prior disrobes for a physical examination in a doctor’s office ‘is technically against the law in North Carolina’, Chambers pursued his cause with zeal. ... ‘a handful of protesters decrying ‘public nudity’ and ‘pornography’ picketed early performances, facing off with more numerous counter-demonstrators who rallied in support of the production’” (89). Similar events occurred during some of the university productions of the play “in small, fundamentally conservative rural communities, while schools in more urban settings produced the plays with little or no controversy” (Fisher 2002: 90).

³ In her article entitled “Queer Politics to Fabulous Politics in *Angels in America*: Pinklisting and Forgiving Roy Cohn,” Atsushi Fujita lays out some basic facts about Roy Cohn’s life: “Born in New York in 1927, Roy Marcus Cohn became well-known as a result of his participation in the case of Ethel Rosenberg, who, along with her husband, Julius, was accused of spying for the Soviet Union and revealing atomic secrets at the height of the Cold War. The Rosenbergs were consequently found guilty and executed in 1953. Subsequently, Cohn was appointed chief counsel of the McCarthy committee and gained notoriety as McCarthy’s closest ally and aide. Though McCarthy fell from grace during the Army-McCarthy hearings in 1954, and died from alcoholism three years later, Cohn survived and became a high profile New York City attorney with famous clients including Donald Trump, Andy Warhol, and Cardinal Spellman. Cohn died from an AIDS-related disease shortly after being disbarred in 1986” (113). Cohn’s participation in the Rosenberg case was highly illegal and unethical. As Fujita further remarks, “Cohn’s illegal communication with the judge is part of the historical record. Ethel Rosenberg was judged guilty on evidence that was almost exclusively her brother’s testimony. In a book by Sam Roberts, published in 2001, the brother, David Greenglass, confesses that his testimony was false. Cohn, who was only 23 years old at the time of the trial, advanced his career rapidly with this case. McCarthy appointed him as chief counselor for the Communist ‘witch hunt’ he had embarked on, destroying many people’s careers and lives” (115).

⁴ Atsushi Fujita, in the same article also claims that “Cohn, McCarthy, and G. David Schine, who worked for the committee, were rumored to have had an intimate relationship” and in her hearing, the playwright

Lillian Hellman called them “Bonnie, Bonnie and Clyde” (115). It is also known that Cohn died because of AIDS but the official records show the cause of death as liver cancer (Fujita 117).

Also in his article, “Strange Angel: The Pinklisting of Roy Cohn”, Michael Cadden includes an unpublished fragment from one of Roy Cohn’s interviews. In the interview, Cohn answers the claims that he was a homosexual: “Anybody who knows anything about me or who knows the way I function in active life, would have an awfully hard time reconciling that with any kind of homosexuality. Every facet of my personality, of my aggressiveness, my toughness and everything along those lines is just totally, I suppose, incompatible with anything like that” (85).

⁵In his article “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation,” David Savran briefly explains how communitarian organization worked in Mormonism: It “proposed a kind of ecclesiastical socialism in which ‘those entering the order were asked to consecrate their property and belongings to the church.’ To each male would then be returned enough to sustain him and his family, while the remainder would be apportioned to ‘every man who has need’” (25).

⁶ Stanton B. Garner moves on to explain how “sex between men has long been associated with end times.” He notes that “many contemporary prophecy writers have argued that the Antichrist himself will be homosexual. The AIDS epidemic, not surprisingly, has formed a major topic for recent chroniclers of end-time signals” (179).

⁷ In the same article, McNulty also includes an obituary of the genre that appeared in *American Theatre* in October of 1989: “Recently, AIDS has fallen off as a central subject for new drama. It’s no wonder. When, for instance, spectacle and public ritual are so movingly combined in the image and action of the Names Project Quilt, conventional theater seems redundant – at best a pale imitation of the formal, mass expressions that help give shape to real grief and anger. Time and again the spirited protestors of ACT UP have demonstrated that the theater of AIDS is in the streets” (43-44). The AIDS activist group—ACT UP—by carrying the demonstrations to the streets, seemed to have showed that the issue of AIDS has its ideological power when it is represented in the streets. John M. Clum suggests that “ACT UP demonstrations dramatize the AIDS crisis through vivid theatrical metaphors played out where decisions are made—on Wall Street, in the headquarters of drug companies, and at medical conventions. In doing so, they prove the power of theater but also come up against its limitations, as drama tends to play to the already-converted and seems to have little effect on those who need conversion. ... ACT UP has redefined political theater for the age of mass media. It has shown that theaters are not places to effect social change: theater is a more effective tool for shocking people into awareness of key issues when it is taken out of its conventional home” (81). Thus, Clum also thinks that “AIDS theater is played out most effectively in the real world” (82) and concludes by saying “AIDS drama onstage, so important in the mid-eighties, may have served its purpose. But AIDS theater, with the world as its stage, is still being powerfully played” (82).

⁸ In his book, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, John M. Clum further asserts that “for many gay men, the past was a time of unabashed enjoyment of erotic pleasure. To denigrate that past is to denigrate a way of life, an ethos. For the generation that lived through the erotic age, finding a meaningful present in an age in which sex has become not only deerotized but terrifying involves retrieving and affirming the past and purging it of the stigma of guilt, sin, and corruption with which AIDS and heterosexism have stained it” (47-48).

⁹ The hearings were held as a result of pressure Cohn had put on the army in order to secure an exemption for David Schine’s military service. During these hearings, McCarthy named a young man as a possible communist; the man had been a member of the National Lawyers Guild, which was listed as a communist group then. Joseph Welch, the attorney of the army, accused McCarthy of wrongly and unfairly naming this young man. Since this naming would surely destroy the young man’s future, Welch criticized McCarthy with tears in his eyes, saying that famous line in American history: “Little did I dream you could be so reckless and so cruel as to do an injury to that lad ... I fear he shall always bear a scar needlessly inflicted by you ... Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you no sense of decency?”

CONCLUSION

After the huge success of *Angels* Kushner continued to expand his career in playwriting. He kept on writing and producing adaptations, and his other plays further underlined Kushner's obsession with reconsidering and rewriting significant periods in world history. In 1994 Kushner wrote an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan* which was produced in La Jolla Playhouse in La Jolla, California. Another play Kushner wrote in 1994 was *Slavs! Thinking About The Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, where Kushner, once again, returns to the 1980s, this time however, his focal point of interest is the crumbling Soviet Union. The play contains one scene and a character who was previously introduced to audiences in *Perestroika*. The world's oldest living Bolshevik, Prelapsarianov delivers the same speech about the impossibility of moving ahead without the next big beautiful theory, and the play is about the ordinary people living in Russia who try to move ahead. However, it is important to note that the play, as Fisher says, "is anything but documentary" (2002: 94). Kushner has never visited Russia and in his notes to the play he states that he intended to imagine the situation there rather than to represent it accurately. Imagination, indeed, gains the upper hand in *Slavs!* as it does in *Angels*, as Kushner moves further away from traditional realistic theater and creates a play that seems to be a cartoonish satire. Moreover, with *Slavs!*, Kushner also starts to demonstrate the "weird interconnectedness" in his own body of work and relies on intertextuality to underline that interconnectedness.

1995 was a different year for Kushner in which he wrote two plays dealing with a different aspect of his identity— his Jewishness. The first of these plays was *A Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds*, an adaptation of the early-twentieth-century Yiddish theater classic, *The Dybbuk*, written by S. Ansky. The play was first produced in New Haven by Hartford Stage Company in 1995 and later in New York's Joseph Papp Public Theatre in 1997. In this adaptation the collision of the real and spiritual worlds is dramatized within a plot that involves two lovers. The play, while exploring Judaism's magical and fantastical territory, also challenges its rigid doctrines, especially its leaving out and silencing women and its repression of erotic desire. The other "Jewish" play Kushner wrote was a one-act play called *Notes on Akiba*, which was conceived on an airplane for

the Third Seder of New York's Jewish Museum on April 13, 1995. The play is actually composed as a dialogue that occurs between Kushner himself and his friend, director Michael Mayer, who had staged the national tour of *Angels*. Suffused with typically postmodern metafictionality that comments on the writing process of the dialogue and that inscribes its own author as a character, the play presents a discussion between its two characters on Passover traditions. Furthermore, by using cross casting in the staging Kushner problematizes the notion of the integrated author of a unified text since the character "Tony" who is supposed to be Kushner himself is played by Mayer and "Michael" who offers a more solid view on Judaist traditions and who tries to give Tony a perspective is played by Kushner himself.

In 1996, Kushner produced two one-act plays and a screenplay to be filmed for television. His play *Reverse Transcription: Six Playwrights Bury a Seventh, A Ten-Minute Play That's Nearly Twenty Minutes Long*, was written for Actors Theatre of Louisville to be staged in their Humana Festival of New American Plays. The play was produced in March 1996 and later published in 2000. Clearly a Kushnerian take on the quintessential metadramatical play, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), this one-act play explores the roles and struggles of the artist, especially the playwright. While the six characters—all playwrights—bury their beloved friend Ding illegally (Ding has committed suicide), they comment on the writing process and compose another script on the experience they are going through. The play constantly makes use of metatheatrical devices: the playwright's voice announces the entrance of his characters and comments that "Seven characters are too many for a ten-minute play. It'll be twenty minutes long! Fuck it. One of them is dead and the others can all talk fast" (2000: 8). Also, right before the stage action starts properly, one of the characters moves towards a light switch, turns it on and a full moon appears on the stage. Thus, this play further demonstrates Kushner's amazement with the incomplete, with the almost-always broken illusion of theater. Kushner's *G. David Schine in Hell* was also written in 1996 for *New York Times* magazine and was never produced as a play. With this piece Kushner makes us revisit Roy Cohn in hell, who is now accompanied by David Schine—his one-time object of desire—Alger Hiss, Richard Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover. The play's mixture of history, fantasy and outrageous humor makes it a perfect third element of the

intertextuality Kushner has been forming in *Angels and Slavs!*. The last play that was written by Kushner in 1996 was actually written as a screenplay commissioned by Alec Baldwin: *East Coast Ode to Howard Jarvis*. The script was published as a play in 2000 and remains yet to be filmed. James Fisher describes the play as follows:

Using fanciful humor to reflect the multitude of attitudes about taxation, the Internal Revenue Service, government, antigovernment militias, and law-enforcement, it employs a mock-documentary style fictionalizing an actual mini-tax revolt inspired by a scheme created by a Midwestern white supremacist. (Fisher 2002: 195)

The characters in the play appear as familiar social types rather than three-dimensional characters and through their monologues, the bizarre plot to avoid taxes is revealed. The play illustrates, once again, Kushner's conviction that the political is strongly tied to human nature.

In 1998, Kushner wrote another one-act play to be included in a bill of one-acts called *Love's Fire: Seven New Plays Inspired by Seven Shakespearean Sonnets*. Staged by The Acting Company for a tour of the United States, *Love's Fire* concluded at New York's Public Theatre in the summer of 1998. Kushner's play, entitled *Terminating, or Lass Meine Schmerzen Nicht Verloren Sein, or Ambivalence* was inspired by Shakespeare's seventy-fifth sonnet. Set in a present-day psychiatrist's office, the play focuses on the relationship between a patient and his psychiatrist. While Esther—the psychiatrist—is trying to terminate her sessions with Hendryk, the two talk on love and ambivalence and frequently see the visions of their lovers sitting in the room with them. Hendryk is actually a homosexual and Esther is a lesbian but both refuse to acknowledge their sexual preferences openly. Full of ambivalent angst, the play can also be seen as a somewhat slight intertext of *Angels*, since it is about closeted homosexuals and even echoes a line from one of the conversations in *Angels*: “Real love isn't ambivalent” (102). Another Kushner play that was produced in 1998 was *Henry Box Brown, or the Mirror of Slavery* and it was produced at the Royal National Theatre in London. The play offers its audience another depiction of a historical character, Henry Box Brown who was a nineteenth-century Virginia slave who escaped to freedom by mailing himself to Philadelphia in a dry goods container. The play is the first play of what Kushner plans as a three-play epic trilogy on economic history and it explores the relationship between the

textile industry in Britain and American slavery. Accentuating Kushner's obsession with history and historical personages, the play, however, has remained unpublished to date.

In 2001, Kushner once again shocked his audience with his play *Homebody/Kabul*, which was first performed in New York City on the nineteenth of December. The time and place of the production of the play was essential to its shock effect. Written before the attacks of 9/11 and set in London and Afghanistan, the play explores a middle aged British woman's fascination with Afghan history. A mother and a wife, Homebody, escapes to Kabul and disappears into the fabric of Afghan culture. James Fisher comments that, when produced after 9/11, the play appeared "prophetic in shaping the questions that suddenly face us as we try to comprehend a culture so utterly different from our own" (2002: ix). In his play, Kushner argues for a deeper level of Western engagement with the struggles of the Afghan people; he insists that those living in comfort and luxury are obliged to assist those without the same level of security and ease and that they "must strive to truly comprehend the 'other'" (Fisher 2002: x). When viewed after Afghanistan's backlash on America, the play seems to have hit all the right nerves in current American history.

In 2002, Kushner wrote a play in collaboration with Ellen McLaughlin called *Helen* that was produced at Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York. The play was a rewriting on the story of the famous Greek queen, Helen of Troy. Also in the same year, Joseph Papp Theater was home to the premiere of another Kushner piece called *Caroline, or Change*. In a play which successfully merges the historical and the personal, Kushner, once again, returns to a significant transition period in American history. *Caroline* is an opera libretto that takes place in the Deep South, Louisiana at the time of John F. Kennedy's assassination. Set in Kushner's childhood hometown, the play explores a society of inequities and the oppression of African-Americans. The main character, Caroline, is an African-American woman who has had a hard life; she is a divorcee with four children and she works for a white middle-class family for a mere thirty dollars a week. By exploring Caroline's relationships with her family, friends and employers, Kushner, once again, dramatizes the difficulty and inevitability of change in this era of vast social change in America.

In 2003, the *Nation* published the first scene of Kushner's yet to be produced play *Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*. The scene achieves a very dark and witty anti-war protest as the first lady Laura Bush, accompanied by an angel, reads a story to dead Iraqi children in pajamas. The most current Kushner productions are: two operas called *Brundibar* and *The Comedy on the Bridge* in 2005 at Berkeley Repertory Theater and an adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* in 2006. Kushner also wrote the screenplay of the 2005 Steven Spielberg movie *Munich*.

As can be concluded from this diverse body of work, reconsidering what he perceives to be significant periods of history is an obsession of Kushner's. His critical eye sees too widely to be restricted just by a single country or a single period of time: up to now he has visited Germany in the 1930s, America in the nineteenth and twentieth (1960s and 1980s) centuries, Russia in the 1980s and Afghanistan in the 1990s. However, in all his attempts to rewrite these significant periods of history, two stand out as more political, more self-reflexive and hence, more postmodern. *A Bright Room Called Day* and *Angels in America* seem to question notions like official history and monumentalized past in their highly metatheatrical postmodern invocations of those histories. It is no surprise that both plays are profoundly informed by Walter Benjamin's approach to history since Benjamin, in his "Theses" contests the official metanarrative of history and asks future generations to crack open its continuum to bring back the stories of the oppressed.

It is evident that what triggered Kushner to write both plays is the same: the ineffectuality and hypocrisy of the Reagan administration in America. The Reagan administration seems to have created a state of amnesia and blissful ignorance in America: by reinforcing American myths like machismo and by emphasizing traditional values like family, church and nation, the administration that was run by a former actor created a fantasy of bliss in the country. However, all the while the country's marginalized people, especially homosexuals who were dying because of a horrible epidemic, were being kept out of this seemingly peaceful picture. While mainstream America was unknowingly being drugged by oblivion and ignorance, Kushner was becoming more and more agitated by the social conditions in his country. *Bright Room* was the first wake up call Kushner offered to the people of his country. In the play, Kushner tries to remind his

fellow citizens that the past's intersection with the present is inevitable and even necessary. He makes the most daring and outrageous choice he could have ever made and returns to Germany in 1930s, just before Hitler came to power. The controversial parallel drawn by Zillah in the play between Hitler and Reagan is extremely necessary for the sense of urgency the play sought to create since people living in Germany during those times were equally drugged and unaware of what kind of disaster lay ahead of them. Thus, to conceive the sense of urgency in his play, Kushner disrupts the totalizing flow of the metanarrative of history and brings together two separate periods of time and two separate countries. Informed by the Benjaminian notion of *Jetztzeit*, Kushner proves to his audience that history can never be seen as a unified continuum leading to a definite end. For Kushner history is something to be learned from and he establishes this fact by blasting open the official history written by the victorious and rewriting *in* it the previously silenced stories of the marginalized. Thus, *Bright Room* dramatizes the "presence of the past," which Linda Hutcheon sees as an important element in postmodern art.

Angels in America, which took five years for Kushner to write, was his second contestation of Reagan's America. This time, Kushner examines the fabric of social life during the mid 1980s, which he set out to reconsider in 1990. Instead of turning back to another period of history to convey the state of urgency his political views required, Kushner, in *Angels*, uses the urgency that occurred with the AIDS epidemic and digs deep into the American society's different narratives during those times. Different metanarratives of history are opened up to critical viewing in the play: history seen as the record of the powerful, history seen as a progressive movement towards freedom and free will and history seen as a continuous flow towards a millennial and/or apocalyptic end. Kushner's strategy in dealing with the first two versions of history is creating two characters from the opposite political sides in America. Roy Cohn, as embodying the American right, and Louis, as embodying the American left reveal the inner workings of the narratives of American politics and give the audience a chance to realize the hypocrisies in those narratives. When it comes to the millenarian narrative of history, Kushner, in a typically postmodern fashion, inscribes that narrative within the play but also subverts it through parody.

Thus, in both plays “cracking open” the continuum of history is the essential action that prevents those periods from being teleological and monumentalized. The notion that history is composed of one big cause-effect continuum towards an end—millennial or not—is the historical metanarrative Walter Benjamin sought to demystify. He advised future generations to “break open” history, to “brush it against the grain.” In *A Bright Room Called Day* Kushner manages to salvage two different periods from this historical continuum and evaluate the narratives, the events and the urgency of those two periods in each others’ light. Kushner, aware of the fact that the history of Germany around the Second World War is a risky period to invoke, nevertheless, digs up that period from its sacred tomb and uses it to highlight the urgent issues in America in the 1980s. Even though the situations in the two countries during these periods might seem different—one being on the brink of war and the other in seemingly peaceful conformity—the stories of the marginalized and oppressed remain equally painful. Hence, Kushner, in the risk of being labeled immature, creates an “outrageous” comparison between Hitler and Reagan and tries to demonstrate that their attitudes towards the oppressed were fundamentally similar. In *Angels in America*, the Benjaminian cracking open the continuum of history is focused on one single period—the 1980s in America. This time Kushner explores the many narratives at work during that period and shows the conditions of the powerless in systems which favor the powerful. *Angels* can be seen as a play that tries to give a certain amount of power to those who have long been excluded from history, those who have been victimized for the continuum of history to go on its course. The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg haunts the play and her executioner, Roy Cohn, by breaking the continuum and by reclaiming her power. Even though she was one of the many who were sacrificed to history, she reminds the audience that she has never been defeated. Similarly, gay people in general and people with AIDS in particular make their own voices heard in a period in American history in which they have been cruelly discriminated against, left alone and ignored.

While *Bright Room* and *Angels* contest the great narrative of history, they do it through a typically postmodern metatheatricality. In *Bright Room*, Kushner does not only question the official continuum of history but also inscribes its own narrative in that history. Metatheater and the blurring of the boundaries are Kushner’s strategies to open up a

space in that very continuum for the narrative he wishes to write. Brechtian epic theater that creates an overtly interrupted text that forces its audience to recognize the play's theatricality is Kushner's main strategy in the play for his Benjaminian task. Epic theater, with its highly episodic structure is the perfect tool to interrupt the continuum of history, take a single period out of it and establish a new critical approach towards that period through its alienation effects. Highly conscious of its own constructed nature, *Bright Room*, as a Brechtian play, also aims to show its audience the constructed nature of the narratives of history. Furthermore, Kushner, in the play makes use of his own metatheatrical devices such as scene within a scene. These small scenes within the play not only contribute to its Brechtian interrupted structure but also create a unique awareness of the performative nature of life itself, since the play signals the theatricality of each performance given both in the play and in real life. Also in *Bright Room*, with his character Zillah, Kushner makes his audience hear a self-consciously didactic presentational voice that is typical of many historiographic metafiction. The political and ideological content of Zillah's remarks remains subjective and her "messages" are prevented from being dry agitation propagandas as a result of her strong self-awareness of her role as a provocateur. The boundaries between Kushner's contemporary character and other characters who have been lost among the pages of official history gradually become weaker as the play moves forward. Thus, boundaries of time and space collapse on Kushner's stage in a very postmodern manner.

In *Angels*, Kushner's metatheatrical stage still contests the narratives of history but takes on a different turn. Kushner subverts and parodies the metanarratives of the mainstream America through the "gay sensibility." Self-conscious performance and overly accentuated stereotypical behavior have been gay people's strategy to cope with and subvert the stereotypes the society imposed on them. Thus, "gay sensibility" lends itself very easily to metatheater and provides Kushner with a very politically charged standpoint to use and abuse the narratives and conventions of America. Throughout the play, the gay characters continuously make the audience aware of the "performances" they put on in their lives. This performativity gains an additional importance with the character of Roy Cohn who leads a life that depends on his performance on the stage of American politics. By creating a historical personage whose historical actions appear to

be purely theatrical acts, Kushner blurs the boundaries between history and theater, proving both to be constructed performances. Moreover, through its gay sensibility, the play establishes a postmodern intertextuality as a result of the many references to other art works and to real life and personages. As a product of what Richard Hornby calls the “drama/culture complex,” *Angels* places itself in the complex web of culture in America and manages to show through its intertextuality that all the seemingly separate and seemingly “given” systems in the world are actually interconnected and man made. This interconnectedness is further demonstrated by Kushner’s usage of the split scenes as different lives, different issues and different problems are shown to be related in this complex web. The play’s homosexual point of view also provides the parodical ground that it rebuilds the historical metanarratives on. Kushner undercuts conservative America’s patriarchal myths with explicit scenes of homosexual encounters to demonstrate the inherent homosexuality in them. Furthermore, the play parodically rewrites the religious millenarian narrative of history by inserting homosexuality and gender confusion in the very heart of the narrative—in its angel and prophet. As a result, *Angels in America* offers its audience a new gauge to approach America; the play dramatizes history as seen from the eyes of the nation’s “ex-centrics.”

In both plays Kushner seeks to question the metanarrative of history through a postmodern self-conscious, playful and parodical style. What makes his plays a part of the “postmodern” discourse is his awareness of the constructed and textual nature of systems like history, politics, religion and art. This awareness forces Kushner to question those systems, to play with them through his own self-conscious discourse and to open up spaces in them for the stories of the marginalized. This is essentially why Kushner’s plays appear to be “overtly historical and unavoidably political, precisely because they are formally parodic” (Hutcheon 1988: 23).

Both *Bright Room* and *Angels* are political in nature not because they have a new big theory, or a new moral message to offer. Kushner is not a believer in political or stylistic anarchy. He comments that

art can help change people, who then decide to change their own lives, change their neighborhood, their community, their society, the world. I don’t think art alone

changes people, but consciousness, the life of the mind, is a critical force for change and art helps the shaping of consciousness ... watching theater teaches people a way of looking at the world with a doubleness of vision that's immensely useful – transformative, even ... Art has a power, but it's an indirect power. Art suggests. When people are ready to receive such suggestion, it can and does translate into action ... Truth is never finally entirely graspable, but neither is it entirely unknowable; glimpses of it come to the courageous, the curious, the diligent, the kind-hearted, the generous. (Izzo 57)

In an era when belief in any metanarrative would be foolish, Kushner puts his faith in art, in theater. His theater does not work by spoon feeding messages and ideologies to its audience; on the contrary, Kushner tries to give his audience “a doubleness of vision” that will eventually be “transformative.” As a result, his plays work within the same dual point of view: they celebrate paradox, and contradiction rather than order and harmony; they advocate the plural, the multiple and the heterogeneous instead of the unified, the totalized and the homogenized. By working *within* the conventions to subvert them, the plays demonstrate the insider-outsider attitude of postmodern art. Instead of doing away with the historical metanarratives in an anarchical manner, Tony Kushner theatricalizes history through the playfulness of metatheater and provides his audience with a critical point of view to realize that nothing is “natural” or “given” in our world; all the narratives and boundaries are man made and each of them serves a different ideological purpose.

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