



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THEATRICAL IMMANENCE: THE *DEUS EX MACHINA* AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD

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What, has this thing appeared again tonight?

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Introducing the *Deus ex Machina*

The Latin term *deus ex machina* (*apò mēkhanês theós*, in Classical Greek) refers to the sudden and often unexpected appearance of a divine figure on the theatre stage, unravelling the otherwise insoluble predicaments of the humans, thus bringing the performance-narrative to a closure. Its literal meaning, “god from the machine,” comes from ancient stagecraft in which an actor playing a deity would be physically lowered by a crane-like mechanism onto the stage. Such supernatural interventions were quite common on the Greek classical stages, but they were severely criticized already by Aristotle, who argued (in chapter XV of *The Poetics*) that since

the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable [...] the unravelling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the *deus ex machina*—as in the *Medea* [...]. The *deus ex machina* should be employed only for events external to the drama—for antecedent or subsequent events, which lie beyond the range of human knowledge, and which require to be reported or foretold; for to the gods we ascribe the power of seeing all things. Within the action there must be nothing irrational. If the irrational cannot be excluded, it should be outside the scope of the tragedy. Such is the irrational element in the *Oedipus* by *Sophocles*. (Aristotle [350BCE], XV)

Aristotle's ideas could be summarized by saying that since the gods are both omniscient and irrational, they should not be a part of the ideally rationally motivated course of dramatic action in tragedy.

If irrational elements—primarily meaning the gods, but also other scenic materializations of supernatural creatures or forces—cannot be totally eliminated from the fictional world, they should at least be kept off the stage in the tragedy itself, Aristotle argues, pressing for logical consistency and continuity. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* the confrontations with the supernatural, in particular through the Delphic oracle, serving as the mouthpiece of Apollo and the encounter with the sphinx, which are the initial motivations for the tragic action of this play were not included by Sophocles in the stage action itself. Since the irrational elements have been seemingly marginalized—even if without them there is nothing to activate the dramatic action—*Oedipus Tyrannus* serves as Aristotle's prime example for tragedy.

The appearance of supernatural creatures on the theatrical stage, directly intervening in the flow of the events can be viewed from two perspectives. First it can be seen as a meta-theatrical device through which the theatrical medium self-reflexively, sometimes even playfully, examines its own conditions and limits, as an integral aspect of the theatrical apparatus, or its dispositive. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is no doubt one of the most prominent examples of how the supernatural, with the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father, literally activates the theatrical machinery, igniting the dramatic action by telling the young prince how he (i.e. Old Hamlet) was murdered by his brother Claudius, who has also inherited the nuptial bed and Old Hamlet's widow Gertrude. Already in the very first line of the play, Bernardo who is entering the stage expresses his fear of encountering the ghost, and asks Francisco, the guard on duty, "Who's there?" Already this famous opening line points at the uncanny meta-theatricality of Shakespeare's play. It would be logical that the guard on duty asks who is arriving, but instead Shakespeare creates a strange reversal, as if the guard on duty is not what he seems to be in the eyes of Bernardo who is just entering.

The two questions "Who's there?" as well as line 21 of the first scene which I have quoted as the epigram to these reflections on immanence in the theatre, when Horatio (or Marcellus, depending on which of the early editions of the play we consult) asks "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" first of all address the presence of the ghost in a world supposedly governed by rational thinking. These questions immediately introduce the supernatural into the fictional world of the drama. But at the same time they also address the artistic practices of the theatre itself, where an actor entering the stage, tongue-in-cheek asks the actor onstage, who he is playing; or (in line 21) if this 'thing', i.e. the performance, is appearing 'again tonight'. This gesturing towards the performative situation itself, of having some form of disguise as well as 'appearing again tonight' also establishes a direct channel of communication between the actors and the spectators. This *thing* appearing again tonight is obviously not only the ghost of Hamlet's dead father; it is the performance and the actors who are invited to return and appear who are introduced to the spectators watching the performance. The appearances of the gods as well as other supernatural figures like *dybbuks*, demons, angels, devils, etc., are inherently theatrical. They constitute an

integral aspect of the traditional theatrical machinery through which this thing (appearing again) materializes the spiritual and the other-worldly.

It is even possible to claim that the improbability and irrationality of the *deus ex machina*, its apparent subversion of rational thinking—which is why Aristotle rejected it—is exactly what has made it so attractive for theatre. And this also seems to be one of the reasons why this is still the case, even on the 20th and 21st century stages. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* turns the theatrical playfulness with the appearance of the supernatural on its head by depicting two vagabond tramps waiting for someone called Godot, who—performing a reversal of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—does **not** appear **again** tonight. Beckett has actually depicted how the age-old machinery of the *deus ex machina* has stopped working and does not function anymore, transforming itself by the ironies of the absurd into a reflection on itself. And as I want to suggest here, modernity has an ambiguous relationship towards such meta-aesthetic phenomena, while for the post-modern imagination, gathering the fragmented remnants from previous periods, the *deus ex machina* and the supernatural create an almost necessary frame of reference for aesthetic expressions.

It is however also necessary to consider the *deus ex machina* from a philosophical or theological perspective, raising the question why it has continued to serve as a powerful metaphor not only for an open-ended futurity through which Utopian notions are critically reflected and refigured, but also for ideological, social and personal conflicts, frequently even involving strong components of excess, violence and cruelty. The modern theatre has apparently been trapped in the paradox formulated by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, obviously referring to the cave in Plato's *The Republic* that "God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too" (Nietzsche 1974, 167).

Jürgen Habermas clearly drew attention to this paradoxical situation, calling attention to the utopian open-ended futurity in the thinking of the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, for whom

God is dead, but his locus has survived him. The place into which mankind has imagined God and the gods, after the decay of these hypotheses, remains a hollow space. The measurements in-depth of this vacuum, indeed atheism finally understood, sketch out a blueprint of a future kingdom of freedom. (Habermas 1969/1970, 313)

How free the blueprint of the modern theatre can make the spectators, and if, indeed, we are really able fully to appreciate and fully understand this "hollow space" is of course an open question. The modern theatre and many of our contemporary performance traditions are no doubt attempting to fill the voids in our 'systems' of thinking, mainly by making us painfully aware of them; or just by making them 'beautiful'. The modern theatre can be perceived as the *locus* trying to find the thread leading to this "kingdom of freedom", even if the awareness that this kingdom itself can probably never be reached, no doubt prevails, as it does in the work of Brecht and Beckett. But the *deus ex machina* remains a central feature of the theatre apparatus, the **dispositive** for confronting this void, filling it with spectacle, at least as long as the performance itself lasts. Following Nietzsche for

whom Classical tragedy was the outcome of a union between two divine forces, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, while at the same time declaring the death of God, this paradox can be formulated from a somewhat different perspective: The appearance of the supernatural forces on a theatrical stage is not dependent on the belief-systems of the spectators (if they actually believe in these forces), but rather on the possibilities presented by the dispositive or the machineries (including the *deus ex machina*) with which the theatre operates.

Introducing the Dispositive

The notion of the 'dispositive' (*dispositif* in French) was introduced by Foucault in the late 1970 as a

heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. (Foucault 1980, 194)

According to Foucault the dispositive is “the system of relations that can be established between these elements” and what we must investigate in particular, he continues, is “the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements [... because] between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely” (Foucault 1980, 194–195). The dominant strategic function of the dispositive is as a “formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*,” and therefore, Foucault sums up, it “has a dominant strategic function” (Foucault 1980, 195).¹ Both in its inclusions of discursive and non-discursive elements as well as in its expression of urgency, or even just by “responding to an urgent need”, the cultural practices of the theatre can be seen as a model for what a dispositive is and how it can be conceptualized.

According to Burchell, “Foucault uses this term [dispositive] to designate a configuration or arrangement of elements and forces, practices and discourses, power and knowledge that is both *strategic* and *technical*” (Burchell 2008, xxiii; quoted in Bussolini 2010, 86). But one of the crucial differences between the dispositive of an artistic practice like the theatre and of ‘life itself’ is that the dispositive of the theatre contains elements (or aspects) with a high degree of coordination between strategy and technique (which is not necessarily true of ‘life’) enabling us to decipher the ways in which they are constituted. In cases where the dispositive of the theatre is highly conventionalized, the relations between strategy and technique can be more easily detected and deciphered. The inner dynamics of the dispositive of the theatre establishes a network that links the various aspects of this cultural practice, reflecting configurations of power and resistance in social life (or in the public sphere) that can be tested and even subverted by ‘doing’ theatre. The practices of the theatre (including the employment of the supernatural) can thus be seen as a form of commenting on social practices which do not have to subscribe to these beliefs or where these beliefs (in such supernatural forces) are even the very object of the critique of a particular

performance. I will present one concrete example here, Bertolt Brecht's and Elisabeth Hauptmann's adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* from 1728.

Bertolt Brecht and the *Deus ex Machina*

Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera), with music by Kurt Weill and directed by Erich Engel premiered at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm (today the home of the Berliner Ensemble) in 1928. It ends with a spectacular and totally unexpected *deus ex machina*, through which Macheath (alias Mackie Messer), London's greatest and most notorious criminal, is miraculously saved from being executed. Even if this ending, with the criminal Macheath who is sentenced to death receiving a pardon from the Queen as he is about to be hanged, was actually added during the rehearsals for the first production it immediately became a part of the "official" text of the opera. Besides this formal feature of the ending, which in fact actually served as an implied critique of such a "happy ending", showing that criminals like Macheath will always be set free, *The Threepenny Opera* presents a broad spectrum of experiences and reactions which in different ways allude to and depend on supernatural forces, not only by just critiquing them, but also making them 'beautiful'. It is however not self-evident that a play by a writer whose ideological point of departure was Marxist contains such features. Looking at Brecht's *oeuvre* however, we find that he also wrote other plays with a *deus ex machina*, like *The Good Person of Szechwan* which begins with the appearance of three gods in a small village.

By 1933, when Brecht and Weill, as well as many others, were forced into exile after Hitler's take-over of power, *The Threepenny Opera* had been translated into 18 languages and been performed more than 10,000 times on European stages. It was Brecht's first and greatest commercial success. Consequently, to capitalize on this success, in 1931 it was filmed both in a German and a French version by the well-known director G. W. Pabst. Brecht had signed a contract with Nero Film, but the producers rejected Brecht's script. Brecht sued them but lost the case, afterwards summarizing his conclusions of the trial in a long essay called *The Threepenny Lawsuit (Der Dreigroschenprozess)*. And after leaving Germany in 1933, during the beginning of his exile in Denmark, Brecht reworked the materials from the play into a novel, *The Threepenny Novel*, which takes place in the same kind of milieu of criminals and hypocrites as *The Threepenny Opera*, but in post-World War I Germany. The novel was published in Amsterdam in 1934.

The Threepenny Opera begins with Jeremiah Peachum selling "costumes" and "props" for beggars, while at the same time controlling these activities, creating an artificial world of beggar-actors. Begging is somewhat paradoxically conceived of as a performance of 'miracles' that serves as an embellishment for the Coronation of the Queen which takes place as a 'background' to the plot of the play, a kind of Christian 'mystery play' taking place within the poverty-stricken *demimonde* of London. Peachum's office is embellished with slogans of Christian morality like "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Brecht 1982a, 6), which of course gain a strong ironic significance in the context of a play where the hero is a notorious thief and a murderer, frequently carrying out his deeds while Brown, the chief of police and Macheath's former brother in arms, shuts his eyes.

Peachum is in fact a preacher basing his fake aesthetics of compassion on Biblical quotations. While holding up the Holy Scriptures—which as Brecht emphasized are chained to his desk, though not out of meanness, but “because he is scared someone might steal it” (Brecht 1982a, 91)—Peachum elaborates the basis for the spectacle he is staging in the crowded streets of London.

The Bible has four or five sayings that stir the heart; once a man has expanded them, there’s nothing for it but starvation. Take this one, for instance—“Give and it shall be given unto you”—how threadbare it is after hanging here a mere three weeks. Yes you have to keep on offering something new. So it’s back to the good old Bible again, but how long can it go on providing? (Brecht 1982a, 6)

The Holy Scriptures where God reveals himself has become a source for moral bankruptcy, reflecting a society where the spectacle of begging provides an income which is at least more “honest” than stealing.

Peachum is also a father, opposing the marriage of his daughter Polly to Macheath and does everything in his power to incriminate Macheath, finally succeeding to get him imprisoned and sentenced to death. At her wedding to Macheath Polly sings about the Pirate Jenny, who with her army of light from “the bright midday sun” (Brecht 1982a, 21) fights the dark forces of male oppression. The pirate woman, whom Polly actually both impersonates and sings about in a gesture of Brechtian *Verfremdung* presents a multiple perspective. She is both a performer at her own wedding and the destroyer/saviour, representing the forces of Divine Nemesis, who with her “Hoppla” presents a powerful moment of supernatural intervention.

Polly introduces the song by saying that it is an imitation of a girl she once heard singing it in a bar in Soho. The song itself constitutes a small performance within Brecht’s play, with Polly showing Pirate Jenny’s fantasy/memory to Macheath and the wedding guests. Here, in the last verse of her song, is how she describes her role as a supernatural messenger in the flow history:

And hundreds will come ashore around noon
And will step into the *shadows*
And will catch anyone in any door
And lay him in chains and bring him before me
And ask: Which one should we kill?
And at that midday it will be quiet at the harbour
When they ask, who has to die.
And then they’ll hear me say: All of them!
And when the heads roll, I’ll say: Hoppla!

And the ship with eight sails
And with fifty cannons
Will disappear with me. (Brecht 1982a, 21)

After Polly has ended the song with these last lines one of the members of the gang, in order to overcome the uncomfortable silence it has caused, exclaims that it was “Very nice. Cute” (Brecht 1982a, 21), while Macheath retorts, perhaps making a point not only on his own behalf, but also

on Brecht's: "What do you mean nice? It's not nice, you idiot! It's art, it's not nice" (Brecht 1982a, 21). And Macheath immediately adds in a biting aside to Polly: "Anyway, I don't like you playacting; let's not have any more of it" (Brecht 1982a, 22), revealing that she must have touched a threatening chord with her apocalyptic vision of justice. The song about Pirate Jenny conventionalizes artistic practices involving supernatural interventions by uncovering the strategies, or estranging them (through a *Verfremdung* as Brecht would say), that reverses, resists and even subverts the traditional, social power-structures by evoking such supernatural forces.

In the Pabst film, the song of Pirate Jenny is sung by the prostitute, who is also called Jenny (famously played by Lotte Lenya; see Pabst 1931, 1:10:30). Jenny, who has been bribed by Mrs Peachum to betray Macheath, opens the window and signals to the police waiting outside that they can now catch him when he comes to the brothel. After she closes the window and one of the girls of the brothel draws a curtain to the room where the group of young ladies are competing for Macheath's attention, Jenny remains by herself and begins to sing the song of Pirate Jenny, in a pose of introspection, motivated by her jealousy for Polly as well as by the money she has just received from Mrs Peachum.

After a while the camera glides in the direction of the other room and we see Macheath standing and watching her intently. She only returns his intense gaze after she has finished singing. Then he goes towards her and says that no matter what happens he will never forget her. There is no sense of threat—no matter how playful—from her 'art' here, rather a total seduction. At this point one of the prostitutes signals that the police are entering the brothel, and Jenny now helping the man she loves, not betraying him, shows Macheath a way to escape, only to be arrested later, after visiting another lady whom he meets at the next street corner. In the film, the song about Pirate Jenny is a song about betrayal, and is not the kind of provocation it is in the stage version. Instead of opening up any possibility for a "divine" intervention it points at human deceit, masquerading as a false *dea ex machina* and redemption through the intervention of a female figure.²

Another important change in the 1931 film version was the deletion of the *deus ex machina* ending of the *Schiffbauerdamm* performance. In the stage version the execution of Macheath was interrupted by the chief of police, who has been sent as a messenger mounted on a white horse. After the messenger pardoning Macheath has been announced and before the Finale is sung and the bells of Westminster announcing the coronation are heard again, Peachum gets the last, ambiguous words of the stage performance, and this is how the play was published:

Now please remain all standing in your places, and join in the hymn of the poorest of the poor, whose most arduous lot you have put on stage here today. In real life the fates they meet can only be grim. Saviors on horseback are seldom met with in practice and the man who's kicked about must kick back. Which all means that injustice should be spared from persecution. (Brecht 1982a, 79)

According to Peachum, injustice will continue to reign, and no doubt Brecht would have agreed. Brecht himself also commented on his intentions with the mounted messenger:

The Threepenny Opera provides a picture of bourgeois society, not just of “elements of the Lumpenproletariat”. This society has in turn produced a bourgeois structure of the world, and thereby a specific view of the world without which it could scarcely hope to survive. There is no avoiding the sudden appearance of the Royal Mounted Messenger if the bourgeoisie is to see its own world depicted. [...] Depriving bourgeois literature of the sudden appearance of some form of mounted messenger would reduce it to a mere depiction of conditions. The mounted messenger guarantees you a truly undisturbed appreciation of even the most intolerable conditions, so it is a *sine qua non* for a literature whose *sine qua non* is that it leads nowhere. (Brecht 1982b, 96)

The *deus ex machina* with the chief of police freeing Macheath is according to Brecht a grandiose theatrical gesture through which the absurdity of the social system is revealed, nothing more.³

Instead of the *deus ex machina* and the riding messenger of the performance, the film has a completely different ending. After the coronation of the Queen has ended in chaos, because the beggars are demonstrating against social injustice, Macheath, Polly and Brown, the now “former” chief of police, led by Mr. Peachum, sign the contract for the establishment of a new bank. They are no longer petty thieves, defending their activities by the famous line from the play (which significantly does not appear in the film): “What’s breaking into a bank, compared with founding a bank?” (Brecht 1982a, 76) In the film they have actually all become criminals, by founding a new bank.

And after the contract has been signed, the film somewhat unexpectedly closes, showing a group of anonymous beggars, with their backs to the camera moving slowly across the screen, passing from an illuminated area (on the lower part of the screen and thus ‘closer’ to the spectators) into the more distant darkness on the upper part of the screen. They are accompanied by the newly written lines which Brecht had added, providing an appendix to the famous Moritat about the sharp teeth of the shark with which the film opens:

So we reach our happy ending.
Rich and poor can now embrace.
Once the cash is not a problem
Happy endings can take place.
[...]
Some in light and some in darkness
That’s the kind of world we mean.
Those you see are in the light part
Those in darkness don’t get seen. (Brecht 2001, 143)

And, the last strophe in German reads:

Denn die einen sind im Dunkeln
Und die andern sind im *Licht*.
Und man sieht die im Lichte
Die im Dunkeln sieht man *nicht*. (Brecht 1959, 241)

When these lines are heard, the anonymous bodies of the poor with their backs turned to the camera can be seen moving slowly from the lower illuminated part of the screen into the darkness on the upper half, where they are engulfed by it and disappear (see Pabst 1931, 1:47:45—end of canon song and Moritat).

The basic iconographic elements of the *deus ex machina* have been preserved, in particular the light, but these elements have been reversed and transformed into an abstract visual language, like in a modernist *avant-garde* painting, or even an absurdist play. Instead of emerging from and through a divine light—traditionally situated in the vanishing point of the stage perspective with a clearly visible focus—the beggars can instead be seen as they are disappearing into total darkness. The halting rhymes of the last words in the lines, ending on the void, the *nicht*—the darkness which is nothingness—rhyme on *Licht*, the light which they now leave behind as they disappear into that darkness. Even if this reversed apocalyptic vision is not only Brecht's, because the producers of the film broke the contract with him, he undoubtedly wrote the verse on which it is based, where the powerful rhyme of *Licht* and *nicht* appears, reinforcing the dispositive of the stage as a meaning-creating machine in its own right.

Walter Benjamin's 'Critique'

In the second version of Walter Benjamin's essay "What is Epic Theatre", which was published during his life-time, in 1939, he argued, following Brecht's own directive, that

The task of epic theatre [...] is not so much to develop actions as to [both present] and represent conditions [*Zustände darzustellen*]. But 'represent' does not here signify 'reproduce' in the sense used by the theoreticians of Naturalism. Rather, the first point at issue is to uncover those conditions. (One could just as well say: to *make them strange* (*verfremden*)). This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted. Take the crudest example: a family row. Suddenly a stranger comes into the room. The wife is just about to pick up a bronze statuette and throw it at the daughter, the father is opening the window to call a policeman. At this moment the stranger appears at the door. 'Tableau', as they used to say around 1900. That is to say, the stranger is confronted with a certain set of conditions: troubled faces, open window, a devastated interior. There exists another point of view [*Es gibt aber einen Blick*] from which the more usual scenes of bourgeois life do not look so very different from this. (Benjamin 1973, 18–19; German version in Benjamin 1977, 535)

According to Benjamin the aim of the interruption "consists in arousing astonishment [*Staunen*] rather than empathy [*Einfühlung*]" (Benjamin 1973, 18). The 'Tableau'—or rather the *tableau vivant*—where the movements of the actors are frozen in a moment of extreme gesturality and 'standstill', even alludes to the theatrical tradition of the *deus ex machina*, where the divine figure has become an unknown stranger arriving at a moment of crisis, like in *The Good Person of Szechwan*.

When Benjamin 'stages' this standstill in one of his last pieces of writing he published during his life time, in 1939, after ten years of close friendship with Brecht, he also returns to a critical moment in the scenario of his seminal, but notoriously difficult essay *Critique of Violence (Zur Kritik der Gewalt)*—or force—published almost 20 years earlier, in 1921. In this earlier article, which predates their close friendship by almost a decade, Benjamin presents several situations and character types whose actions upset the equilibrium in times of social and political unrest. But after carefully examining such paradigmatic situations Benjamin reaches the somewhat unexpected conclusion he claims can "throw light on the insolubility of all legal problems," namely that

[a]mong all the forms of violence permitted by both natural law and positive law there is not one that is free of the gravely problematic nature [...] of all legal violence. Since, however, every conceivable solution to human problems, not to speak of deliverance from the confines of the world-historical conditions of existence obtaining hitherto, remains impossible if violence is totally excluded in principle, the question necessarily arises as to other kinds of violence [or force] than all those envisaged by legal theory. (Benjamin 2007, 293)

This argumentation leads Benjamin to the conclusion that it is necessary to include mythical violence, exemplified by Niobe, as well as divine violence, exemplified by the rebellion of company of priests led by Korah, challenging the authority of Moses (described in *Numbers* 16) to cope with this fundamental issue.

Benjamin's caesura for taking this crucial step from the impasse of the formal, legal discussion to the consideration of mythical and divine forms of violence, with which he brings his essay to a closure, is by pointing out how the function of violence "is illustrated by everyday experience." And he adds, that

[a]s regards man, he is impelled by anger, for example, to the most visible outbursts of a violence that is not related as a means to a preconceived end. It is not a means but a manifestation. Moreover, this violence has thoroughly objective manifestations in which it can be subjected to criticism. These are to be found, most significantly in myth. (Benjamin 2007, 294)

Instead of trying to inscribe violence in a causal chain clarifying how law-establishing and natural forms of violence interact with their respective means and ends, which Benjamin finally deems impossible, he recognizes that he has reached an impasse from which he takes recourse by referring to mythical violence. This is how Benjamin formulates the mythical violence which

in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods. Not a means to their ends, scarcely a manifestation of their will, but first of all a manifestation of their existence. The legend of Niobe contains an outstanding example of this. (Benjamin 2007, 294)

The sudden entrance of the stranger rescuing the daughter from the violence of her mother goes back to such a 'manifestation of the gods', for what they (Apollo and Artemis) do to Niobe because

of her arrogance towards them. But as I am sure Benjamin must have been aware of, Niobe also plays an important role in *Antigone*, serving as a model for the title character who just before entering the cave of her death compares herself to this semi-mythological figure and is mocked by the chorus.

This divine manifestation does not only uncover the conditions of the dramatic situation as the sudden appearance of a stranger which is the focus of Benjamin's later essay on Brecht's epic theatre. It is also a representation of a fate beyond human reach or reason which has a prominent counterpart in the realm of theatrical devices through the *deus ex machina*. And at the same time it also serves as a metaphorical *deus ex machina* in the scenario of the essay itself, complemented by the story of Korah from the Hebrew bible, showing how Benjamin by accepting some form of metaphysical intervention in the philosophical argument—after having reached an insoluble impasse—reaches a closure to his essay by such metaphysical means, just as the *deus ex machina* brings closure to a dramatic plot. The question to what extent Benjamin actually arrived at some form of closure through this textual/supernatural intervention must however remain open. I believe this is the underlying motivation for relying on the 'manifestation of the gods' in order to end the 'philosophical performance' of *Critique of Violence*.

This is also what happens in *The Threepenny Opera* for which the essay on violence can even be considered as a precursor or a model. Not only does Brecht's play end with an ironic parody of a *deus ex machina*, when the messenger of the Queen comes riding on a white horse pardoning the criminal Macheath as he is about to be executed. Benjamin also discusses the death penalty at great length in his article. Macheath is sentenced to death when the Chief of Police, 'Tiger' Brown, who has been bribed by Polly's parents to stop his protection of what Benjamin terms the "great criminal", who according to Benjamin arouses "the secret admiration of the public" (Benjamin 2007, 281). Macheath and 'Tiger' Brown are close friends because they have served in the army together, and as long as crime also pays for the Chief of Police (by receiving bribes from Macheath) the criminal is protected by the police who according to Benjamin intervene "for security reasons in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists" (Benjamin 2007, 287) and can therefore obviously also refrain from intervening when it suits their goals. Macheath is only arrested after Tiger Brown is earning more money by being bribed by Mrs. Peachum to protect her daughter from the great criminal.

There is apparently no evidence that Brecht had read or knew Benjamin's essay on violence. But it is clear that when Benjamin concludes his essay pronouncement that "The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history" (Benjamin 2007, 299) he means that the mythical and divine forms of violence are an important aspect of this history, pointing at the immanent manifestation of supernatural forces in the world. In *The Threepenny Opera* Brecht—knowingly or unknowingly—inscribed himself in this critique, by superimposing the manifestations of the supernatural in the community with a meta-theatrical dimension, with an elegant "Hoppla" when the heads have fallen.

I hope that I have been able to show that the *deus ex machina* as an expression of the supernatural is a crucial and inherent feature of the dispositive of the theatre as a cultural practice. This aspect

begins to reveal itself in a discussion where both the performative and the philosophical dimensions of the theatrical dispositive are combined. And with regard to our understanding of Brecht, I believe it is crucial to take his treatment of the supernatural into consideration, in particular the repeated use of the *deus ex machina* as an expression of what I would like to term Brecht's 'metaphysical materialism'. And this in turn is profoundly connected to the larger issue how ideas can be materialized on the stage through its unique machineries, a subject I hope to return to in greater length.

Notes

¹ The English translations of Foucault's term *dispositif* vary, ranging from 'apparatus' (in this particular translation), to 'device', 'machinery', 'construction', and 'deployment'. I have chosen the English term 'dispositive' to avoid the confusions that this broad range of translations has given rise to. Jeffrey Bussolini has made the following clarifications: "Within a heterogeneous and dynamic field of relations, the dispositive would seem to be a kind of moving marker to allow some approximation of a particular preponderance or balance of forces at a given time. It helps to identify which knowledges have been called out and developed in terms of certain imperatives of power, and it aids in the discernment of the many resistances that also necessarily run through the multiple relations of force according to Foucault. This is all the more important given his castings of power as a fractured field in which the different lines of force are sometimes reinforcing, sometimes undermining and contradicting one another—reading the points of confrontation and intensity is historically and politically valuable" (Bussolini 2010, 91). The Apparatus might be said to be the instruments or discrete sets of instruments themselves—the implements or equipment. Dispositive, on the other hand, may denote more the arrangement—the strategic arrangement—of the implements in a dynamic function (Bussolini 2010, 96).

² Instead of Polly singing the song of Pirate Jenny at her wedding, in the film she sings the Barbara Song, about the man who has been courting her and which she has turned down, finally accepting the man who does not ask for her hand in marriage. In the text of the play she sings this song to her parents, in order to explain why she has married Macheath.

³ No riding messenger in Robert Wilson's 2012 production at the Berliner Ensemble; see Wilson (2012).

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Biography

Freddie Rokem is Professor (Emeritus) in the Department of Theatre at Tel Aviv University, where he was the Dean of the Faculty of the Arts (2002–2006) and is currently the Wiegand Visiting Professor of Theater & Performance Studies at the University of Chicago. His more recent books are *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (2010); *Jews and the Making of Modern German Theatre* (2010, co-edited with Jeanette Malkin); *Strindberg's Secret Codes* (2004) and the prize-winning book *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (2000). He has been a visiting professor at many universities in the United States, Germany, Finland and Sweden, and is also a practicing dramaturg.

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