



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

HEINER GOEBBELS'S *STIFTERS DINGE* AND THE ARENDTIAN PUBLIC SPHERE

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At the pivotal moment in her “report” on the Eichmann trial, Arendt describes how, on the ninth day of the court proceedings in Jerusalem, Eichmann’s guilt was established beyond doubt: he admitted not only to his role in transporting many thousands of Jews to their deaths, but testified that he had personally seen the destinations to which they were to be sent—the gas chambers and mobile gas vans, as well as the blood-soaked trenches filled with the bodies of those shot by the *Einsatzgruppen*—and that he had been “shocked out of his wits” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 90). With the delivery of this evidence, it was clear that Eichmann had not only “known what he was doing” but had known also that it was wrong: and so, Arendt writes, “one felt [the defense] could rise right away, for the criminal proceedings against the accused in this ‘historic trial’ seems complete, the case for the prosecution established” (90).

The moment is pivotal not because it marks the moment in which Eichmann’s fate was sealed (in her assessment, the verdict in this “show trial” was a “foregone conclusion” (4, 92) but because it introduces the real subject of Arendt’s analysis of the trial: the degradation of moral agency under totalitarian conditions. With the completion of this testimony (pre-recorded by the police onto audio tape and replayed for the court from a tape-recorder, while “the body that owned the voice” stood “strangely disembodied” behind the walls of a glass booth) there remained only one question to ask, “the most disturbing of all”, addressed now repeatedly to the defendant by the judges: “Had the killing of Jews gone against his conscience?” (90–91). The legalities of the trial could be satisfied with the circulation of the defendant’s confession and the presence of a body on which to enact a sentence; but this moral question of conscience, which lay at the heart of the political interest of

the trial and was expressed now with urgency, could only be answered by the defendant in the present. Arendt's report reveals that what the court found it needed at this point, though *not before*, was a re-integration of Eichmann's voice and his body, a corporeal re-fleshing that would permit him to attest to the inner state that the court sought to discern through his words. But, she relates, even so these words proved difficult for the court to grasp in any definitive or conclusive sense: it had to ask for them "over and over again" (91) and discovered consequently that, the longer the trial continued, "the paler and more ghostlike became the figure in the glass booth, and no finger-wagging: 'And there sits the monster responsible for all this,' could shout him back to life" (8).

This episode is instructive because it captures, almost in parable form, the extent to which the "space of appearance" that Arendt regards as conterminous with her conception of the public sphere and of politics, and which she describes as "com[ing] into being wherever men are together in manner of speech and action" (Arendt [1958] 1998, 199), also materialises in her work as a space of *disappearance*, experienced in quotidian life as sites of absence. For, in this case, in the District Court of Jerusalem, Eichmann's receding and ghostly figure itself stood only in a middle position between those present in the audience and other, even more distant and silent figures, for whom his testimony and that of the other witnesses served most unsatisfactorily as proxies: those of his victims, or of history itself.

This paradox of testimony, which confirms that "appearance" in the public sphere must be accessed in ordinary experience through attention to that which disappears—to the non-existent, to that which is "not given [...] and which therefore [...] [can] not be known" (Arendt [1961] 2006, 150)—is expressed again a generation and a half later in the formula offered by German director and composer Heiner Goebbels to describe his "theatre of absence": "Absence as the presence of the other, as a confrontation with an unseen image or an unheard word or sound, an encounter with forces beyond man's control, that are out of our reach" (Goebbels 2015, 4, 6). Goebbels himself acknowledges his debt to Arendt quite explicitly, quoting her *Vita Activa* to assert that "you can consider every performance to be a 'public sphere, ... in which it is necessary not to attack each other'—neither in the work relations nor in the relation to the audience" (Goebbels 2015, 58)—the public sphere is, here, once again understood in that aspect presented by Arendt when, following Aristotle, she appeals to the human being as ζῶον πολιτικόν, the political animal, whose nature is realised through the faculties of acting and speaking in contradistinction to violence.¹ My purpose, then, is to indicate in the following some of the ways in which Goebbels's work can be understood as an engagement with these Arendtian positions, and to demonstrate some of the ways in which reading Goebbels through Arendt can assist in elucidating the antirepresentational political aspirations of his practice. In particular, I hope to show how Goebbels's defense of the political value of "spontaneity", which he associates with the creative capacity of things and people to enact the unordained and new, finds its counterpart in Arendt's concept of natality, and with it traces a lineage back, via Kant, to the particular experience of freedom discovered by modernity to subsist in aesthetic judgment. To that end, I will begin by sketching an episode which denotes, early in Goebbels's career, his sensitivity to the conditions whereby performance enters into the public sphere, before offering a more detailed explanation of Arendt's treatment of this latter concept. I shall then turn to a close examination of one of Goebbels's later works, *Stifters Dinge* (2007a).

Goebbels's oeuvre provides numerous iterations of the double problem presented by Arendt in her account of the Eichmann trial scene: that of reattaching the speaker to his statements, which, once given, float reproducibly free to circulate with lives of their own; and that of the necessity for the witness to attest himself in words that predate his entry into the space of appearance. In many cases, this is achieved through Goebbels's extensive use of acousmatic voices—voices separated electronically from their source bodies—such as, for example, in the opening sequence of the 2012 “musictheatre” piece,² *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, during which a mantra chanted by a group of teenaged girls and young women (“Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right.”) simultaneously issues from speakers in recorded male and female voices that break across the space (the voices are those of Ulay and Abramović and are excerpted from their 1982 sound work, *Bioguarde*). Of the use of acousmatic voices, Goebbels quotes Helga Finter to explain:

The recorded voice suggests to the spectator the construction of presence-effects, since he perceives the spoken words as being addressed to him. This can be attributed to the acousmatic status of such a voice, the source of which remains invisible. The spectator will thus connect what he hears with what he sees in order then to formulate hypotheses about motivation and causality. (Finter, quoted in Goebbels 2015, 6)

But this process is pursued most diligently in the 2007 “no man show”, *Stifters Dinge*—Stifter's Things—which not only confronts its audiences with the problem of disappearance through the inclusion of many recorded voices of the dead—Malcolm X, Claude Lévi-Strauss and William Burroughs, as well as early anthropological recordings of unnamed voices from Papua New Guinea, South America and Greece—but which, excepting the fleeting entrance of two technicians in the opening minutes, banishes human performers from the stage entirely, replacing them as protagonists with “non-anthropomorphic machines and objects” evocative of a dehumanised world: “elements of nature” such as fog, water, ice, tree branches; and “elements of the *mise-en-scène*” including pipes, lights, screens, projected images and mechanised pianos (Goebbels 2015, 6). In thus staging human absence, *Stifters Dinge* extends the Arendtian concern for public “appearance” to non-human actors to pose the question of the kind of relationship human beings might have with a world they cause to vanish upon their entry into it—a world which must appear to them, like the voices of the lost, always in the guise of testimony.

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Goebbels's career began, as he recalled during a 2014 Melbourne interview with the ABC Radio National presenter Michael Cathcart, approximately ten years after the Eichmann trial:

MC: Let's go back and talk about your earlier work. So in the 1970s you were co-founder of a group whose name means something like “So-called radical left-wing orchestra”. Is that right? [...] Tell us about this group.

HG: I was part of a spontaneous movement in Frankfurt in the early seventies which brought up politicians like Joschka Fischer, for example, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who

founded later the Green Party. But that was in the seventies when we were squatting houses. I lived in a squat house for example with Joschka Fischer in those days, and we tried to create a music which is as engaged as the movement but which also doesn't denunciate music just as a message-transporting instrument. So we tried to make music with a political ambition. We didn't try to make political music, if you know the difference... we would never have called ourselves "Left Radical Brass Band", but somebody announced us in a teach-in as "Left Radical Brass Band"—this was before we had a title—so we thought, OK, now we are the "So-called Left Radical Brass Band".

(Goebbels 2014)

Further information emerges in other interviews and writings. In an interview with John Tusa for BBC Radio 3 in 2003:

JT: But was it entirely serious? Or again, did that [name] indicate a certain distancing from really high ground radicalism?

HG: Yes, and from any fundamentalist position, either musical or political, yes.

(Goebbels 2003)

And in 1996, Goebbels related the following episode during a forum chaired by Alan Read at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London:

I remember very well when this orchestra—more connected to the spontaneous political scene before the Green Party was formed—played at a demonstration. There was another orchestra coming down the street—from a dogmatic communist faction—and they were really walking 'straight forward' they had the note-stands 'straight forward' and they played 'straight forward' in a strict four/four beat; in contrast we were very chaotic, had more of a 'free-jazz' sort of feeling; so we started to undermine their sound a little bit as they were passing by; and they were so pissed off by our way of playing—not by the meaning of our words—that they came and smashed our instruments. (Goebbels 1996, 54)

In this composite anecdote, one observes the telling of a story by an artist who, at decade-long intervals, returns to the same autobiographical ground in order to express the continuity of his practice. In this tale, certain concerns are clear: the nature of the relationship between performance and political life, the connection between authority and the naming power of language, and the contestation of public space through an opposition of bodily ways of moving. Understood as an artistic origin story, this anecdote may serve, then, to foreground in any examination of Goebbels's later works, a distinction that expresses itself here in the contrast between the two groups: on the one hand, the "chaotic", "spontaneous" energy of the So-Called Left Radical Brass Band and, on the other, the disciplined seriousness of the communist orchestra. This distinction, which lies between "political music" and "music with a political ambition", disassociates the political effectiveness of performance from its didactic capacity, its power to act as a conduit or instrument through which messages or truths might be conveyed, and instead

locates it in its sheer appearance as a *thing*. For the “music which is as engaged as the movement”, or the “music with a political ambition”, adjectivally unsupplemented, manifests its own volition, and thus emerges as a political protagonist in its own right. Politics here appears precisely in the guise described by Arendt in her lecture “Freedom and Politics” where she observes that the presence of freedom in human societies “needed a common public space [...] a politically organized world, in other words, into which each of the free-men could insert himself” (Arendt 1960, 29). That is, politics appears in the unpredictable moment of engagement between bodies, in the moment in which the So-Called Left Radical Brass Band, spilling into the street, chooses to confront the other, and not as something that, in wishing to deny the living encounter, passes through bodies in the execution of a script written elsewhere and in advance.

Substantially, the distinction drawn here by Goebbels registers also as a contrast between two procedures for inclusion: to be a member of the communist orchestra, the listener is told, means to conform to the strictness of an ordained rhythm; whereas the more polyphonic inclusion elaborated by the So-called Left Radical Brass Band emerges from the “Sponti” scene of 1970s Frankfurt and gains its motivation, as Goebbels reflects later in the Tusa interview, from this movement’s ambition “not to exclude anything” but to connect with “the other qualities we try to develop”—ways of living, cultural possibilities, ways of making political protests—and therefore to regard the making of music as an extension of a common spirit (Goebbels 2003). Paul Hockenos describes how the “Sponti turn” in Frankfurt involved rejecting the implicit authoritarianism of party political association in favour of a decentralized ethic:

At no time did the Spontis ever have a party platform, party membership cards, membership lists, an official central organ, or even an organization name [...] [B]eing a Sponti meant, first of all, *not* belonging to a dogmatic political organization. (Hockenos 2008, 112)

If the Spontis viewed traditional political agitation as encouraging individuals to assent *pro tempore* to a hierarchical discipline for the sake of a promised future liberty, they themselves refused this deferment, and instead sought impatiently to achieve this promise in the present. To be a Sponti, therefore, “meant not to be a Trotskyist, Maoist or communist party member” (Georg Dick, in Hockenos 2008, 112), but to turn one’s attention to the structures of human relations and to try to find collective modes of interaction which could respect, rather than curtail, the self-determination of individuals and their potential development as whole persons. Likewise, Goebbels has throughout his career expressed a desire to foster, in the development of his works, collaborative and non-stratified relationships among artists and between artists and audiences: such relationships of equality, he suggests, are unlikely to be realized within the “centralizing” spaces of “institutions, which are not prepared for these given their gravitational forces and hierarchical structures” (Goebbels 2015, 58). Goebbels’s artistic practice can thus potentially be traced back to this movement, which, in establishing co-ops and squat houses, and conducting teach-ins and decision-making assemblies on the bases of participatory self-government and the right of everybody to speak, endeavoured to create spaces in which collaborative life might be realized; a project that was not so much a withdrawal from the political sphere (as violent street

confrontations with police over the squats attested) as a recasting of its boundaries—what Jacques Rancière (2001) has termed “litigation”, or the reclamation as “the space of circulating” of “the space of circulation” (¶22).

This points us back to the public sphere and to Arendt, who, despite Rancière’s critique (a critique anticipated by others: see Benhabib 1992, 75), does not always envisage the public sphere in terms of a particular political model or “way of life that is proper to those who are destined for it” (Rancière 2001, ¶3), but argues also that the freedom of the public sphere might be thought in terms of the vanishing figure of an “apparition”, a “lost treasure” or a “mirage” that appears only when a social order is challenged (Arendt [1961] 2006, 4). It is this reading of Arendt that Goebbels aligns himself with when, in his collection of essays *Aesthetics of Absence*, he claims “I am interested in the public sphere” (Goebbels 2015, 13). *Against* this conception of politics, the brutality of the communist orchestra can be seen as the actualisation of violence implicit in the will to maintain a certain spatial order: that of forward progress; but also that in which there is a repetition, a doubling or tripling of elements rather than their opening out to mutual visibility. The “straight forward” sound is doubled by the “straight forward” march, and doubled again by the “straight forward” note-stands. It is the potential for disruption of this tight control of the relations between things, this “strict” bodily disposition, that enrages the communists—the “way of playing” rather than “the meaning of our words”.

Finally, one can observe in this episode a suspicion, on Goebbels’s part, of *naming*, that appears intrinsically entwined with these other concerns. In the very name of the “So-called Left Radical Brass Band” appears an ironic detachment from language, a distrust in its ability to catch the truth of *things*. Goebbels’s description of his band’s music as “spontaneous” or (tellingly) “more [...] free” in comparison to that of the “dogmatic” communist orchestra, suggests active potentiality, a sentiment he elsewhere counterintuitively expresses as a desire for “absence”, an urge to avoid “the things we expect, the things we have seen, the things we have heard, the things that are usually done on stage” (Goebbels 2015, 5). Instead, Goebbels seeks, quoting Elias Canetti, “To spend the rest of one’s life only in completely new places...To burn everything one has begun. To go to countries whose languages one can never master” (quoted in Goebbels 2015, 5). This defense of spontaneity carries the suggestion that the “forwardness” of the note-stands is the element that disposes all of the others, leading them on, so that the rhythm of the music and of the marching bodies is subjugated to it and put to its use, becoming an illustration or reinforcement in the present of something already written in the past. Elsewhere, Goebbels decries the tyranny of “texts, which above all want to make announcements rather than maintain an artistic reality” (Goebbels 2015, 83); but this hegemony of writing and its order is also shown, in this scene, to end in and depend on a pre-linguistic enactment of corporeal force, which seeks to smash all alternative rhythms and means of articulation.

Yet insofar as Goebbels, in inheriting these Arendtian categories, can be biographically situated against this precise twentieth-century political moment, it is perhaps also helpful to step back and remember that spontaneity has been a political value in modernity at least since the moment that Kant, in establishing grounds for the appreciation of beauty in the *Critique of Judgment*,

distinguished between the beautiful and that which we find merely sensorially agreeable, connecting the former to the public sphere and grounding it in the representations of the imagination:

For as to the agreeable we allow everyone to be of a mind of his own, no one requiring others to agree with his judgment of taste. But in a judgment of taste about beauty we always require others to agree. Insofar as judgments about the agreeable are merely private, whereas judgments about the beautiful are put forward as having general validity (as being public), taste regarding the agreeable can be called taste of sense, and taste regarding the beautiful can be called taste of reflection [...]. (Kant [1790] 1987, §8.214)

Indeed, it is precisely the quality of “spontaneity” that Kant ascribes, in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, both to the multiform diversity of material existence as it appears to the subject—the obdurate persistence of things in apprehension even “without [...] a determinate concept of an object” (§22.241)—and to the faculty of the imagination, whose role is to refer the world’s contents to the subject’s cognition, and which Kant describes as manifesting a creative capacity “not taken as reproductive [...] but as productive and spontaneous” (§22.240); another word for this quality is “freedom”.

In Arendt, as I have already hinted, this value surfaces as “natality”, “the freedom to call something in to being which did not exist before” (Arendt [1961] 2006, 150) or the capacity to begin something new, and it is possible to discern two distinct treatments of this principle in Arendt’s characterisations of the public sphere, which appear and run side by side. The first of these casts political participation in terms of a retreat or emergence from theatrical illusion. But this characterisation is also described as the emergence *into* a mutual visibility, and gives way for Arendt to a second, in which the public sphere is outlined as having a performative dimension.

An example of the former line in Arendt’s thinking appears in the Preface to *Between Past and Future*, which she opens by quoting the French poet René Char—who, in attempting to distil the experience of his generation’s struggle during the German occupation, reflected on the surprising discovery made by those who took part in the Resistance,

that he who ‘joined the Resistance, *found* himself,’ that he ceased to be ‘in quest of [himself] without mastery, in naked dissatisfaction,’ that he no longer suspected himself of ‘insincerity,’ of being ‘a carping, suspicious actor of life,’ that he could afford ‘to go naked’ [...] stripped of all masks—of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself in his psychological reactions against society [...]. (Arendt [1961] 2006, 4)

In ceasing to be actors, Arendt writes, the members of the resistance had begun to act, to “become ‘challengers,’” and to “create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear” (4).

Here, Arendt appears initially to defer to a long tradition of anti-theatrical thought whose impulse is also discernible, for example, in Habermas's account of the representative public sphere (see Habermas 1989 and 1992) and which rests ultimately on a fear of credulity, since the insubstantial forms of the theatre are viewed as dangerous not merely because they are false (which in itself signifies only a lack of plenitude) but because their charismatic force leads them to be believed. In Arendt's formulation, the fear of credulity inspires the recovery of an extra-theatrical authenticity that contests social control: in taking off those masks "which society assigns to its members" the members of the Resistance "find" themselves, unconcealed, in a truer, wider environment undistorted by fictions of role. The unexpectedness and rarity of this discovery—which Arendt describes as an "age-old treasure" of the order of "Unicorns and fairy queens" (Arendt [1961] 2006, 4–5)—reveals the difficulty of breaking the theatrical spell. But the fear of credulity is also not complete in Arendt: in her work, the lost treasure of revolution surfaces periodically throughout history as "the innermost story of the modern age" (4) and, moreover, is each time discovered afresh by the people themselves. Thus Arendt emphasizes that the members of the resistance had "taken the initiative upon themselves" (4) and, in so doing, commenced something new, namely, the resurrection of the public sphere as an active principle.

Is there not something incongruous, though, in this description of a "public realm" as something so elusive, both as an iteration of a phenomenon that is hardly perceptible to history and also because it appears, in the nature of its revolutionary struggle, as something that must be "hidden from the eyes of friend and foe" (3)? For in speaking of something "public" we usually mean that it is visible. In what sense, then, does this public sphere maintain its connection to visibility—characterised, as it is, as the concealed and the unnoticed?

Only in the public sphere, writes Arendt in *The Human Condition*, can individuals demonstrate their "specifically human quality" of uniqueness (Arendt [1958] 1998, 22), of being able to appear to one another as irreducible to the generality of the species-life by virtue of a distinct life story:

This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life. This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order. (Arendt [1958] 1998, 19)

In *Between Past and Future*, this rectilinear movement is also the path of thought that runs transverse to the colliding vectors of past and future, along the "non-time-space" of which the thinker treads deliberately back and forth, and in which gap alone can he (*sic*) appear as "a 'he' [...]" and not a 'somebody' [...] in the full actuality of his concrete being" (Arendt [1961] 2006, 12–13). In the Eichmann account, Arendt similarly identifies this "non-time-space" with the maintenance of individual conscience and the refusal of its co-option by "common sense" or the authority of the leader. Janelle Reinelt (2015) sums this insight up neatly: the public sphere is the space in which the "who" and not the "what" of a human being can appear through her capacity for actions that exceed the conditioning forces of natural necessity or the momentum of human affairs. In beginning something new, something "which was not given" (Arendt [1961] 2006, 150), human beings can aspire to the only immortality of which they are capable, namely, remembrance: which,

through History, admits into the company of eternal nature only those mortals who have distinguished themselves through their deeds and words. But because “who-ness” is coeval with its own enactment, it must come as “a revelation and often as a surprise, even to the subject herself” (Reinelt 2015).

Those who discard their masks and step into this space are no longer hiding: indeed, everything is visible. They are “naked”; all may scrutinize their choices and courage and, therefore, to act in this sphere entails an acceptance of responsibility for one’s passage through the world. The *opportunity* for each to act in this “naked” way is, for Arendt, the very essence of democracy. But this is not the case passively, but actively; there are always those who desire to banish citizens from the public sphere and “to deprive them of the time necessary for participation in common matters” (Arendt [1958] 1998, 222). The democracy of the public sphere must be claimed by its members, and sustained, rather than understood as an already open space into which one enters with prior “rights” established.

Yet it is in this activity and becoming-visible that the second sense of Arendt’s descriptions of the public sphere as “a space of appearances” and “a kind of theater” begins to emerge. For the metaphor that Arendt uses for this activity is precisely the virtuosity of the performing artist:

Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of *virtù*, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of *fortuna*. Its meaning is best rendered by “virtuosity,” that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it. (Arendt [1961] 2006, 151)

Politics, understood as the disclosure of human unicity, implies both an enactment—a claiming—and context of plurality. For visibility demands to be seen; human beings cannot aspire to remembrance without witnesses to their words and deeds. Moreover, without the presence of equals to disturb the inexorable movement of the individual will to its execution, the special quality of human action remains indiscernible. Arendt distinguishes between the performing and the creative arts in the same way that she distinguishes between the nature of human beings and of the gods: the demiurge, toiling in solitude to shape the substances of the primal world, anticipates no interference with the execution of his designs, which become the living creation; but to religion and the poets, he is veiled behind namelessness, or behind many names, which notify his subsumption into *function* (Arendt [1958] 1998, 22, 23 n1). She writes: “Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it” (22–23). Likewise, the creative artist herself disappears behind the completeness of her works, which exhibit an ideal of a perfection of will, and which announce her mastery of her “doings from beginning to end” (220). But the performing artist does not so disappear and is not so subsumed by function; rather, she enacts her own special quality unsubordinated to any judgment that respects an end or *telos*. Arendt makes the connection explicit:

Performing artists—dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like—need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their “work”, and both depend upon others for the performance itself. (Arendt [1961] 2006, 152)

Hence, to discard one’s masks and to step forward in one’s nakedness is not to leave the theatre. On the contrary, one still *performs*; only the configuration of the spectacle has changed. If, in their authenticity, Char and the members of the Resistance momentarily abandoned a stage of one kind, they did so only to establish a different “space of appearances” where, regardless, “they could *act*” (my emphasis). In this sense, Arendt’s casting of politics as “a kind of theater where freedom could appear” requires not so much the rejection of theatricality as the reorganising of the theatrical event, and a redistribution of the positions it allows, in order to stage a mutual showing of virtuosity in which everyone participates—or, at least, everyone free.



In light of the foregoing, it is worth turning now to *Stifters Dinge* and to Goebbels’s arguments in *Aesthetics of Absence* and elsewhere for “Theatre as a ‘thing in itself’” (Goebbels 2015, 2), or for theatre as “an art form, that like a painting, or like a sculpture, or like an installation [...] has its secret [...] its possible space of imagination for the one who’s looking at it” (Goebbels 2014); and to his acknowledgement of Cathcart’s proposition that:

when we listen to a piece of music we don’t say, ‘Well, now I have a proposition about the world that is demonstrated by that particular key change.’ We just experience the music in and for itself. (Goebbels 2014)

For this “secret” of the artwork, which appears in its “thingness” and “itself-ness” rather than its power to represent (important *topoi* in Goebbels’s work and of postdramatic theatre generally) is precisely the virtuosity described by Arendt.

“Thingness”, of course, is also reflected in both the title of *Stifters Dinge* (*Stifter’s Things* in English) and the non-name of the So-called Left Radical Brass Band. But “thingness” is also an apt word to apply to the writings of Adalbert Stifter, the nineteenth-century Austrian realist whose work, like that of Arendt and also Gertrude Stein, serves as a touchstone for Goebbels in multiple pieces (not least *Stifters Dinge*). If Stein’s remarkable experiments, as Sianne Ngai (2005) has noted, at times tend exhaustingly toward “taxonomic analysis and differentiation” (253), a similar deliberate dullness is evident in Stifter, whose lengthy specifications of the forms of the natural and human worlds are often so thorough as to overshadow the pretexts for his characters’ entry into them. Stifter’s laborious commitment to the enumeration of particularity is clear, for example, in the title of his 1853 collection of novellas, *Many-coloured Stones* (see Sammons 1989), an image suggesting at once mundanity and the joy of the collector in the special qualities of objects. Of this author, Friedrich Hebbel wrote that “he obviously had Adam and Eve in mind as his readers, because only

they could be unfamiliar with the things he describes extensively and in depth” (quoted in Goebbels 2015, 27). W. H. Auden, too, marveled at Stifter’s “breathtaking risks of appalling banalities [...] a sort of fugal repetition of descriptive details” (Auden 1945, viii). In the present context, it is worth noting that the astonishing pressure of these details, which in Stifter’s writings perpetually interrupt the forward momentum of the plot and threaten to escape its bounds, finds a surprisingly accurate echo in another context within Arendt’s explanation of the importance to ancient history of the isolated moment:

What is difficult for us to realize is that the great deeds and works of which mortals are capable, and which become the topic of historical narrative, are not seen as parts of either an encompassing whole or a process; on the contrary, the stress is always on single instances and single gestures [...]. The subject matter of history is these interruptions—the extraordinary, in other words. (Arendt [1961] 2006, 42)

And indeed Arendt, in her own unpublished review of Stifter’s novella *Rock Crystal*, names Stifter as “the greatest landscape-painter in literature”, calling attention to his “extraordinary precision” and his “distrust of generalities, of the very quality of an abstract word”—

and this to such a degree that, for him, the word *horse* is already too much of an abstraction. He will never write of a rider on a horse but rather of a certain well-described man on a dapple-gray. (Arendt 2007, 111)

Goebbels himself incorporates a number of excerpts from Stifter into *Stifters Dinge*, which may also be described as a “landscape piece” in that, physically, it presents a varied stage topography filled with a rich flora of objects over whose features the audience’s attention ranges, and because the marginalization of human figures permits a scenic tempo to displace “drama” in the progression of the work. Most prominently, Goebbels includes excerpts from the “Ice Tale”—a fragmentary piece that describes the abandonment of a journey through a forest due to the onset of immense cold (Stifter [1846] 1997). The tale appears in two separate moments: in the first, a recorded voice “reads” the text aloud while, on stage, the audience watches the colours of a projected image slowly change; in the second, the text of the “Ice Tale” itself becomes a collection of “things” as its words and letters are projected across the uneven surfaces of the stage space, evoking, in their broken whiteness, the snow and ice of the storm.³ This is obviously an encounter with sublimity, and Johannes Birringer (2013) confirms this in his review of *Stifters Dinge* when he writes: “Stifter’s narrative voice evokes the Kantian sublime, the amazement and terror that might grip us when facing the imponderable and abysmal, threatening us to lose ourselves ‘into that thing...’” (6). Yet the complex mood of Stifter’s text can be caught also in those places where, counter-intuitively, there appears the presence of something else. For as well as awe and terror, there appear smaller, happier emotions—a countervailing domesticity and interest in the particular object:

To keep the fir tree beside my small summer bench from being damaged, someone had knocked down the ice from it with long poles as far as he could reach, and when the top of the tree seemed about to tilt, my other servant, Kajetan, had climbed up to it, carefully knocked down the ice, and then tied around the highest

branches two barn ropes which he let down and shook from time to time. They knew this tree was dear to me and also very beautiful, with green branches so thickly bunched together that an enormous weight of ice had been clinging to it which might easily split the tree or at least break its boughs. (Stifter 1997, 54)

The tension conjured in this image, between the beauty that inheres in the closeness of the “green branches so thickly bunched together” and the “enormous weight [...] which might easily split” stems from the expression of a personal preference, which has at its origin a first turning of attention, a direction of the gaze towards a depth which is not open and ultimately enveloping of the subject, but finitely circumscribed, receding within the interior of a defined shape. And in writing about the scenes in which these texts appear in his works, Goebbels as often invokes feelings of pleasure—of “animation”, “relief”, “delight” or of being “untroubled” (Goebbels 2015, 5–6; Goebbels 2011)—as he does of dread, fear, or the strangeness of alterity.

Writing about the origins of *Stifters Dinge*, Goebbels observes that “[t]he starting point of these experiments was initially to attempt an absence of performers onstage” (Goebbels 2015, 28). Elsewhere, he writes of the “narcissistic” disposition of theatrical spectators who look to find themselves reflected in the human figures of actors or other performers, or even in constructed anthropomorphic objects that, because they “move in a human-like manner” are able to serve as “projection surface[s] for our [...] desire” (6, 31, 32). Instead, Goebbels states that *Stifters Dinge* arose “from an experimental desire to develop something on stage which we cannot use as a mirror [...] to assemble things on stage which remain strange to us” (32):

Hence, *Stifters Dinge* became a ‘no-man show’, in which curtains, lights, music and space—all the elements that usually prepare, support, illustrate and serve a theatrical performance and its performers, become (in a kind of justice long deferred) the protagonists, together with five pianos, metal plates, stones, water, fog, rain and ice. (Goebbels 2015, 5)

Instead of a human performer, in the middle of the theatrical space in *Stifters Dinge* is a rectangular pool, divided into three sections roughly the size and dimensions of cinema screens, around which the forest of all of the other “protagonists”—the tree branches, pianos, pipes and plates—are arranged. But this reflective surface does not, like Narcissus’s pond, throw back the image of the viewer who bends towards it, but rather is angled obliquely away from the audience and, over the course of the performance, casts up its own secrets, in shapes that insinuate the indifference of a de-anthropomorphised world: blocks of light that pass over it, almost but not quite like clouds; the illuminated puckering of “raindrops” hitting its surface, which, side-lit in the darkness, look quite like the reflected twinkling of stars; fog that bubbles up from dry ice pellets in popping spurts and seems to thicken the water, nearly resembling a liquid marsh belching gas from its depths. These impressions, in their “nearly-ness” and “quite-ness”, seem to point to the strategy in Goebbels’s work that Corey Wakeling (2017) (following Todorov)⁴ has identified as “signification but not representation”: the recollection of absent things by present things, which evoke them without being reducible to them. In *Aesthetics of Absence*, as already noted, Goebbels writes of “a confrontation with an unseen image or an unheard word or sound” (Goebbels 2015, 6) and also

the possibility for the spectator of “an artistic experience [that] does not have to result exclusively from a direct encounter, but can also be thought of as a triangular, indirect, non-immediate relationship with a mediatised third-party” (Goebbels 2015, 85). In this aqueous central void (which is not one), then, one discovers encapsulated the sink into which representation falls—the fluid inexactitude of being vis-à-vis what is supposedly missing. The pool does *not* reproduce the world as it might appear in the absence of human beings (which action would involve the illogicality of regarding the spectator’s gaze as the absence of a gaze), but introduces things (squares of light, droplets, bubbles) that, because they cannot be anything other than what they are, are able to stand as symbols, not of what is missing, but of the thought of absence itself.

This scenic arrangement of water amidst a forest of things is subsequently doubled with the appearance (via projection onto a gauze curtain) of Jacob Isaackszoon van Ruisdael’s *Swamp*.⁵ Like the other painting appearing significantly in *Stifters Dinge*, Paolo Uccello’s *Night Hunt*,⁶ *Swamp* similarly features trees which perspectively encircle an emptiness (in this case a marsh); just discernible near—but not quite *at*—the vanishing point of this painting is a tiny human figure. With this doubling, the noises that pervade *Stifters Dinge*—humming wires, a scraping stone, the sharp *snap* of a light shutter closing, the deep *blat* of a flap hitting a pipe-end, trickling water, discordant piano phrases—suddenly resonate as the unheard sounds of deep nature—of nature by itself. Even the recognisably human music of a Bach piece (the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*), playing on one of the five automated pianos, registers a sense of loss as the keys visibly move up and down by themselves, revealing the invisibility of the player, her disappearance from the present. It is clear that this painting synechdochically reciprocates, on the level of the image, *Stifters Dinge* itself. *Swamp* is more overtly evocative of sublimity than *Night Hunt*—an overwhelming and foreboding vastness of space within which a single individual vanishes into the grotesqueries of the landscape—and yet in writing about the compositional method of *Stifters Dinge*, Goebbels uses vocabulary that refers more clearly to the “inspiring principle [...] fully manifest only in the performing act” (Arendt [1961] 2006, 151) than to the paralysis of terror:

When there isn’t anyone on stage any longer [...], when nothing is being shown, then the spectators must discover things themselves. The audience’s delight in making these discoveries is enabled only by the absence of the performers, who usually artfully fulfil the task of demonstrating and focus the audience’s attention on themselves. Only their absence creates the gap, which renders this freedom and pleasure possible. (Goebbels 2015, 5–6)

“Freedom”, and “pleasure” in discovery are exactly the terms used by Arendt to describe the subject’s experience of action: a pleasure only possible in this case in the roving motion of perception over objects where, in Kantian terms, “no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule” (Kant [1790] 1987, §9.217). This *rule* is that which determines the exact placement of the “pure line of the horizon” (indistinguishable in the image) towards which, as The State Hermitage Museum’s website (2019) informs viewers, the lost traveller in *Swamp* “seems to be trudging in search of firm ground”.

What is *missing* in Goebbels's "adaptation" of *Swamp*—and what connects his adaptation back to the "freedom" and "pleasure" of action—is the human figure near the centre of the image. Moreover, a similar absence is apparent in the decelerated motion through which Goebbels slowly reveals to the audience small glimpses of Paolo Uccello's *Night Hunt*. This painting, which bends all of its figures toward the vanishing point of a great chase, is projected in a late scene by Goebbels across the otherwise darkened space of the theatre, catching the surfaces of some of the objects it contains: tree branches, mechanized pianos, water, light-stands, speakers. Here and there a fragment of Uccello's image is reflected indistinctly back, but for the most part the work remains invisible until a small screen, suspended from two wires and a pulley system, descends and begins a crawling circuit of the visual field. As this opaque screen travels around the projected image and catches the projected light, some of the *Night Hunt's* features become visible: first, animals running—apparently directionlessly—deer and dogs moving along jumbled and seemingly purposeless vectors; then other bodies, which quickly disintegrate into a series of impressions—a head, a tail, a torso, legs, a tree stump, flowers, a hand clutching the shaft of a spear, the eye of a horse.

Notable in this movement is the fact that the screen, and thus the implied gaze, circles around but never arrives at the vanishing point of Uccello's perspectival composition, the goal of the chase—and yet, when one examines the original, it is not clear what this goal is. *Is* it a deer? For in the centre of Uccello's picture the animals recede amongst the trees until it is uncertain whether the furthest figures are deer or dogs; following this line back to the foreground, one finds both species mingled together and now also intermixed with both men and horses, so that again it is not clear who is chasing whom. There is no final figure that leads and thus gives order to the hunt. Deer, dogs, horses and men all appear before and after one another, yet all equally streaming toward a quarry that remains undefined; it is not hard to imagine this line extending forever, a continuous locomotion of bodies in pursuit of a *purpose*, which would allow them finally to cease all of this exertion and rest in an authoritative determination of their connection to one another—a purpose towards which each body moves but always just falls short of achieving. Figured in the spectacle of this painting's great hunt, then, is the restless motion of being's inequivalence to its concept: a motion arrested by Goebbels, who, in unmooring the image from the referential anchor of its visual focal point, allows the flotsam of its details to float free. Untethered from the gestalt of the whole, things lose their relation to one another: deer and dogs; but also body parts, which become animated in their independence, yet also inscrutably desiring—so that the fist holding the spear seems to do so for no other reason than to grasp it eternally. The spear, too, shorn of utility, ceases to be a *spear*; the trees of the forest loose themselves from the regimentation of their mathematical espacement and emerge promiscuously from the background, no longer holding to their function as a perspectival grid against which the movement of agents can be measured, but asserting themselves as things in themselves which, as the screen moves across them, gather our attention just as much as those other objects that we now attend to: an ear, a blade of grass, a face—or even the lines and colours of the brushwork itself, which, too, shake themselves free of the shapes that they make up, to appear in the unique complexity of their textures, liberated from the demand to represent something other than themselves. They cease to be "actors", and become visible.

This excision of the centre which bends everything else towards it (observed here on the level of the image) becomes a principle of much of Goebbels's work: the diffusion of attention over the entirety of the sensory field, rather than its capture by a single organising element. Goebbels says: "Literally, an empty centre stage [means] the absence of a visually centralised focus, but also as the absence of what we call a clear theme, topic, of a play, or a message" (Goebbels 2011; cf. Goebbels 2015, 5). Thus, in the "staged concert" *Eislermaterial*,⁷ Goebbels arranges the orchestra around three edges of the stage, leaving the centre vacant and asking the musicians to play without the guidance of a conductor (the conductor's position is occupied by a small statue of Eisler, as if to emphasise his absence; see Goebbels 2015, 3); a similar moment occurs in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* when the Carmina Slovenica choir, in order to sing the *Las Huelgas Codex's* "Benedicamus Domino", likewise positions itself along three sides of the performance space, behind a ring of white tables, leaving the interior unoccupied. And the empty centre is, of course, the generative premise of this "no-man show" or "performative installation without performer" that is *Stifters Dinge* (Goebbels 2015, 5, 27).

What one witnesses, then, in both this scene involving *Night Hunt* and the earlier one involving *Swamp*, is a double dissolution: the disappearance of a disappearance that therefore also marks a re-emergence to view. On the level of content, the denial of the vanishing point causes the image to break down into its minutest details. The hunt ceases, bodies and textures shake themselves loose, the infinite line expands to a volume. But as each image flattens out, it also becomes impossible to ignore that aspect of the representation that reaches out into space to become a *thing* amongst the landscape of branches, stones, water, and ice. Or rather, two things, which now also separate from one another: for the projected image is also a "screen", which catches the "light". Notably, in their intersection, each renders the other visible: the small screen, stumbling brightly around the features of Uccello's composition, reveals the hidden presence of the projection of the work, reflecting its light partially back to the viewer; reciprocally, the flux of the projection illuminates the screen itself and reveals it to be a surface inequivalent to the forms that pass across it. Light, here, is disclosed in its double nature: just as the details of the image separate from one another, so one observes—in the transience of those impressions from *Night Hunt* that, appearing, soon slide back into darkness as the screen moves on—light separated from the information it carries. Light in its mediality: as that which enables objects to be seen, but is in itself invisible. Or rather (like all mediality), as that which is the only thing that can be seen: to use Hans-Thies Lehmann's phrase, as "the phenomenality of visibility that is blinding" (Lehmann 2006, 164).

Additionally, though, in the roving motion of the screen around the theatrical space, is it not possible to see reflected the wandering motion of the eye itself: a gaze that, as if it were tracing the lines of thickly clustered branches from the comfort of a summer bench, winds anfractuously inward from the limit of a circumference? Goebbels describes how, with the separation of elements, the audience is granted a "freedom of perception" (Goebbels 2015, 11) that enables "the onlooker's eyes [to] wander from left to right, from background to the front, from this scene to the next" (11). Thematized here, then, is aesthetic judgment itself, or the restlessness of conscience, the power of natality. For just as things reappear "in themselves" in this dissolution of content, this appearance is described by Goebbels in terms of pleasure and a reprieve from authority: "Audience

members," he writes, "often let me know afterwards with some relief: 'Finally, nobody on stage to tell me what to think'" (6).

Stifters Dinge thus at last returns us to the paradox of testimony offered by Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which demands that under conditions of modernity judgment must be dissevered from authority for justice to be served. In the postscript to her report, Arendt locates Eichmann's moral failing in his "lack of imagination", which led him to act "fully within the framework of the kind of judgment required of him [...] he did not have to fall back upon his 'conscience'" (Arendt [1963] 2006, 287, 293). The logical culmination of this bureaucratic mindset is "the rule of Nobody" under which subjects devolve into "functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery" (Arendt [1963] 2006, 289); a retreat from individual distinctness that in the twentieth century converges with unprecedented crimes whose target is the plurality of the human world, "an attack upon human diversity as such" (Arendt [1963] 2006, 268–9). In our own time, faced with other, similarly vast disappearances of the natural world and of culture, Goebbels's work meditates upon the likelihood that any attempts at justice will have to navigate related problems of representation. How is the case to be made for the vanished and vanishing; by whom and to whom? Arendt's diagnosis of the Eichmann trial's shortcomings was that the District Court of Jerusalem was ultimately unable to grasp such facts, including that Eichmann was a "Nobody": and hence, in failing to see nobody, compelled him clumsily to visibility.

Compared with this tenuous focal presence, the "empty centre" of Goebbels's compositions points to a different type of absence. This "other" absence is perceptible in Arendt's depiction, in the preface to *Between Past and Future*, of the public sphere as a gathering of equals around a table, at the head of which an empty place has been left. Quoting the men of the European resistance, she writes: "At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to sit down. The chair remains vacant, but the place is set" (Arendt [1961] 2006, 4). The empty chair is itself an invitation to agency that consists precisely in there being "no-one at the head",⁸ to which Goebbels adds that such "table parties" (which he stages quite literally in the opera *Landscape with Distant Relatives*) "are hence also invitations to the audience to figuratively find their own seat at the table" (Goebbels 2015, 14). In the presence of this absence or void, which Arendt also figures as a "mirage", a "fata morgana" or "an apparition of freedom" (Arendt [1961] 2006, 4) those gathered must create "that public space between themselves where freedom could appear" (4); this can occur to the extent that each gazes upon the invisible and describes, in their own terms, how this lost treasure appears.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Arendt [1961] 2006, 22–23. Referring to the example of the ancient Greek *polis*, Arendt writes: “The distinction was that the Greeks, living together in a polis, conducted their affairs by means of speech, through persuasion (πείθειν), and not by means of violence, through mute coercion. Hence, when free men obeyed their government, or the laws of the polis, their obedience was called *πειθαρχία*, a word which indicates clearly that obedience was obtained by persuasion and not by force.” By contrast: “Barbarians were ruled by violence and slaves forced to labor, and since violent action and toil are alike in that they do not need speech to be effective, barbarians and slaves were *ἄνευ λόγον*, that is, they did not live with each other primarily by means of speech.”

² Goebbels uses both “musictheatre” and “music-theatre” as terms for describing this and similar works. (See Goebbels 2015, 13; also www.heinergoebbels.com.)

³ Goebbels provides the text of this section of the “Ice Tale” in his Program Notes to *Stifters Dinge*: “Now we recognised the noise that we had heard earlier in the air; it was not in the air, it was close to us now. In the depths of the forest it resounded near us and came from the twigs and branches as they splintered and fell to the ground. It was all the more dreadful as everything else stood motionless. Not a twig, not a pine needle stirred in the whole glittering brightness, until after an ice-fall a branch would come crashing down. Then all was silent again. We listened and stared; I don’t know whether it was amazement or fear of driving deeper into that thing” (Goebbels 2007b).

⁴ See Todorov 1990, 69.

⁵ Circa 1660. Listed by the alternative title of *Marsh* on the website of the The State Hermitage Museum, St Peterburg (2019), and often also known as *A Wooded Marsh*. “Swamp” is the name given to the painting in the program notes for *Stifters Dinge*.

⁶ Also known as *The Hunt in the Forest*. c. 1460. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. “Night Hunt” is the name given to the painting in the program notes for *Stifters Dinge*.

⁷ First produced in May 1998 in Munich as part of the *Musica Viva Festival* and Hanns Eisler’s one hundredth birthday commemorations.

⁸ See Rancière 2001, ¶2.

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Biography

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