

‘Suddenly a Stranger Appears’ Walter Benjamin’s Readings of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre

FREDDIE ROKEM

ABSTRACT

My contribution to the the NTS issue on Theatre and Continental Philosophy discusses a particular aspect of the complex intellectual and creative dialogue between the work and thinking of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, beginning in 1929, the year they became close friends. Benjamin is no doubt the first critic of Brecht’s epic theatre, even planning to write a book about his artistic contributions. By examining the notion of the “Interruption” (*Die Unterbrechung*) and the sudden appearance of a stranger in three of Benjamin’s texts about Brecht’s epic theatre, I want to draw attention to Benjamin’s philosophical understanding of this ‘critical’ figure’ (the interrupting stranger), as one of the central aspects of the epic theatre. The essay is a prolegomenon for a more comprehensive study of this topic.

KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Epic theatre, Performance theory, Critical Theory, Interruption, Estrangement effect.

‘Suddenly a Stranger Appears’ Walter Benjamin’s Readings of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre

*Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!
Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*¹

This discovery (or estrangement) of situations is fostered through interruption of the actions. The most basic example: a family scene. Suddenly a stranger appears. The mother is just about to seize a bronze bust and hurl it at her daughter; the father is in the act of opening a window to call a policeman. At this moment, the stranger appears in the doorway. “Tableau” is what it would have been called around 1900. In other words, the stranger is confronted with the situation: troubled faces, an open window, the furniture in disarray. But there is a gaze before which even more ordinary scenes of middle-class life look almost equally startling.

Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre? II” (1939)²

The section in the so-called ‘second version’ of Walter Benjamin’s essay “What is Epic Theatre?”, published in 1939, called “The Interruption” (*Die Unterbrechung*), part of which is quoted in the second epigraph above, presents what Benjamin

1 Shakespeare, 1989, I, 5, ll. 164-167.

2 Benjamin, 2003a, 304-305. (Adjusted, F.R.). The German original: “Diese Entdeckung (Verfremdung) von Zuständen vollzieht sich mittels der Unterbrechung von Abläufen. Das primitivste Beispiel: eine Familienszene. Plötzlich tritt ein Fremder ein. Die Frau war gerade im Begriff, eine Bronze zu ergreifen, um sie nach der Tochter zu schleudern; der Vater im Begriff, das Fenster zu öffnen, um nach einem Schutzmann zu rufen. In diesem Augenblick erscheint in der Tür der Fremde. »Tableau« - wie man um 1900 zu sagen pflegte. Das heißt: Der Fremde wird mit dem Zustande konfrontiert; verstörte Mienen, offenes Fenster, verwüstetes Mobiliar. Es gibt aber einen Blick, vor dem auch gewohntere Szenen des bürgerlichen Lebens sich nicht so viel anders ausnehmen.” (Benjamin, 1977, 535)

considers to be a central feature of Bertolt Brecht's dramatic writing. Benjamin – the first critic to scrutinize the innovative character of Brecht's work in depth – analyzed the major components of Brecht's theatrical experiments, emphasizing in particular how the sudden appearance of a stranger creates a vital juncture between Critical Theory and Performance at a time of crisis. For Benjamin, this stranger is a 'critical figure' in two senses, simultaneously appearing as an embodied character on the stage, interrupting the actions of violence in what could, according to Benjamin, be an ordinary scene of middle-class life, while, at the same time, serving as a literary/theatrical 'trope' of *Verfremdung* itself – i.e. estrangement – drawing attention to the philosophical dimensions of Brecht's epic theatre.

The stranger is a 'critical figure' who besides its sudden appearance, interrupting violence, also empowers a critique (*Kritik*). For Benjamin this primarily means creating a direct involvement with a work of art, integrating it in new discursive formations, even transforming it into a program for social change, rather than, as in a traditional Kantian critique, objectifying it from an external position. Such a negotiating position can already be found in the exchange between Horatio and Hamlet – which I have quoted as my first epigraph – when Hamlet after ordering Horatio to swear, with the ghost as their witness, not to say a word about the strange things they have seen and heard, which (as Hamlet famously adds) cannot be "dreamt of in your philosophy." In this situation Hamlet tells Horatio that he should "therefore as a stranger give it welcome." This reinforces the sense of fatality concerning what happens when this 'thing', the ghost, who is the ultimate stranger, appears again tonight, already referred to in the first scene of the play: "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?"³

This, the second version of "What is Epic Theatre?" was one of the last texts Benjamin published during his life time. It appeared in the July-August 1939 issue of the Swiss journal *Mass und Wert*, a year before he committed suicide in the Spanish town of Portbou, on the border with France on the Mediterranean coast, fleeing the Nazis. The reason it is called 'the second version' is that already in 1931, when Benjamin and Brecht had been close friends for over a year and had no doubt discussed their work and ideas with each other on many occasions, Benjamin had written an essay with that name, which was more detailed than the version published in 1939, where the enigmatic stranger also appears. The earlier essay, only published posthumously, had at the time been accepted for publication in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, but was for 'editorial reasons' withdrawn just before its publication.

The figure of the interrupting stranger also appears in a lecture, "The Writer as Producer", which Benjamin wrote in April 1934 for a meeting in Paris of 'The Institute for the Study of Fascism' led by Arthur Koestler. Even if this lecture was apparently never delivered,⁴ it is certain that Benjamin brought it with him, together with his then not yet published essay on Kafka, when – in the summer of 1934 – he made his first of three extended visits (followed by additional visits in the summers of 1936 and 1938) to Svendborg, on the island of Fyn

3 Shakespeare, 1989, I, 1, ll. 21. See also Rokem, 2009.

4 Benjamin 1999a, note 1, 781.

in Denmark, which Brecht had made his exilic home after the Nazi takeover of power in Germany in February 1933. Benjamin mentions the essay in his first diary entry (from July 4, 1934) documenting his conversations with Brecht during his stay in Svendborg.⁵

These three essays – the two versions of “What is Epic Theatre?” and “The Writer as Producer” – which had been written several years apart, all include the same scene of domestic violence which is interrupted by a stranger. In what follows, I want to examine the slightly different contexts in which the stranger appears in these three texts, first by looking more closely at the 1939-version of “What is Epic Theatre?”, which is also the most concise, gradually going backwards to the earlier versions, towards the origins – perhaps even an *Ursprung* (origin) – of the ‘critical figure’ of the suddenly appearing stranger. This does however not mean that the 1939 version is the version which Benjamin himself would have considered as final or more definitive. Rather, it was the version he succeeded in publishing, just before the beginning of the Second World War; and, as I will point out later, the first version of “What is Epic Theatre?” from 1931 draws attention to certain features of Brecht’s writing and thinking, which are probably the most innovative.⁶ After discussing the three appearances of the suddenly appearing stranger, I will in closing briefly draw attention to two instances which are not connected to Brecht’s epic theatre, where Benjamin refers to the appearance of strangers.

In the 1939-version of “What is Epic Theatre?”, Benjamin introduces the passage on “The Interruption” by suggesting that at the same time as the Brechtian interruption produces astonishment (or wonder/amazement) – the *thaumazein* through which Aristotle claimed (in *Metaphysics* 982b12) “that men both now and at first originally began to philosophize,”⁷ – it aims at abolishing “the Aristotelean catharsis of emotions”.⁸ Thus, according to Benjamin, “instead of identifying with the protagonist the audience should learn to feel astonished at the circumstances under which he functions;”⁹ because, as he adds, “according to Brecht,” apparently referring to something Brecht had said, perhaps even directly quoting a conversation with him, this is achieved by the epic theatre being less concerned with “the development of the action than the representation of situations”¹⁰

This presents an additional conflict with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where the most important aspect of a tragedy is the development of an action, focusing

5 Benjamin, 1999b, 783

6 I will not try to speculate on how Benjamin’s difficulties of getting published during his life time affected his writing. However, Benjamin had a group of readers among his circle of friends, like Brecht, who read and discussed these essays with Benjamin himself. Benjamin wrote more than ten essays on Brecht and according to Wizesla (2009, 98ff) he planned to collect them in a book about Brecht. As many of Benjamin’s plans, it never materialized. It is also impossible to speculate how an earlier publication of Benjamin’s essays on Brecht, or even a book, would have influenced Brecht’s early or subsequent reception.

7 <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html> (accessed September 10, 2018)

8 Benjamin, 2003a, 304.

9 Benjamin, 2003a, 304.

10 Benjamin, 2003a, 304. In German: *Das epische Theater, meint Brecht, hat nicht so sehr Handlungen zu entwickeln, als Zustände darzustellen.* (Benjamin, 1977, 535)

on the process, rather than presenting situations or conditions (*Zustände darzustellen*) where the development of the action is arrested. Benjamin's opposition between the verb *entwickeln* (develop), accounting for what is usually translated as the "representation of an action" in Aristotle's *Poetics*, on the one hand, and *Zustände darzustellen* ("representation of situations") on the other, to characterize Brecht's method of 'presenting' (as I would prefer to translate *darzustellen* here) situations or conditions, on the other, points at the core of the theoretical issue at stake here. For Benjamin, who, like Brecht, opposed much in Aristotle, the verb *darzustellen* and the noun *Darstellung* are reserved for situations where presentation and representation (or rather a complex mixture of both) interact with each other.¹¹

Instead, Benjamin argues, the presentation of such *Zustände*, where actions in effect have been interrupted (or rather 'arrested'), is a crucial aspect of the epic theatre. This procedure, enabling us through astonishment "to discover situations [or conditions] for the first time" (*die Zustände erst einmal zu entdecken*) is according to Benjamin "fostered through interruption of the actions" (*Abläufen*, a term which also means 'procedures', as in a scientific experiment). To describe more exactly how the discovery of such situations takes place, Benjamin adds the word "*Verfremdung*" in parenthesis, which, in the published English translation is rendered as "defamiliarization", while the German word actually includes the root for 'stranger' (*Fremde*), thus referring more directly to an 'estrangement', 'making strange' or 'alienating' (and I have adjusted this in the quote in the epigraph), making room for the appearance of the stranger as the 'origin' for this estrangement. This is an important detail because Benjamin's basic 'example' for an interruption is the stranger, who suddenly appears in a room where the wife is about to throw a bronze bust at her daughter while the father is opening a window to call a policeman, describes a situation where there does not seem to be any specific motivation for such a sudden appearance, as opposed to the appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet*. The sudden appearance of the stranger, Benjamin concludes, creates a *tableau*, as it would – he significantly adds – be called "around 1900" (*um 1900*), the date in the title of Benjamin's book about his childhood (*Berliner Kindheit um 1900*).

The stranger first notices the older woman about to throw a bronze statue at a younger woman, presumably her daughter, while the man referred to as the father is about to open a window to call a policeman (*ein Schutzmann*); someone who can supposedly protect them (with *Schutz* meaning 'protection') from this potential violence. Since the stranger obviously does not know these details as he enters, Benjamin sums up the short section on the interruption by presenting the point of view of the stranger who has been "confronted with the situation: troubled faces, an open window, the furniture in disarray," complementing the chaotic impression with information which only Benjamin as a spectator of this interruption can provide. Benjamin supposedly knows who the three figures in the room are; while the stranger probably does not. "But there is" – as Benjamin emphatically adds – "a gaze (*Blick*) before which even more ordinary scenes of

11 For a more detailed discussion of this issue see my article, Rokem, 2018.

middle-class life look almost equally startling.”¹²

However, at the same time as this family scene seems quite transparent, it is also quite enigmatic: Why should we be startled or astonished by scenes looking like ordinary scenes from middle-class life? How is it possible to distinguish between the ordinary and the exceptional; what on the one hand is acceptable or tolerable and what, on the other, characterizes states of exception and violence? By concluding that the “more ordinary scenes of middle-class life look almost equally startling,” Benjamin probably both means that what has the appearance of something exceptional is much more common than we usually think – an attitude he adopts when interpreting historical events – and furthermore that the ordinary also contains an uncontrollable potential for violence. Or as he expresses it in his eighth thesis on history (one of the last texts he wrote) which also incorporates the Aristotelean *thaumazein*: “The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.”¹³ And beyond the issues of where and how to draw the line between the ordinary and the exceptional – the common and the strange – it is much more difficult to explain why, as far as I know, there is no existing play or performance which includes a scene like the one Benjamin describes in what he terms “the most basic example” (*das primitivste Beispiel*) of an interruption. Why does he ‘invent’ such a scene to clarify the theoretical basis of the epic theatre, when such a scene apparently does not exist, at least not in any canonic play? (And I must admit that I have not yet found a satisfactory answer to this question.)

The sudden entrance of the stranger, interrupting a scene of potential violence as it is just about to reach its climax, creates a *tableau*, a visual arrangement which is ‘frozen’ or creates what Benjamin termed a “dialectics at a standstill”, a notion he has referred to in several contexts. One of the most well-known formulations appears in the *Arcades Project*, his *magnum opus*, which Benjamin began working on already in 1927, but which remained unfinished at his death:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [bildlich].¹⁴

This could be read as a more abstract version of the interrupting stranger, who is an image through which “what has been comes together in a flash with the now”, creating a standstill, i.e. a *tableau*. Already, in the first version of the essay “What is Epic Theatre”, written in 1931, i.e. eight years before the second version quoted above, Benjamin had written that “The thing that is revealed as

12 Benjamin, 2003a, 305.

13 Benjamin, 2003b, Thesis VIII, 392.

14 Benjamin, 2002, N3, 1, 463.

though by lightning in the 'condition' represented on the stage – as a copy of human gestures, actions and words - is an immanently dialectical attitude. The conditions which epic theatre reveals is the dialectic at a standstill."¹⁵ Finally, it is through the sudden appearance of the stranger that the image of violence in the room becomes visible; triggering the dialectical process between past and present by the interruption itself.

The essay, "The Writer as Producer" from 1934, which has the tone of a lecture, draws attention to some of the formal aspects of Brecht's work that have probably become the most widely accepted and discussed among Brecht-scholars:

/.../ Epic Theater, [Brecht] declared, had to portray situations, rather than develop plots. It obtains such situations, as we shall see presently, by interrupting the plot. I remind you here of the songs, which have their chief function in interrupting the action. Here – according to the principle of interruption – Epic Theater, as you see, takes up a procedure that has become familiar to you in recent years from film and radio, literature and photography. I am speaking of the procedure of montage: the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted. But here this procedure has a special right, perhaps even a perfect right, as I will briefly show. The interruption of action, on account of which Brecht described his theater as "epic," constantly counteracts illusion on the part of the audience. For such illusion is a hindrance to a theater that proposes to make use of elements of reality in experimental rearrangements. But it is at the end, not the beginning, of the experiment that the situation appears – a situation that, in this or that form, is always ours. It is not brought home to the spectator but distanced from him. He recognizes it as the real situation – not with satisfaction, as in the theater of Naturalism, but with astonishment. Epic Theater, therefore, does not reproduce situations; rather, it discovers them. This discovery is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences. Yet interruption here has the character not of a stimulant but of an organizing function. It arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-a-vis the process, the actor vis-a-vis his role. I would like to show you, through an example, how Brecht's discovery and use of the gestus is nothing but the restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure to a human event. Imagine a family scene: the wife is just about to grab a bronze sculpture and throw it at her daughter; the father is opening the window to call for help. At this moment a stranger enters. The process is interrupted. What appears in its place is the situation on which the stranger's eyes now fall: agitated faces, open window, disordered furniture. There are eyes, however, before which the more usual scenes of present-day existence do not look very different: the eyes of the epic dramatist.¹⁶

15 Benjamin, 1998, 12.

16 Benjamin, 1999a, 778–779.

Benjamin's analysis of Brecht's method has to be examined at greater length than I will be able to do here, in particular the discussion of the more general "organizing function" of the interruption as that more formal feature of the text or the performance which "arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-a-vis the process, the actor vis-a-vis his role."

Already in his early writings, Benjamin had discussed Friedrich Hölderlin's often enigmatic remarks about the *caesura*, the break in the poetic line and the rhythm of the language as an interruptive device. It served as the point of departure for a more comprehensive theoretical approach to literature and to drama in particular. In his essay on two poems by Hölderlin written during the First World War (which was not published during his life time), as well as in his doctoral dissertation "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" (*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, published 1920), and in the essay "On the Task of the Translator" published in 1923, Benjamin shows that the break (or the interruption) created by the *caesura* does not arrest the continuity of a text but rather serves as a device (or a feature) which structures its form, or, as Hölderlin himself suggested in his "Remarks on Oedipus", gives form to "representation itself".¹⁷ In "The Writer as Producer", though without clearly formulating this principle – which will become important for the Brechtian theory of acting – Benjamin argues that there is also a *caesura*, an interruption between the actor and the role.

In the 1931-version of "What is Epic Theatre?" Benjamin draws attention to the identity of the stranger as a thinking man or a philosopher:

*Epic theatre, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them. This uncovering of conditions is brought about through processes being interrupted. A very crude example: a family row. The mother is just about to pick up a pillow to hurl at the daughter, the father is opening a window to call a policeman. At this moment a stranger appears at the door. Tableau', as they used to say around 1900. In other words: the stranger is suddenly confronted with certain conditions: rumpled bedclothes, open window, a devastated interior. But there exists a view in which even the more usual scenes of bourgeois life appear rather like this. The more far-reaching the devastations of our social order (the more these devastations undermine ourselves and our capacity to remain aware of them), the more marked must be the distance between the stranger and the events portrayed. We know such a stranger from Brecht's *Versuche: a Swabian 'Utis', a counterpart of Ulysses, the Greek 'Nobody' who visits one-eyed Polyphemus in his cave. Similarly Keuner – that is the stranger's name – penetrates into the cave of the one-eyed monster whose name is 'class society'. Like Ulysses he is full of guile, accustomed to suffering, much-travelled; both men are wise. A practical resignation which has always shunned utopian idealism makes Ulysses think only of returning home; Keuner never leaves the threshold of his house at all. He likes the trees**

17 Hölderlin, 1999, 102.

which he sees in the yard when he comes out of his fourth-floor tenement flat. 'Why don't you ever go into the woods,' ask his friends, 'if you like trees so much?' 'Did I not tell you,' replies Herr Keuner, 'that I like the trees in my yard?' To move this thinking man, Herr Keuner (who, Brecht once suggested, should be carried on stage lying down, so little is he drawn thither), to move him to existence upon the stage – that is the aim of this new theatre.¹⁸

In this version, written already before the years of forced exile, beginning in February 1933 with the Nazi takeover of political power, Benjamin claims that the identity of the stranger finally depends on the characteristics of the society where the performance will be presented. When the social order is in a state of devastation (*die Verwüstungen unserer Gesellschaftsordnung*) as well as when in particular it is difficult to recognize or to become aware of this situation of danger (which was no doubt how both Benjamin and Brecht experienced the situation from their horizon in Berlin, in 1931), the identity of the stranger, Benjamin argues, should be more distant or even estranged from the events portrayed. The character that, according to Benjamin, fulfills this condition is the a-social, cynical trickster-figure Brecht invented called Herr Keuner, whom he begins to depict in ironical situations, beginning in the middle of the 1920's. Here is just one example of such a Keuner-situation: "What are you working on?' Herr K. was asked. Herr K. replied: 'I'm having a hard time; I'm preparing my next mistake.'¹⁹

His name, Herr Keuner, representing his character-traits, is a combination of two 'etymologies'. First, as Benjamin suggested in a radio-talk about Brecht that was broadcast on the *Frankfurter Rundfunk* in June 1930, the name 'Keuner'

is based on the Greek root κοινός (koinós), the universal, that which concerns all, belongs to all. And in fact, Herr Keuner is the man who concerns all, belongs to all, for he is the leader. But in quite a different sense from the one we usually understand by the word. He is in no way a public speaker, a demagogue; nor is he a show-off or a strongman. His main preoccupations lie light-years away from what people nowadays understand to be those of a "leader." The fact is that Herr Keuner is a thinker.²⁰

But his name is also, as Benjamin notes in the passage from the first (1931) version of "What is Epic Theatre?", "a Swabian 'Utis', a counterpart of Ulysses, the Greek 'Nobody' who visits one-eyed Polyphemus in his cave" and has come to challenge nothing less than class-society. This nobody is also a Schwabian stranger because, in Brecht's home-dialect, the German word for nobody, *keiner*, is pronounced as 'keuner'. Thus, both etymologies make him a thinking

18 Benjamin, 1998, 18-19. (Adjusted, F.R.)

19 <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/brecht-keuner.htm> (accessed September 10, 2018).

20 Benjamin, 1999c, 367

man, a philosopher as well as an anarchist and a 'nobody'.²¹

It is also no coincidence that Herr Keuner – as in the quote above, about preparing his next mistake – is frequently also referred to as “Herr K.” Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, which was published posthumously in 1925, begins with the appearance of a stranger who announces that “Josef K.” as he is called at first, then also simply named “K.”, who is waiting to have his breakfast brought to him, has been arrested. Brecht had no doubt read Kafka’s novel many times because his personal copy kept in the Brecht Archives in *Die Berliner Akademie der Künste* is literally falling apart, and he has marked his ownership of this copy by signing his own name on the front cover, between the name of the author and the title. *The Trial* was also extremely important for Benjamin, who had brought his then not yet published essay on Kafka on the tenth anniversary of Kafka’s death with him on his first visit to Brecht in Denmark in 1934. There are several diary entries by Benjamin about his and Brecht’s disagreements in interpreting Kafka’s work.²² Without having any clear evidence, it is even possible that Benjamin’s stranger, and the interruption he created by his sudden entrance, can be more directly identified in the writings of Kafka than in those of Brecht; and that Benjamin, for some reason, superimposes the interrupted family scene on Brecht’s *oeuvre*, rather than relating directly to Kafka where similar scenes can be more clearly discerned, even if the specific family scene Benjamin describes should probably be seen as his own invention. There is clearly something enigmatic in these texts.

It seems clear though that by tracing the appearance of the stranger at a scene of violence retrospectively in three of Benjamin’s texts about Brecht’s epic theatre, we can discern a gradual development of Benjamin’s stranger from an Homeric, Swabian ‘Utis’, a subversive thinker and philosopher in the earlier version, to an astonished, universal observer who tries to make sense of the violence in the room. Chronologically, these texts also progress from the more playful violence in the 1931-version, where “The mother is just about to pick up a pillow to hurl at the daughter, [and] the father is opening a window to call a policeman”, to the much more threatening gesture of the mother in the two later versions, from 1934 and 1939 who “is just about to seize a bronze bust and hurl it at her daughter”. This development reflects the political developments

21 In the *Messingkauf* dialogues, which Brecht began writing in 1939, but never completed before his death in 1956, he planned four nocturnal conversations taking place on a theatre stage between a group of people working in the theatre: a dramaturg, an actor, an actress and a lighting technician hosting (in Brecht’s own words, introducing these conversations) a “philosopher who has come to a large theatre after the performance has finished, to talk with the theatre people.” And “He has,” Brecht adds in what could even be seen as an ironic remark, “been invited by an actress” and “wants to use the theatre ruthlessly for his own ends.” (Brecht, 2015, 11) In these texts the philosopher has finally entered the stage, investigating how the thespians he is addressing “apply your art and your whole apparatus to imitating incidents that occur between people, making your spectators feel as though they’re watching real life. Because I’m interested in the way people live together, I’m interested in your imitations too.” (Brecht, 2016, 13) But a more detailed discussion of this remarkable Brecht text lies beyond the scope of this essay.

22 For a detailed analysis of the discussion between Benjamin and Brecht about a short story by Kafka, see Chapter 4 in my book *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (Rokem 2010)

during this decade, from the waning Weimar Republic to the Third Reich and its preparations for the Second World War.

I fully agree with Judith Butler who referring to the 1939-version of "What is Epic Theatre?" claims that "It is fair to say that this is an astonishing scene of violence," concluding that it "gives us a domestic example that includes dimensions of gender, class and violence," adding that "The scene emerges quite suddenly for the stranger and for us, and no one has a context for what is happening."²³ In the text itself, this is no doubt the case. However, as I have suggested here, Benjamin's stranger appears and reappears in what seems to be (more or less) the same family scene, which, even if its concrete realizations are very similar, the larger contexts shift and their significance, as Benjamin has constructed them through his rhizomatic, intertextual writing, give rise to change and transformation. This does not necessarily give us a clearer understanding of the role of the suddenly appearing stranger. But it reinforces our sense that this stranger is a central trope (or 'critical figure') for how Benjamin envisions the possibilities for putting a halt to violence.

Having said that, it is no surprise that there are several additional strangers in Benjamin's writings, further re-contextualizing the interrupting stranger. I will only give two brief examples here, without discussing them further, fully aware that they only mark the beginning of a broader discussion of *Verfremdung* as the origin of artistic image-making, not only in Brecht's epic theatre. My first example is from the opening paragraph of the third (and final) part of Benjamin's extensive essay on "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*), written in 1919-1922 (and published in 1924-1925). Here he introduces the stranger in a simile presenting a methodology for making a critique of works of art, exploring what has become a central feature of Benjamin's own intellectual legacy: the elective affinity between art and philosophy:

Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance of a person who is handsome and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret with him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry. Still, it would surely be permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. In just this way critique (Kritik) seeks to discover siblings of the work of art. And all genuine works (alle echten Werke) have their siblings in the realm(s) of philosophy (im Bereiche der Philosophie). It is, after all, precisely these figures in which the ideal of philosophy's problem appears.²⁴

And finally (for now), in his notoriously difficult essay "Critique of Violence" (*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*), published in 1921, Benjamin gives the mourning figure of Niobe, who has lost all her children through the vengeance of the gods, and whom Sophocles in *Antigone* calls the 'Phrygian Stranger', with whom Antigone compares herself before entering the cave to perish. For Benjamin Niobe

²³ Butler, 2017, 187.

²⁴ Benjamin, 1996a, 333.

represents mythical violence, being a victim of violence rather than the one who can stop it by suddenly entering a room just before the violence will burst out, as in the examples on Brecht's epic theatre I have discussed here. According to Benjamin she herself has reached a standstill, through petrification, creating an uncanny mirror reflection of the scene with the suddenly appearing stranger:

Violence therefore bursts upon Niobe from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate. It is not actually destructive. Although it brings a cruel death to Niobe's children, it stops short of claiming the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind, more guilty than before through the death of the children, both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods.²⁵

AUTHOR

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 held the Emanuel Herzikowitz Chair for 19th and 20th Century Art (2006-2016). He is currently the Wiegeland Visiting Professor of Theater & Performance Studies (TAPS) at the University of Chicago. His more recent books are *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (2010; translated into Italian, Polish, German and Slovenian); *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; translated into German and Polish). He was the editor of *Theatre Research International* (2006-2009) and was a founding co-editor of the Palgrave/Macmillan book series 'Performance Philosophy' (2012-2017) also being among the founders of the 'Performance Philosophy'-network. He has been a visiting professor at many universities in the United States, Germany, Finland and Sweden, and is also a practicing dramaturg.

²⁵ Benjamin, 1996b, 248.

REFERENCES

Benjamin, Walter. 1977. “Was ist das epische Theater [2]”, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol II, edited by Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 532-539.

Benjamin, Walter. 1996a, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, translated by Stanley Corngold, in *Selected Writings*, volume 1, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 297-360.

Benjamin, Walter. 1996b, “Critique of Violence”, translated by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, volume 1, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 236-252.

Benjamin, Walter. 1998. “What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]”, *Understanding Brecht*, translated by Anna Bostock. London/New York: Verso.

Benjamin, Walter. 1999a. “The Author as Producer”, Translated by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, volume 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 768-782

Benjamin, Walter. 1999b. “Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934”, Translated by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, volume 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, vol. 2. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 783-791

Benjamin, Walter. 1999c. “Bert Brecht”, translated by Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, volume 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 365-371.

Benjamin, Walter, 2002. *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 2003a. “What is Epic Theatre? II”, Translated by Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, volume 4, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 4. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 302-309.

Benjamin Walter. 2003b. “On the Concept of History”, translated by Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 389-400.

Brecht, Bertolt, 2015, “*Messingkauf or Buying Brass*” in *Brecht on Performance*, edited by Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles, and Marc Silverman. London: Bloomsbury.

Butler, Judith. 2017. “When Gesture Becomes Event”, in *Inter Views in Performance Philosophy: Crossings and Conversations*, eds. Anna Street, Julien Alliot and Magnolia Pauker. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 171-191.

Hölderlin, Friedrich. 1988. “Remarks on *Oedipus*”, in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, translated by Thomas Pfau. Albany: State University of New York Press, 101–108.

Rokem, Freddie. 1994. "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?", *Theatre Research International*, 19, 2, 143-147.

Rokem, Freddie. 2010. *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rokem, Freddie. 2018. "On [the limits of] Affirmation: Benjamin and Wittgenstein", *Performance Research*, 23, 4/5, 134-140.

Shakespeare, W. 1989. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

Wizesla, Erdmut. 2009. *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: the Story of a Friendship*, translated by Christine Shuttleworth. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.