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Theater as Critical Praxis: Interruption and Citability

In this article, I will reflect on a question that was posed in the announcement of the conference, on which this volume is based (“Poetic critique – is that not an oxymoron?”) by shifting (it) to the field of theater, where the intersection between the “poetic” and “critique” takes place in a specific way, and in each of the ‘elements’ of the question, the poetic and critique. In what follows, I will consider theatrical practice that takes a distance from itself, is divided in itself, and thereby, as the critical reflection on theatrical (re)presentation, interrupts it and allows for “critical stances” (*kritische Stellungnahme[n]*) (Benjamin 1939, 538).¹ I will make use of concepts from Walter Benjamin, referring to notions from his essays on Brecht’s theater (Benjamin 1931b and 1939), and, where it seems apt or necessary, I will also address Friedrich Schlegel (as well as Benjamin’s readings of Schlegel). In reading Benjamin’s essay(s) “Was ist das epische Theater?” (“What is Epic Theater?”) – one version of which was stopped in print in 1931 and the second of which was published anonymously in 1939² – I will focus in particular on the notions of ‘gesture,’ ‘interruption,’ and ‘citability.’³ These terms mark central tenets of Benjamin’s philosophy, that is to say of his readings, and they have a particular relevance for theater (and not only that of Brecht).

Benjamin explicitly relates what he sees Brecht’s theater to achieve to the concept of romantic-ironic self-distancing (of form) and thereby to critique as the (self-)reflection of form in/on itself. Benjamin does this, on the one hand, when he accounts for epic theater’s “awareness of being theater” in interrupting its (re)presentation with the old phrase: “an actor should reserve for himself the possibility of falling out of character artistically” (Benjamin 1939, 538).⁴ Thus, Benjamin brings

Note: Translation by Jason Kavett

1 All translations of Benjamin’s and of other texts are modified where necessary. Throughout the article, the references usually list the page numbers for both the original edition and for the translation. The first page number refers to the original.

2 In 1931, Walter Benjamin wrote “Was ist das epische Theater? Eine Studie zu Brecht,” invited by Siegfried Kracauer to be published in the journal *Frankfurter Zeitung*. It was stopped while being printed by the editor Bernhard Diepold (cf. Benjamin GS II, 1374, 1379 – 1381; printing proof and document in Wizisla 2017, 71 – 80). Benjamin wrote a second version, “Was ist das epische Theater?,” to be published anonymously in the bimonthly magazine *Maß und Wert* 2/6 (1939).

3 There is some overlap here in wording and ideas with my article “Gesture and Citability: Theater as Critical Praxis” (*Critique: The Stakes of Form*. Eds. Sami Khatib, Holger Kuhn, Oona Lochner, Isabel Mehl, and Beate Söntgen. Berlin: diaphanes, 261 – 296).

4 “Der Schauspieler soll sich die Möglichkeit vorbehalten, mit Kunst aus der Rolle zu fallen.” (Benjamin 1939, 306 – 307)

the concept of *parekbasis* and thereby *the* paradigmatic figure of ‘romantic irony’ into play, which he, on the other hand, immediately rejects as a flawed analogy for the epic/*gestural* theater.

According to Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, the “critique of a work [*die Kritik des Werkes*] is [...] its reflection” (Benjamin 1920, 78/159), which “drives [its form] out of itself” (73/156).⁵ This is the case, because the form of the work ‘is’ self-limitation, and therefore ‘is’ not, but rather remains bound to what is excluded, what is external to it (Benjamin speaks of the ‘contingency’ [*Zufälligkeit*] to be excluded). Therefore, in order not to remain ‘limited,’ it must relate itself to its own constitution and refer to the formlessness from which it has emerged, which it excludes while delimiting itself. Thus, the “criterion” (*Maßstab*) of “immanent critique/criticism” is the “immanent tendency of the work,” the reflection of its form on its form(giving) (77/159). “Critique fulfills its task by” “resolving [...] the original reflection” of its form (form as “the work’s own reflection”) “into a higher one and continuing it in this way,” since this deferral out of itself always attains form again (73/156).⁶ Tieck’s comedies are well known as examples of the romantic irony of form.⁷ His *Puss in Boots*, to which Benjamin explicitly refers in the second text from 1939, is a case of reflection of the play in/on itself. The play performs what Benjamin refers to as the most ‘evident’ “technique” of a “play within the play” in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*: “the stage itself” “is set up on the stage, or the spectators’ space is incorporated within the space of the stage,” which mirrors or folds the play and its framework into the occurrences on stage (Benjamin 1928a, 261/69). In this play, the actors, in ‘falling out’ of character, assert themselves ‘beside’ the dramatic figures, thereby establishing a duality between actors and dramatic figures.

Parekbasis as gesture, with which a figure on the stage turns away from the dramatic scene, had traditionally been chalked up as a failure of ancient comedy, because it interrupts the dramatic illusion of what is taking place on the stage⁸ in addressing the audience. Friedrich Schlegel not only re-evaluated this gesture of speech⁹ but also defined romantic irony *tout court* as “a permanent *parekbasis*.”¹⁰ The reflection of the play – this is what makes it paradoxical – performs the constitution of what may become presented by means of its delimiting (folded into the play

5 “[T]he unity of the single work” is “continually being displaced [from itself] into irony and criticism.” (Benjamin 1920, 86/164)

6 “Formal irony [...] presents a paradoxical venture: to build on the formation even through demolition [*am Gebilde noch durch Abbruch zu bauen*]” (Benjamin 1920, 87/165).

7 See Benjamin 1920, 84/163; also Benjamin 1939, 538/307; cf. de Man 1996, 178.

8 See de Man 1996, 178, 177–180.

9 See Schlegel 1794 [1979], esp. 30.

10 “Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase” (Schlegel 1797 [1963]: KFSa, XVIII, 85 [Fr. 668]). De Man reformulates this ‘permanence’ of the *parekbasis* of romantic irony as a self-disruptive turning-away, which can occur or may have occurred anytime, *everywhere*, and *at every moment* (de Man 1996, 178–179).

and its framework)¹¹ in that it presents the *processes* of constitution, which must continually be carried out as figural separations between that which belongs, between form, between what is ‘actually presented,’ and the digressions, additions, or marginal occurrences, what is merely contingent or not meaningful: without reaching a conclusion and thereby a ground or a separation of form or figure from the formless or (the figure’s) ground. In the potentiated (*potenziert*, a concept from early German Romanticism)¹² displacement or transgression of delimited form and its framework in/to play, the limit/border that decides about form becomes always again and still uncertain,¹³ becomes always again and still unrecognizable, its contours diffuse in an undecidable manner.

But Benjamin states with unusual clarity that it would be “erroneous” (*irrig*) to recognize the “old Tieckian dramaturgy of reflection” within the Brechtian praxis of theater (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11, cf. 522/4; 1939, 538–539/307). The latter performs the theatrical presentation’s taking a distance (from/to itself) in a different way, as its interruption taking place in presentation: as “gestural theatre” (Benjamin 1931b, 521/3).¹⁴ The theatrical presentation’s “awareness of being theater” is indeed a theatrical one: manifesting in gestures, its citability, and the interruptions they open up. According to Benjamin, epic theater thereby withdraws itself from ‘professional’ criticism and contests it and its failed standards.¹⁵ It does so with the distance the play takes from itself, by letting “intervals” into itself, which are to incite the audience to take a “critical stance” (*kritische Stellungnahme*):

Thus, intervals emerge which rather undermine the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. These intervals are reserved for the audience’s critical stance toward the behavior of the persons and the way they are presented. (Benjamin 1939 [trans. 2006], 306)

So entstehen Intervalle, die die Illusion des Publikums eher beeinträchtigen. Sie lähmen seine Bereitschaft zur Einfühlung. Diese Intervalle sind seiner kritischen Stellungnahme (zum darge-

11 When (limited) form interrupts itself *ironically* and *reflects itself*, it still does not escape what is limited, the conditionality of theater, in the “paradoxical reflection of play and illusiveness” (*paradoxen Reflexion von Spiel und Schein*) (Benjamin 1928a, 261/69).

12 What this potentiation refers to here is an ‘irony of irony’: the ironizing turning (away) of the representation from and out of itself does not allow something else to be understood as what is (really) meant but rather suspends the decision about the position of speech, its object, and its addressee, in favor of its potential deferrals (cf. Schlegel 1800, KFSa II, 368).

13 In the potentialization of the folding of what presents into what is represented, it is uncertain where the contour between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ is: does the puss in boots fall out of his role when he climbs up a tree in fear? Or does the actor fall out of his role into the role of the puss in boots? Or something else? In this falling out of the role, what is shown in Tieck’s comedies, according to Szondi, is not the actors but rather the “role,” which takes distance from their “dramatic existence” (Szondi 1978, 28–31/68–75).

14 See also Benjamin 1939, 536/305; cf. his drafts “Studien zur Theorie des epischen Theaters” (Benjamin GS II, 1380–1382).

15 The critics have to become aware: “ihren Agentencharakter aufgedeckt und zugleich außer Kurs geraten” (Benjamin 1931b, 527–528/9–10).

stellten Verhalten der Personen und zu der Art, in der es dargestellt wird) vorbehalten. (Benjamin 1939, 538)

Through his acting/playing, the actor has to demonstrate (*in seinem Spiel auszuweisen* [538]) the “intervals” as interruptions let into the theatrical presentation, in the action on the stage, opened up to give the audience space for their “critical stance”: in the self-distancing of acting from what is represented and from its own presenting. There is no place for a position of authority, no certain ground for critique (or criticism).¹⁶

Epic theater, as *gestural* (*gestisches*) theater is constituted, as Benjamin puts it, by the “Vorstellung des ‘Theaterspielens’” (Benjamin 1939, 538/306). What this refers to is not the idea of theater-playing but, roughly, the presentation, or the ‘putting on a show’ of “‘theater-playing’” itself, taking place in the praxis of acting/playing (*schauspielen*). Benjamin accounts for this explicitly with the old phrase for *parekbasis*: “falling out of character artistically/artfully” (538/306–307). As a gesture of speech, *parekbasis* is an *act*: a turning away, an interruption and a suspension. But in Tieck’s *Puss in Boots*, this act of turning, interrupting, and addressing the spectators in the theater is contained in a new frame, the play in the theatrical play. Thus, *parekbasis* and the reflection of the theatrical play *inside* the play become dramatic action (again). The interrupting turning away, which drives the form beyond itself, thus is included in “Tieck’s old dramaturgy of reflection,” which would produce a rather dull satire of the philistines in the theater. But, even in this case, the presentation is not homogeneous and is always only provisional,¹⁷ because it is always again undecidable *what and where* its frame actually is; the distinction between form and its being shifted from/out of itself is, in this manner, always undecidable. In *parekbasis*, in the speakers’ turning away from the represented action, out of the contours of the dramatic person and out of the scene of dramatic speech, the speakers address those others who do not belong to the represented action and who, according to Diderot, should be made forgotten by what is represented and by the actors who represent – for the sake of illusion and empathy. Diderot’s fictive fourth wall represented the closure or containment of the play in itself. Benjamin refers to this self-containment by speaking of the “pit” (*Graben*) into which the “abyss” (*Abgrund*), “which separates the actors from the audience as the dead from the living,” and which “bears the most indelible traces of its sacral origin” (Benjamin 1939, 539/307), had then been transformed, and which thereby becomes obsolete. It is decisive that, according to Benjamin, “[t]he aims of theater (today) (*[w]orum es heute im The-*

¹⁶ According to Benjamin’s “Memorandum” to *Krisis und Kritik* (Benjamin 1930, 619), the journal conceived by Brecht and Benjamin in 1930 and 1931 (with obvious reference to the events of the times), critique cannot “rely on authorities” (*[sich] im Ganzen nicht auf Autoritäten stützen*). It is necessary to draw “radical conclusions from the unfoundedness and untenability of authority” (Müller-Schöll 2002, 310). For more on the journal project, see “Konzeptgespräch” (in Wizisla 2017, 102–104).

¹⁷ On provisionality and its incompatibility with drama, see Szondi 1978, 26/1986, 68–69.

ater geht) can be defined more precisely in terms of the stage than in terms of a new form of drama” (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; 1939, 539/307) – thus through its relating otherwise to the stage that has been transformed into a “podium,” whereas the ordinary old theater business continues to operate an ‘obsolete’ “stage apparatus” (Benjamin 1939, 539/307).¹⁸

Benjamin’s reservation that the gesture, the taking distance of the actors in gestural theater, should not “remind” us of *romantic irony* (538/307) is not only an objection against its restrictive performance in terms of Tieck’s “old dramaturgy of reflection.” In his book on romantic criticism, Benjamin had already pointed out the insufficiency of the romantic concept of critique. As “medial, continuous transposition” of the reflection of form (Benjamin 1920, 70/154), the romantic critique of art that “drives [form] out of itself” (73/156) should be both: “on the one hand, the completion, consummation, and systematization of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute” (78/159).¹⁹ If thereby the “unity of the individual work” shall “continually be displaced in irony and criticism/critique,” then in this way a continuum of artworks and the “idea” of art is conceived (86/164),²⁰ without the conflict between the work (of art) and (the idea of) art actually becoming manifest. According to Benjamin – contrary to Friedrich Schlegel – it is not that critique/criticism should be poetic, but poetic form is (“immanent”) *critique/criticism* of itself; critique does not process the “continuity” of the work (of art) and shift in(to) art, but rather sets a caesura. Benjamin invokes the “caesura,” the “inexpressive” (*das Ausdruckslose*) as “critical violence,” which has to impede and shatter the work’s “false totality.”²¹ And in an explicit revision of the romantic concept of critique/criticism as reanimation – or to quote again Friedrich Schlegel on the poetic critic, who will “add to the work” and “rejuvenate” it (*ergänzen, verjüngern*) (Schlegel 1798, 140/281) – Benjamin, in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, defines critique as the “mortifica-

18 “Auf diesem Podium gilt es sich einzurichten. Das ist die Lage. Wie aber vielen Zuständen gegenüber, so hat sich auch bei diesem der Betrieb ihn zu verdecken vorgesetzt, statt ihm Rechnung zu tragen” (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; Benjamin 1939, 539/307). As Benjamin postulates in “Der Autor als Produzent”: No “apparatus of production” (*Produktionsapparat*) should be supplied without changing it or giving it a new function (Benjamin 1934, 691–692/774–775).

19 “[E]inerseits Vollendung, Ergänzung, Systematisierung des Werkes, andererseits seine Auflösung im Absoluten” (Benjamin 1920, 78). “Both of these processes coincide in the end” (Benjamin 1920, 78/159). “Formal irony [...] presents a paradoxical venture: to build on the formation even through demolition, to demonstrate in the work itself its relationship to the idea” (*Die formale Ironie [...] stellt den paradoxen Versuch dar, am Gebilde noch durch Abbruch zu bauen: im Werke selbst seine Beziehung auf die Idee zu demonstrieren*) (Benjamin 1920, 87/165).

20 See also Benjamin 1920, 87–91/165–167.

21 The conclusion of *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* alludes to this with reference to Goethe (Benjamin 1920, 111–115). The work, a concept for which Goethe stands, needs, as Benjamin has it in “Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften,” the caesura as the expressionless (*ausdruckslose*) interruption, the “critical violence” that applies to the mistaken mythical supposition of wholeness, that “completes the work, which shatters it into a broken piece [*Stückwerk*], into a fragment of the true world” (Benjamin 1924–1926, 181–182).

tion of works,” as which critique takes effect in complicity with the duration in which the works decay and endure as *débris*.²²

Benjamin claims that “for all its skills of reflection, the Romantic stage never succeeded in doing justice to the [...] relationship between theory and praxis” (*dem Verhältnis von Theorie und Praxis gerecht zu werden*) (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11–12). Tieck – that is Benjamin’s reservation – merely demonstrates his being “philosophically savvy” (*seine philosophische Informiertheit*): “the world may ultimately prove to be a theater” (Benjamin 1939, 538/307).²³ In contrast, gestural theater copes with the relation between theory and praxis “with the ongoing setting-apart [*Auseinandersetzung*] of the action which is shown on the stage [*Bühnenvorgang*] and the behavior of showing on the stage [*Bühnenverhalten*]” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11). Quoting Brecht, Benjamin characterizes the relatedness and division of both actions *in* the play-acting as the actors’ “showing a thing” and “showing themselves”:

The actor must show a thing, and he must show himself. He naturally shows the thing by showing himself, and he shows himself by showing the thing. Although these two tasks coincide, they must not coincide to such a point that the contrast (difference) between them disappears. (Brecht, cit. in Benjamin 1931b [trans. 1998], 11)

Der Schauspieler muß eine Sache zeigen, und er muß sich zeigen. Er zeigt die Sache natürlich, indem er sich zeigt, und er zeigt sich, indem er die Sache zeigt. Obwohl dies zusammenfällt, darf es doch nicht so zusammenfallen, daß der Gegensatz (Unterschied) zwischen diesen beiden Aufgaben verschwindet. (Cit. in Benjamin 1931b, 529)²⁴

‘Showing a thing’ would “coincide” with the actors’ ‘showing themselves’ in playing (as acting) (*Vorspielen*); thus, precisely, the play is split and doubled in itself (*in sich entzweit*): The “ongoing setting-apart of the action which is shown on the stage and the behavior of showing on the stage” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11) is what constitutes gestural theater. This is taking place *in* theatrical performance, in playing and putting on an act, in the playing’s/acting’s *practice*, turning it to – implicating – *theory*. The text from 1939 continues: “The extent to which artistic and political interests coincide in the epic theater can be easily seen in its mode of playing” (*die Art des Spiels*) (Benjamin 1939, 538/307). This is not (so much) because of its political content, but rather due to precisely the ongoing process of setting-apart: the *Auseinandersetzung in act-*

²² See Benjamin 1928a, 357/193. Critique/criticism is a mode of the “living-on of works,” where these no longer belong to art, which is “merely a transitional stage of great works.” This is analogous to the status of translation in Benjamin’s notes on critique/criticism in the context of *Krisis und Kritik* in 1931 (Benjamin GS VI, 174, 170–172). The scope of Benjamin’s concept of critique/criticism is thus indicated (see Steiner 2000).

²³ See also Benjamin 1931b, 529/11–12. With this, the presupposed givenness of both “world” and “theater” would merely be confirmed. And the counterpart to this (which is merely inverted) is the stage as “the planks, which mean the world” (520/2).

²⁴ In the text’s second version, see Benjamin 1939, 538/306.

ing/playing (*Vorspielen*), which allows “the one showing – the actor as such – [to be] shown” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11). Thereby, in epic theater, “the awareness that it is theater” “is incessantly asserted,” something which the naturalistic theater must repress in order to “devote itself,” *without* being “distracted,” to the supposed representation of the supposed real (522/4). And this “awareness” is politically relevant.

This can be argued by referring to Benjamin’s essay on “historical drama,” written close in time to (and in thematic proximity with) *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*.²⁵ Here, Benjamin presents the “historical drama” as a “problem,” since it assumes a “meaning of the determinateness” (*Sinn der Determiniertheit*) of the dramatic action, for which the recourse to causality would be insufficient: history can “only” “claim dramatic truth” as “fate”; it must present “history as fate” (Benjamin 1923, 276, 250).²⁶ But it can only do that as the “play” that drama is. “When the drama of play [*Dramatik des Spiels*] is confronted with historical subject matters, it finds itself compelled to unfold fate as play. It is precisely this cleavage [*Zwiespalt*] that constitutes the ‘romantic tragedy’” (260). The play-character, which the “fate” of the “drama of fate” inevitably has (and exhibits), requires the “romantic,” that is, “paradoxical reflection of play and semblance [*Spiel und Schein*]” (Benjamin 1928a, 261–262/69). If the “world of fate,” or rather, of the “dramas of fate” is “closed in itself” (*in sich geschlossen*) (Benjamin 1923, 267; 1928a, 262/71), this world is none other than the *stage*, the “strictly delimited space” of the theater-play (Benjamin 1923, 272): Fate is presented “as play,” as the play (*Schauspiel*) and its framings are ‘playfully’ reflected as a play, mirrored inside of its constitutive delimitations, “minimizing” (*verkleinernd*) and “framing” it (*umrahmend*) (Benjamin 1923, 268–269; 1928a, 262/70).²⁷ In contrast, when taken seriously, when “fate is postulated as real” (*das Schicksal schlechthin real [...] gesetzt [werde]*), that is, “only in the bad, unromantic tragedies of fate” (Benjamin 1923, 272), such “historical dramas” that present history “as fate” must fail. Without the exposition of the play that it is – that is to say, without the disruptive entry of theater *into* what is represented – the *play* of fate (which cannot be other than a deliberate assemblage) will be *forgotten* or *repressed*. Thus, “unromantic historical dramas” fall prey to a “realistic” misunderstanding of “fate” or of the necessity of reality (or history).

25 In making this reference to Benjamin’s *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* and its contexts, we also recall that, on the one hand, the awkward German baroque *Trauerspiel* (not closed in itself) refers to the coming “most recent experiments in drama” (*neuesten Versuchen*) (Benjamin 1928a, 390/235). And, on the other hand, according to the text’s inquiry into the Brechtian theater, this theater emerges from a non-linear tradition, travelling on smuggler’s paths and mule’s tracks, of a whole disorderly clan (*Sippe*) of anti-dramatic theater forms, to which the baroque *Trauerspiel* belonged (Benjamin 1931b, 523/5). On the relations between Benjamin’s texts on epic theater and the *Trauerspiel* (book), see Müller-Schöll 2002, 50–52, 110–112, 139.

26 Here and in what follows, see also B. Menke 2005.

27 It is the “Verkleinerung des Reflektierten” in the play (*im Spiel*) (Benjamin 1928a, 306, 260–262/126, 68–71).

Against the “naturalistic” confusion of the events on the stage with the extra-theatrical world,²⁸ ‘epic theater’ precisely does *not* perform without being distracted, but rather, has a “productive awareness” “incessantly” that “it is theater” (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4). In Brecht’s theater, “historical incidents” (*Vorgänge*), according to Benjamin citing Brecht (Benjamin 1931b, 525; 1939, 533/303), resist, precisely, the *Dramatik des Spiels* (Benjamin 1923, 260), the dramatic conception of the theatrical play. Since the course they follow is known, they do not preoccupy spectators with comprehendingly following (*Nachvollzug*) the course of action. Therefore, according to Benjamin (but not Brecht), they allow theater “to loosen the [...] joints of the plot [*Fabel*] to the limits of the possible” (*bis an die Grenze des Möglichen*) (Benjamin 1931b, 525/8; 1939, 533/303).²⁹ Hence, what is “incommensurable” to the plot, what is not along the “lines of expectation” (*Fluchtlinien der Erwartung*) (Benjamin 1931b, 525), is allowed to come to the fore, with its known and presupposed connections being “loosened.”³⁰ Instead of presupposing the given “state (of things)” (*Zustände*) as to be imitated, theater as theater is handled as a *Versuchsanordnung*, that is, as an “experimental disposition” (522/4) which always also refers to its respective framing – where the *Zustände* that may stand “at the end” of the experiment are possible (522/4) – and thereby refers beyond the particular frame and the *Zustände* it reveals too. This kind of theater-playing, then, makes the contingency of theater “productive” – in taking this basic attitude (*Grundhaltung*): “It can happen in this way or in a completely different way” (“*Es kann so kommen, aber es kann auch ganz anders kommen*”; quotation marks are Benjamin’s) (525/8).³¹ “Where someone experiments, there reigns no necessity; rather, possibilities are obtained,” states Christoph Menke (2005, 145/117). “At the end,” that is, retroactively, or belatedly, what is shown in “the experimental disposition” (*Versuchsanordnung*) may be (re) cognized as the “real state of things” (*die wirklichen Zustände*) (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4). Then not only the events on the stage, but also *die wirklichen Zustände* are cognizable as *not* necessary, that is, as possible otherwise: They could *not be*, or *be different*, and are always accompanied by the shadows of *other* possibilities.³²

28 See Benjamin 1939, 539/307. Benjamin’s text from 1931 finds the traces of the interrelation between irony and criticism in Strindberg’s histories, which have “paved the way for the gestural theater” (Benjamin 1931b, 526/8).

29 Benjamin’s metaphor “wie ein Ballettmeister der E Levin” (Benjamin 1931b, 525; 1939, 533/303) would have to be read as *very* specifically gendered. The Brechtian theory of theater is bound to plot or *Fabel* (cf. Lehmann 2002, 219–237; see also Lehmann 2016, 147–164, esp. 157–159).

30 On the “epic extension” (*Streckung*) of “historical incidents” (*geschichtliche Vorgänge*) “by a particular mode of acting, by placards, and by onstage captions,” see Benjamin 1939, 533/303; 1931b, 524–526).

31 See Lehmann 2002, 368.

32 The abandonment of the illusion of the reality of ‘how it really was’ is decisive for Benjamin’s concept of historiography and its relation to its ‘subject matters,’ which are not to be conceived as pre-given (cf. especially *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, 1935–1940).

While what constitutes gestural theater is the “presentation of play-acting [*Vorstellung des Theaterspielens*]” (Benjamin 1939, 538/306), this is not to be read as a reference to a (Brechtian) theoretical concept (*Vorstellung*) but rather with respect to the “presentation of playing” in *acting*. What is emphasized is the practice of play-acting,³³ the playing itself – which is doubled and divided in itself and thereby is dependent on and engenders insight. Playing (in) theater (*Vorspielen*) brings “the relation of the performed action to that, which is given as such in the performance,” “to expression” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11),³⁴ since it unfolds the relation of both as division of both, and at the same time exposes, in both “actions,” their non-identity, their difference from themselves. Thus, theater-practice is divided in and from itself: it is never *one*, never identical with itself: it is foreign to itself. Brecht’s theater, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann (2002, 231), referred “to a radicalized *self-foreignness*, or an internal otherness, alterity [...] from which Brecht – in theory – always shrinks away in fear.”

“[T]he relation of the performed action to the action given in the performance as such” is brought “to expression” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11) insofar as the relationship between the two is blocked in the *gesture*; thus, they do not collapse into one another. The gesture is not the expression of something that supposedly preceded it;³⁵ it is not a form of expression, whether involuntarily or historically conventionalized; it contradicts the representational model and asserts itself *as* an act in its *dynamis* intransitively against anything that it would ‘carry.’³⁶ It is an “element” of a stance (*Haltung*) as a halt, an interruption of the courses of events that “retards” them,³⁷ and sets itself apart, incompatible with any interest in the coherence of action.³⁸

In a gesture of casualness, Benjamin highlights the “interruption [as] one of the fundamental procedures of all form-giving,” bringing in *citation*: “To cite a text also

33 Thereby ‘practice’ does not apply to the ‘real’ reality outside of theater as opposed to the illusionary theatrical play. The relation between play and world is put differently by Christoph Menke, who distinguishes the action of playing something to someone [*Handlung des Vorspielens*] from the (concept of) praxis (derived from *prattein*), which is aim-oriented and completes itself in the achievement of the aim (C. Menke 2018, 45; 2005, 123–125, 128–129/98–100, 103–104).

34 “[D]as Verhältnis der aufgeführten Handlung zu derjenigen, die im Aufführen überhaupt gegeben ist, zum Ausdruck zu bringen” (Benjamin 1931b, 529). See Benjamin 1939, 538–539/306–307.

35 Regarding the common understandings of gesture as a sign bound to semantics, see Meyer 2004, 61.

36 See also, very close to Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture” (Agamben 1993, 133–140/49–54); on gestures becoming intransitive (with reference to Bergson and Barthes), see Meyer 2004, 56–57.

37 See Benjamin 1931b, 521–523/3–5. In the second text: “‘one waited until the crowd had laid the sentences on the scale.’ In short the play was interrupted.” (“abgewartet wurde, bis die Menge die Sätze auf die Waagschale gelegt hatte.’ Kurz das Spiel wurde unterbrochen.”) (Benjamin 1939, 535–536/305)

38 “Until now it was missed” that “there might be an even unbridgeable discrepancy between what Brecht’s idea of gesture is aiming at and his concept of the plot [*Fabel*]” (Lehmann 2002, 231, also 214–216; Lehmann 2016, 159).

means: to interrupt its context” (Benjamin 1939, 535–536/305).³⁹ The epic theater, “which is organized by interruption, [is therefore] a citable [theater] in a specific sense” (*das epische Theater, das auf die Unterbrechung gestellt ist, [ist] ein in spezifischem Sinne zitierbares*); not only in the sense of the “citability of its texts,” but rather with respect to the “gestures that have their place in the course of the play” (536/305).⁴⁰ With gesture, there is no form specified that critique could assume; rather, it is an ‘entry of form’ and *as entry* it is disruptive, form-giving, but not an established form. It is an act of giving that is suspended before its becoming present (as something),⁴¹ not something that could be stated, but *in* the very process held out *before* this. This must also be opposed to concepts of theory as a ‘content’ to be learned or taught.⁴² Thereby the ‘position’ of theory as such is affected.

Benjamin conceptualizes “the actor’s most important accomplishment” to “make gestures citable” [“Gesten zitierbar zu machen”] by making a stunning comparison: “he must be able to space out his gestures as the typesetter spaces out words [*seine Gebärden muß er sperren können, wie ein Setzer die Worte*]” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11). Theater is thereby thought of according to the spatial arrangement of letters and the typeface of books.⁴³ Gestures are not only produced by means of the interruption of an action; rather, they interrupt the course, setting themselves off as an extended – retarding – interruption, like the typesetter, who spaces out words by expanding the spaces between letters into interstices, which in turn separate the letters (from each other) in such a way that the words space out (*sperren*) or block the course of the sentence by inserting intervals in themselves, and setting themselves

39 In “Karl Kraus,” Benjamin sets the task of “unbinding” the “force” (*Kraft*) in citation: “to expurgate, to destruct, the only [force] that gives hope [*zu reinigen, zu zerstören; die einzige [Kraft], in der noch Hoffnung liegt*]” (Benjamin 1931a, 365); this relates to the status of citation in Benjamin’s concept of historiography as expounded in his *Passagenwerk* (Benjamin 1934–1940, 595 [N 113]).

40 At around 1931, Benjamin defined criticism/critique as a mode of *citation* (cf. Benjamin’s notations [*Fragmente zur Literaturkritik*], GS VI, 169–171 [Fr. 135 and 136], 161–162, [Fr. 32]).

41 This is how Jacques Derrida conceives of the gift. See Derrida 1992, 12–15, 23–27, 38–42, 100–102, 111–112; see also (referring to Nancy) Lehmann 2002, 367–368.

42 The “relation between theory and practice” refers to the “dialectic that reigns between teaching and learning comportment” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11–12). “What the *Lehrstück* promises to teach consists not in the transmission of content, but rather in an attitude of experimental action and interpretation [*einer Haltung des versuchenden Selbermachens und -deutens*]” (C. Menke 2005, 145/117). *Lehrstücke*, “Dichtung für Übungszwecke” (Brecht, cited in Müller-Schöll 2002, 325), instead of using the production of *gestures* merely as a means to an end, make them “one” of their “most immediate ends” (Benjamin 1939, 536/305).

43 Benjamin characterizes the baroque mourning plays (*Trauerspiele*) in a similar way: “daß die Situationen nicht allzu oft, dann aber blitzartig wechselten wie der Aspekt des Satzspiegels, wenn man umblättert” (Benjamin 1928a, 361/198). The ‘literalization’ of theater connects there: “Auch in die Dramatik ist die Fußnote und das vergleichende Blättern einzuführen” (Brecht, quoted by Benjamin 1931b, 525/7). Instead of “scenery sets” (*Dekorationen zu Szenen*), surfaces of presentations are assembled: “inscriptions” (*Beschriftungen*), “placards” (*Plakate*), relating to the several “numbers” (*Nummern*) of the program (Benjamin 1931b, 524–525/6–7; 1939, 533/303).

off from it, dissociating it in itself.⁴⁴ Gestures are made “citable” insofar as they are spaced out or barred, as a damming-up of the course of action, exposing the “relation” of the “action given in performing” to “the performed action” (Benjamin 1931b, 529/11; 1939, 538–539/306–307). *Gesperrt* and *sperrend*: spaced out, barred, and blocking, they set themselves off as “citable.”⁴⁵ Conversely they are as such *given* only through their *repetition* or citation, and that means precisely where and insofar as they are not themselves.⁴⁶ As Benjamin emphasizes with regard to Brecht’s *Mann ist Mann*: “One and the same gesture summons Galy Gay, first to change his clothes, and then to be shot, against the wall” (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12). Set off in the repetition as gesture, that is, as citable, precisely there, where it (always already) will not have been able to be ‘one and the same thing,’ it interrupts, by referring back and potentially ahead to what is to come (a repetition elsewhere, sometime); it is *citable* as other (to itself). In Brecht’s *Die Maßnahme*, one of his *Lehrstücke*, gestures are cited in a very specific kind of “play within a play,”⁴⁷ that is, according to Benjamin, “not only the report from the communists, but through their acting [*Spiel*] also a series of gestures of their comrade whom they acted against [*des Genossen, gegen den sie vorgingen*] are brought before the party tribunal” (Benjamin 1939, 536/305). In the acting/playing of what has happened before the tribunal and before the spectators, one of those who have returned at each time acts/plays (*spielt vor*) the absent one, whom they killed, and for whose effacing they seek a judgement.⁴⁸ In this (doubled) *Vorspielen* of *Vorspielen* (playing/acting of playing/acting) – ex-citing, as it were, the dead, the absent one⁴⁹ – the actors (as those who returned acting the absent dead, whose ‘part’ they play) cite his gestures: citing them and making them citable, performing them *as* citable by showing them *as* gestures. ‘Making gestures citable’ is here the “action performed” itself. The entry to the stage, which in drama must be integrated as a transition *into* the performed dramatic person, (here) is hindered as a problematic – provisional – passage *into* the performance: in these cited ges-

44 Benjamin cites Karl Kraus who spaces out in his citation: “die dort im Gr a n a t b a u m sa ß” (Benjamin 1931a, 363); thereby the citation that calls out of the context is both destroying (the context) and saving (the cited).

45 See also Meyer 2004, 60–61.

46 On the foreignness of the gesture to itself, insofar as it is repeated or lends itself to imitation, see also Henri Bergson: “We [...] become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. [...] To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person” (Bergson 1911, 33). The imitative process is cleaved in itself from the beginning (Müller-Schöll 2002, 156).

47 See C. Menke 2005, 146/118.

48 See Lehmann 2002, 256–257, also 264–266; in addition, see Lehmann, “Die Rücknahme der Maßgabe” (Lehmann 2016, 165–180).

49 This is to recall the (rhetorical) figure of the excitation of the absent, of the dead, of the faceless, that is, *prosopopeia*. The “separation of actors and spectators as the dead from the living” (*der Spieler vom Publikum wie die Toten von den Lebendigen*), which has become inoperable (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; 1939, 539/307), is indeed to be held by the threshold that *Die Maßnahme* folds onto the stage in its playing.

ture-citations – in spacing out these gestures – *otherness*, absence, defacement, pre-vails.

Here we might recall the (word) *episodion* in its significance for ancient theater. It speaks of the entrance (*Zutritt*) of the protagonists as a stepping-into-the-way, opening up another time-space of the protagonists' speech, disruptively opening the *episodion* of each entry between the choruses' songs and dances. Every stage entry has the character of an interrupting intrusion by a stranger. Benjamin cites this access, which as an interruption gives and sets off episodes,⁵⁰ with the entrance of the stranger, who in interrupting a 'situation' brings it to a standstill (*stillstellen*) and in setting it off produces it.

The epic theater that is interested in *Zustände* ("the state of things") instead of the development of actions (*Handlungen*) is *gestural*, because these *Zustände* are *not* available objects which would only have to be represented or imitated; rather, they first had to be "discovered" by being "distanced from the spectator" (Benjamin 1931b, 521–522/4–5; 1939, 533/303). This discovery, in the sense of an alienation of situations, is performed as the "courses" are interrupted and brought to a halt.⁵¹ The sudden appearance of a stranger is the gesture which interrupts the course of things, which inserts the distance of *another regard* and, in effecting a standstill, brings forth "a state" (*einen Zustand*) one runs into:

The most primitive example: a family scene. Suddenly a stranger enters. The wife had just been about to clench a pillow, in order to throw it to the daughter; the father had just been about to open the window, to call a policeman. In this moment the stranger appears in the door. A 'tableau' – as one called it around 1900. That means: the stranger now runs into a situation: rumpled bedding, open window, ravaged furnishings. But there is a gaze before which even the familiar scenes of bourgeois life do not look much different. (Benjamin 1931b [trans. 1998], 5)

Das primitivste Beispiel: eine Familienszene. Plötzlich tritt da ein Fremder ein. Die Frau war gerade im Begriff, ein Kopfkissen zu ballen, um es nach der Tochter zu schleudern; der Vater im Begriff, das Fenster zu öffnen, um einen Schupo zu holen. In diesem Augenblick erscheint in der Tür der Fremde. 'Tableau' – wie man um 1900 zu sagen pflegte. Das heißt: der Fremde stößt jetzt auf einen Zustand: zerknülltes Bettzeug, offenes Fenster, verwüstetes Mobiliar. Es gibt aber einen Blick, vor dem auch die gewohnteren Szenen des bürgerlichen Lebens sich nicht viel anders ausnehmen. (Benjamin 1931b, 522)⁵²

Thus, a *Zustand* in the moment (*Augenblick*) of the interruption by the sudden entry of a 'spectator' (of sorts) is brought forth to a pause (*Inne-halten*) and thereby ex-

⁵⁰ This is referred to by the "episodic character" of gestural theater, organized and presented by "frameworks" as a disruptive-retarding setting-off of its parts (Benjamin 1931b, 521–523/4–6; 1939, 533–535/303–305).

⁵¹ In the original, it says: "Diese Entdeckung (Verfremdung) von Zuständen vollzieht sich mittels der Unterbrechung von Abläufen" (Benjamin 1939, 535/304).

⁵² In the second text, it says: "verstörte Mienen, offenes Fenster" (Benjamin 1939, 535/305).

posed.⁵³ Such *Zustände* – in this way ‘discovered’ through interruption – may be “cognized” (*erkannt*) by the spectator “as the real state of things (*die wirklichen Zustände*), not [merely recognizing], as in the theater of naturalism, with a smirk, but with amazement” (*nicht, wie auf dem Theater des Naturalismus, mit Süffisance sondern mit Staunen*) (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4).⁵⁴ For the *wirklichen Zustände* are cognizable where, and insofar as, they are precisely not available as something to be represented and cannot be imitated (*nachgeahmt*), but insofar as, to use a phrase from Lehmann (Lehmann 2002, 366), they must be pre-mitigated (*vor-geahmt*): “at the end, not at the beginning of this experiment” (*Versuch*) (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4), which is carried out tentatively (*probeweise*).⁵⁵

This, on the one hand, makes for the “episodic character” of gestural theater, organized and presented by its framing, a disruptive-retarding setting-off of its parts, exposed as such,⁵⁶ that lets us perceive the theatrical presentation – quite contrary to the alleged dramatic coherence of action – as a disjunctive assemblage⁵⁷ of dissociated parts or separated “panels.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, the *Zustände* that might become cognizable “at the end of this experiment” (*Versuch*) as which, according to Benjamin, the theatrical presentation takes place – on trial and revisable (Benjamin 1931b, 522/4)⁵⁹ – refer to the otherwise possible: that which is not realized. “Amazement” (*Staunen*), as Benjamin’s text from 1931 quotes in an extraordinarily long passage of Brecht, is the effect of the theatrical observance: that “man [*der Mensch*] is not to be recognized completely [*ganz*] or definitely [*endgültig*] but rather is not so easily exhausted, holding and hiding within him many possibilities” [*viele Möglichkeiten in sich Bergendes und Verbergendes*] “is a delighting insight” (*lustvolle Erkenntnis*) (531/13). It is made possible by theater, which deals with “the elements of the real in the sense of an experimental disposition” (*im Sinne einer Versuchsanordnung*)

53 It is the gaze of the spectator which brings those entering the stage fleeing to a standstill: “Der Augenblick, da sie Zuschauern sichtbar werden, lässt sie einhalten.” (cf. Benjamin 1928b, 72)

54 See also Benjamin 1931b, 531/13; 1939, 535/304).

55 See also Benjamin 1939, 535/305.

56 Regarding the “episodic character of framing [*Umrahmung*]” (Benjamin 1931b, 521–523/4–6; 1939, 5/303–305), compare the baroque choruses or interludes as “bracketings of the action” that is thereby presented as “part of a mere show” (*Bestandstücke einer bloßen Schaustellung*) (Benjamin 1928a, 300–301, 367–369/119, 205–207). This corresponds to the observation that the “episodic theater,” “comparable to the images of the film strip,” “advances in jolts” (*den Bildern des Filmstreifens vergleichbar, in Stößen vorrückt*); similarly, in the allegorical mourning play, action advanced into the allegorical framing, always altered “in jolts” – through “the intermittent rhythm of continual arrest [*Einhaltens*], sudden reversal [*stoßweisen Umschlagens*], and new freezing [*neuen Erstarrens*]” (373/213).

57 This is characteristic for all the forms of that ‘kin’ of theater, that counters drama, whose “mule track” (*Pasch- und Schleichpfad*) “today – however unkempt and wild” (*wie struppig und verwildert auch immer*) – emerges in the Brechtian theater (Benjamin 1931b, 523/5).

58 According to Brecht, theater is “a series of panels” (*eine Folge von Tafeln*) (cited in Müller-Scholl 2002, 165).

59 See Benjamin 1939, 535/305. The *Lehrstück* is revisable (see 537/306).

(522/4), whose “stance” or tenor is that all that is represented, and all those who are presenting, are possible otherwise or possibly are not (525/7), which is practiced in theater-playing, in an ‘acting on trial’ or ‘in rehearsal.’ In this way, theater refers “productively” to itself as a *space of the possible*⁶⁰ in which what is presented and the presenters are not given as identical with themselves and are not self-contained – where every tentative or experimental arrangement in which the *wirkliche Zustände* may be (re)cognized retrospectively⁶¹ implies (and this applies both to the events on stage and to reality) an uncountable multitude of *other* “possibilities” (that have not become real) held and hidden in themselves.

Therefore: “Der Zustand, den das epische Theater aufdeckt, ist die Dialektik im Stillstand” (“The state that epic theater uncovers is the dialectic at a standstill”), as Benjamin puts it here for the first time, coining a phrase for theater’s interrupting *Stillstellung*, its putting-to-a-halt (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12–13),⁶² which he will further develop in his later notations on history and historiography.⁶³ The “amazement” (*Staunen*) notably emerges from the play of the signifiers between *Staunen* and *Stauen* (“damming-up”), characterized as the “backwards tide” of a “swell in the real flow of life” (*Stauung im realen Lebensfluß*), in the “instant that its flow comes to a standstill” (*im Augenblick, da sein Ablauf zum Stehen kommt*) (531/13),⁶⁴ there, where at the same time – in the katachrestic breaking of the metaphors – “the flow of things breaks itself” on the “cliff of amazement” (*Fels des Staunens*), allowing “Being” (*Dasein*) to “spray up high out of the bed of time and, iridescent, in an instant [*Nu*] to stand in emptiness, in order to bed it anew” (531/13).⁶⁵ The *dynamis*

⁶⁰ In particular, the *Lehrstück* discovers the “space of the possible” as a “setting free of potential, play, fantasy, provisionality, openness” (Lehmann 2002, 368); see also C. Menke 2005, 145/117–118.

⁶¹ Christoph Menke (following Nietzsche) ties imitation (*Nachahmung*) to playing as form-giving out of formlessness, in which the forms, in becoming, again and again dissolve themselves, “meet[ing] the abyss, the emptiness, and the potential of formlessness”: in the play, form is the imitated “form of life” (C. Menke 2018, 41) if what is represented finds its form given in reality as that which can be imitated – “the imitation [*Nachahmung*] of another, preceding form” (42). This is, however, just a *retroactive* effect, as is (according to Benjamin) the cognizability of the “real state of things” (*der wirklichen Zustände*).

⁶² See also Müller-Scholl 2002, 160. “Immanent dialectical behavior is what in the ‘state of things’ is cleared up in a flash” (*Immanent dialektisches Verhalten ist es, was im Zustand [...] blitzartig klargestellt wird*) (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12). Thus, Galy Gay in *Mann ist Mann* is “nothing other than a stage of contradictions, which constitute our society” (530/12). Instead of “forcing open our state of things from the outside” (*von außen her unsre Zustände einzurennen*), Brecht is said to let them “mediated, in a “dialectical way” (*vermittelt, dialektisch*) “criticize one another, play their various elements logically against each other” (526/8).

⁶³ See Benjamin’s *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, 1935–1940, 104, 102–105; see also Benjamin’s notations (Benjamin GS I, 1236, 1250); Benjamin 1934–1940, 55, 577–578 (N2a,3; N3,1), 1001.

⁶⁴ “[D]as Staunen ist diese Rückflut. Die Dialektik im Stillstand ist sein eigentlicher Gegenstand” (Benjamin 1931b, 531).

⁶⁵ “[...] [lässt] das Dasein aus dem Bett der Zeit hoch aufsprühen und schillernd einen Nu im Leeren stehen, um es neu zu betten.” Here there is “no difference between a human life and a word.” The

of rupture in the interruption, in the damming-up (*Stauen*) as a broken movement, trembles ‘inside’ of the *Zustand* brought forth by interrupting and in retarding. The dialectic at a standstill manifests itself “already in gestural elements that underlie every temporal sequence and that one can only improperly call elements” (530/12).⁶⁶ Indeed, as they are not indivisible elements but are already split and doubled *in* themselves – and thus are *citabile* – they are not themselves and not identical with themselves.⁶⁷ The force of the form-giving interruption putting to a halt conveys itself to that which it gives, without this attaining any identical givenness.

If gestural theater is characterized by Benjamin as “a way of acting [*spielen*] that directs [the actor] to cognition” (*die ihn [den Schauspieler] auf Erkenntnis anweist*) (Benjamin 1931b, 528/11), then the latter, being “produced” in the play-acting or theater-playing, is nothing one would have already known in advance, or which could simply be stated. But here, cognition is a matter of performing, a matter of opening gestures and breaches that hold open ruptures in the inside, turns and gaps.⁶⁸ The actors act “the one thinking (about his *part*)”⁶⁹ insofar as, with their distance from both what is represented and “the way in which it is represented,” “in their acting” (*in ihrem Spiel*), in its difference from itself, they display the “intervals,” which give the spectators occasion (*Anhalt*) to take “critical stances” (*kritische Stellungnahmen*) (Benjamin 1939, 538/306). This takes place *in* theater-playing, which is doubled and split in itself, and which inserts spectatorship into itself and thereby turns actors into spectators, to the effect that spectatorship sees itself being inserted into the acting/

broken metaphor continues and transforms the verses cited from Brecht: “Beharre nicht auf der Welle,/Die sich an deinem Fuß bricht, solange er/Im Wasser steht, werden sich/Neue Wellen an ihm brechen.” (Benjamin 1931b, 531)

66 The “mother” of “the dialectic at a standstill” – which is Benjamin’s rather irritating metaphor – is “not the course of contradictions” but “gesture itself” (Benjamin 1931b, 530/12).

67 Benjamin conceives the “dialectic at a standstill” (*Dialektik im Stillstand*) in the context of the “dialectical image” as the “readable image,” for epistemology or, more precisely, the procedures of historiography (Benjamin 1934–1940, 570, 576–578, 591–592). These tie “cognizability” as “readability” to citation, which rips out and makes readable what has been (*das Gewesene*), in its broken bits, cited into the text of the present (595 [N11,3]). What has been ‘is’ not what one might be used to conceiving as facts (see Benjamin’s *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*; see Hamacher 2005). As in a flash, the “readable image,” that is, the “historical object,” appears in the “now of readability” (*Jetzt der Lesbarkeit*) (Benjamin 1934–1940, 570 [N1,1], 577–578 [N3,1], 591–592 [N9,7]) that must be grasped as the moment (*Augenblick*) of perceptibility of a constellation, that is, in danger of being missed “already in the next moment” (592 [N9,7]). The so-called “image” ‘is’ the “dialectic at a standstill,” “in its interior,” a “field of tension” that is polarized into “pre- and post-history by the effects of “actuality” (*Aktualität*) (594–596 [N10,3; N10a,2; N10a,3; N11,5], 587–588 [N7a,1; N7,7], 577–578).

68 The *Lehrstück* places more weight on “the reality and the occurrence of the act of representation itself” than on the completion of representation and content (Lehmann 2002, 368). This, as an act without completion, contradicts Austin’s concept of performatives (see Hamacher 2018).

69 More exactly, Benjamin’s text from 1939 claims that the actors should: “[es sich] nicht nehmen lassen, den (über seinen Part) Nachdenkenden vorzumachen” (Benjamin 1939, 538/307).

playing (*Schauspielen*) – as *other*.⁷⁰ Distance to *oneself* (and to one's own action [Benjamin 1931b, 521/3]) is taken and given – opened – in and as acting (*Verhalten*) in play-acting (*Schauspielen*), which refers 'critically' to the "actions on the stage" that it shows, but also to itself *as* this showing (*Zeigen*).

Thus, Theater-playing (*Theaterspielen*) is a 'critical practice' not because of something that may be said or meant, but due to its giving of a non-identity – interruption as a gift – through which it becomes theoretical, (potentially) everywhere, by referring everything that is shown elsewhere to an other which it is not, to the fissure or gap that makes it possible and that the gesture holds open.⁷¹ It is a matter of theater *as* critical praxis, as the setting-apart of acting in itself, as a praxis that splits/doubles itself from and in itself,⁷² that, *as* the *act* of performing in/as playing, performs an action (allegedly identical with itself) on the stage *as* split/doubled in itself. What is at stake in theater-playing is not a distinction that ends in judgment (as is the case for criticism or critique).⁷³ Rather, theater-playing is 'critical' *as* performing or as taking place, without instituting any authority that may state or judge, consisting (undecidably) *in* the event or *in* what is coming,⁷⁴ where it does not coincide with itself: potentially at any moment, in every place, differing from itself, becoming other. Thus, the behavior or acting *in* "theater-playing," the stance (*Haltung*) toward acting *in* playing, conflicts with instituting such an authority. Theater can be called *critical* because, according to Christoph Menke, with its non-identity it counters the repression of the non-identical,⁷⁵ through which alone the supposedly self-contained iden-

70 In particular, in the *Lehrstück* "[t]he act of spectating is brought into the play. The actors [*Spieler*] [...] are actors [*Akteure*] and spectators at once and thus, strictly speaking, are acting spectators and spectating actors" (Lehmann 2002, 372). Benjamin puts this the other way around: "Every spectator will be able to become an actor [*Mitspieler*]" (Benjamin 1939, 536/305).

71 This is articulated in the theatrical presentation's relation to the stage, which allows considering "what theater is about today" (Benjamin 1931b, 519/1; 1939, 539/307). While gestural theater is the attempt (*Versuch*) to 'arrange' itself on the "podium" (of the stage), this attempt can only ever be experimental, tentative, provisional. The gesture of form-giving remains in reservation before and against every givenness (even that of reality).

72 If praxis is "reflected and thereby transformed in drama," this opens up "a tension in the inside of praxis": between completion and possibility (C. Menke 2018, 45, 41). But Christoph Menke develops the "paradox" of theater-playing as that of playing (something to someone) (*Vorspielen*) and imitating something.

73 See also C. Menke 2018, 37–38, 48.

74 "[E]s gibt' [...] ist im Modus des Entstehens da"; "[es] besteht in einem Ankommen" (Lehmann 2002, 368 [with reference to Nancy], 367).

75 "The critique of theater goes against the defense, the immunization of life against the transformation it experiences in the theater." "Theater criticizes [...] the immunization against paradox, and thus against theater; for theater is the implementation of paradox" (C. Menke 2018, 45–46). "Theater brings forth in its bringing-forth of form, and indeed through its paradox, an *other play* and indeed *another life*. This always already happens when there is theater. [...] Theater transforms life (or the world)." (44)

tity and necessity of the world asserts itself as given.⁷⁶ Moreover, it can be called ‘critical’ as it (that is to say, the “reflection [*Nachdenken*] about theater” implied in it) demonstrates “that one can criticize in the name of paradox, decide in the name of undecidability” (C. Menke 2018, 48). Its *halt* is without place, it *comes* from a (non)place of difference – which attains no unity. The theatrical distancing of the presentation and those presenting/acting *from* themselves contests (pretensions to) self-identity and self-containment. It refers the represented action on the stage and the act of performing (suspending it in its becoming) to their margins; refers form to (excluded) *other* possibilities (not having become reality), to the *shadows* of the otherwise-possible, which is excluded in every instance of form-giving, but which accompanies each constituted form. Each ‘form,’ that is, everything presented (according to Benjamin citing Brecht), thus *birgt* – implicates and holds – the otherwise possible in its interior, being thereby divided and virtualized. The potential being-other of what is provisionally (*probeweise*) cited from the space of the possible partakes in ‘what is shown’: as its gaps, ambivalences, and ambiguities,⁷⁷ in “the trembling of the contours” (*Zittern der Umrisse*),⁷⁸ in the shadows of the otherwise possible.

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⁷⁶ Identity ‘is’ solely through the exclusion, or repression, of difference from itself, of hidden (other) possibilities (which split actions, figures, and worlds in themselves), through excluding and making forgotten the non-form for the sake of the supposedly self-contained, ‘finished’ form, through the repression of the margins of (other) possibilities which are cut off by the figuration for the sake of the supposedly realized figure.

⁷⁷ On this point, see Lehmann 2002, 376–378.

⁷⁸ “[T]he trembling of its contours still reveals from which intimate proximity they have torn themselves in order to become visible” [*das Zittern ihrer Umrisse verrät immer noch, aus welcher innigen Nähe sie sich gerissen haben, um sichtbar zu werden*] (Benjamin 1931b, 525/7). Nägele comments not only on the “spatial difference” and (possible) reversals of foreground and background (Nägele 2005, 113–114; see also Müller-Scholl 2002, 162–164) but also notices this “trembling” to have affected Benjamin’s text (Nägele 2005, 114–116).

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