

# When Gesture Becomes Event

*Judith Butler*

I am pleased to contribute to this volume devoted to thinking about philosophy and performance. I would like to work within two different frameworks to conceptualize the relationship between social embodiment and the speech act. In recent years, we have seen the growth of Performance Studies throughout the world, and this has compelled many of us to rethink what we mean by performance and where we find it. It has become important to distinguish Performance Studies from theater studies precisely to foreground performance as a kind of action or practice that does not require the proscenium stage. Performance can and does happen in the street, or in the mall, in ordinary life, and even, we might say, in every possible instance of motion and stillness. Although it has been important to distinguish Performance Studies from theater so as to expand our conception of what the platform for bodily action can be, we make a mistake by failing to see the necessary overlaps between theater and performance, since the “stage” is hardly an unmovable plane, and there are ways of acting in the theater that move both actors and audience on and off the stage. In other words, there are kinds of theater that allegorize the very distinction between theater and performance, and, sometimes, a found object on the street—a random plank—can suddenly

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become a stage or a platform, and that happens within demonstrations on the street as well when a toppled tank becomes a platform for speech. In the latter case, certain surfaces become provisional and improvised supports for movement and speech, assuming the status of the stage. Indeed, why not understand the proscenium as itself a roving or moveable element? Perhaps when the proscenium does move, or withdraw, or turn up in spaces or on surfaces where it is not expected, we are already in the orbit of performance art and performance studies without having left theater altogether. Theatrical street politics bears this out.

And yet, not all senses of performance are held to be theatrical, and some well-known debates about how to think about performativity brought that tension to the fore. The performative operation of language seems to rely on rules that establish language as effective, or even creative. But can the performative aspects of language be wholly separated from the speech act? I will be exploring the sense of performance we find in the performative speech act and performativity more generally in order to understand where the body can be found in the relationship between language and performance. Along the way, I will be using the example of gender performativity to think about the somatic dimension of both the speech act and embodied performance. And then finally, I hope to consider the role of “gesture” as it crosses between language and performance, focusing on Walter Benjamin’s discussion of epic theater in Brecht, which brings language and performance together in some unexpected ways and where the citational account of the speech act has consequences for how we think about forms of action that appear to be shorn of context, or even rip it up in the course of appearing. The gesture, I will suggest, is an ethically consequential decomposition of the speech act characteristic of epic theater and that shares certain features with the performativity of gender.

## PART I: FROM AUSTIN TO EMBODIMENT

Of course, lingering in the background of any such proposal is the question once highly discussed in queer theory of the difference between performance and performativity. Perhaps “performativity” is simply the quality of any given performance. We can refer to a “performative” dimension to an artwork to foreground how an artwork performs, suggesting that it acts, that it intervenes upon and transforms a space, that it seems to exercise its own agency and effect. But are there other reasons to use the word “performativity”? Even J.L. Austin who developed the theory of

performative speech acts<sup>1</sup> spoke mainly about performatives as sentences, and used “performative” as an adjective in order, simply, to bring out the generative or consequential dimensions of a particular speech act. The problem proved to be important for linguistics and philosophy, as we know, since it raised a set of fundamental questions: what acts when speech acts? What kind of action is a speech act? Under what conditions does speech act, on whom or what, and where? Austin proposed, as you doubtless know, that though there has to be a speaker who utters the speech act, speech “acts” not because the subject’s intention is so effective, but because the act of speech relies upon certain social conventions that give efficacy to the act. His examples included judges condemning people to prison and couples taking vows of marriage. And we were meant to understand that the juridical authority of the judge had been conventionally established, that the legal system in which the judge acts or the couples marry is working and considered legitimate. Sometimes the example given for the illocutionary utterance—the one that brings into being what it names—references the naming practices of divine authority, God, or one of his delegated representatives. So, Adam can wander around that garden and start to name what he sees, and those seen and named objects are not only generated on the spot, but become associated with that name. Some rather strong assumptions about authority back up the speech act that creates a reality or radically transforms a situation. The first is illocutionary, understood as the socially generative or creative dimension of the speech act, and it is distinct from a second sort, the perlocutionary, which works by producing a set of consequential effects. So, yelling “fire” in the movie theater does not produce any fire; it only compels people to move with panic toward the exit. Sometimes, calling a group of people assembled on the street a “revolution” contributes to the effect of bringing about what it names (and is thus illocutionary), but, other times, it is a call to arrive, seeking to persuade simply more people to the scene (and is thus perlocutionary). But if, under certain conditions, the declaration actually produces the revolution, or helps to produce it, then that means that those who use the speech act are assuming authority precisely as they create the phenomenon they name.

<sup>1</sup> See J.L. Austin, “Performative Utterances,” in *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) and *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

So, for some time, there has been a question as to what this linguistic theory is doing in the midst of a theory of performance. After all, it is a theory that relies on utterances that work mainly through the force of conventions, and do not immediately seem to have a relation to any bodily action in space other than that of speaking. Does Austin's theory presume that everyone has the capacity to speak, or only those in positions of authority who are backed up by conventions? He seems less interested in the somatic dimensions of vocalization—the throat, the diaphragm, or breathing, or its tonality or rhythm—than the force it derives by its forms of conditioned actions. Does the speaker rely on the somatic dimension of speech, and does it matter whether the speech act assumes a sensuous expression, and what manner of sensuousness is at work?

Further, it is not the speaker's intention which governs when linguistic conventions bring about realities or produce particular consequences. As Derrida pointed out in "Signature Event Context,"<sup>2</sup> those conventions are already at work way before you or I speak them, and they only have the power that they do by virtue of their iterable status, the way they are repeated and elaborated in various texts and institutional practices. So, it may be said that those conventions, and their iterability, are what dispose any of us to act through speech: they act on our speech when we act, and they precede and exceed the moment of the enunciation. Something repeats in and through our own speaking as we "act" in language.

It is important to take seriously the fact that a speech act does not simply act, but is also acted on, and derives whatever power it has to act from the citational chain in which it operates. We may well make emphatic declarations or utter authoritative imperatives, wielding power through the speech act; but those declarations and imperatives bring with them a history and a historicity that we did not make; this animating legacy of speech acts upon our speech, and even acts upon speech as it acts.

If someone addresses me directly, or speaks about me in the third person, and they seek to summarize who I am with a name or a phrase, they do not constitute who I am in the moment of those utterances. They wager that their speech act will be taken up by others, so we are already in a scene of persuasion, and the speech act, whether or not it is successful, is perlocutionary. And yet, the aspiration of the speech act is illocutionary:

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Alan Bass, in *Limited, Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 1–23.

I want to have the power to constitute someone by the names I use, but I do not have that power, and so have to rely on others accepting or rejecting my efforts. Their efforts to name may fall flat, the way that declarations of revolution often do. And if someone calls fire and there is no fire, or someone says that the stock market is about to fall, and consequences follow, that is only true only if those speakers are within a structured field of audibility, within a space and time in which the utterance means and matters, and if those listening are directly affected by the event referenced by the speech act. I must have already been admitted into the language and the meaning of such exclamations before I can react to them as something other than impinging forms of noise.

All of us are called names; name-calling inaugurates an important dimension of the speech act. We are named and assigned gender in our very first and radically unchosen exposure to language. There is a distinctly formative effect of having been named as this gender or another gender, as part of one nationality or as a minority; sometimes, it is a name that arrives very early in life, but you can quite belatedly encounter the terms by which you are regarded, ones that you yourself did not know. We can, and do ask, with Sojourner Truth, "Am I that Name?" which is one way of querying the effect of such primary forms of interpellation. How do we think about the force and effect of those names we are called before ever hearing them, before emerging into language as speaking beings, prior to any capacity for a speech act of our own? Speech acts upon us quite against our will, prior to both our will and our own speaking. If it did not act upon us, we could not speak at all. Although we explain this through recourse to a sequential scheme, that is not fully right. Speech acts on us before we act through speech, but as we act through speech, it continues to act upon us: even as we think we are acting, we are also acted upon at that very same time. This simultaneity traverses and confounds the sequential account.

Derrida clearly raised this question about Austin's theory, noting that what we call a discrete and punctual "act" is a citational form, a repetition of what has come before, even a break with that prior context of the utterance. Indeed, one of the major contributions of his "Signature Event Context" is that we cannot understand the social conventions that make a speech act possible without reconceptualizing the idea of a convention as a citational chain. The notion of convention is temporalized, and even as it is instated time and again, so there exists a possibility of deviation with every instantiation. In this sense, there is a historicity to the speech act, one that is citational. Although the speech act may seem

punctual—it is uttered here and now, within this space and time—it only operates by virtue of an insistent referencing of those contexts that have vanished. In fact, the prior contexts of usage are invoked and vacated at the moment of the utterance, such that the speech act draws upon, and breaks with, the prior instances of its iteration.

The juridical examples show us that assumptions about social institutions and authority are at work in Austin's theory. The account is populated with figures who speak, judges and married couples, mayors and policemen, and they demonstrate how the speech act relies on authorized and authorizing forms of embodied agency. Even as the Austinian theory of the speech act implicitly calls upon an account of social embodiment and its relation to power, the theory itself cannot directly theorize this issue. At least for Austin, the speech act cannot quite get away from the notion of "performance."

## PART II. GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Several years ago, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was among those who wrote about the relationship between performance and performativity.<sup>3</sup> Sedgwick found that speech acts deviated from their aims, very often producing consequences that were altogether unintended, and oftentimes quite felicitous. For instance, one could take a marriage vow, and this act could actually open up a zone of extra-marital sexuality. The public acknowledgement of the couple through marriage vows produces another zone, protected from recognition. Sedgwick underscored the sense of how a speech act could veer away from its apparent aims, and this "deviation" constituted one sense of the word queer. Queer was at that time understood less as an identity than as a movement of thought and language contrary to its expected forms, opening up spaces for desire that would not always be openly recognized through existing categories.

My own initiation into the theory of performativity was the result of reading Derrida on Kafka's story "Before the Law."<sup>4</sup> In that essay, Derrida considered how the man from the country lives in expectation that the law will one day reveal its inner secrets, or grant him admission. Derrida

<sup>3</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992).

suggested that the expectation itself established the reality of the law's inner secret, and in that way generated the phenomenon whose disclosure it awaited. We may presume that the enigmatic essence of law produces the expectation that law will reveal itself in time, but Derrida's reading suggested that the expectation posits the enigmatic essence. That reversal proved important to me as I thought about how several discourses on gender seemed to create and circulate certain ideals of gender that many people sought to embody. Those ideals were taken to be natural essences or internal truths, and embodiment was taken to be the more or less successful expression of those ideals. In my earlier views, I held that the expectation that gender essence might be successfully realized failed to see that the expectation of that realized essence was actually generative of the phenomenon itself. Is the essence realized in an embodied ideal, or does the posited ideal retroactively posit the ontological reality of an "essence"? Further, if we take gender norms to operate as a set of conventions repeated through time, subject to sedimentation or displacement, then we can understand how a reiterated set of conventions generated the effect of an internal essence. That internal essence or core reality not only substituted for the iterable status of the social norm, but effectively masked and facilitated the operation of the norm.

The formulation that "gender is performative" became the basis for many long discussions giving rise to two quite contrary interpretations: the first was that we radically choose our genders; the second was that we are utterly determined by gender norms. Those wildly divergent responses meant that something had not quite been articulated and grasped about the dual dimensions of any account of performativity. For if language acts upon us before we act, and also in every instant in which we act, then we have to think about gender performativity first as "gender assignment"—all those ways in which we are, as it were, called a name, and gendered, prior to understanding anything about how gender norms act upon and shape us, much less how they produce a number of ongoing quandaries for us (gender assignment might be understood as a primary and traumatic mode of name-calling). And then, secondly, following Sedgwick, we have to understand how deviations from those norms can and do take place, suggesting that something "queer" is at work at the heart of gender performativity, a queerness that is not far afield from the swerves taken by iterability in Derrida's account of the speech act as citational.

So, let us assume, then, that performativity describes both the processes of being acted on, and the conditions and possibilities for acting, and that

we cannot understand its operation without both of these dimensions. That norms act upon us implies that we are susceptible to their action, vulnerable to a certain name-calling from the start. And this registers at a level that is unchosen and involuntary. An understanding of gender assignment has to take account of this field of an unwilling receptivity, susceptibility, and vulnerability, a way of being exposed to language prior to any possibility of forming or enacting a speech act. Norms such as these both require and institute certain forms of corporeal vulnerability without which their operation would not be thinkable. It is with an understanding of this primary corporeal susceptibility that we can, and do, describe and oppose some gender norms as they are instituted and applied by medical, legal, and psychiatric institutions on a field of bodies, especially when they give rise to accounts of gender in pathological or criminal terms. This very domain of susceptibility, this condition of being affected, is what exposes us from the start to objectionable forms of power. At the same time, susceptibility of this kind is also where something queer can happen, where the norm is refused or revised, or where resistance, deviation, and new formations of gender begin. Although gender norms precede us and act upon us (that is one sense of gender's enactment, its performative character), we are the vectors of their reproduction (and that is a second sense of gender's enactment). Precisely because something inadvertent and unexpected can happen in this primary realm of "being affected" (we can, for instance, be put off, enraged, seduced, or compliant), we find forms of gender taking hold that break with mechanical patterns of repetition, deviating from, resignifying, and sometimes quite emphatically breaking, those citational chains of gender normativity. The theory of gender performativity, as I understood it, never prescribed which gender performances were right, or more subversive, and which were wrong, and reactionary. The point was precisely to relax the coercive hold of norms on gendered life—which is not the same as transcending all norms—for the purposes of living a more liveable life.

So, then, if performativity was considered as linguistic by Austin and Derrida, how do bodily acts re-enter the scene of the performative? I want to suggest that gesture, as a citational act, traverses the domain of language and performance, and that this dual sense of the performative proves important not only for understanding the dynamic of gender performativity, but for understanding how gesture, conceived as both citation and event, might also be understood as a critical practice that seeks to bring to a halt forms of violence accepted as quotidian.



To summarize: my brief discussion of Austin relates to the consideration of gender performativity if we can identify the conventions that operate at the basis of the speech act with the norms that operate in a broad array of gender-assigning strategies. Both of these discussions are only possible if we can see how the speech act affects and animates us in an embodied way—that the field of somatic susceptibility and affect is already operative in the account of how language acts on us in formative ways. Indeed, the embodiment presupposed by both gender and performance depends on the ways that institutional structures and broader social worlds make their impress upon the body. Further, we cannot talk about a body without knowing what supports that body, and what its relation to that support—or lack of support—might be. In this way, the body is less an entity than a relation, and it cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living. The acts of speech, or the broader operations of discourse, to the extent that they act upon and form a body, presuppose that a body is living, and that its life is made possible by means of support, themselves in need of constant formation and reiteration to maintain the livability of a life. Is there a way to think about the “supported” character of embodied life in relation to this broader problematic of performativity?

### PART III. GESTURE AS UNSUPPORTED ACTION

There is much to be said about this relation, but I want at this juncture to call attention to Shannon Jackson’s book *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, which argues that performance art has to be understood as requiring a coordinated set of social relations as well as networks of support, and that it gives us a chance to reflect on social organizations of life that secure the welfare and livability of lives.<sup>5</sup> For Jackson, performance is invariably social and infrastructural. Even the monologue requires a platform and a structured space that some group of people have found, built, and arranged; moreover, there is no performance without the broader coordination of the event, which means that when one person acts, many people are acting. For Jackson, performance emerges from shared social worlds, so no matter how individual and fleeting any given performance might be, it relies upon, and reproduces, an enduring

<sup>5</sup> Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

(or durational) set of social relations, community practices, infrastructures, labor, and institutions, all of which turn out to be part of the performance itself. In a way, “social work”—the title of her book—names, as well, at least two dimensions of performance. There is a working together that constitutes the social condition and the stuff of performance itself, and there is a chance to recreate community through the kinds of performance undertaken. All of these elements compel us to think anew about some rather fundamental theoretical questions: first, are the human and object worlds that, together, make a performance possible also what make up the performance? Are such worlds carried and conveyed, made or unmade, in the performances that we do and are, the ones we see and hear, that lay claim to our responsiveness and, by acting on us, tacitly restructure how we sense the world and come to act as we do?

Gender performance shares some features with what we might more generally call performance: an action that involves a number of people, objects, and institutions, even when it is without a stage and takes place in the briefest of moments, punctual and evanescent. Performance is always already for and with someone or some set of things, always relying on a ground or background, a social world of some kind, even if only a momentarily passing crowd, in order to come forth as “performance” at all. And yet, as much as we might contemplate the general social and embodied conditions of performance, we have also to account for the shifting historical specificities of its form, the vexing way that historical time enters into the time of performance and becomes refracted there.

Both performance and disability studies have confirmed the crucial insight that all action requires support, and that even the most punctual and seemingly spontaneous act implicitly depends upon an infrastructural condition that quite literally supports the acting body. This idea of “support” is quite important not only for the re-theorization of the acting body it provides, but for the broader politics of the arts it defends, including its demand for institutional support. But “support” is also a key term for the politics of mobility. What architectural supports have to be in place for any of us to exercise a certain freedom of movement and assembly: are there not spaces and forms of social and material support necessary for collective action or acting in concert? In the same way that Austin illuminated how the speech act depends upon its social conditions and conventions, we can also claim that performance more generally depends upon its infrastructural and social conditions of support. This bears implications for a general account of embodied and social action.

I cannot give that account here, but I want to pause at this juncture to ask some further questions about the infrastructural conditions and conventions that allow for creative and consequential action. For instance: *When traditional supports fall away, what form does action take?* This is a timely question as those suffering the devastating effects of precarity gather to oppose that condition. When the absence of infrastructural support becomes the very reason for action, and when we act precisely because there are inadequate forms of institutional support for the lives we are trying to live, how do we understand such action? Perhaps it is “supported” by forms of solidarity that emerge among people who have lost their ground, or who feel that they are being asked to live without the kinds of traditional supports that lives require? On the one hand, if we maintain that infrastructure is necessary for human action, we help to debunk the idea that we each, individually, act only from our own strength and with our own power, that we are self-sufficient and self-motoring, and that social conventions and social institutions more generally do not provide necessary support for our actions. So we can, through this perspective, de-ratify forms of individualistic autonomy that consistently efface the social conditions required for efficacious action and livability. On the other hand, if we assume that such infrastructural conditions are necessary for action, we might inadvertently commit ourselves to the proposition that only those who are *already* supported can truly act; in that case, we fail to grasp how those who are deprived of adequate infrastructure can, and do, mobilize resistance to the imposed conditions of accelerating precarity and inequality. These latter forms of mobilization are what we have witnessed in the last few years as crowds gather to object to increasing social and economic inequality, to increased precarity and unpayable debt, to the rise of securitarian and authoritarian modes of power, and to the new (and old) forms of fascism that are finding their way into state and regional governments in Europe and the racist forms of populism found throughout the globe.

So, let us return to what turns out to be both a timely and theoretical problem: What happens to action when its conditions of authorization and support fall away? What form does action take when it is radically unsupported? And when it is effectively de-authorized? How, if at all, can such an undertaking return us to the relation of performance to social embodiment?

To undertake that task, I want to consider the relationship between citation and gesture in Walter Benjamin’s account of Brecht’s epic theater.

It may seem like something of a stretch, but let us remember that Derrida's own critique of Austin relies on an idea of citationality that resonates with Benjamin's focus on the citation in his readings of Brecht and Kafka. The notion of citation is linked not to the speech act, but to the gesture. Indeed, Derrida criticizes Austin for thinking that the speech act is tied to the context in which it is formed and uttered. For Derrida, a speech act, understood as citational, breaks with the context from which it originates as it proves to be transposable to a new and different context. Perhaps this thought finds incipient form in Benjamin's description of epic theater: "Quotation," Benjamin writes, "involves the interruption of its context."<sup>6</sup> That distance from the original context is a precondition of quotability or citationality: there could be no citation without that distance, that break. Benjamin concludes that epic theater, which narrates deeds and engages in explicit commentary, is quotable, even marked and defined by its quotability. A character is constantly breaking out of the context of the play to speak didactically. But also, characters lift utterances from their functional purpose, and display them in quotable form. The citational dimension of speech arrests its effectivity. The where and when of a quotation is always, to some extent, lost when it emerges for the purpose of display; when the citation stands apart from its function, the everyday context is suspended, backgrounded, even lost, and so the quotation becomes a gesture, that is, a truncated form of action that has lost the context for its intelligibility.

Benjamin's brief essays on Kafka refer to the problem of his incomplete gestures. Here, the gesture was understood as a kind of stalled action, one that could not quite become action, that was something less than a fully formed act. Benjamin remarked that Kafka's literary work "divests the human gesture of its traditional supports and then has a subject for reflection without end."<sup>7</sup> I am not sure whether Kafka's work actively divests the human gesture of its traditional supports, or whether it registers that gestures have lost those supports. And I am not sure that this infinite reflection is a hopeful consequence; indeed, it may well be a "bad infinity" opened up by gestures such as these. But one reason for Benjamin to claim that the work

<sup>6</sup>Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1976), 151.

<sup>7</sup>Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations*, 122.

“divests” the human gesture of traditional supports is that it allies Kafka’s writing with Brecht’s dramaturgical aims. After all, the gesture is tactically separated from completed action in Brecht’s dramaturgical writings; the gesture is meant to be extracted from the temporal flow of ordinary action, presented in relative isolation from what precedes and follows. Similarly, the gesture is no longer propped up by a taken-for-granted world, and so seems to have been deprived of its usual grounding in both temporal sequence and spatial context. For Brecht, this isolation and freezing of the gesture is meant to denaturalize the ways that bodily gestures follow from one another, forming perceptual and practical unities in everyday life.

One can see rather clearly how a Brechtian method of this kind has led to performances that seek to denaturalize gender, bringing into relief bodily movements like gait, stride, gesticulations with the hands, expressions, smiles, grimaces, turns, bends, stretches, and how and whether one leans, holds the mouth or the chin or the lips. Such discrete moments of bodily action can be compared with those gestures in Kafka’s literary work when body parts signify or act no longer in the context of a situated body; for instance, a non-prosthetic leg becomes an object that has to be lifted and placed on a surface, or two hands clapping seem to become an industrial set of hammers. Usually, in Kafka, the coordination of bodily parts fails: body parts lose their functions, or speech and action are working in opposing ways so that a facial expression has nothing to do with what is said, something that happens all the time in *The Trial* and elsewhere. In *The Castle*, there is a scene between Frieda and the surveyor, where all the affect seems out of joint. As she explains that she is the mistress of a certain Klamm, Frieda “involuntarily straightened up a little, and her triumphant glance...had no connection whatever with what she was saying.”<sup>8</sup> This same kind of disjunction between body and speech happens in the short stories as well: in “Description of a Struggle,” the body lacks coordination as the narrator seeks to establish volition control over his body as he prepares for a confrontation: “I screwed up my mouth, this being the best preparation for resolute speech, and supported myself by standing on my right leg while resting the left one on its toes, for this position as I have often experienced gives me a sense of stability.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 36.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 28.

Adorno, responding to Benjamin, suggests that gesture crystallizes the disjunction between what the body does and what it says. A certain unmasterable arbitrariness now characterizes the relation between what the body does and what the person says, suggesting that language and body go their own way. As a result, the gesture allegorizes the decomposition of the speech act understood as the embodied expression of a definite will. If we expect a body to perform its words in conformity with the oratorical standard of the speech act (the Roman word as deed, referenced by Hannah Arendt), its gestures mark and enact the impossibility of that particular coordination.

Gestures such as these approximate what happens on the Brechtian stage, at least in theory. The motion and integrity of the body seems to be at issue in both Kafka and Brecht. Benjamin's "What is Epic Theatre?" opens with the figure of a body, relaxing and reading, only then to have that repose dramatically interrupted by the claim that theater is the opposite of this figure. Whether sitting or, indeed, standing in the theater, the one who follows what happens on the theatrical stage is rapt: one is said to "follow the action with every fiber of his being,"<sup>10</sup> so already, within the first paragraph, we are introduced to a body quite gripped by the performance it watches. The performance is "followed" as a visualized and dramatized sequence at a distance from the body that is watching, but if every fiber is involved in that watching, then the body is also seized by what it sees.

But for Benjamin, Brecht offers another way of opposing the relaxed individual, for the "one" who follows what happens on the Brechtian stage is less an individual than a collective, one whose shared reaction is very different from the individual body gripped by spectacle, bound up with what it watches. His point is that neither relaxation nor fascination will do. If anything, the collective who watches, or the one who watches from the perspective of the collective, is "ungripped" by what she sees, taking in the action from a position of attentive consideration and, especially of "interest." Those who follow have an interest in what they watch, but this takes two different but simultaneous forms: when they are seized by what they see, the object is a form of *action with which one identifies*; the second way of seeing—attentive, considered, even critical—is what Benjamin calls *performance*. And so a distinction is introduced in this rather breathless

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?," 147.

paragraph between an action considered as the basis of identification and performance, bound up with critical attention. The distinction permits Benjamin to explain that an action can be tracked on the basis of one's own experience—in which case we are not really differentiated from what we see, since identification and sympathy both fail to differentiate the one who watches from the action watched. *Performance*, however, is mounted by someone else, with the result that one's own way of seeing is interrupted by another's way of seeing; it implies a director whose deliberate forms of orchestration are considered "pellucid."

Through this deliberate orchestration, we are constituted as a "we" who are implicated together in what we see, and, as this very plurality, it would appear that we become capable of attentive and critical thinking. That once rapt body that was, it seems, associated with spectacle and sensation, is put out of play. Indeed, to the extent that epic theater takes historical events as its subjects, its point is "intended to purge them of the sensational."<sup>11</sup> For Benjamin, the "event" will be related to the gesture; in the place of sensational absorption, critical attention focuses on that incomplete or fragmented form of action deprived of its traditional supports. Indeed, in his writing on Kafka, Benjamin tells us that *the gesture has become the event*.

What constitutes "the truly epic process" must have to do with a de-sensationalized and thoughtful relation to the course of historical events, one that Benjamin will call "critical."<sup>12</sup> It must center on events rather than on outcomes, and, in this way, is distinguished from tragic drama which, it seems, relies on a suspenseful sequence of action and locates its meaning in the ultimate human destiny to which it leads. When an action is incomplete, or treated separately from any consequence, it becomes for Brecht an occasion for the audience to recognize itself as a collective. The action does not belong to one character, and it seems to act quite apart from the character to whom it is ascribed. At one point, Benjamin writes, this collective thinker in Brecht is not dissociable from the action but constitutes, in fact, "the hero of the drama."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

The action may be the hero, but it is also, separated from consequences, an event; as partial and decontextualized, it is also a gesture. The scene is orchestrated by a strong directorial agency, and this is what allows thinking to take place. Performance is not only an individual act, but the name for this directorial agency's orchestration of the action as hero, as gesture, and as event. Thinking starts to take place under contemporary social and economic conditions, when actions are displaced from their usual contexts, from a naturalized understanding of everyday life, from their traditional supports. Indeed, the thinking audience is jolted from the natural attitude through a series of interruptions.<sup>14</sup> One might say that the conventional context for an action is interrupted and that, for Brecht, such an interruption leads to "astonishment" (*Erstaunen*) in the face of the normalized and naturalized circumstances under which everyone lives and works. Those circumstances are, for instance, the historical conditions of work that are exposed and delineated precisely through the presentation of events that are frozen or decontextualized in certain ways, removed from what passes as "the natural" and "ordinary" flow of existence. In effect, the deliberate task of the director is to educate the audience to be astonished, disposed toward a critical astonishment toward which it has no "natural" or immediate inclination. This astonishment about the historical conditions under which they live and work is the specific "performance" of epic theater, what distinguishes it from Aristotelian "action." To undergo this astonishment, and to "see" or "behold" these conditions of life, one cannot start with identification or empathy or rapt attention; on the contrary, one starts with *Verfremdung*; one is startled by *Verfremdung*, a sense of alienation from those conditions that become astonishingly there to see, as if for the first time. They become graspable, though, only through a de-historicization, a break or rupture of such a kind that these conditions can no longer be contextualized—all these making them historically understandable. They break out of the continuity of history, we might say, and the naturalized understanding of social relations.

Perhaps we can now see how Benjamin's version of Brecht prefigures Derrida's "Signature Event Context." And perhaps, as well, the resonance

<sup>14</sup>In "What is Epic Theatre," Benjamin elaborates the relation of epistemology and action through interruption: "This discovery (alienation) of conditions takes place through the interruption of happenings" (150); "Interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring (151).



with the so-called theory of gender performativity is on display insofar as that theory sought to transpose and animate the somatic dimension of the speech act for an account of the performative as bodily enactment. That enactment was understood as a variably subversive citational strategy that aimed to arrest and disorient the “natural” course of gender performance, and so, in that sense, approximated a Brechtian project of denaturalization.<sup>15</sup>

When Benjamin describes interruption in Brecht’s epic theater, he gives us a domestic example that includes dimensions of gender, class, and violence. He describes what he calls a “primitive...scene” in which “suddenly a stranger enters. The mother was just about to seize a bronze bust and hurl it at her daughter; the father was in the act of opening the window in order to call a policeman (*einem Schutzman zu rufen*).”<sup>16</sup> The scene emerges quite suddenly for the stranger and for us, and no one has a context for what is happening. It is fair to say that this is an astonishing scene of violence. It matters that this is a domestic scene, since the violence that astonishes us emerges within and from the traditional family and bourgeois life, and the father who, unable to intervene, gets ready to call upon the greater paternal authority of the police to enter the familial territory and stop a potential murder. Indeed, the violence is directed by the mother against the daughter, so it is a violence that strikes at the heart of the bourgeois family, the mother–daughter bond, and gendered violence. Why is it a statue, a bronze one, that is about to be thrown? It seems like it is an imitation of some kind, and not gold, so not the most original and superior form of the head. The German “*eine Bronze*” is translated as a “bust.” Why is the replica of a head taken as a murderous instrument and directed at the daughter? Someone or something has lost its head, perhaps, or the head has become severed from a body and is now a lethal instrument, except that the head is not a head, but a copy, and so already having suffered a severing of its own and, as replica, is clearly deprived of its original body and original scene and is now travelling in worlds where it does not belong. This bronze bust does not act on its own, but if the mother has lost her mind, and is now about to

<sup>15</sup> See Elin Diamond, “Gestus and Signature in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*,” *ELH* 56(3) (1989); “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,” *TDR* 32(1) (1988); and *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Was ist das epische Theater? (2),” in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 535; Benjamin, “What is Epic Theater?” 150.

throw a head, then some sort of decomposition, displacement, and simulation of the human body has already occurred for this scene to emerge, some alienation of the body or fetishism of the object or relic of ruined work is weaponized. Of course, we do not know what happened before, nor do we know what happens after, so there is no sequential narrative to supply a context. And now it seems that the family—this family, but any family, since there is no context for this family—also will be destroyed or invaded by this inanimate citation of a head. It is only a part of body, and we do not know the whole. And it is a replica, perhaps a ruin, whose citational character marks the distance between that “bust” and any possible person it might be replicating. Was it royalty? Was it authority? Something is already lost, and seemingly irrecoverably, in this scene in which the mother appears to be about to injure or destroy the daughter and the family, in defense of which the police are called, and, by implication, the courts and the prison. Did the head start this business, or was it rather some prior loss of bearing and orientation that established this scene without context, the one that Benjamin suddenly starts to write in the middle of his paragraph, a kind of directorial performative on his part that establishes this nearly murderous moment with a sudden start and stop and does not, and cannot, tell us what happened before or what happens next?

We can see this loss of context as a form of alienation, to be sure, and that interpretation would follow the directorial imperative of a Brechtian kind. The human body has come apart and its head has become a commodity that appears on the shelf of the family dining room, as if a beheading has already taken place. Perhaps this is the murderous trace of a certain form of alienated labor or some head of state, or one of the last remaining relics of patriarchal aristocracy animated as a lethal weapon by a murderous mother. For Benjamin, who took Marx seriously, this is surely a possible reading. Is there, however, another reading, according to which Benjamin is suggesting that the violent act against the institution of the family and bourgeois life, even the criminal act of murder, is a “critical” practice? Is this an operation of divine violence, that difficult notion that provides such an unsettling and sudden end to his essay, “Critique of Violence”? Concerning Macheath, the criminal in *The Threepenny Opera*, Benjamin notes that some, albeit a minority, find him to be admirable, even a “social model” and “born leader.”<sup>17</sup> Macheath does not defend

<sup>17</sup>Walter Benjamin, “Brecht’s Threepenny Novel,” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostok (London: NLB, 1973), 75.

those laws that protect property relations, and so is his criminality here figured as way of exposing the injustice of property law? Or do we read Benjamin's description of Macheath's "noble" status as ironic?

In "Critique of Violence," Benjamin argues that legal regimes inflict their own violence, and that one has to take a point of view outside of law and its justificatory procedures to understand the violence of the law. Divine violence is associated with that critical practice that suspends the hold of legal regimes on their subjects. In his text entitled "Conversations with Brecht," Benjamin tells how Brecht stands in front of him, imitating the state and saying "with a sidelong squint at imaginary clients;[,] 'I know, I *ought* to be abolished.'"<sup>18</sup> This narrated performance is neither an ideological defense of the violent dismantling of the state, nor even a case for fully disregarding the rule of law. Benjamin does credit Brecht, however, with "removing the drappings of legal concepts."<sup>19</sup> At the end of "Critique of Violence," Benjamin wonders whether an attack on law is now imaginable, and mentions in this regard "the divine judgment of the multitude on a criminal [*"Gottesgericht der Menge am Verbrecher"*],"<sup>20</sup> a remark that has made some wonder whether he is moving toward mass violence. Divine violence is associated with messianic power, and that may be one reason why Brecht notoriously accuses him of siding with "Jewish fascism."<sup>21</sup> And yet, in examples such as these as well as in the violent domestic scene that Benjamin effectively directs in his essay on Brecht, something else seems to be going on, since no completed picture of a destructive action is ever offered in either text. We search in vain for examples that illustrate what Benjamin means by divine violence only to realize that the example cannot help us here. Benjamin stops the scene quite suddenly, giving us only the gesture, the frozen image, but not the completed act of violence. There is no textual basis on which to conclude that the act of violence will or did take place since, after all, we are reading

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Conversations with Brecht: Svendborg Notes," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 213.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 203. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 300.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, "Conversations with Brecht," 208.

a fiction, and its ending arrests the action. If interruption clearly characterizes the starting and the stopping of the familial scene of violence, then we might well conclude that the gesture has, in fact, replaced the action, and indefinitely postponed the violence. Indeed, if one asks at the end of “Critique of Violence” whether Benjamin imagined a full destruction of society or its laws, one is running way ahead of the text without noting that the essay stops precisely at that question, effectively thwarting its answer. That text, too, fails to give us a complete act of destruction. This is, we might say, Benjamin’s directorial act that pulls the breaks, but it may also be a felicitous effect: the gesture to take us into and out of ordinary scenes of violence without quite allowing for their commission, stopping violence, as it were, at the moment before the anticipated deed. *The gesture, then, functions as the partial decomposition of the performative that arrests action before it proves lethal.* Perhaps this kind of stalling, cutting, and stopping establishes an intervention into violence, an unexpected non-violence through an indefinite stall, one produced by interruption and citation alike. In other words, the multiplication of gestures makes the violent act citable, brings it into relief as the structure of what people sometimes do, but does not quite do it—relinquishing the satisfaction of the complete act in a textual break which produces an ethos of restraint.

There is a horizon within which the threat of violent destruction suddenly emerges in the story that Benjamin tells us, in the scene he directs through narration. The institution of the family has *already* come apart in some rather consequential ways such that the mother (which mother?) might threaten to hurt or kill the daughter (which daughter?) with some replica, some ruin, some dismembered and displaced copy of a head that is far removed from any original context. The mother, after all, does not throw that bronze statue, at least not in the scene that we are given; she is only *poised* to throw it, so what we have received is a “still”—a frozen image—and so, precisely, a gesture that does not convert to action. Benjamin stopped that throw through directorial fiat, working an interdiction against violence, before any police power has the chance to arrive. And so the scene stands as an interdicted action, a truncated narrative, drawing on theatrical, literary, and cinematic traditions, so precisely not an act in any usual sense, but a gesture, the gesture as a citation of an action that becomes its own event. End of story.

Perhaps at such a moment we can see how Benjamin counters Brecht’s charge of Jewish fascism, levied against him when he suggests that, in

Kafka, “the true measure of life is remembrance,”<sup>22</sup> and this becomes all the more urgent when life appears as fleeting moments, swiftly receding horizons, unfulfilled acts. Remembrance, Benjamin tells us, “traverses life with the speed of lightning” and is always thwarted by the brevity of life, the loss of one perspective by the establishment of another.<sup>23</sup> The decomposition of the speech act into gesture is not only the sign of critical capacity, but also of grief for what decomposes as we compose, for what is no longer possible, and for the loss of those traditional supports—and tradition itself—that cannot be restored. But if we no longer know what we have lost, then the scene is melancholic. After all, that mother was about to throw a hard piece of some defunct tradition at her daughter, and we do not know which one. We can neither recover that history nor conceptualize the act when gesture becomes event. In the best of circumstances, such disconcerting moments of citation, these incomplete performances, can bring to a halt what has become both very usual and utterly wrong.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht,” 209–210.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht,” 210.

<sup>24</sup> Parts of this essay were published in “Theatrical Machines,” *differences* 26(2) (2015).