Dramaturgies of Exile: Brecht and Benjamin
‘Playing’ Chess and Go

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In my book Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance (Stanford University Press, 2010) I analysed four encounters between philosophers and theatre people – the thespians in the title – as a point of departure for presenting a typology based on the exploration of the complex border landscapes between the discursive practices of philosophy and performance/theatre. In this article, I take a closer look at one of these encounters, exploring the narrative strategies of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, as well as Franz Kafka, suggesting that they can be analysed on the basis of the games of chess and go. The differences between the rules of these two board games serve as the basis for a dramaturgical analysis where different aspects of performance/theatre and philosophy (practice and theory) are brought together. This hermeneutic ‘approach’ also reflects the basic pedagogic situation of studying and researching theatre and performance as well as many of the ethical concerns raised by our involvement with these artistic practices, along with those of philosophy.

I like to think that it began with the ships. As far as men could remember they had always hugged the coast, then suddenly they abandoned the coast line and ventured out across the seas. On our old continent a rumour sprang up: there might be new ones. And since our ships began sailing to them the laughing continents have got the message: the great ocean they feared, is a little puddle. And a vast desire has sprung up to know the reasons for everything: why a stone falls when you let it go and why it rises when you toss it up. Each day something fresh is discovered.

Galileo Galilei in Bertolt Brecht, Life of Galileo

In chapter nine of the Poetics, Aristotle provided a point of departure for an analysis of the relations between the discursive practices of poetry, history and philosophy, which, even today, remain the three main areas of study and research in our university faculties of humanities and the arts. Specifically, Aristotle claimed that the distinction between historian and poet . . . consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.
According to this scheme, poetry is situated between history and philosophy, and because of its universal nature it is of ‘graver import’ (*spoudaioteron*), a ‘better thing’ or ‘something to be taken more seriously’ than history, while for Plato ‘imitation is merely play (*paidia*) and not anything serious (*spouden*)’. The basic question I want to raise here is what we discover when we reconsider the relations between these discursive practices, in particular those between philosophy and performance but also history, and how the two games of chess and go (that are merely *paidia*) bring them together.

One of Aristotle’s crucial points is that each of the three discursive practices is based on a unique, specific mode of representation. While Plato had established a vertical, top–bottom hierarchical ontology, with the work of art situated on the lowest step of the ladder of ‘being’—considered to be a copy of a copy—ever more distant from the pure, metaphysical forms than the individual objects, Aristotle claimed that poetry is situated in an intermediary position, strategically and horizontally situated between two other distinct practices of representation—history and philosophy. Further, because of its more universal character, poetry, in Aristotle’s view, is closer to philosophy than to history. Poetry, he argued, is situated between the discursive practice representing specific events in the past—generating our sense of history—and what might be in the future, as an always and as yet unrealized utopian (and universal) potentiality. Plato had obviously taken a completely different position—in particular in *The Republic*—portraying a utopia where the poets would no longer be necessary and will be censored or exiled, while for Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, poetry is a representational practice that is actually pointing towards some form of utopia.

Aristotle’s mapping of history, poetry and philosophy even implies that poetry is the golden mean between the discursive practices of history and philosophy in a similar fashion to the typologies of extremes which define the desirable mediating position in Aristotle’s theory of ethics. Poetry can be seen as the golden mean situated between history and philosophy—closer to philosophy, but without specifying how close—just as the ethical action is situated between two extreme forms of behaviour (with ‘courage’ as the golden mean situated between ‘cowardice’ and ‘rashness’), thus also drawing attention to the ethical dimensions of artistic practices.

Aristotle’s typology also implies that poetry and the other arts are simultaneously somehow both singular/particular and universal, suggesting that the aesthetic object is constituted through an ontological instability, wavering between the universal and the particular, being both at the same time. Such an ontological instability would obviously have been unacceptable within Plato’s metaphysical framework, where the aesthetic object, since it is a copy of a copy, has been assigned an ontologically inferior position and cannot be universal in any sense. The arts are, for Plato, also in breach of the moral principles cultivated by the ideal state, while for Aristotle the combination of the proximity of poetry to philosophy and the ontological instability of the work of art were crucial for the inherent ethical authority of artistic practices.

At the same time as the standpoints of Plato and Aristotle seem to be diametrically opposed, we must also consider the profound performative aspects of Plato’s philosophical practices, in particular his ‘staging’ of Socrates in the *Symposium*. Even if the basic philosophical/ontological framework presented in this dialogue is
‘Platonic’, it presents a much more complex (and ambivalent) relationship to the theatre than *The Republic*. The *Symposium* portrays a philosophical discussion which takes place as a result of a theatrical event, celebrating Agathon’s victory at the Lanaean tragedy competition. In his dialogue Plato shows how a theatre competition (or *agon*) leads to a philosophical competition where a select group of Athenian intellectuals spend the night eulogizing Eros. And these two competitions lead to an additional competition between the discursive practices of theatre and philosophy, when Socrates, after the long night of speeches, tells the two exhausted playwrights – Agathon and Aristophanes – that ‘authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy: the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet’. Since Socrates himself is the person in the *Symposium* who, according to Plato, seems to combine comedy and tragedy through philosophy, the relationship between the discursive practices of philosophy and the theatre, and the arts in general, is positioned in a much more complex light than in *The Republic*.

We must keep this complexity in mind when we consider how the positions of Plato and Aristotle have served as the basis for the Western traditions of reflection on the arts in relation to basic philosophical issues, configuring the relationships between the discursive practices of philosophy and the arts, but also of history (at least in Aristotle’s scheme). Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s position in *The Republic*, restricting the freedom of expression of the arts in the ideal state, still challenges us to reconsider the crucial role of artistic creativity and the aesthetic experience for understanding the world we live in. In fact, the arts serve as an important point of departure for philosophical reflection. First, the arts enable us to consider basic ontological issues, in particular in trying to grasp the ontological instability of the work of art and the subversive potentials this instability gives rise to; second, the arts allow us to explore epistemological issues and to question how we know certain things and how we can gain this knowledge; third, the arts enable us to consider the ethical dimensions of this understanding and our emotional response to this knowledge. These issues also harbour important pedagogical dimensions, enabling us to examine how the arts have been studied, researched and practised within academic contexts, but also for the broader understanding and appreciation of artistic practices within the larger public, social sphere, empowering us to define moral actions and even to pass moral judgement.

In what follows I want to pass from the general framework of these discursive practices to a specific example exploring how the principles governing the rule patterns of the two board games of chess and go were applied by Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht in their philosophical thinking as well as their artistic practices, and how the narratives they created were based on the movement of the pieces in the two games. The two board games exemplify principles of ‘doing’ or *drama* in Greek (also meaning ‘action’) – how the pieces move or do not move after being placed on the board in order to gain control over a certain space – as well as principles of ‘thinking’, formulated on the basis of the deep structures governing the rules of the two games. I want to suggest that the relationships between the board games and narrative principles have to be formulated from a philosophical as well as a dramatic/narrative perspective. These movement patterns also have profound metaphysical implications, concerning a specific past and the concept of origin, on the one hand, and the utopian dimensions of ‘the
kind of thing that might be’, on the other. Theatre and performance are located in the heightened moment of a ‘now’, situated between these two poles, carrying the weight of the past, but with a constant pull towards the future.

**Movement patterns in exilic travel and in board games**

I will begin with a photograph from 1934 (Fig. 1), showing Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin playing chess during Benjamin’s first visit to Svendborg in Denmark, where Brecht was living from December 1933 to April 1939. They had first met in Berlin in 1929 and had collaborated closely on plans for a journal. With the rise of Hitler to power they both left Germany. Brecht and Helene Weigel fled Berlin the day after the Reichstag fire, on 28 February 1933, first to Prague, then to Zurich, and in November they continued to Paris. Benjamin escaped Berlin two and a half weeks later, going directly to Paris. With Brecht’s arrival in Paris they stayed in the same hotel and planned to write a series of detective stories together. However, this project never materialized and in December 1933 Brecht and his entourage found refuge in Skovsbostrand at the outskirts of the small town of Svendborg on the southern tip of the small Danish island of Fyn, situated only a few dozen kilometres from the German Baltic coast and the city of Kiel.

After his arrival in Svendborg, Brecht wrote to Benjamin, who was still in Paris, proposing to ship parts of Benjamin’s library to Denmark. The offer was accompanied by an invitation to come and work there. After much hesitation Benjamin agreed and decided to make the trip to Svendborg. He arrived on 20 June 1934, staying in a pension.
called Stella Maris not far from the farmhouse where Brecht was living (a twelve-minute walk, according to Google Maps), and he stayed there until October that year. Brecht and Benjamin spent the summer and part of the autumn reading and writing, while the evenings were mostly devoted to listening to the radio broadcasts from Germany and Austria, to discussions and to playing chess – the latter, it has been reported, usually in complete silence.

In a letter to Brecht from Paris, dated 21 May 1934, a month before his arrival at Svendborg, Benjamin asked,

> Are you familiar with Go, a very ancient Chinese board game? It is at least as interesting as chess – we should introduce it to Svendborg. You never move any pieces in Go, but only place them on the board which is empty at the start of the game. It seems to me to be similar to your play in this regard. You place each of your figures and formulations on the right spot from whence they fulfill their proper strategic function on their own and without having to act.5

The play Benjamin is referring to is Roundheads and Pointed Heads, which Brecht, after the completion of one of its many versions, about six weeks earlier had sent to Benjamin, and which Benjamin had promised to recommend to a theatre in London. As things turned out, however, it premiered in Copenhagen three years later.

Benjamin made two additional trips to Svendborg, in 1936 and 1938, and in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Brecht continued his own journey to Sweden and Finland, and then via the Soviet Union to the US, and from there, after being investigated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he returned via Switzerland to Berlin, in 1949. And even if Benjamin had made plans to go to Mandatory Palestine, invited by his close friend Gershom Scholem to join the faculty of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as well as to the US, where many of his friends and associates had found refuge, he never left Europe and was confined to gradually more uncomfortable residences and growing despair. During his attempt to cross the Franco-Spanish border on 26 September 1940, fleeing from the Nazis, Benjamin committed suicide, ending his journey.

The maps of the exilic travels of Brecht and Benjamin have the same zigzagging pattern as the constant crossings of Europe made by Mutter Courage with her wagon during the Thirty Years War in the play Brecht began writing during his stay in Denmark. The main difference between the respective journeys was that Brecht and Benjamin were running away from the war, while Courage had to pursue it in order to make a living, at the cost of losing her three children.

The dramaturgies of movement and travel developed by the playwright/director and the philosopher in their thinking and writing no doubt reflected their own exilic travels at the time on many levels. In what follows I want to suggest that the dramaturgies of exile they live as well as thematize in their work can be studied through the two board games Benjamin mentioned in his letter to Brecht: chess, where each piece has a particular movement pattern, a genetically determined character script according to which they move and threaten the pieces of the opponent; and go, where, as Benjamin pointed out in his letter about Brecht’s play, the figures are ‘on the right spot’ and from there they
fulfil their ‘proper strategic function’, by probing what makes the characters move from A to B, or incapable of making such a journey, projecting a sense of stasis, as well as if their attempts to move are perceived as a forward or a backward movement. Trying to understand what a ‘proper strategic function’ is within a narrative structure, I want to suggest that the intriguing and even enigmatic characteristics of the narrative strategies of Brecht and Benjamin, as well as of Kafka, who inspired both of them, are the result of merging the movement patterns of the games of chess and go through a dramaturgy where both games become activated in combinatorial patterns and variations.

Even if the two games depict diametrically opposite strategies for how the individual pieces move in a certain space, the two patterns can also be combined or intertwined within a fictional narrative. Actually, an unexpected change of the movement pattern can become a goal in itself, thus generating a more complex, multilayered narrative. This combinatorial strategy serves as the basis for the paradoxical, sometimes even enigmatic and ‘exilic’, effects of Kafka’s narratives, as well as of those by Brecht and Benjamin. The dramaturgies of exile are based on a broad range of combinatorial patterns between the two board games.

The analogy between the two board games and the practices of narrative representations of movement in fictional contexts – just as Beckett called one of his plays *Endgame*, the last stage in a chess game – can serve as a hermeneutic key for the complex constellations of the individuals moving through space and time in Benjamin’s and Brecht’s, as well as Kafka’s, narratives, combining the movement patterns and spatial interactions between the characters with their respective inherent and potential dramaturgies. Such a hermeneutic key or dramaturgy, drawing attention to a particular movement pattern in a specific board game, and in particular combining the movement patterns of both board games, creates a complex interaction between concrete situations involving human subjects and abstract ideas, between doing and thinking.

I use the term ‘dramaturgy’ – in collocations like ‘character dramaturgy’ and ‘dramaturgies of exile’ – in order to draw attention to at least two different aspects of my larger argument. First, the two dramaturgies deal with the movement of human bodies in space which is central to any form of theatre and performance. In order for the cultural practices of theatre and performance to become activated, someone or something must appear again tonight on the stage. This mechanism is alluded to in the first scene of *Hamlet* (line 21), where Horatio (or Marcellus, depending on which edition of the play is consulted), asks, ‘What, has this thing appeared again tonight?’ In the context of Shakespeare’s play, the ‘thing’ in this question first of all refers to the ghost, but then also to what the spectators are watching on the stage. What it means to appear, and to be or not to be, and then to disappear, are philosophical questions which every theatre-spectator has to grapple with in one way or another, in particular when watching *Hamlet*.

Second, the notion of dramaturgy explored here opens up a discursive space situated between practice and theory, engaging doing and thinking in ways which have to be examined in more depth than has been done so far and through which we can deepen our understanding of the ontological instability of the aesthetic object, referred to above in connection with Aristotle’s scheme of discursive practices. My present discussion of
the two board games is an attempt to explore this largely unknown territory, where a set of rules for how individual pieces move or do not move, or are affected by the presence of other pieces, opens up complex and even enigmatic narrative possibilities. But before examining a few narratives by Benjamin, Brecht and Kafka, it is necessary to present a conceptualization of the differences between the two board games in more depth than Benjamin’s summary comment in his letter to Brecht.

In the chapter called ‘1227: Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine’, in A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari provide an in-depth analysis of the two board games, focusing on ‘the relations between the pieces and the space involved’, a necessary prerequisite for any discussion of dramaturgical principles of movement in space, creating conflicts between subjects:

Chess pieces are coded; they have an internal nature and intrinsic properties from which their movements, situations, and confrontations derive. They have qualities; a knight remains a knight, a pawn a pawn, a bishop a bishop. Each is like a subject of the statement endowed with a relative power, and these relative powers combine in a subject of enunciation, that is, the chess player or the game’s form of interiority. Go pieces, in contrast, are pellets, disks, simple arithmetic units, and have only an anonymous, collective, or third-person function: ‘It’ makes a move. ‘It’ could be a man, a woman, a louse, an elephant. Go pieces are elements of a nonsubjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones. Thus the relations are very different in the two cases… Chess is indeed a war, but an institutionalized, regulated, coded war, with a front, a rear, battles. But what is proper to Go is war without battle lines, with neither confrontation nor retreat, without battles even: pure strategy, whereas chess is a semiology. Finally, the space is not at all the same: in chess, it is a question of arranging a closed space for oneself, thus of going from one point to another, of occupying the maximum number of squares with the minimum number of pieces. In Go, it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival.7

This analysis perhaps unintentionally summarizes some of the central ideas which have energized most of our modern and contemporary theatre.

Kafka/Benjamin/Brecht

Arriving at the small Danish town of Svendborg in June 1934, Benjamin had brought his as yet unpublished essay written on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Kafka’s death, which he was eager to discuss with Brecht. This essay was first published in Jüdische Rundschau in December 1934, a few months after Benjamin had left Svendborg for Paris and Italy and it is one of the first major interpretations of Kafka’s work, confronting the notion of exile on several levels.

After some initial reluctance on Brecht’s part, which Benjamin has described in his Svendborg diary, they finally decided to discuss the Kafka essay. They focused their discussion on Kafka’s short story called ‘The Next Village’ (Das nächste Dorf):
My grandfather used to say: ‘Life is astoundingly short. As I look back over it, life seems so foreshortened to me that I can hardly understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that, quite apart from accidents [unglücklichen Zufällen], even the span of a normal life that passes happily may be totally insufficient for such a ride.’

The grandfather, who has obviously not left his own village, tells his more adventurous grandson about the rider who will never reach the next village. Benjamin summarized his own as well as Brecht’s interpretation of the story in his diary:

Brecht said it was a companion piece to the story of Achilles and the tortoise. A rider can never reach the next village if he divides the journey up into its smallest components – even aside from any incidents en route. Because life is too short for such a journey. But the error lies in the concept of ‘a rider.’ For you have to divide up the traveler, as well as the journey. And since in this you abolish the unity of life, you likewise do away with its brevity. However short it may be. This doesn’t matter, because the man who started out on his journey is different from the man who arrives. – For my part [Benjamin said] I proposed the following interpretation: the true measure of life is memory. Looking back, it runs through life like lightning. The speed with which you can turn back a few pages is the same as the speed with which memory flies from the next village back to the place from which the rider decided to leave. Whoever like the Ancients, has seen his life transformed into writing, let him read this writing backward. Only in this way – in full flight from the present – will he be able to understand it.

Benjamin’s interpretation of the Kafka story is consistent with his philosophical understanding of history, culminating in the fragmentary collection of texts ‘On the Concept of History’, published after his death, which opens with a text about the automaton wearing Turkish attire playing chess who could ‘respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game’. However, a dwarf who is a master of chess is hiding under the board, ensuring that the automaton always wins. According to Benjamin, ‘historical materialism’ is the philosophic counterpart to this chess-playing apparatus. The journey to the next village in Kafka’s story is, according to Benjamin’s interpretation, also a journey connected to an understanding of history, backwards through memory to the time/place – the Bakhtinian ‘chronotopos’ – where the journey originated. This conceptualization is closer to the image of the angel in Klee’s drawing Angelus Novus, which, according to another well-known text from ‘On the Concept of History’, is the angel of history, personifying a retrospective, melancholic gaze (like the position of the grandfather in Kafka’s story) while the angel is propelled into an unknown future by the storm that is caught in its wings.

Brecht’s Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (Mother Courage and Her Children) can also be seen as an application of the dramaturgy of Kafka’s enigmatic story. Brecht started to write this play in Denmark, completing it in 1939, and he decided to open his renewed theatre career in Berlin, in January 1949, a few months after his return to this city, with
a production of this play. This production was the beginning of the collective of actors which later became the Berliner Ensemble. Mutter Courage lives with the illusion that she is the Queen — the most flexible figure on the chessboard — constantly searching for the King that she can chess-mate, in particular through capitalistic manipulations, selling her goods, while at the same time she and her children are actually surrounded by the war, unable to move; or when moving, as she does so triumphantly in the first scene of the play, with her two sons pulling the carriage, filling the role of the horses, while she, comfortably seated on the carriage, marches triumphantly with her leg moving in the air.

In his production notes for *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* Brecht emphasized that in the beginning of the performance the ‘wagon is rolled forward against the movement of the revolving stage’. From the point of view of the audience, the wagon moved counterclockwise, from left to right, while the revolving stage itself turned clockwise, from right to left. As a result of such a superimposition of two circular movements, but in opposite directions, the spectators were watching two contrary movements, perceived as a stasis. The wheels of the wagon were moving, while the wagon itself was fixed in one place.

Benjamin’s definition of the ‘image’ in the *Arcades Project* is based on a similar opposition between a dynamic and a static principle, combining the dynamic script of the game of chess with the static one of go. But whereas Brecht created a dialectics at a standstill in space, for Benjamin such a standstill is realized on the temporal axis:

> It is not that what is past casts its light at what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather, image is that wherein *what has been* comes together in a flash with *the now* to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.

For Benjamin, the pieces on the board, or the images, move in time, becoming history, while for Brecht they are expressed through a spatial ‘dialectics at a standstill’. In both cases, however, they become realized through the interaction between the two board games.

Benjamin’s interpretation of the Kafka story that ‘the true measure of life is memory’ emphasizes this complex duality, forming a Gestus with the horse somehow caught in mid-air, where, in Benjamin’s formulation, ‘the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent’. Benjamin’s own narrative performance of this Gestus can be found in the last section of his essay on Kafka, called ‘Sancho Panza’, which opens with a story about the beggar who has reached the inn in a Hassidic village.

This story, which according to Benjamin ‘takes us deep into the household that is Kafka’s world’, is not by Kafka and it has an unclear, even contested, origin, but by including it in his Kafka essay Benjamin has made it his own. Since it is a story about origins (*Ursprung*), the mysterious origin of the story itself carries extra weight:
In a Hassidic village, so the story goes, Jews were sitting together in a shabby inn one Sabbath evening [Sabbat-Ausgang]. They were all local people, with the exception of one person no one knew, a very poor, ragged man who was squatting in a dark corner at the back of the room. All sorts of things were discussed, and then it was suggested that everyone should tell what wish he would make if one were granted him. One man wanted money; another wished for a son-in-law; a third dreamed of a new carpenter’s bench; and so each spoke in turn. After they had finished, only the beggar in his dark corner was left. Reluctantly and hesitantly he answered the question. ‘I wish I were [Ich wollte, ich ware] a powerful king reigning over a big country. Then, some night while I was asleep in my palace, an enemy would invade my country, and by dawn his horsemen would penetrate to my castle and meet with no resistance. Roused from my sleep, I wouldn’t have time even to dress and I would have to flee in my shirt. Rushing over hill and dale and through forests day and night, I would finally arrive safely right here at the bench in this corner. This is my wish.’ The others exchanged uncomprehending glances. ‘And what good would this wish have done you?’ someone asked. ‘I’d have a shirt,” was the answer. [‘Und was hättest du von diesem Wunsch?’ fragte einer. – ‘Ein Hemd’ war die Antwort]13

This unusual, enigmatic narrative is profoundly connected with Benjamin’s philosophical concerns, with history and the notion of Ursprung or origin, in particular of the beggar: where he comes from, what kind of kingdom he wishes that he had been king of before his palace was invaded by the enemy, and finally, what kind of journey the beggar has made in order to end up at the table in the inn to tell about his wish to have a shirt. It is a story about a lost messianic kingdom, situated in the past, but also very far away, probably too far away – ‘even the span of a normal life that passes happily may be totally insufficient for such a ride’ – and the wish to have a shirt constitutes the first step towards recovering the route through which it can be reached, by activating the imagination.

When Benjamin wrote his Kafka essay he had already written an academic thesis on the notion of Ursprung, his Habilitationsschrift on the Trauerspiel, in English titled The Origin of German Tragic Drama, originally published in 1928. It was in many ways a response to Nietzsche’s ideas about the birth (Geburt, not Ursprung) of tragedy, resulting from a sexual union between two male gods, Apollo and Dionysus. In his study Benjamin formulated in theoretical, abstract terms what the story about the beggar and the shirt so effectively concretizes:

Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy [Strudel] in the stream of becoming [im Fluß des Werdens], and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original [das Ursprüngliche] is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this,
as something imperfect [actually ‘unfinished’, Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes] and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history.\textsuperscript{14}

This text is a theoretical formulation of the chronotopos of how the beggar reached the inn where his story can be told, where his wish to have a shirt turns him into the king in the uncanny chess game of messianic longings. At the same time, though, as he chess-mates himself, by merely presenting a wish, he can be totally eliminated, as a piece in go, because he obviously does not possess the shirt he wishes for.

Benjamin's story literally stages the notion of \textit{Ursprung}, which in German actually means ‘first leap’, i.e. setting the body in motion, taking the first step or making the first move on the board, which the beggar was forced to do when his imagined palace was invaded and he had to flee, beginning his exilic journey. The wish to have a shirt is the beggar's performance of this \textit{Ursprung}, seated in the shabby inn, while the story about the beggar – Benjamin's version of Mutter Courage – is the narrative performance of an \textit{Ursprung} which includes the notion of utopia through the wish to have a shirt. History and philosophy, which Aristotle had separated by distinguishing between the singular event in the past and the universal ‘kind of thing that might be’, have here completely imploded through Benjamin's universalization of the unique event in the past.

Kafka, whose writing had been the subject of Benjamin's essay, and which he and Brecht had discussed in Svendborg, was no doubt a master in creating such paradoxical situations, where movement and stasis implode and where the unique becomes universal, creating the ontological instability which characterizes a work of art. Since the knight in chess – designated by the head of a horse – is such a complex piece, moving forward as well as making a diagonal turn, I have selected stories or situations in Kafka's writings where the horse appears, like in the short parable ‘My Destination’:

I called for my horse to be brought from the stable. The servant did not understand me. I myself went into the stable, saddled my horse and mounted. In the distance I heard a trumpet blast. I asked him what it meant but he did not know and had not heard it. By the gate he stopped me and asked ‘where are you riding to sir?’ I answered ‘away from here, away from here, always away from here. Only by doing so can I reach my destination.’ ‘Then you know your destination’ he asked. ‘Yes’ I said ‘I have already said so, “Away-From-Here” [\textit{Weg-von-hier}] that is my destination.’ ‘You have no provisions with you’ he said. ‘I don’t need any’ I said. ‘The journey is so long that I will die of hunger if I do not get something along the way. It is, fortunately, a truly immense journey.’\textsuperscript{15}

It is impossible to reach this destination because it is by definition always another place, called ‘Away-from-here’ for which the always already exhausted rider needs no provisions, because he is constantly on his way by being fixed in one spot.

The one-sentence parable called ‘Wish to Be a Red Indian’ (\textit{Wunsch, Indianer zu werden}), published in 1913, is probably the most enigmatic of Kafka's horse tales:
If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one sheds one’s spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when the horse’s neck and head would be already gone.16

This story expresses a wish to be an Indian because then, as a result of the riding, the horse will simply disintegrate, probably leaving the rider suspended in the air. After quoting this enigmatic narrative about the disintegrating, disappearing horse, in his Kafka essay, Benjamin summarizes, ‘A great deal is contained in this wish’, and immediately continues, ‘Its fulfillment, which he [Kafka] finds in America, yields up its secret.’17

Kafka’s novel Amerika (Der Verschollene, The Man Who Disappeared) was published three years after Kafka’s death, in 1927. It depicts the bizarre exilic wanderings of Karl Rossman in America, and its final fragmentary section/chapter, which presents an allegory of his death, is called ‘The Great Theater of Oklahoma’ [sic]. In his essay on Kafka, Benjamin claimed that this theatre, where Karl Rossman and everyone else who wishes to join this theatre is actually hired, ‘is the last refuge, which does not preclude it from being their salvation’.18 The hiring of the actors for this theatre actually takes place on a racetrack without horses:

On a street corner Karl saw a poster with the following announcement: ‘Today, from 6 A.M. until midnight, at Clayton Racetrack, the Oklahoma Theater will be hiring members for its company. The great Theater of Oklahoma calls you! The one and only call is today! If you miss your chance now, you miss it forever! If you think of your future, you belong with us! Everyone is welcome! If you want to be an artist, come forward! Our theater can use everyone, and find the right place for everyone! If you decide to join us we congratulate you here and now! But hurry, so that you get in before midnight! At twelve o’clock the doors will be shut and never opened again! A curse on those who do not believe in us! Set out for Clayton!’19

After quoting this passage Benjamin remarks that even if a racetrack is the only place on which Karl Rossman attains his object of desire, ‘this racetrack is at the same time a theater, and this poses a puzzle’, adding that it brings out a performative modality which stems from the Chinese theatre, concluding, ‘One of the most significant functions of this theater is to dissolve events into their gestural components.’20

Such a gestural analysis, based on the image of the racetrack, with its running horses, has the same basic structural characteristics as the well-known Muybridge photographs of galloping horses from the late 1880s, paradoxically presenting the movement of the animal at a total standstill, reproducing each gestural component separately, in isolation and in sequence. In his discussion of Kafka’s gestural devices, Benjamin introduces an opposition between the gradually disintegrating horse from ‘Wish to Be a Red Indian’ and the perception of the gestural components of this running, but static, horse which also appears in ‘The Next Village’.21

It is not easy to understand the complex relationship between the movement of horses and theatricality. Why did this remnant of pre-technological movement in a
world which at that time had to reckon with the speed of light and bomber planes become a sign for theatricality? Perhaps Kafka hints at the answer through the figure of Fanny, a young woman Karl Rossman already knows. She is part of a huge live altar – a tableau vivant – and is dressed as an angel, playing the trumpet, and tells him that ‘we make the largest accommodations for the greatest crowds. There’s lots of room on a racetrack. And wherever the bets are usually taken, the hiring offices are set up’. There is obviously some risk-taking involved in the supernatural spectacle of the theatre. And somewhat later, when Karl has finally been employed by the theatre, he

remained standing and looked across the large racetrack that reached on every side into the distant forests. He suddenly wanted to see a horserace, he hadn’t yet had an opportunity for that in America. In Europe he had once been taken along to a race, but could remember nothing other than not wanting to be torn away from his mother in the middle of all the people he was being pulled through. He had actually not seen a race yet.

The fact that Karl had not seen the horserace in his childhood, for fear of being ‘torn away from his mother’ probably means that he also does not know (at least did not then) what the theatre really is. And the ‘Great Theater of Oklahama’ is obviously not a conventional theatre. It is the core of life.

The strange fusion of the huge human altarpiece, of which Fanny is a part, and the racetrack infuses this theatre with a unique, even uncanny, atmosphere, combining the brute physicality of the horses with the metaphysicality of the altar. Benjamin, for whom the fact that this ‘racetrack is at the same time a theatre – and this [he writes] poses a puzzle’ finds a resolution to this paradox by interpreting many of Kafka’s stories as theatrical scripts and stagings:

One can go even further and say that a good number of Kafka’s shorter studies and stories are seen in their full light only when they are, so to speak, put on as acts in the ‘Nature Theater of Oklahoma’. Only then will one come to the certain realization that Kafka’s entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings. The theater is the logical place for such groupings.

Kafka’s own stories about horses are perhaps the most natural candidates for this form of metaphysical tableau vivant, in what Benjamin terms ‘ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings’, creating new and multilevelled constellations of exilic dramaturgies where the complex movement patterns of chess and go can be combined. ‘The theatre’, repeating Benjamin’s claim, ‘is the logical place for such groupings’.

NOTES
3 Spoudaisoteron also refers to the elite members of a society, who because of their influence must be taken more seriously than others. I want to thank Elizabeth Belfiore for drawing my attention to these


6 ‘The game is played by two players who alternately place black and white stones on the vacant intersections (called “points”) of a grid of 19 × 19 lines (beginners often play on smaller 9 × 9 and 13 × 13 boards). Stones act as markers, representing one’s occupation of a particular point. The object of the game is to use one’s stones to surround a larger portion of the board than the opponent. Once placed on the board, stones cannot be moved, except in the case that they are captured. When a game concludes, the controlled points (territory) are counted along with captured stones to determine who has more points. Games may also be won by resignation – one may resign if one has fallen too far behind in total points.’ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_%28game%29, last accessed 28 July 2011.


15 See www.kafka.org/index.php?id=162,172,0,0,1,0 (in *Parables and Paradoxes*, accessed 3 July 2008).


17 Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka’, p. 800.

18 Ibid., p. 804.

19 Quoted from ibid., p. 800.

20 Ibid., p. 801.

21 Der Blaue Reiter, consisting of artists who were active as a group between 1911 and 1914, valorized horses and their movement. Wassily Kandinsky’s and Franz Marc’s paintings of horses are a direct expression of this paradoxical outburst of energy which frequently included the disappearance of the animal, also a central concern for Kafka as well as for Benjamin and Brecht.


25 Ibid.
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