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The Body as Deus Ex Machina: Revealing the Stage through Apparatus

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**The Body as Deus Ex Machina:
Revealing the Stage through *Apparatus*****Gülten Nur Bilgiç**

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Abstract

The stage is revealed through performative practices that arise from the interaction of bodies and moment. These bodies are often related to one another in a performative manner. In this paper, a metaphorical framework will be developed through this relationality. The space, as a stage, creates an axis of bodily traces and relationships that can be defined using ropes, ties, and apparatuses. The first body is the performer, or *deus ex machina*, who moves through these mechanisms. The second body, on the other hand, is responsible for establishing the apparatus; it is a productive figure who initiates and has authority. After Futurism, movement became prominent in performance-based practices. Performance became a material for scenes in which spatial boundaries were challenged. In Archias's art discourse, the body is transformed into a concrete body with ambiguous spatial presence, agency, and bodily expression. The performing body, by its nature, becomes a performative and constructed object that relies on the apparatuses to demonstrate its existence. In twentieth-century theatre scenes, the boundaries of ancient theatre gradually faded, and a new definition of stage emerged. Artists, such as Sophie Taeuber-Arp in *King Stag* and Allan Kaprow in *The Courtyard* 1962, used action-based and immersive apparatuses to transform space into a performative mechanism. They emphasised that integration by physically or metaphorically connecting discursive or indicative narratives to the ropes, restoring societal realism and roles. This paper examines Euripides' concept of "deus ex machina" through a conceptual approach that explores the stage space using apparatuses that manipulate the movement of the body on it. The performances under consideration involve mechanical systems with attached performer bodies, such as marionettes, humans, or objects. The stage spaces of the twentieth century reveal a new opportunity to reflect artistic understanding.

Keywords: deus ex machina, performative apparatus, performative bodies, architecture of theatre space

The Body as *Deus Ex Machina*: Revealing the Stage through Apparatus

The twentieth century witnessed a radical transformation in which performance, theatre, and stage space broke away from historical continuity and were redefined. This transformation took place under the guidance of manifestos. As Marinetti (1909) emphasized as the “habit of being energetic”¹ the stage space was shaped not only by new aesthetic pursuits but also by the gestures of the individualized body, inclining toward a new genre through the body’s political quests. The body’s desire to become an individual created an absurd field of expression on the stage (Marinetti, 1909). At this point, the stage is no longer something to stand on. The new perception of space, which emerged as a result of movement, had a profound impact on the theatre stage, which expanded beyond simply being a platform to become a multifaceted field of performance. Above all, the spectator’s position, as well as that of the event and the image of the stage, were fundamentally altered (Hannah, 2019). The stage shed its traditional elements, such as the *proskenion*, *skene*, and *theatron*, and evolved into a new form of existence. This process takes performance away from the public spaces of traditional theatre. This distancing can be defined in terms of individualization, either by reducing it to the scale of private life or by allowing it to exist naturally. It evolves domestically, as Oskar Schlemmer frequently observes in his forays. The stage transforms into a platform for individual action. As a result, the stage can be defined using a subjective lens. The stage is viewed as a space and extension that influences the performing body, directs movement of the body and spectators, mediates the relationship between representation and performance, and transports content; it is an apparatus within the process-event. This apparatus shapes the limits of bodily agency, choreographic material, props, ropes, ties, and lighting, resulting in a machinic logic. On the other hand, it functions as an interface, revealing the relationship between the observer and the observed, a tool for personal conceptualization, and a stage beyond the stage. It exists in the physical presence of the body (Brook, 1968). This performative apparatus operates the body on stage as a tool of propaganda. The stage is understood as a threshold where both representation and performance intersect; at this threshold, the stage exists together with its instantaneous events.

In this paper, the body is conceptualized as “first” and “second” in metaphor. The first body is the performing body, which is in direct communication with the audience. It is a visible body that serves as the stage’s primary image. The second body, in contrast, is the constitutive body. It establishes the stage’s apparatuses while also serving as a mechanical body. It communicates with the audience in an indirect manner. This metaphor is similar to İnci Eviner’s description of

¹ In his 1909 Futurist Manifesto, Marinetti rejected the artistic understanding of the past, extolling speed, dynamism, and technology. He replaced tradition with a love of danger.

Barthes' essay *On Bunraku* as “the complexity of the relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer, between the one who moves and the one who causes movement” (2025).

Within this complexity, the image of the second body emerges from the deconstruction of the first (performer) body. This is the stage's “*deus ex machina*.” The stage is formed by combining both bodies. The apparatuses form the stage, while its deconstruction reveals its materiality. This deconstruction is inherently performative. It is performative because it attempts to dismantle a complex, fragile experience that extends over time and space.

Viewing the spectacle and performance arts of the twentieth century through the lens of performative apparatuses allows for an examination of the interaction between stage and body, revealing potential notions and projections that reflect the social realities, oppressive regimes, and performance identities of the time. This lens examines the performer in relation to the body as puppet/marionette, body as body, and object. Thus, performativity is defined as the collective outcome of an effort that spans all of these stages.

This paper proposes a reinterpretation of the *deus ex machina* concept, which originated in Ancient Greek theatre, as a staging mechanism that manifests the image of the stage using apparatuses such as strings, ties, costumes, and spatial arrangements. By tapping into the ghost of the twentieth-century performative environment, a new trail of traces is revealed. As a result, the stage is conceived as an interface to a dual-directional space in which elements of authority and propaganda are produced concurrently. Finally, an approach that focuses on the stage image serves as an existential, critical, and intersectional lens, allowing for discussions of feminist, political, or cyclical discourses.

Deus ex Machina

Deus ex machina is an Ancient Greek theatre term that translates as “god from the machina.” It is a rhetorical stage strategy based on the mechanical apparatuses of tragedy. This narrative device is typically used to resolve an unresolvable conflict in a play or story by introducing an unexpected external intervention. It is an intervention that is independent of the overall performance and contradicts the plot's internal dynamics. In this regard, this method, which contains an element of artificiality, calls into question the narrative's autonomy and credibility with the audience. Aristotle criticizes this technique in *Poetics*, arguing that events should be resolved using a cause-and-effect structure: The plot resolution should come from the play's internal structure rather than a mechanical device (*Poetics*, Chapter 15.). In this study, however, this concept is more than just a narrative saviour; it also has meanings related to stage, staging, and the body.

Radical transformations in the performance arts, as well as in the plastic arts, began in the early 1900s. Artists, particularly those working with the body, sought to break free from the

constraints of traditional stage arts and experiment with material as a performative element. Material was more than just a stage prop or décor; it was a provocative component that formed the conceptual foundations of the performance. Body art, shaped by the search for new materials, was elevated to an experiential level by the elements and capabilities of its object. Material revealed the body's potential for disclosure. Using commonplace materials, everyday objects, textile scraps, or household items arranged either randomly or choreographically, the body mediated the display of its political identity on stage. Material obtained a customized agency (Phelan, 1993). For instance, material became a topic unto itself as revolutionary theatre in Popova's Magnificent Cuckold stage set. In the end, every commonplace item could be integrated into the story of a new identity, turning into a propaganda tool, or "agit-prop." Texture, colour, light, everyday objects, discourse, representation, the interface-image-agent of space-stage, performer-performed, staging-specific elements, mechanisms, matter, and materiality are all considered forms of material. The presence of material on stage is considered a *deus ex machina*. The performer's body realizes conceptual productions by incorporating them into the stage. Constructivists studied material as movement and object, while Dada artists sought discursive material for the stage. Cubists like those at the Bauhaus² used representational materials to build the stage. In all of these pursuits, historical knowledge of stage material is defined as an original yet superimposed layer, not as something detached from its time period. The body itself is a material. While Traza's puppets are the result of a body that disregards contingency, Archias (2016) defines the body, through Rainer, as a "concrete" material of performance. The body is imaged in intimate relation to itself. Butler believes that the body makes gender, norm, and identity visible. This visibility is not solely due to the body's individual effort; as she observes, "*The body is never fully self-sufficient; it is always shaped by another force*" (Undoing Gender, 2004). This "another force" refers to the *deus ex machina*. Thus, *deus ex machina* refers to the same force: external, mechanical, and ideological. The body is an integral part of the apparatus, and performativity flows through it. As a result, *deus ex machina* is interpreted as a complete expression of materiality for the stage.

Performative Apparatus

The concept of apparatus extends beyond a mechanical definition confined to space. As a dispositive, the apparatus is as much about what is said about a space as what is left unsaid (Foucault 1977). It is a completely diverse ensemble that includes philosophical and moral propositions, theoretical frameworks, regulatory measures, precautions, and scientific statements. Agamben interprets Foucault's definition of the dispositive as apparatuses —

² The stage workshops in 1921-1923 Bauhaus.

architectural, juridical, mediatic, and performative systems — that regulate, direct, and constitute bodies. Barad (2007) defines apparatus as a relational configuration that influences the emergence of reality. The stage apparatus, on the other hand, examines people, machines, discourses, spatial arrangements, staging mechanisms, social relations, and historical context together (Figure 1). In this regard, it is performative. In the context of theatre, this concept, which functions as an apparatus, device, or mechanism, transcends a purely functional definition, and becomes an inquiry into its theoretical antecedents, with the goal of constructing a conceptual foundation. When this inquiry is combined with Derrida's (1997) practice of “deconstruction”, it yields a redefinition that could be read as the “stage of language.” The apparatus is no longer a fixed and closed structure; instead, it manifests as a field of meaning that is constantly deferred, unpacked, and internally contradictory. As a result, Agamben's apparatus demonstrates the formation of the subject within this conceptual elaboration. This subject, difficult to define, is the performer of the apparatus. In this paper, the term “apparatus/apparatus” refers to a staging-specific apparatus that affects the body, the stage, and the materiality³ of the stage from which performance emerges. This structure is not merely a tool or a background arrangement; rather, it is an apparatus that moves the body, triggers events, and continuously structures the space along with its meanings — a dynamic and relational system. It regulates the conditions of visibility within the stage space and mediates the relationship between representation and action. In this respect, it determines how the corporeal existence of space is constructed and staged (Brusselaers & Julian, 2021)⁴. It is a productive structural formation that occurs at the intersection of the body and power. This structure is inherent in the apparatuses' processes of “objectification.” For example, Brusselaers and Julian refer to Vandewalle's Peri-Sphere as a “skinned device,” a description based on its provision of multiple perspectives that challenge the cable, joint, and eye-centred logic. In this manner, space becomes visible.

Figure 1

Barad's definition of (performative) apparatus (2007).

performative apparatus = people + machines + discourses + spatial arrangements + staging mechanisms
+ social relations + historical contexts

³ The materiality of the stage has been described in the previous paragraph.

⁴ Brusselaers, D., & Julian, H. (2021). A hybrid device to choreograph the gaze: Embodying vision through a historical discourse on optics in Benjamin Vandewalle's Peri-Sphere. In D. L. Jones & R. G. Smith (Eds.), *Performance and posthumanism* (pp. 315–335). Springer.

Examining Through Examples

In this study, the proposed first body concept is connected to the second body using a mechanical system. This type of bodily understanding gives rise to the concept of *deus ex machina*. The analysed performances involve mechanical systems with performer bodies, such as marionettes, humans, or objects attached to them. This section examines examples of this type, including Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), Sophie Taeuber-Arp's *King Stag* (1918), Allan Kaprow's *The Courtyard* (1962), and Frederick Kiesler's *Art of This Century Gallery* (1942), through the lens of apparatus.

Figure 2

The deployment of deus ex machina.

performative.....things.....are apparatuses as **deus ex machina**.

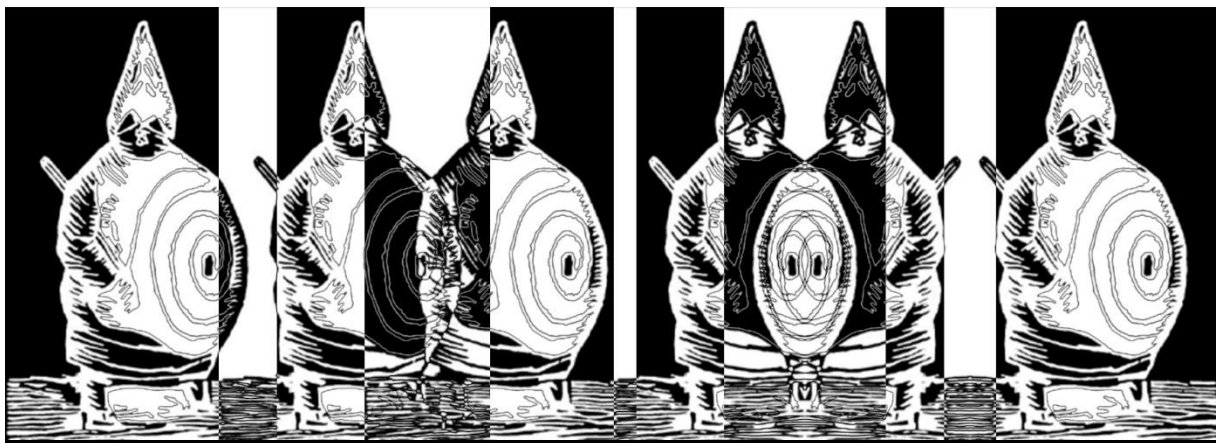
Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi

Costumes serve as apparatuses for deus ex machina.

The costumes in *Ubu Roi* — the horse's head and the king's inflated costume — represent the shaping and objectification of the performing body by external forces. The costumes conceal and limit the actor's identity, while the horse's head serves as a grotesque, animalized symbol of power. The king's inflated costume restricts the body in an exaggerated and comical way, creating an overly strong and authoritative image. The use of these devices on stage highlights the tension between power and freedom, reinforcing *Ubu Roi*'s critique of authority despite hindering natural movement.

Figure 3

Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi.



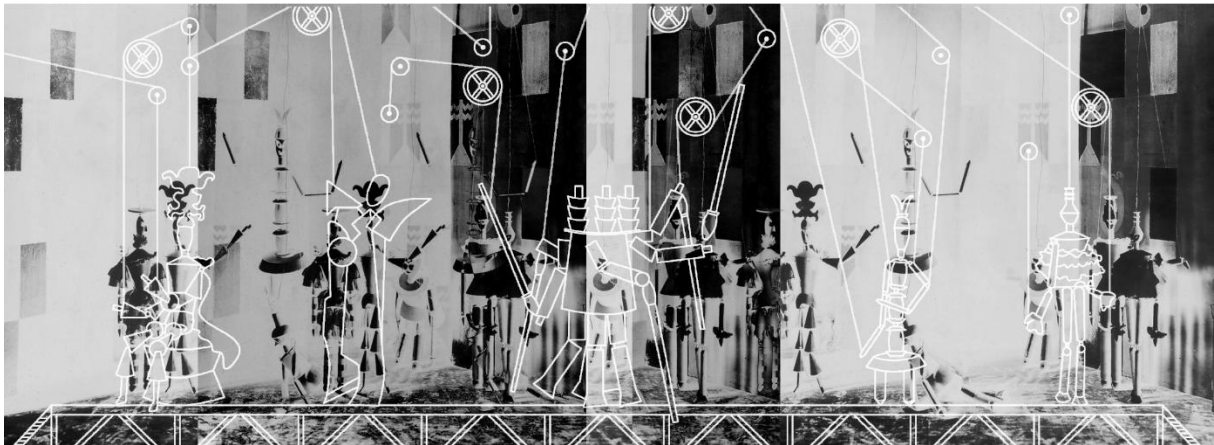
Sophie Taeuber-Arp's King Stag

Ropes and ties serve as apparatuses for deus ex machina.

The play uses abstraction and symbolic bodies to stage the king's search for identity as well as the boundaries between reality and illusion. Taeuber-Arp creates a performance in which bodies are mechanically and externally directed using marionettes tied with ties. These ties strip the bodies on stage of their free will, controlling and objectifying them. This process produces psychoanalytic characters. As a result, the body becomes more than just a vehicle for the narrative; it is also an entity shaped and constrained by external forces. Suspended by strings, these bodies represent deus ex machina on stage, revealing the tension between power and freedom and deepening the play's thematic structure.

Figure 4

Sophie Taeuber-Arp's King Stag.



Allan Kaprow's The Courtyard

The objects (ladder, bicycle, mattress, tire) and participants serve as apparatuses for deus ex machina.

This play pushes the traditional boundaries of art by transforming the audience into active participants. The barriers between space and spectators have been removed, allowing the audience to move and interact directly with the performance. Kaprow employs simple objects and spatial arrangements to create a multidimensional and interactive environment. These devices contribute to the piece's dynamic structure and disrupt the hierarchy between the audience and the artwork. The Courtyard emphasizes art as a living, changing, and collaborative process, expanding the concept of "happening" and providing a fresh perspective on performance art.

Figure 5

Allan Kaprow's The Courtyard.



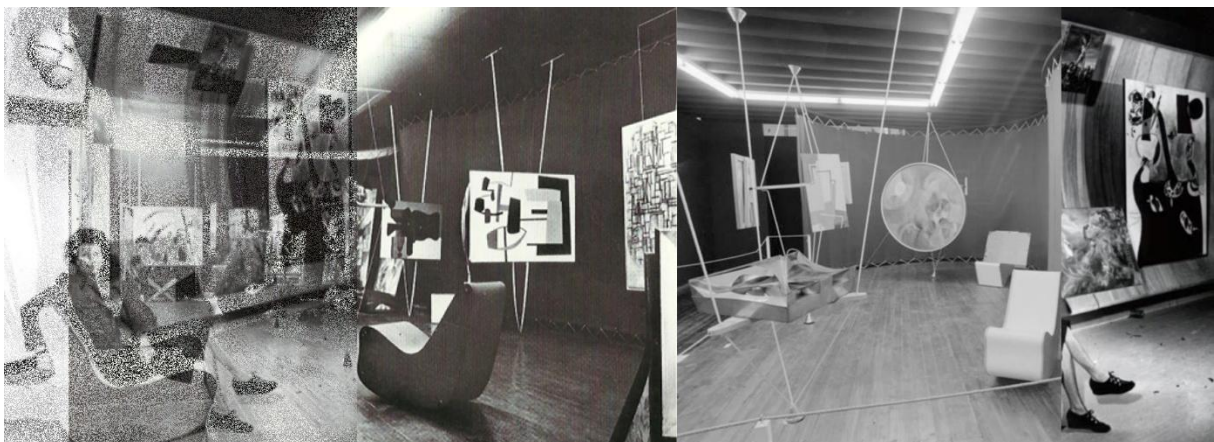
Frederick Kiesler's Art of This Century Gallery

The objects, ropes and exposition serve as apparatuses for deus ex machina.

In this installation, Frederick Kiesler's suspension of paintings with ropes reduces the physical distance between the artwork and the viewer, strengthening their direct relationship. Kiesler intended to reduce the works' material presence and transform them into "eidetic images"; in other words, he wanted the paintings to be perceived as dreamlike visuals floating in space with no frame or support. The ropes not only remove any non-aesthetic barriers that may exist between the viewer and the artwork, but they also transform these barriers into aesthetic elements, reshaping perception, and spatial experience.

Figure 6

Frederick Kiesler's Art of This Century Gallery.



Conclusion

The stage, examined from an exploratory standpoint, is deconstructed by redefining the *deus ex machina* as an apparatus. This study, which focuses on the image of the stage, reveals a discourse in which the body and mechanism are integrated. The stage exists through bodies, and deconstruction is made possible by access to the stage's apparatuses. These apparatuses are interwoven with traditional theatre elements, as well as twentieth-century absurd stage props. As a result, the deconstruction of the stage is itself a performative act.

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