



# **'The very cunning of the scene': notes towards a common dispositive for theatre and philosophy**

**Freddie Rokem**<sup>1, 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tel Aviv University – Tel Aviv, Israel

<sup>2</sup>University of Chicago – Chicago, United States of America

**ABSTRACT** – **'The very cunning of the scene': notes towards a common dispositive for theatre and philosophy** – The article suggests that eavesdropping scenes contain the key to a fundamental dispositive of the theatre, that reinforces the intricate metatheatrical dimensions of any performance and amplifies its philosophical aspects. In order to make this claim clear, the article discusses the idea of a dispositive, a concept broadly taken from Foucault (1980; 1986) and applies its self-reflexive dimensions to a number of examples from different plays, in order to demonstrate as those work both as scores for performances as well as texts with a philosophical character.

**Keywords:** **Eavesdropping. Dispositive. Metatheatre. Philosophy of Drama. Performance Philosophy.**

**RÉSUMÉ** – **'L'action seule de la scène': notes pour un dispositif commun pour le théâtre et la philosophie** – L'article suggère que les scènes d'espionnage sont la clé d'un dispositif fondamental pour le théâtre. Il renforce les dimensions méta-théâtrales complexes de toute performance théâtrale, amplifiant son caractère philosophique. Afin de clarifier cette affirmation, l'article examine l'idée de dispositif, concept d'inspiration foucauldien (1980; 1986), et applique ses dimensions autoréflexives à divers exemples tirés de différentes pièces afin de discuter de la manière dont ils peuvent fonctionner scores de performance ainsi que des textes philosophiques.

**Mots-clés:** **Espionnage. Dispositif. Meta-théâtre. Philosophie Dramatique. Philo-Performance.**

**RESUMO** – **'A astúcia própria da cena': notas para um dispositivo comum entre o teatro e a filosofia** – O artigo sugere que cenas de bisbilhotagem contêm a chave para um dispositivo fundamental para o teatro, capaz de reforçar as intrincadas dimensões metateatrais de toda performance teatral, amplificando seu caráter filosófico. De modo a tornar essa afirmação clara, o artigo discute a ideia de dispositivo, conceito de inspiração foucaultiana (1980; 1986), e aplica suas dimensões autorreflexivas a vários exemplos retirados de diferentes peças, a fim de discutir como estes podem funcionar tanto quanto partituras para performances quanto como textos de caráter filosófico.

**Palavras-chave:** **Bisbilhotagem. Dispositivo. Metateatro. Filosofia do Drama. Filosofia-Performance.**

The theatre is precisely that practice which calculates the place of things as they are observed: if I set the spectacle here, the spectator will see this; if I put it elsewhere, he will not, and I can avail myself of this masking effect and play on the illusion it provides. The stage is the line which stands across the path of the optic pencil, tracing at once the point at which it is brought to a stop and, as it were, the threshold of its ramification (Barthes, 1977, p. 69).

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

The two epigraphs for these preliminary reflections, regarding theatre as a dispositive, and also on philosophy and what it has in common with theatre, present two radically different forms of seeing/viewing. Barthes draws attention to the *things* which can be observed by a supposedly neutral spectator, while Foucault's gaze focuses on the reflection of himself in the mirror, seeing himself where he is not, transforming the utopian gaze into a heterotopic one. What they have in common though is the visualized demarcation of a space where the aesthetic practices of theatre and performance literally *take place*, the place where philosophy *begins*, establishing a dynamic habitation for the representation of human experience. Together, the two quotes constitute what in the theatre, through the performance of a set script, takes place in a space which has a fictional dimension where human or non-human agents, usually actors playing characters – but also where sub-human and supernatural figures appear –, interact and leave (by exiting from) this space. This is the theatrical *scene* which we, with different degrees of intensity, are watching, either focusing more on the line of Barthes' *optic pencil* which makes these agents appear or disappear; or on the complex forms of mirroring this evocation of *bodies* triggers, through which I can in some sense see myself in a place where I know that I am not, as a trigger for philosophical thinking.

This would be what Hamlet, in Shakespeare's play, calls "the very cunning of the scene" through which, he claims, would be possible to make "guilty creatures sitting at a play confess their crimes" (Shakespeare, 1985, act II, scene 2, pp. 542-543) Therefore, Hamlet adds, "the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (Shakespeare, 1985, act II, scene 2, p. 557-558) I will, however, not try to verify Hamlet's assumption about "catching the conscience of guilty creatures" by having them watch a performance. Instead I want to reflect on scenes of eavesdropping which are, as a rule, intentionally created (or set-up) by the characters themselves who take part in such scenes (as part of the action), but in turn are of course scripted by the authors of the plays where these scenes appear with specific purposes. I want to draw attention to the *cleverness* or *skill* that goes into creating scenes based on such cunning deceptions. Or, as Esa Kirkkopelto has shown:

Wherever there is theatrical representation or activity recognizable as such, 'there' is also a scene that delimits and determines the representational aspects and conditions of that activity [which] [...] directs our theoretical gaze to the 'scenic thing', the phenomenon of human action (Kirkkopelto, 2009, p. 230-231).

Eavesdropping scenes are a form of representation drawing attention to the inherent theatricality of scenic structures in general. In what follows I want to suggest that eavesdropping scenes can both serve as a point of departure for a discussion of the dispositive of the theatre as a constitutive feature through which the self-reflexivity of the *language* of the theatre, and its theatrical function – following Roman Jakobson's (1960) definition of the poetic function of language communication – can be identified, as well as add something crucial, though probably more marginal to our understanding of philosophy.

In the theatre such a dispositive consists of a combination of a basic rules' set according to which the *game* of the theatre is played, based on the material conditions for realizing this artistic practice, with a stage on which human as well as supernatural figures appear. In order to play chess, we need a board with 64 alternate black and white squares arranged in an eight-by-eight grid, a set of rules for how the 16 pieces of each player move and how the game proceeds in order to declare the winner. The

combination between the material conditions and the rules for *playing the game* enables us to consider the theatrical event as a complex *machinery* which meticulously coordinates a wide range of different features and activities. The theatrical machinery is not only defined by its more or less sophisticated use of material technologies – the stage-machinery, as well by the use of perspective and lighting, stage sets and props, and also by the appearance of the (live) actor, performing a character (as well as frequently *playing* her- or himself) activating this machinery, becoming integrated within it. Thereby, through this process, through the game and through such a machinery that are the material conditions of the theatrical play, actors and actresses become transformed into a work of art. The art of acting is unique in the sense that the artist transforms him- or herself into a work of art during the performance itself.

The notion of the ‘dispositive’ (*dispositif* in French) was introduced by Foucault during the late 1970, who explained that it consists of a

[...] heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid (Foucault, 1980, p. 194-195).

According to Foucault, the dispositive is “the system of relations that can be established between these elements” and what we must investigate in particular, he continues, is “[...] the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements [...] [because] between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely”. Such a dispositive is constituted by an open-ended playfulness, constantly generating new combinations for ‘playing the game’, even becoming ludic (Foucault, 1980, p. 194-195).

At the same time, based on this form of structural thinking, the dominant strategic function of the dispositive is as a “formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*,” and therefore, Foucault (1980, p. 194-195) clarifies, it is possible to distinguish the “dominant strategic function” of such constitutive elements. Eavesdropping, both in its inclusion of discursive and non-discursive elements as well as in its expression of urgency, or even just

by “responding to an urgent need”, can even be seen as a basic model for the conception of theatre as a dispositive and how it can be understood. It is important to note that the idea that the broad range of “interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function” – that can be associated with the constant restructuring between such discursive and non-discursive elements which characterizes eavesdropping as I will develop later – is crucial for Foucault in defining the notion of the dispositive itself. This game-like model in term serves as the basis for a ludic dimension of the theatre, and in what follows I will also present a brief sketch how such an interplay can be realized in different contexts<sup>1</sup>.

The character of a Philosopher in Brecht’s (2014) *Dialogues of Buying Brass*, or the *Messingkauf Dialogues* – a play consisting of a collection of fragments left uncompleted at the time of Brecht’s death – very clearly expresses the basic idea that the practices of the theatre are based on organizational principles which can also be applied to social practices and vice versa. According to Brecht’s meta-theatrical dialogue-fragments, the philosopher’s objective for coming to the theatre is to learn something from this artistic practice. He presents this aspiration – including certain self-ironies – already in his first statement of the dialogue between the Dramaturg, an Actor and an Actress, while the ‘Stage Hand’ is still dismantling the set on the dusty stage where the unique exchange of ideas has just begun:

What interests me about the theatre is the fact that you apply your art and your whole apparatus to imitating incidents that occur between people, making your spectators feel as though they are watching real life. Because I am interested in the way people live together, I’m interested in your imitations too (Brecht, 2014, p. 13).

Brecht’s philosopher assumes that the theatre is constituted by an *apparatus* for representing events and relationships from the social sphere, through which certain aspects of *real life* can be revealed, making the spectators *believe* (not feel as in the translation above)<sup>2</sup> that they are watching something that is crucial for their lives, not merely an entertaining distraction.

According to Burchell, “Foucault uses this term [of the dispositive] to designate a configuration or arrangement of elements and forces, practices

and discourses, power and knowledge that is both *strategic* and *technical*' (Burchell apud Bussolini, 2010, p. 86). Following Brecht's philosopher there are obviously crucial differences between the dispositive of the theatre and *life itself*, because the theatre is an imitation with a high degree of coordination between strategy and technique (which is obviously not necessarily the case in *real life*), making it possible to decipher how these imitations are constructed, not only which aspects of social life they exhibit and expose. Since the dispositive of the theatre is highly conventionalized, the relations between strategy and technique can be more easily detected and deciphered when they appear on a stage than in real life situations. Our lives are much less clearly framed as a rule than an event devised for a theatrical event or in other more directly ritualized contexts.

The reason why theatrical events as well as other artistic practices are important and interesting for the philosopher in Brecht's *Messingkauf Dialogues* (2014) is that they are closely related to real life situations, in some cases even striving to make the spectators believe that they are watching *real life*. Furthermore, the inner dynamics of the dispositive of the theatre establishes a network that links the various aspects of this cultural practice together, even making us aware of how the machinery itself functions while at the same time reflecting on configurations of power and resistance in social life (or the public sphere) that can be tested and even subverted by *doing* theatre.

The principles regulating the appearances and disappearances of the figures and the objects and images within a designated stage space where they can be perceived by the spectators for a certain time during the theatrical event are a basic feature of the dispositive of the theatre. When a certain character or an image has fulfilled its basic function, it will as a rule exit or disappear from the particular space we call the stage. Entrances and exits of human figures enable the meetings and the confrontations between the characters, regardless of what the stage represents or how this representation has been constructed. The regulating mechanisms of entrances and exits are a *sine qua non* of every dramatic text as well as its scenic realizations, creating a higher degree of overlap between the textual and the performative dimensions of the medium. Exits/entrances have to be inscribed in the text as such.

One of the functions of the actors is to link the play-script and its basic narrative scenarios based on the flow of encounters between the characters within a particular stage realization, materializing the conceptual textual framework of entrances and exits – of presences and absences – on the stage. Depending on the dramatic conventions of the text as well as its particular staging, the regulatory principles of entrances and exits also suggest how the world of these characters is constructed, what their possibilities of action and their chances of escaping an inevitable fate are, or even enabling them to master it, thus also problematizing the ethical dimensions of their actions.

Among the unlimited possibilities for regulating the movement of the characters I want to focus on one particular variant here. I want to suggest that eavesdropping, where a character is both present and absent at the same time, overhearing or spying on a situation on the stage, holds a privileged position among the many techniques for regulating presences and absences on the stage. The eavesdropper may be an accomplice of one or several of the visible characters on the stage and as a rule the spectators are also aware of what is happening, while at least one of the characters on the stage is unaware of the set-up.

Among the Classical Greek plays with eavesdropping scenes, I want to mention Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* (2007), from 411 B.C., usually called *The Poet and the Women* or *Women at the Festival* and the *Bacchae* by Euripides (2005), from 405 B.C. In both these plays male characters are eavesdropping on a group of women who are performing a ritual from which men have been excluded. In Aristophanes' play, where Agathon is also one of the characters, Euripides sends a relative dressed up as a woman to this ritual in order to prevent the women from boycotting or punishing Euripides for his negative depictions of female characters (like Medea, Helen or Phaedra)<sup>3</sup>. The unnamed relative – fully visible but hiding *in* or *behind* his attire, which is simultaneously a form of eavesdropping and masquerading – is discovered and put on trial. In the *Bacchae*, on the other hand, the eavesdropping takes place off-stage, with Pentheus being caught while secretly watching the ritual of the women from the top of a tree where it is possible to discover him, as a result of which he is beheaded by his mother Agave. In both of these plays – one a comedy and the other a

tragedy – the eavesdropper is first revealed and then punished or victimized in some way, in the *Bacchae* even by death, which is often the case in tragedies, while in comedies the eavesdropping leads to a complex negotiation, as a rule, finally resolving the dramatic conflict after the eavesdropper has been revealed and threatened and/or corrected.

Two well-known examples from ‘early’ modern plays like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1985) and Moliere’s *Tartuffe* (1963) show even more clearly how difficult it is to distinguish between the tragic and the comic modes in eavesdropping scenes, even if the two plays themselves are clearly classified as either a tragedy or a comedy, respectively. When we consider the performative potentials of these scenes, both with three characters – one who hides, one who knows about the set-up and one who is unaware of the eavesdropping situation, a much more complex picture emerges, in particular because the spectators are also invited to watch the eavesdropping scene, becoming eavesdroppers as well. The two eavesdropping scenes I am referring to are Polonius hiding behind the arras in Gertrude’s *closet* (in *Hamlet*, act III, scene 4) in order to find out if Hamlet’s love for Ophelia is the cause of his *madness* and Orgon witnessing the exposure of Tartuffe’s sexual avarice and hypocrisy through Elmire’s *mock-seduction*, while Orgon is hiding under the table (in *Tartuffe*, act IV, scene 5). They are both highly theatrical, aimed at investigating or revealing a complex situation.

I also want to suggest that both scenes present a radical ambivalence regarding to how they can be characterized and even performed. The first issue that must be clarified is who knows about the set-up of the eavesdropping, how it is discovered and what the consequences of this discovery are. In the scene from *Hamlet* everybody, including the spectators, know that Hamlet – who is unaware of this until the moment when he hears the call for help from behind the arras – is under surveillance. This does not take many lines in Shakespeare’s text, but when Hamlet enters his mother’s closet Polonius is clearly perceived as a transgressor, striving to gain information and as a result of that also power, by spying on Hamlet and indirectly also on Gertrude. But when Hamlet understands that there is someone secretly overhearing his conversation with his mother he is immediately transformed into a murderer, he



instantly takes “/a/rms against a sea of troubles” (as he says in the famous ‘to be or not to be-soliloquy), killing Polonius, as saying in act III, scene 4, response to discovering this that “I took thee for thy better” (Shakespeare, 1985, p. 32), probably referring to Claudius.

In the crucial eavesdropping scene in Moliere’s play, Orgon is hiding under the table while Elmire makes Tartuffe believe that she is seducing him or that she is willing to be seduced by him, in order to *show* her husband that Tartuffe is a hypocrite (Molière, 1963). Here the eavesdropper is empowered to get a true understanding of the situation, while Tartuffe, who is watched in secret, becomes revealed/uncovered. What these two scenes have in common is the sudden change of the initial situation, where victims and victimizers quickly change roles and where the exposures they lead to, in all the senses of ‘exposure’, are both fatal and liberating at the same time. Polonius and Tartuffe are suddenly transformed into victims from having been powerful perpetrators, while the potential victims – Hamlet and Orgon – triumph for a short moment. In Hamlet’s case his discovery transforms him into a murderer and in Orgon’s case it almost turns him into a cuckolded husband.

At the same time as these two scenes trigger deep anxieties among all the characters present, there is also something ludicrous about the situation, almost like a form of slapstick, where the eavesdropper in different ways is tempted to reveal himself while it is almost impossible to predict how the character subjected to the eavesdropping will react. In performance every little nuance and change of attitude will be registered by the spectators because of the great dangers as well as the ridiculous potentials of these scenes. If both Hamlet and Tartuffe sharpen their senses, so inevitably will the spectators, as well. The eavesdropping scenes present enormous comic and tragic potentials in performance, producing a form of liminality in which what is perceived as threatening can instantly be transformed into something extraordinary and *vice versa*.

Issues of gender and sexuality are also central in both of these examples, with the eavesdropper generally being a male figure who is both ridiculed and pitied at the same time as he is finally exposed to some form of threat (Polonius or Orgon) while his accomplice, who knows he is hiding, is a female figure (Gertrude or Elmire) while the *bait*, whose

behaviour is triggered by the behaviour of this woman and secretly observed by the eavesdropper is a male (*Hamlet* or *Tartuffe*). In the two examples from Aristophanes the eavesdroppers (the relative and Theseus) are also male, while the women are initially unaware of them, only discovering gradually that they are under surveillance. Here the spectators serve as *accomplices*, who know about the set-up which eventually *goes wrong*.

But there are interesting exceptions to the male dominance among the eavesdroppers, as in the second act of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* (Ibsen, 2009) where Rebecca West hides behind the curtain in Rosmer's bedroom to overhear what Rosmer and Kroll are discussing and what they know regarding the suicide of Beate, Rosmer's wife and Kroll's sister. Based on her desire for Rosmer, the young and attractive Rebecca had convinced Rosmer's wife Beate to take her own life in her efforts to gradually *take over* Rosmersholm, including Rosmer's bedroom where she hides behind the curtain in an eavesdropping scene. As we learn when she is discovered by Rosmer and Kroll, Rebecca had secretly entered the room through another door without their or even (according to the script, which can of course be changed) the spectator's knowledge. This is different from the two eavesdropping scenes in *Hamlet* and *Tartuffe* where the women (Gertrude and Elmire) as well as the spectators are aware of the set-up, while Hamlet and Tartuffe who are both present on the stage are unaware of it. And consequently, in *Rosmersholm*, the moment Rebecca's wish to marry Rosmer can be realized she refuses, because of an incestuous relationship with her supposedly adoptive father, Dr. West, that was in truth her biological father which has been hidden even from her. Learning this Rebecca decides to take her own life, inviting Rosmer to join her, jumping into the millrace meeting their deaths together, just as Beate had done. This is no doubt a more complex form of victimization than in *Hamlet* or *Tartuffe*.

The female eavesdropper seems to be more complex psychologically than her male counterparts. Instead of becoming fools, confronting their *mistakes*, like Polonius and Orgon, the female eavesdropper becomes self-destructive when her sexual desires cannot be realized. Female eavesdropping creates a complex dialectics between a (comic) desire (or wish) and a (tragic) failure, internalizing the tensions and fusing the

contradictions between the comic and the tragic. This complex dynamic can already be found in *Hippolytus* by Euripides, from 428 B.C., where we actually see Phaedra eavesdropping, while the Nurse and Hippolytus, both unaware that somebody is listening to them are situated behind the *skene* (Euripides, 2010, lines 565-600). In this *reversed* eavesdropping scene where the spectators see Phaedra eavesdropping at the door (not hiding behind the arras or under the table as Polonius and Orgon do), straining herself to hear what Hippolytus and the nurse are saying (or rather shouting) as the nurse reveals Phaedra's *secret* to him. Phaedra then reports to the chorus (and the audience) what she has heard creating a very different response than if the scene had been shown from the opposite direction, with the Nurse and Hippolytus on the stage. In *Hippolytus* (Euripides, 2010) the outcome of this chaotic situation is profoundly tragic, but it also contains some potential comic elements which can become profoundly disturbing regarding how Phaedra reports what she has heard about her own passionate love for Hippolytus.

Thereby, eavesdropping is a foundational dispositive of the theatre, also drawing attention to spectatorship and reinforcing the intricate meta-theatrical dimensions of any performance. And since the eavesdropper is a potential victim, so is also the spectator. But when the eavesdropper in the fictional world is *sacrificed*, he can be seen as a scapegoat for the spectator, whose transgression as a witness who is hiding supposedly becomes *absolved*. Eavesdropping must obviously also be considered within a larger set of practices of *witnessing* (without being hidden), whereby the presence of spectators or witnesses inside the fictional world, like in the performance-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, in which the guilt of Claudius is supposedly exposed when he interrupts the performance, while he is at the same time being closely (and secretly) watched by Hamlet and Horatio who are eavesdropping on him. Eavesdropping scenes usually appear in multiples, illuminating each other while at the same time there is often a specific, climactic eavesdropping scene. The two scenes I have referred to in *Hamlet* and *Tartuffe* are examples of such climactic eavesdropping scenes, both in plays which contain numerous additional eavesdropping scenes.

Most readers of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* have drawn attention to the broad variety of eavesdropping scenes in this play but have only rarely

drawn attention to the possibility that the ghost is also an eavesdropper. In the first scene the appearance of the ghost – “Look where it comes *again*” (Shakespeare, 1985, Act I, scene 1, p. 40; my emphasis), as Marcellus exclaims – triggers the action of the play. But the question a dramaturg or a director preparing a performance of this play should ask, first of all, is not only what happens when the ghost actually does appear (and in this context the word *again*, repeated several times is important), but also at what point in the opening scene the spectators will be able to see the appearance of the ghost for the first time. It is possible that we become aware of the presence of an eavesdropping ghost already when we hear the first line of the play: “Who’s there?” (Shakespeare, 1985, Act I, scene 1, p. 40). Already the possibility that the spectators can see the ghost before the characters do, indicates that it is potentially an eavesdropping figure.

In order to give a full account of the closet-scene in *Hamlet*, we must therefore also take into consideration that the ghost does not only appear briefly towards the end of the scene, but is present in the closet, and is even perceived by the spectators from the very beginning of the scene when Polonius arrives, hiding behind the arras as Hamlet approaches. There is thus another eavesdropper in Gertrude’s closet, who is most likely present throughout this scene, waiting to appear at the end, when Gertrude insists that she sees “nothing at all, yet all that is I see” (Shakespeare, act III, scene 4, p. 132), while at this point the ghost is clearly visible for Hamlet. Earlier in the same scene, when Hamlet after killing Polonius says “I took thee for thy better” (Shakespeare, act III, scene 4, p. 133), he could just as well refer to the ghost of his dead father as being Polonius’ better, while it is usually assumed that Hamlet refers here to Claudius. It is even possible that when Hamlet hears a shout for help from behind the arras – and since he has not seen who is hiding – he *believes* that it is the ghost that is haunting him, because he no doubt experiences the ghost as a threat, also to himself. Eavesdropping scenes have the potential to create multiple, even contradictory possibilities of interpreting a certain situation: *they bring us to the core of the theatrical experience through the ‘very cunning of the scene’*.

When discussing the notion of eavesdropping we must therefore also consider the appearance or presence of supernatural characters like ghosts, dybbuks and divine figures as well as the traditional *deus ex machina*,

usually appearing in the focal point in the back of the stage where the eavesdropper also frequently hides on the stage, as a narrative devise through which the complications created by the humans are solved at the end of a play. The ghost in *Hamlet* however, appears already in the first scene of the play, presenting the complications which nurture its plot. The important point in this context is that the theatre takes the appearances of supernatural beings seriously though they do not demand that the spectators actually believe in their *extra-theatrical* existence. The supernatural figures appearing on the stage are very different from those in which humans actually believe in. What they have in common is their ability of omniscient knowledge, which means that the supernatural creatures appearing on the theatre stage have the ability to eavesdrop and must therefore also be seen as an integral aspect of the eavesdropping dispositive.

As a stage convention, eavesdropping also has a long and complex history connecting the cultural and discursive practices of the theatre with philosophical thinking, beginning with the interactions between tragedy and comedy which I have suggested are a central feature of the eavesdropping dispositive. In Plato's *Symposium* (1994), depicting the celebration of Agathon's victory in the Lenaeon tragedy competition in 416 B.C., eavesdropping even serves as a multi-dimensional site or juncture where the discursive practices of philosophy and theatre converge and partially even overlap, problematizing the exact limits between the theatre and philosophy. Such interactions between tragedy and comedy as well as between philosophy and theatre are at the same time both playful and potentially threatening. This combination is represented in Greek culture by what was called an *agon*, a competition which therefore, at the same time can, as Johan Huizinga has suggested can also be characterized as being playful or *ludic*<sup>4</sup>.

At the end of Plato's *Symposium*, after Agathon, who hosted the celebration of his victory in the tragic competition, together with prominent guests like Aristophanes, Socrates and several other Athenian intellectuals had engaged in a night-long speech contest, or *agon*, praising Eros and after Alcibiades has finished his tirade against Socrates (which can also be seen as an *agon*) only Socrates himself and the two playwrights

(Agathon and Aristophanes) as well as Aristodemus, who accompanied Socrates to the celebration, had remained. At this point Socrates tries to convince Agathon and Aristophanes “that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy; the skilful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet” (Plato, 1994, 223d.). But as Apollodorus, who tells an unidentified companion about the celebration, and how Agathon and Aristophanes as well as Aristodemus himself – who was present at the party and had told Apollodorus what he (Aristodemus) remembered several years afterwards – were too tired to follow Socrates’ arguments and fell asleep. From the initial contests (*agons*) – at the public festival and more privately, among the Athenians who have gathered for the celebration – an additional *agon*, between the philosopher and the two playwrights begins to emerge, personifying the ancient quarrel between philosophy, represented by Socrates, and poetry, represented by Agathon, an author of tragedies, and Aristophanes, an author of comedies.

As Socrates is lecturing to the two playwrights about the possibility of unifying tragedy and comedy in a comprehensive discursive practice, which I want to suggest is actually an attempt to clarify the origins of the discursive practices of philosophy, both playwrights as well as (the witness) Aristodemus fell asleep. Exactly what Socrates said about the competition between poetry and philosophy which Plato staged in his dialogue is therefore left unanswered behind a veil of intoxication from wine and drowsiness from lack of sleep. This has no doubt been intentionally hidden with Plato’s text refraining to provide us with the details of Socrates’ arguments which could have put an end to this ancient struggle. We must therefore conjecture in which sense, philosophy, as practiced by Socrates, could unify these two dramatic genres or discourses.

Just as according to the well-known myth which Aristophanes had told earlier in the speech-contest – most likely authored by Plato himself – how Eros is the force that reunites the two halves of the *complete* four-legged creatures which had been cut in half by Zeus, philosophy is the discursive practice which can reunite the two dramatic forms of expression which had been separated from each other. Just as Eros strives to bring the two-legged creatures together to their original completeness, becoming reunited, philosophy strives to bring tragedy and comedy together. The

reason for the gods, headed by Zeus to divide the four-legged creatures into two two-legged humans was to weaken their power, preventing them from being rebellious, while at the same time also threatening them that if this rebelliousness does not cease, Zeus will cut them in half one more time, making them hop around on one leg. The same thing goes for the subversive power of philosophy which becomes weakened by being divided into the two dramatic genres which Socrates now suggests can and should be mended by demanding that writers of tragedy should also be able to write comedy and vice versa.

Indeed, Plato (and through him Socrates) claims that philosophy is the discursive practice that integrates or unifies the two genres or modes of expression – and thus, like the four-legged creatures in Aristophanes' myth, philosophy will be able to regain its rebellious aspect and respond to an urgent need in situations of crisis (which as Foucault (1980) claims is one of the conditions for becoming a dispositive). Eavesdropping (as I have already pointed out above) plays an important role in such a subversive strategy in that it for a moment obliterates the strict reinforcement of the rules separating tragedy and comedy. And according to Plato's master-narrative, Socrates was sentenced to death by the Athenian democracy which perceived itself as being *threatened* by his philosophy, while the arts and in particular the theatre, are to be banned from Plato's utopian state, where the philosopher-guardians rule. It is therefore no exaggeration to claim that either philosophy or the arts, sometimes even both, have to surrender to the *needs* of the polis.

Plato's dialogues contain also many variations of eavesdropping situations through which philosophical thinking and its specific discursive practices emerge. One prominent example is the parable of the cave in *The Republic* (Plato, 2015). It can be seen as a variation of the eavesdropping scene, demonstrating in concrete visual terms how philosophical thinking emerges by exposing the shadows on the wall, revealing their true source to the prisoner who is released, as well as by making these false images appear, like photographic shadow images that can be "exposed" by the philosophical search for truth. In the *Symposium*, the mystical teachings of *Diotima* from Mantinea are revealed from behind a veil of secrecy and distance, both in time and in space as she is obviously not present at the

celebration itself. And finally, towards the end of the *Symposium*, the sleep of the two playwrights becomes the veil behind which Socrates' ideas about the relations between tragedy and comedy remain hidden. As the morning breaks after the banquet Socrates left Agathon's home together with Aristodemus who many years later reported to Apollodorus that he "*went directly to the Lyceum, washed up, spent the rest of the day as he always did, and only then, as evening was falling, went home to rest*" (Plato, 1994, 222b). This is the final gesture of the philosopher, spending his day with everyday activities, after having revealed the secrets of philosophy which his auditors were too tired to hear, and which therefore remain hidden behind the veil of asleep.

But there are also examples of more direct and less metaphorical expressions of how philosophical discourses are constituted in the theatrical form of eavesdropping scenes. The most direct is no doubt Pythagoras' practice of lecturing to his students from behind a curtain, only allowing a select group of initiated students to be with him behind the curtain. Pythagoras, probably following religious ritual practices, developed the notion of *veiled utterances* – *akousmata*, where we hear a voice without knowing what is causing it or what its source actually is (as in ventriloquism) – which can only be understood through a proper method of interpretation (based on the acquaintance with some form of secret knowledge). This is how the *primal scene* of philosophy is constituted.

According to Mladen Dolar this as a situation where

The Teacher, the Master behind a curtain, proffering his teaching from there without being seen: no doubt a stroke of genius which stands at the very origin of philosophy – Pythagoras was allegedly the first to describe himself as a 'philosopher,' and also the first to found a philosophical school. The advantage of this mechanism was obvious: the students, the followers, were confined to 'their Master's voice,' not distracted by his looks or quirks of behaviour, by visual forms, the spectacle of presentation, the theatrical effects which always pertain to lecturing; they had to concentrate merely on the voice and the meaning emanating from it. It appears that at its origin philosophy depends on a theatrical coup de force: there is the simple minimal device which defines the theatre, the curtain which serves as a screen, but a curtain not to be raised, not for many years – philosophy appears as the art of an actor behind the curtain (Dolar, 2006, p. 61).



The ultimate *coup de theatre* however, the one that is played out in the theatre is that on the stage, the eavesdropping mechanisms can sometimes very quickly expose for what they actually are: a deception within a more comprehensive intrigue. The discursive practices of philosophy, on the other hand, beginning with Pythagoras, are constructed, as Dolar (2006) claims, as a form of eavesdropping where the words of truth are hidden behind a veil to protect the secrets and reinforce the hierarchical nature of the profession.

I will end my discussion here, at a point where I think that we are beginning to see the contours of a dispositive – the dispositive of eavesdropping – where a certain form of spatial organization of human agents and what they are able and willing to reveal to the each other involves the discursive practices of both philosophy and theatre. This is an issue which I believe needs to be addressed more in detail than I have been able to do here. In closing, however, I want to bring an additional quote from the Foucault interview with which I opened this presentation about the *dispositive*, here translated as *apparatus*<sup>5</sup>:

I said that the apparatus is essentially of a strategic nature, which means assuming that it is a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces, either developing them in a particular direction, blocking them, stabilising them, utilising them, etc. The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge (Foucault, 1980, p. 196).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The English translations of Foucault's term *dispositif* vary, ranging from 'apparatus' (in this particular translation), to 'device', 'machinery', 'construction', and 'deployment'. I have chosen, most of times, to use the English term 'dispositive' to avoid the confusions that this broad range of translations has given rise to. Jeffrey Bussolini has made the following clarifications: "*Within a heterogeneous and dynamic field of relations, the dispositive would seem to be a kind of moving marker to allow some approximation of a particular preponderance or balance of forces at a given time. It helps to identify which knowledges have been called out and developed in terms of certain*

*imperatives of power, and it aids in the discernment of the many resistances that also necessarily run through the multiple relations of force according to Foucault. This is all the more important given his castings of power as a fractured field in which the different lines of force are sometimes reinforcing, sometimes undermining and contradicting one another – reading the points of confrontation and intensity is historically and politically valuable”* (Bussolini, 2010, p. 91) and ‘apparatus’ might be said to be the instruments or discrete sets of instruments themselves – the implements or equipment. Dispositive, on the other hand, may denote more the arrangement – the strategic arrangement – of the implements in a dynamic function (Bussolini, 2010, p. 96). See also Agamben (2009).

- 2 The original German has “*glauben*” which means ‘believe’, not ‘feel’ as it has been translated in the 2014 translation.
- 3 In this play Agathon also appears as a character, actually a rather comic one, because when Euripides tries to find women’s clothes for his relative, they approach Agathon, who they know sometimes dresses as a woman. But since Agathon is busy writing a female part for a new play, he needs his female attire. While no plays by Agathon have been preserved, Aristophanes’ play and Plato’s dialogue, the *Symposium*, celebrating Agathon’s victory in the Lenaia competition are the only sources depicting Agathon at some length.
- 4 In his now classical study of the playfulness of cultural practices *Homo Ludens* (first published in 1938), Johan Huizinga (who insisted that his study is about the playfulness ‘of’ culture and not as in the subtitle of the English translation, ‘in’ culture) draws attention to the fact that even if Classical Greek like many other languages distinguishes between ‘contest’ and ‘play’ there is a deep “underlying identity” between the *ludic* elements and what the Greeks termed as *agon*, basically meaning a competition, adding that “[t]he *agon* in Greek life, or the contest anywhere else in the world, bears all the formal characteristics of play, and as to its function belongs almost wholly to the sphere of the festival, which is the play-sphere” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 31).
- 5 See also note 2 above.

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Freddie Rokem is professor (Emeritus) in the Department of Theatre at Tel Aviv University. He has been a visiting professor at many universities in the United States, Germany, Finland and Sweden and currently is the Wiegeland Visiting Professor of Theater & Performance Studies (TAPS) at the University of Chicago. He was the editor of *Theatre Research International* (2006-2009) and was a founding co-editor of the Palgrave/Macmillan book series 'Performance Philosophy' (2012-2017) also being among the founders of the 'Performance Philosophy'-network.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4417-5761>

E-mail: [freddie.rokem@gmail.com](mailto:freddie.rokem@gmail.com)

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