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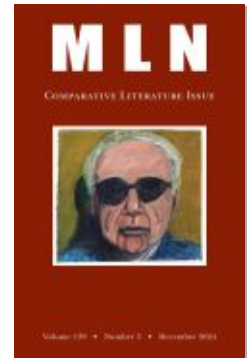
Editorial Note

Leonardo F. Lisi

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Discussion Forum on Alisa Zhulina's *Theater of Capital*: *Modern Drama and Economic Life*

Editorial Note



Leonardo F. Lisi

Alisa Zhulina's 2024 monograph, *Theater of Capital*, promises to inject the comparative study of drama with renewed relevance and focus. Examining the work of six authors (Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Benedictsson, Chekhov, and Hauptman) working in five different languages (Norwegian, Swedish, English, Russian, and German), the book argues that drama has been an unjustly neglected lens through which to understand the workings of modern capitalism. Traditionally, literary studies concerned with capitalism's inner logic have favored the novel, long considered modernity's preeminent genre. And yet, as Zhulina points out, sociologically drama stands in a much more privileged position in this regard, since it is the form of literature most immediately dependent on the fluctuations of the market. Drama is accordingly an untapped resource for thinking about capitalism's literary life, especially, Zhulina further argues, the drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on which she focuses. Two features in particular are significant about this period. First, the consolidation of a new phase in capitalism's development, namely that of finance and speculative capitalism. Second, and more importantly, this period encompasses an exceptional wealth not only of *examinations of capitalism*, but also of a multiplicity of different political and

economic *alternatives to* capitalism, many of which have now been lost to us. These features make clear the stakes of Zhulina's project. For, as she argues, theater's privileged position in the market during this period not only provides it with a greater familiarity with the workings of capital, but also a greater degree of critical reflection on its conditions, limitations, and alternatives. The dramas that she studies thus do not simply hold antiquarian interest but constitute still-relevant resources for thinking through the social conditions of our present.

This argument in *Theater of Capital* largely depends on the elaboration of a more expansive notion of economics, one Zhulina associates with the broader category of *oikos* and which allows different academic disciplines to enter into a more productive exchange. The generative force of that approach is visible in the contributions to this forum, each of which engages Zhulina's innovative argument from a different perspective. These stretch from challenges to, and elaborations of, Zhulina's analysis of specific theatrical devices and their economic analogues (Rebecca Kastleman on the *deus ex machina* as an invisible hand; Douglas Eacho on the speculative temporality in Chekhov's casino capitalism), through methodological concerns surrounding the notion of "immanent critique" (Pannill Camp), to the expansion of the groundwork laid by *Theater of Capital* into regions that it does not explicitly confront, such as the burgeoning field of environmental humanities (Sarah J. Townsend). In her response to her interlocutors that concludes the Forum, Alisa Zhulina draws out many of their commonalities, but also uses the occasion to point out new avenues of inquiry that the conversation has laid bare. *Theater of Capital* thus delivers what it promises, to let us reap anew the analytic and revolutionary potential of modern drama for contemporary thinking.



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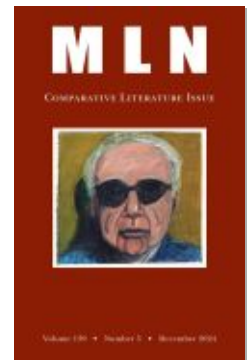
On Chance Performance and Indeterminate Value

Douglas Eacho

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On Chance Performance and Indeterminate Value



Douglas Eacho

In the sprawling, collaboratively authored *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1962/1995), the Romanian-Swiss artist and theater director Daniel Spoerri details the objects on his desk. (1) A piece of white bread, (1a) crumbs from that same bread, (2) an egg cup, (3) a bottle of wine, and so forth up to (79) a ladle and (80) a cigarette burn on the paper Spoerri used to trace.¹ From 1960 on Spoerri built a career on an ocular version of this same perspective, affixing the remnants of some table—usually after a meal with friends—to their surface with heavy adhesive and mounting the resulting assemblage to the gallery wall. The evocatively titled *tableaux-pièges* recalled the gravity-besotted Dadaist experiments of Jean Arp, the readymades of Marcel Duchamp, and the experiments of the *nouveaux romanciers*, and would soon connect Spoerri to aleatory Americans like Rauschenberg and the emerging Fluxus circle. But for Spoerri himself, the work belonged in a more familiar genre. With Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, François Dufrêne and others, he signed a manifesto for “Nouveau Réalisme.” Thus did chance emerge as a method of “realist” aesthetics.

I thought of Spoerri’s *tableaux-pièges* when reading Alisa Zhulina’s discussion of Anton Chekhov’s stage *tableaux*. In the midst of her richly documented discussion of Chekhov’s journalistic attention to a Russian bank failure, and the vexed question of the relation of speculation to gambling within capitalist imaginaries, Zhulina notes that Chekhov’s style is itself rather aleatory—“characterized by arbitrary details [and]

¹Daniel Spoerri, *Anecdoted Topography*.

attention to the seemingly insignificant.”² Chekhov’s approach, she continues, is in this respect “a product of a specific historical moment, when the capitalist economy exposed how different objects could be made equivalent to one another through exchange.”³ For Zhulina, Chekhov’s genius was to simultaneously depict a world flattened by the “universal equivalent” of money, in which tables are strewn with the aftermaths of meals and a dozen people of unclear prominence pace about a stage, and a world in which dreams of *potential* allow those people to step for moments into Berlant’s “cruel optimism” and out of the mundanity of their material lives. Both Chekhov’s flattened narrative perspective and his characters’ flights of speculative imagination, Zhulina emphasizes, are artifacts of the way chance rules over capitalist reason.

Chekhov’s aleatory point of view would arguably come to define realist dramatic production just as much as the innovations in acting that Stanislavski and his colleagues would develop alongside these plays. The same effect structures recent hard-realist attempts in American drama like Annie Baker’s *The Flick* (2013) and David Adjmi’s *Stereoscopic* (2023), and is a hallmark of much neo-realist cinema, whether Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) or Cristian Mungiu’s *RMN* (2022), all of which present a *mise-en-scène* carefully constructed to not seem to guide one’s gaze, notably portraying dialogue as merely one of many actions taking place before us, within which speech may not be of narrative interest when compared to the glances of a laborer on the scene’s periphery. It was just this aspect of cinema, because of its reliance on the apparatus of photography, that repelled Antonin Artaud from the whole medium: “a preponderant role is assigned to the machine and to the spontaneous and direct development of the aspects of reality [...] the poetry which can be distilled from all this is only a poetry of contingency, the poetry of what might be.”⁴ This was of course for Artaud a great condemnation. Cinema could not be effectively controlled; it would always remain bound to the aleatory fact of machine vision. Theater, on the other hand, offered a world of choice to the artist. Nothing, no matter the realists’ suspect attestations otherwise, occurs on a stage without enormous and specific deliberation.

Admiring both Artaud and chance was one of the many ironic contradictions of the postwar avant-garde’s appropriation of its forebears.

²Alisa Zhulina, *Theatre of Capital*, 155.

³*ibid.*

⁴Antonin Artaud, “Premature Old Age of the Cinema,” 311, 314.

(During John Cage's Black Mountain College *Theater Piece #1*, often if questionably dubbed the original work of performance art, Artaud's English translator M. C. Richards read aloud random passages from *The Theater and its Double*.) But in one respect the artists around Cage, Fluxus, and the Nouveaux Réalistes did affirm Artaud's binary: theater was a site of deliberation and control, while mechanism afforded a route to true chance. Further, and insofar as just that binary held, the theatre was a site of unreal phenomena while the mechanically produced event offered the manifestation of reality. Thus would a broad sense of "mechanism"—the rule, the procedure, the algorithm, the electronic device—become central to the 1950s-60s emergence of "performance art." The wired-up spectacles of *9 Evenings* (1966), computer-written music for Cage's *HPSCHD* and computer-written text for Alison Knowles' *House of Glass*, and the hang-outs within projected-image-saturated domes of USCO and Stan VanderBeek all posit the role of the unpredictable and autonomous technical apparatus in demonstrating the spontaneous present reality of the live event insofar as that apparatus also demonstrated the event's distance from rehearsed, blocked, mimetic drama. Much of the rest of the 60s-70s performance art canon, "electronic" or no, shows a similar reliance on the autonomy of the technical to produce this "performance" effect.⁵ Chris Burden's rifle and Volkswagen, Marina Abramović's pentagram of candles and bowstring, Carolee Schneeman's scrolled paper, Gina Pane's glass-shard ladder, Adrien Piper's wig: props, scenery, and costume all refashioned as experimental throws of dice that would insist on the chance, and in so doing underwrite the *realism* of the event they conditioned. This interrelation of mechanism, chance, and the reality-effect is now so familiar to us to seem banal. A merit of Zhulina's account is to draw our attention back to its potential origins.

Zhulina theorizes Chekhov through the structure of the "near hit," the impression that one's fortune could very nearly be—and then, have been—otherwise. This "aspirational temporal structure" binds and motivates his characters and his audience alike, as we spectators learn to expect that small incidents may grow into events of consequence, though at end, those expectations will just barely not come to pass.⁶ This anticipatory dramaturgy plays its own performative role within Chekhov's narratives, as his characters' vision of their everyday

⁵Midcentury discourses of the authenticity of the live event as cultivated in confessional American poetry, as Christopher Grobe has argued, maintained a similar if implicit reliance on the apparent chanciness of audio recording. Grobe, "Breath of the Poem."

⁶Zhulina 148.

experiences as pregnant with speculative possibility cause them to make (and not make) active decisions. The

mere *potentiality* of an event, whether in the form of expectations, desires, or dreams, has a direct influence on the life of the characters and the aesthetic exchange between the author and the reader (or spectator). Drama might be better equipped than narrative to represent this potentiality of speculation.⁷

Fantasies of the almost-could-have-been, however improbable they are revealed to be, are as pivotal to Chekhov's characters as they were to the many bourgeois families advancing uncertain investments within the legally insecure environment of the late Russian Empire. Investment, wagers, and loans offer somewhat irrational hope in a reversal of fortunes, such as the failed loan we learn that Ranevskaya drew against her estate prior to *The Cherry Orchard*, obscuring the deeper social relations at work through the endless generation of optimistic narratives. The spectacular luck of some helps secure ideological legitimacy to capitalism's inequalities despite the crumbling of older justifications for hierarchy, through optimistic aspiration and, as in Roger Caillois's famed theory of celebrity, the ever-theatrical structure of identification.⁸ Zhulina's attention here, however, directs less to ideology as such and more to the phenomenal experience of speculative time. Chekhov's aleatory modernity sustains an anxious affect, "reactive to every minuscule change in circumstances," along with a fatalist impression of historical movement as inaccessible and autonomous.⁹ This affective paradox, alive to contingency while bound ahead of us, is also the situation of theatre spectatorship.¹⁰

This speculative temporality derives not just from the plays' plots and characters, but from Chekhov's apparently haphazard *mise-en-scène*. It is on Chekhov's actual stage that his tendency to give "equal weight to disparate details" becomes most explicit and, as was often attested by early viewers of Stanislavski's productions, radical. To watch *Uncle Vanya* can be to feel one surveilles a "real" group due to the high degree of miscellaneous muttering, housework, minor characters, and lack of narrative coherence the play can sustain. What you watch can feel random, which is to say it feels that it could have been otherwise, and as you watch the characters fail again to even articulate the

⁷Zhulina 156.

⁸Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*.

⁹Zhulina 161.

¹⁰Zhulina 164; on the determined indeterminacy of theatre spectatorship, see especially Ridout, *Stage Fright*.

obvious facts of their situations one may well entertain that near-miss fantasy that perhaps this time Astrov will propose to Sonya. Though it is a commonplace in theatre practice classes to demonstrate how Chekhov's plays are in fact obsessively assembled—a point to which I will return—it is important to recall that the Moscow Art Theatre developed revolutionary techniques for staging Chekhov's drama to achieve precisely the effect of the apparently-aleatory, of a pervasively conditional world. The “accidental, shapeless, unimaginative element” that Brecht identified in naturalism “even at its best” refers to just this spectatorial anxiety watching a material world indicate its own lack of determination.¹¹

The could-have-been, the “near hit,” is a classically bourgeois experience of temporality. At stake here is not just the wish that an investment had gone better: today's homeowner with capital protected in index funds has every reason to feel secure in their position, and would still be familiar with this affective structure. Investments, after all, can and do accumulate value. How *much* value is however constitutively difficult to assess. Whether or not a home's future sale price will rise more or less quickly than the overall rate of interest, whether or not converting that home's land into summer cottages could produce enough rent: these *Cherry Orchard* dilemmas have no answers. However much economic reality obliges us to imagine homes, belongings, and entrepreneurial schemes as possessive of a true inner value—and there is indeed a real objective truth to this form—that value will only actually turn into money and realize its worth at a number at the moment of exchange. The gap between value's assessment and realization, whose myriad potential for disruption and misfire provides a major theme for all three volumes of *Capital*, necessarily haunts the capitalist. As all their property stands in for the abstract form of value, and as that value also *only* exists as a span of unknowable potentials for sale, the very domestic environment can become an opaque haze of possible futures for its owner and occupant (and debtor). Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard; the owner of capital will forever feel the aleatory uncertainty of the value around which her life revolves.¹²

It is here, then, that the obverse side of realist theatre seems so necessary for securing its function as critique. The spectre of unreal-

¹¹Bertolt Brecht, “Notes on the Folk Play,” 215.

¹²Without belaboring the division, I will note that this is a consciously different account for the modern emergence of the impression of omnipresent chance than that which emphasizes the rise of professional statistical practice, influentially offered in Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*.

ized value and narrative contingency, on the stage, is simultaneously produced and negated by the very realized facts of theatre production. What could be doubles what necessarily must be. Artaud was on this point not wrong. Theatre is constructed and deliberate. Chekhov's plays indicate both the sense of an aleatory mess of a real environment and their intensely knotted construction. A Stanislavskian actor's worth is measured not just in her ability to seem spontaneous in her reactive feeling, but in her ability to do so in similar manner every night. (If there is one point on which Stanislavski was consistent it was that this sort of acting requires enormous lengths of training and preparation.) Realist theatre produces the reality-effect of a fully contingent reality while also showing the laborious construction of that quite fictional space. Not for nothing would this constructed/contingent duality come to define theatricality for so many modernist critics.¹³ The tension between a commodity's sensuous weight and unknowable exchange-value mirrors well onto the stage's differentiation between the prop and its narrative ambiguity (important or arbitrary?). The realist drama can then generate its own sort of *V-Effekt*, defamiliarizing spectators with the all-too-familiar situation of living within a world so dominated by uncertainty and (im)probability.

Zhulina never turns her attention fully to realist drama's duplicitous reliance on the materiality of theatrical mimesis. The interrelated revolutions in scenography, acting technique, and illumination that marched alongside realist writing are left out of this book's scope. This omission is well motivated by two of *Theatre of Capital's* firmest premises. First, Zhulina positions realist modern drama against the realist novel so beloved by literary historians, particularly Marxist ones.¹⁴ Second, she wishes to champion the perhaps unfashionable tradition of modern drama criticism. With citations including Emma Goldman's lecture on Bernard Shaw delivered in a coal mine, a production of *The Weavers* at Dhaka University of Bangladesh, and Ernst Toller's misfortunate six-day service as President of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, Zhulina valiantly wards off the common assumption of contemporary students that modern dramatic writing necessarily embodies the quietist politics of the class that dominates today's US theatre production. Plays here are read as plays with long tails of

¹³I here think with the discussion pursued in Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* and especially Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta*. For modernism and "theatricality" on Michael Fried's separate though relevant definition, see Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright* and Joseph Cermatori's dissenting *Baroque Modernity*.

¹⁴Zhulina, 23-25.

critical debate and directorial innovation. That narrative theatrical representation would face a century of hostility can here be neglected in favor of insisting on the continued vitality of a whole discourse that remains on the margins of intellectual life.

This leaves open, however, a significant set of questions regarding realism's latter-day fate. After the readymade, in John Roberts's apt formulation¹⁵—or, in a performance-historical trajectory, after the 1954 debut of Gutai events in Osaka—how did the phenomenon of realist scenography and acting transform?¹⁶ Could a Chekhovian stage still read as arbitrary alongside events with scenography selected, as in John Cage's *HPSCHD*, by computer-simulated *I Ching* throws? "Make a salad," instructs the entire text of the score for Alison Knowles's Fluxus *Make a Salad* (1962). These events reach a new height of staging the "arbitrary details" and the "seemingly insignificant" Zhulina finds in Chekhov. They stripped away all the dramatic legacy that modern realist plays broadly accepted, narrative and character and diegetic space, leaving only the marginal ephemera that realism's contemporary detractors liked to declaim as distracting. André Antoine's live chicken thrown onto the stage of Zola's *La Terre* (1902) could have been the star of a Happening; Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973), in which she scrubbed at a set of art-museum steps, could have fit well upstage of a Chekhovian conversation. What were the consequences of shedding theatrical narrative for the realist strategy of staging the contingent detritus of everyday life?

My concern here is that the modernist turn away from theatrical mimesis, epitomized by the rise of performance art under the sign of "chance," did away with the critical operation at work in modern drama. That is to say, insofar as so much of early performance art trafficked in claims to realism (to reality, to the authentic, the *concrete*), it may have recapitulated the structure of the commodity and its value-form without providing a lever for its critique. If the theatre is constructed and deliberate, and the use of narrative and character and memorized text and choreographed blocking all remind spectators of this, then

¹⁵Roberts, *Art After the Readymade*.

¹⁶The Japanese collective Gutai, who staged a collection of their actions for New York artists several months before many of those same artists staged theatre pieces later known as "happenings," insisted on the primacy of aleatory experimentation to their method. Moreover, as they correctly pointed out, this was something different than Dadaist random distribution. "Gutai places an utmost premium on daring advance into the unknown world [...]. Unlike Dadaism, Gutai Art is the product that has arisen from the pursuit of possibilities." Yoshihara Jiro, "Gutai Art Manifesto," *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, trans. Reiko Tomii.

the pervasive feeling of the “arbitrary” arrives alongside a pervasive feeling of the “determined.” The presence of the commodity alongside the spectral indeterminacy of its value finds itself inverted on this stage, where sensuous reality seems arbitrary while its hidden cause and destiny (its position within a controlled narrative) are known to be determined in advance. Before this stage it seems not implausible that a spectator may begin to notice that their own sensuous reality may be less present and “concrete” than they like to credit, and that there are hidden structures of determination never abolished by the uncertain value of one’s possessions. Immanence, and, critique.

By contrast it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that John Cage and Allan Kaprow, at least, championed only immanence. Kaprow’s *Yard* (1961) arranged rubber tires for gallery-goers to stumble through, and his *Foam* (1966) literally immersed spectators in the titular substance on a Long Island beach. Soon enough Kaprow would give up on spectators, staging unviewed events around urban spaces for *Self-Service* (1967), and eventually by his own admission on art-making altogether. Cage’s *Variations III* (1963) and *Musicircus* (1967) scores declined to instruct performers on sound production in any way, instead suggesting physical arrangements within which performers could do as they desired. These performances conjoin a pervasive sense of the arbitrary and contingent vacuity of the everyday with an affirmation of the same. In many, the spectator is encouraged to join in and project their own subjectivity into the aleatory space. The bourgeois anxiety about the commodity’s value, about where it might be going and how much it might “really” be worth, finds in such performances not an ironic reflection but an insistent embrace. Encountering the world as speculative uncertainty, as a kind of gamble, becomes not a mark of corrupt decline but of liberated abandon. Every “near hit,” in Cage, is a win. Not for nothing were these performances produced by white subjects in the centre of global empire at the arguable height of its self-confidence and affluence.

This is a suspicion, and perhaps an unfair one. Examples of such works seeming to deconstruct this very reading of chance-affirmation are myriad. Cage’s *Water Walk* (1959), in which bathtubs and radios seem a height of comedic anarchy, requires its performer to attend to each operation while staring carefully at a stopwatch: the arbitrary and the determined, here conjoined to a disturbing extreme. Many of the original “Happenings,” notably Claes Oldenburg’s *Store* (1961) and Ray Gun Theater events, took explicit aim at the acts of buying and selling while trying to depict the realm of 1960s America as strewn

with chaotic trash as a result of the rule of market transactions.¹⁷ But by shedding the realm of diegetic narrative in favor of an explicit foregrounding of performance's presence as a live event, and by employing a sense of mechanistically produced chance to do both (to make "narrative" seem illegible through an apparent lack of authorial *telos*, and to insist on the independence of the observed unique event), the early canon of performance art inevitably characterized the realm of indeterminacy shadowing material sensation as a zone of liberated play.¹⁸ If we understand this modern "realm of indeterminacy" as an index of the commodity form, a symptom of an everyday challenge to judge the value of goods outside of the moment of their exchange, then the limits of the midcentury anti-theatrical move to "performance" come into focus. Within it, "performance" emerged as a site where the commodity form's contradictions could be accepted rather than levered open.

I offer this rushed response to the history, far more varied and complex than I have allowed here, that follows in the wake of the territory explored by Zhulina in order to potentially think anew the role diegetic narrative and theatrical mimesis play within the "immanent critique" function she tracks within modern drama. How is that critical function secured not just by the dialogic structure of drama, as she explores in her discussion of Shaw, but by the techniques of narrative theatre? To what extent is theatrical critique reliant on character, setting, story, and representation itself? And how does that structure of dramatic representation do "critique" differently, if so, in our "postdramatic" performance landscape, in which the quite distinct techniques of performance art have introduced themselves back onto the theatrical stages they rejected?¹⁹ These are impossible questions, but such is the breadth of terrain opened by *Theatre of Capital*, a book whose energy may with luck provoke a wider disciplinary reckoning of the global history of how and why those terms relate.

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¹⁷See Mildred Glimcher, *Happenings*.

¹⁸Fred Turner has read Kaprow and Cage along similar lines as part of a midcentury American liberal project, theorized by cybernetic anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, to teach spectators/citizens to feel empowered rather than assaulted by a certain indeterminacy of modernity. See *The Democratic Surround*, 259-293.

¹⁹Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*.

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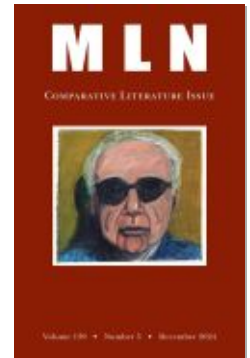
Capital's Negative Revelation: Reappraising the Deus Ex
Machina

Rebecca Kastleman

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Capital's Negative Revelation: Reappraising the Deus Ex Machina



Rebecca Kastleman

Capital moves in seemingly supernatural ways. It produces abrupt swerves in fortune—whether through mysterious fluctuations of the stock market, the deliverance of angel investors, or the financial comeuppance of shrewd corporate titans—while supplying a totalizing narrative for these dramatic events. Stories generated by the movement of capital often have been entangled with Christian ethics. An individual's ascent into prosperity, or her flight down the economic ladder, can appear to follow the whims of providence, charting the same vertical axis that maps out heaven and hell. Capital's "invisible hand" is at once material and spiritual.

The embroilment of capital, Christianity, and secularism has been an enduring area of inquiry in social and economic theory since the nineteenth century, when the origins of capitalism were traced to Protestant movements in early modern Europe. In her impressive new monograph, *Theater of Capital: Modern Drama and Economic Life*, Alisa Zhulina reanimates the subject of capitalism's Protestant inheritance as she explores how questions of economics, broadly construed, materialized on the modern stage during a period in which neoclassical economics was consolidated as a social-scientific discourse. For Zhulina, the theatre is a privileged site for testing capitalism's many contradictions. Addressing the imbrication of Christianity and capital, she draws on works of economic theory and philosophy ranging from R. H. Tawney to Martin Hägglund and engages with the famously opposing views of Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg concerning the secular basis of modernity (favoring Blumenberg in their debate).

As she argues across the book, drama “specializes in the boundary between the visible and the invisible,” making it well suited to representing the immateriality of capital as it translates into money and enters into circuits of material exchange (97). That same constitutive boundary between the visible and the invisible, the material and the supernatural, indexes a tension between Christian and secular frames for capital that finds revealing manifestations in the theatre. This throughline in Zhulina’s argument emerges with her first extended case study on the Norwegian playwright Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson’s *A Bankruptcy*, a “financial melodrama” (47) that turns on the tropes of Christian confession and conversion, and carries through to the book’s final chapter, which takes up the Protestant ethic in Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*.

Zhulina’s first chapter on Henrik Ibsen provides the most extended treatment of capital’s Protestant entanglements. This chapter invokes the providential connotations of capitalism’s invisible hand, examining how Ibsen’s plays “unveil the illusion of the free market” by demonstrating how capital’s providential hand operates dramaturgically like the “hackneyed theatrical device of the *deus ex machina*” (44). The secular use of the *deus ex machina* in Ibsen’s works further develops the immanent critique of capital that Zhulina attributes to modern realist drama more broadly. Capital’s *deus ex machina*, as realized on the modern stage, thus helps to illuminate the paradoxes and harms of capitalism from within.

The discussion of Ibsen’s “aesthetic repurposing” of the *deus ex machina* (45) is confined to a short section of Zhulina’s book, but it raises generative questions at the nexus of dramatic history, philosophy, and postsecular inquiry that invite further exploration here. The dramatic device of the *deus ex machina* was first theorized, of course, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but it developed new valences when filtered through the Christian contexts of early modern European drama. In punctuated moments across the history of the European theatre, the *deus ex machina* has mediated between theatre’s religious and secular functions. A highly metatheatrical device, it draws spectacular attention to elisions in the dramatic plot and, therefore, to the behind-the-scenes workings of the playwright’s craft. As Freddie Rokem has argued—in an analysis with which Zhulina’s reading cleanly aligns—the presence of the *deus ex machina* in the modern theatre frequently serves to critique or subvert a drama’s apparently utopian conclusion, even as it also proposes “an open-ended futurity” where various concepts of utopia can be “critically reflected as well as imaginatively refigured”

(104).¹ Modern playwrights' uses of the device, in which utopian outcomes may be thwarted or forestalled but are not entirely foreclosed, thus bring into view a skeptical variant of "utopian performative," to borrow Jill Dolan's phrase (5).²

These studies of the *deus ex machina* in modernity have laid the groundwork for a broader account of its enduring theatrical inheritance that takes seriously the problems of representation it introduces. As I argue here, the *deus ex machina* signals the irruption of indeterminate knowledge into the dramatic frame; it raises the question of what can fall within the purview of human understanding, troubling the boundary between belief and secular knowing. In the contemporary theatre, the Christianized *deus ex machina* tends to act as what I call a "negative revelation," spectacularly disclosing what cannot be known. This term evokes the tradition of apophatic or negative theology, a body of thought in Christianity that argues that knowledge of God can only arise through knowledge of what he is not, while recognizing that knowledge unveiled in the fabricated domain of the theatre is always epistemologically suspect. The *deus ex machina* troubles the scale and temporality of human understanding, producing a disorienting dilation of the ambit of knowability within the drama. Like an iris rapidly adjusting to a dazzling light, it registers how much might be seen (with keener insight and foresight) and yet cannot be seen because of flawed conditions of perception. In this way, the *deus ex machina* probes the extent to which the theatre itself is a vehicle for negative revelation: that is, whether the stage, as a space of illusive and fluctuating representations, can produce knowledge other than knowledge of what does not exist.

In this essay, I delve further into Zhulina's claims about the *deus ex machina* before testing how it is mobilized in two contemporary "dramas of capital" in which an angel suddenly appears: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992) and Elfriede Jelinek's *The Merchant's Contracts* (2008). Each of these dramas takes the system of capitalism as a central topos, and each features a physical *deus ex machina* in

¹In addition to "*Deus ex machina* in the Modern Theatre" (see works cited), Rokem has published widely on this topic in such selected articles and chapters as "Theatrical Immanence: The *Deus Ex Machina* after the Death of God," *Performance Philosophy* 3, no. 3, 2017, pp. 781–793; "Scenographic Paradigms: Some Principles of Perception and Interpretation," *Performance Research* 18, no. 3, 2013, pp. 75–83; and "Der *Deus Ex Machina* im Theater der historischen Avantgarde" in *TheaterAvantgarde: Wahrnehmung, Körper, Sprache*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Francke Verlag, 1995.

²See also Zhulina's discussion of Dolan's utopian performatives in *Theater of Capital*, 18–19.

the form of an angel who materializes in the mortal world (Jelinek has commented, in fact, that her use of angels was directly inspired by Kushner's), while eschewing a dramaturgical *deus ex machina* that would bring about a swift resolution to the crises depicted in the play.³ In both of these examples, the use of *deus ex machina* announces a spectacular foreclosure of knowledge, a negative revelation. In *Angels*, the revelation is one of absence, the disclosure that God has absconded from heaven; in Jelinek's play, knowledge of the angel itself is put under erasure, as this figure turns out to be complicit in the chimera of capital. The *deus ex machina*, as it applies to the theatre of capital, not only exposes the theatricality of capitalism, as Zhulina has shown; it also underscores how little we can know about capital, while attributing that mystery to material rather than providential causes.

Let me first clarify what I mean by a *deus ex machina*, which has a specific theatrical referent deriving from ancient tragedy, but which is used more colloquially to refer to an implausible and underdeveloped plot twist. On the ancient stage, the *deus ex machina* holds a double meaning as both a dramaturgical device and a material technology whereby a divine figure suddenly intervenes in a dramatic plot. Aristotle criticizes it in his discussion of felicitous and infelicitous tragic plots in the *Poetics*, but takes a more balanced view of the device than is sometimes remembered: in his account, the *deus ex machina* is not necessarily to be avoided, but rather should be reserved for plot events at the margins, namely "preceding events beyond human knowledge, or subsequent events requiring prediction and announcement" (81). The *deus ex machina* makes for weak dramaturgy when it conceals what could be known by mortals, but it is effective when used to gesture towards knowledge that could *not* be gleaned by humans because it is shrouded in the mysteries of the past or is still to follow in the mysteries of the future. Aristotle's formulation emphasizes that the classical *deus ex machina* is bound up with conditions of knowledge and belief as they are represented in the theatre.

As this device was translated into the Christian theatres of European early modernity, it became enmeshed in the matter of divine revelation, that is, knowledge directly from or about God. This can be seen in the *deus ex machina*'s dramatic revival on the baroque stage. As in the classical theatre, the baroque *deus ex machina* was both a dramaturgical and a material element; in the latter respect, it names

³On Jelinek's borrowings from Kushner, see Gitta Honegger, "Introduction to *Rechnitz* and *The Merchant's Contracts*," in Elfriede Jelinek, *Three Plays*, trans. Gitta Honegger, Seagull Books, 2019, 30.

a technology of the baroque playhouse consisting of a rigged scenic device upstage center that could carry actors or a spectacular lighting display such as an array of candles.⁴ This device was often used to portray the apotheosis of a sovereign or other heroic figure who was fitted with the iconographic trappings of a saint. In the modern theatre, its afterlives can be felt in the use of glittering lighting elements upstage, such as the sun rising over Peer in the closing scene of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) or the ballet of electric lights surrounding the titular protagonist of Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938).⁵

How did Ibsen capitalize on the deus ex machina as a dramaturgical device? As Zhulina tells it, Ibsen's realist dramas kick god out of the machine, revealing the whole creaky apparatus to be a contingent fabrication. In showing the absence of providential direction in the movement of capital, Ibsen shifts the focus to everyday labor, particularly the labor of women, realigning the politics of capitalism with the worker (even if he does not go quite so far as to critique the bourgeoisie). While the "economic fiction of the invisible hand stifles the political imaginary," Zhulina elaborates, Ibsen's use of the deus ex machina has the potential to "stimulate the political imaginary and even, perhaps, to inspire political action" (45). His works illustrate the impossibility of choosing sides between a secular and religious grounding for modernity, or between what we could call a Blumenbergian and a Schmittian perspective. Instead, they represent "a modern world in transition, where elements of Christian ethics coexist with new secular values of capitalism" (53). By staging capitalism's inherent theatricality, Zhulina claims, the deus ex machina in Ibsen reveals that the system of capital can be unmade.

This is an alluring argument. It is most convincing in Zhulina's revealing treatment of *A Doll's House* (1879), in which she shows how Ibsen first gestures towards but then withdraws from the deus ex machina, concluding instead with a "radical opening" into as-yet-unimagined social potentialities through which the playwright inquires what transformations to social relations would be necessary to "leave the shackles of alienated intimacy behind" (80). It is perhaps no accident that Nora's sudden exit from domestic life superficially resembles the departure of Euripides's Medea on a divine chariot

⁴George C. Izenour, *Theater Technology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 13.

⁵See Rokem's discussion of the iconographic inheritance of the deus ex machina in *Strindberg's Secret Codes*, 104.

(used as a primary example of the *deus ex machina* in the *Poetics*).⁶ Nora, like Medea, has attempted to work a kind of sorcery on Torvald with the mesmerizing effects of her tarantella. As Zhulina brilliantly observes, this dance, which serves as Nora's attempt to conjure a *deus ex machina* that would allow her family life to continue, is made possible by Kristine Linde's offstage labor, for it is Kristine who mends Nora's costume before the dance begins. Nora's utopian flourish thus indexes the labor of those working behind the scenes, as if Ibsen were exposing the stagehands hoisting a technological *deus ex machina* for all to see. When Torvald calls out, in the final moments of the drama, for "*det vidunderlige*"—literally "the most wonderful thing," often translated as "a miracle"—he seems to summon the playwright to miraculously avert Nora's departure. Ibsen denies Torvald deliverance from his predicament, even as Nora's choice to leave the family home enacts her own vision of that "wonderful thing," rejecting contemporary norms of labor, capital, and gender relations in search of a life lived beyond her own doll's house. At its conclusion, then, *A Doll's House* leaves the audience with political work to do, rather than an easy way out.

As powerful as this reading of *A Doll's House* is, it is not always clear in Zhulina's other case studies what forms of the *deus ex machina* she discovers in Ibsen's texts. Can we really call it a *deus ex machina*, for instance, when the protagonist of *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) suddenly dies? Or when, in *An Enemy of the People* (1882)—which Zhulina takes as her foremost example of Ibsen's use of the device—Stockmann's father-in-law shows up to announce he has purchased shares in the baths whose safety Stockmann has called into question? These are contrivances in the plot, to be sure, but they do not provide any sort of escape for the protagonist, nor do they gesture towards a utopian resolution, and all have natural explanations that are readily available within the realist world of the play, such that they do not evoke any obvious specter of divine or supernatural forces. (Writing later of *The Cherry Orchard*, Zhulina notes how Chekhov concludes this drama with a financial windfall that produces no further resolution in the plot; this may be a more compelling instance of a forestalled dramaturgical *deus ex machina* than occurs in either *Borkman* or *Enemy of the People*.) Additionally, Zhulina's assertion that the modern *deus*

⁶Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1454b, 81. As Francis M. Dunn observes, *Medea* is a "borderline case" of the *deus ex machina*, since Medea herself is mortal; see Dunn, *Tragedy's End: Closure and Innovation in Euripidean Drama*. Oxford University Press, 1996, 28.

ex machina expels god from the machine, which hangs upon the notion that prior uses of the device offered an authentically “divine” and fulfilling resolution, somewhat misrepresents the history of its dramaturgy. Scholars of classical drama have shown how the device inhibited satisfying resolutions, even on ancient stages, and that it is not the efficacy of the deus ex machina as a metaphysical gesture, but rather its clumsy, spectacular failure that defines it as a dramaturgical structure.⁷ Nietzsche makes this point in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he famously criticizes Euripides for sloughing off drama’s Dionysian spirit and replacing it with what he views as the contrived resolution of the deus ex machina.⁸ Long before Ibsen, then, it was deemed a paradox to discover god in a machine. We might say that the deus ex machina, as a dramaturgical feature, was always already profane.⁹

In the contemporary theatre, the inherent profanity of the deus ex machina has been turned to comic use. In more literal instances of the device on late twentieth and twenty-first century stages, it often acts as a negative revelation, spectacularly announcing what lies beyond the knowable and displaying the limits of what can be represented theatrically. We find this in one of its canonical occurrences on the American stage, in Kushner’s *Angels in America*, where a dramaturgical and material deus ex machina concludes the first part of Kushner’s dramatic diptych.¹⁰ In this final stage image in “Millennium Approaches,” the character Prior Walter, who is dying from AIDS, witnesses an angel descend violently into his bedroom: “a sound, like a plummeting meteor, tears down from very, very far above the earth” until a “terrifying CRASH” rips apart the ceiling, revealing an angel spreading her wings (Kushner 124). The angel ruptures the playing space, sending “plaster and lathe and wiring” flying to the ground; in a direct citation of the baroque deus ex machina, her entrance bathes the stage in a “shower of unearthly white light” (124). On one level, the arrival of the angel unsettles the realistic register in which much of the play unfolds, but her entrance is staged as a technological rather than a supernatural feat. What in “Millennium

⁷See, for example, Dunn, *Tragedy’s End*, 26.

⁸Nietzsche writes of Euripides that “the *deus ex machina* has taken the place of metaphysical solace”; see *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 84.

⁹This evocation of the “profane” cites Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, Zone Books: 2007, which defines the profane as that which has been moved outside the temple and made available for play. In my forthcoming book manuscript, I draw out the proposition that the theater itself, in the view of modern dramatists, was always already profane.

¹⁰Rokem gestures towards *Angels in America* as another significant instance of the *deus ex machina* worthy of further study; *Strindberg’s Secret Codes*, 121.

Approaches" serves a utopian concluding gesture then develops, in *Angels'* second part, into a sustained element of the plot: at the start of "Perestroika," Prior is named a prophet and drawn into a mystical vision of an angelic convocation. There he suggests that God ought to be held accountable for divine crimes, proposing that the angels sue him for his withdrawal from the world and roundly declaring that he "ought to pay" (276). Prior's proposal for a morally justified lawsuit against God inverts the dubious legal dealings of Roy Cohn and his employee, Joe, whose enmeshment in nefarious capitalist networks is pilloried throughout the play. In *Angels*, then, the critique of capital, one of Kushner's most persistent subjects, emerges in part through Prior's sardonic assertion that even the highest divinity can be held accountable to the laws of the market.

During the Angel's first visitation to Prior, who is losing his sight, the prophet becomes a privileged spectator in a theatre of mysteries. Donning a pair of "bronze spectacles with rocks instead of lenses," which Kushner calls "peepstones," Prior is "horror-stricken" by what he sees in the divine theatre that is revealed to him: "OH! OH GOD NO!" he exclaims, "I don't want to see that!" (162–163). The scene that stuns Prior is never narrated to the audience, remaining outside of what is knowable, even as Prior discloses other supernatural knowledge, including a long list of facts about the angels themselves. The peepstone scene, in which the physical theatre opens out to a metaphysical playhouse beyond the audience's view, anticipates Prior's trip to an earthbound theatre, the Mormon Visitor Center's Diorama Room, with its red velvet curtains and illuminated mannequins; the more Prior grows blind, the more he becomes an ideal spectator capable of theatrical visions beyond ordinary human sight. The *deus ex machina* in "Millennium Approaches" thus makes the realistic stage permeable to a fantastic, metaphysical theatre, nesting one playing space within another while cloaking the latter in darkness. Its negative revelation interrupts the primary plane of dramatic representation while emphasizing the inaccessible dramas that lie beyond it.

Elfriede Jelinek's *The Merchant's Contracts*, though it takes inspiration from Kushner's *Angels*, unfolds in an entirely different representational register. Composed in Jelinek's concatenative, associative prose and only loosely divided into scenes, it features the open dramaturgy that has come to be a signature element of the author's style.¹¹ "The text can start and stop anywhere at random," Jelinek notes in her opening

¹¹See Honegger, "Introduction" to *Three Plays*, 2–3.

stage directions. “It doesn’t matter how it is staged” (198). Loosely based on the collapse of an Austrian grocery dynasty that was an early casualty of the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008, its speakers are mostly unidentified and undifferentiated; the named characters include a chorus of bankers and investors, and, towards the end of the play, several Angels of Justice and Injustice. The angels speak an oracular language of capitalism, as if prophesying the prosperity gospel and, at the same time, demonstrating that there can be no independent divine justice within a capitalist frame. The first angel, for example, asserts that “Nature is as much the source of wealth as labor” (281), and is later “pushed out [onto the stage] by invisible hands,” a clear reference to Adam Smith’s concept (286). As in Kushner’s work, even the angels are subject to market logic. Although one angel quotes from Marx and Engels—Jelinek’s translator, Gitta Honegger, observes the resonance of the German *Engel* with Friedrich Engels’ name—the Marxist critique is subsumed within the capitalist fantasia of the angels’ dizzying speech. The sudden appearance of these angels towards the end of the published text, which propels the play forward to its conclusion, cites the device of the *deus ex machina* while ironizing it. No real resolution is achieved through their appearance; indeed, the angels may not even conclude the play, given Jelinek’s assertion that her script can be staged in any order.

In *The Merchant’s Contracts*, then, the angels are a source of negative revelation that at first seems to augur new knowledge but then forestalls it, signaling that the logic of capital requires a leap of faith that supersedes what can be represented on the stage. There is little distinction between the angels’ voices and the chorus of investors. Far from delineating between the material and the metaphysical, the angels reveal the latter to be a flickering effect of the former. Yet the angels do provide something of a glimpse of the world beyond the play, insofar as their speech prompts spectators to ask what forms of language and systems of knowledge might be possible beyond capitalism’s symbolic order. Jelinek seems to propose that the true *deus ex machina*, unachievable within the world of *The Merchant’s Contracts*, would be the discovery of a mode of speech not already conditioned by capital’s flow. Capitalism here is a system that exceeds ordinary knowledge, a jumble of opaque references and jargon, much as Jelinek’s iterative language in the play defies grammatical and often semantic sense. As Jelinek shows us, however, capital’s mystery is not the result of any supernatural cause, but rather emerges in the strategically baroque language of financiers whose abstractions serve the

end of exploiting workers. *The Merchant's Contracts* reveals that capital produces obfuscation. Like the *deus ex machina* on the modern stage, it trades in negative revelation.

In dramas of capital, the use of the *deus ex machina* gestures towards another plane of representation while limiting access to it. Returning to Zhulina's case studies, we can apply this function, which I have called negative revelation, to further illuminate the dramas she glosses so persuasively. In *A Doll's House*, for example, Nora's exit acts as a negative revelation of *det vidunderlige*; it proposes a miraculous freedom that cannot be represented within the walls of the Helmer house. Naming this "miracle" as a negative revelation can help us to recognize how Nora's upstage departure gestures towards, but also ironizes, the iconography of a secular apotheosis, a device Ibsen had previously cited in a more direct manner at the conclusion of *Peer Gynt*. Identifying the negative revelation in *A Doll's House* also turns our attention to the Christian temporalities of the drama, which begins on Christmas Eve and concludes on the 26th of December. Nora's negative revelation of worldly knowledge as yet unseen is bound to the ritual time that heralds the birth of a divine child; yet without a star or prophet as her guide, Nora leaves her children and exits into an undiscovered world. Across these examples, the *deus ex machina* of the modern and contemporary theatre plays at the intersection of drama, philosophy, and postsecular thought, indexing knowledge beyond the knowable while destabilizing the modes of belief necessary to peer outside the representational plane of the stage. The *deus ex machina* shows how the mysteries of capital are constrained by material causes. At the same time, this device reminds us that the representational conditions of the theater as such generate a problem of knowledge, in that the stage is a site where belief and doubt—god and the machine—cannot be so easily disentangled.

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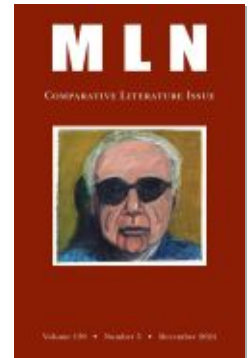
Ibsenism, Immanent Critique, and *The Wild Duck*

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Ibsenism, Immanent Critique, and *The Wild Duck*



Pannill Camp

In *Theater of Capital*, Alisa Zhulina pursues a project that is at once modest in its overt claims and bold in its implications. On one hand, the book is a deep and careful look at a set of economic themes in key works of modern drama. Many of the most studied and produced works, Zhulina shows, are profoundly concerned with money, debt, finance, and the pressures they exert on individuals. Zhulina does not make categorical claims about modern drama. Instead, she provides fresh readings of mainstays of modern drama syllabi (Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Chekhov, Hauptmann), and later productions and plays in this tradition. But this just begins to describe the book's implications. Zhulina has not merely shown that within modern drama there is an aspect of social commentary incidentally concerned with capitalism. This facet of modern drama—the “theater of capital”—constitutes an overlooked, coherent, and not exactly minor tradition of anti-capitalist art. And by choosing for her case studies many of the pillars of modern drama syllabi, she implicitly makes the case for a broader reconsideration of modern drama along historical materialist lines.

Here I will examine some of the broader questions that Zhulina raises, including the way that *Theater of Capital* revises settled assessments of the ostensibly “bourgeois” tradition of dramatic realism, and the way that the critical lens of “immanent critique” may revise the scholarly consensus about the politics of Ibsen's drama. To further explore the implications that *Theater of Capital* may have for our understanding of Ibsen, I conclude with a preliminary assessment of

immanent critique in an Ibsen play that Zhulina does not discuss, *The Wild Duck*.

One of the questions that Zhulina encounters concerns the attitudes that modern dramatists held toward capitalism. Here her intervention is sharpest with respect to some of the widely accepted assessments of modern playwrights. Shaw's socialist politics are well known, and Hauptmann's working-class sympathies are overtly displayed in *The Weavers*. But it is less in line with the conventional view of Chekhov (who depicted domestic life among the Russian bourgeoisie in melancholic and comic tones) to see him as directly confronting capitalism. It is indeed part of Chekhov's reputation that he refused didacticism for a "documentary" approach to dramatic realism (Styan 86). The most important Marxist dramatist of the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht, rejected Chekhovian realism. Brecht may have had Chekhov in mind when he wrote in the *Short Organum* that "our enjoyment of the theatre must have become weaker than that of the ancients," since modern theatre relied so much on empathy, "on the beauty of language, on the elegance of narration, on passages which stimulate our private imaginations: in short on the incidentals of the old works" (182-3).

Similarly, to align Ibsen with a critical view of capitalism is a somewhat revisionist undertaking. As Zhulina notes, Ibsen avidly invested his earnings in stocks and wrote of himself—albeit with some irony—as a capitalist (46-7). Ibsen's dramaturgy is also more typically characterized as individualistic and philosophical, rather than identified with working class struggle or concerned with contradictions in the capitalist mode of production. Shaw, a Fabian socialist himself, saw Ibsen mainly as an anti-idealist whose plays advance the "thesis that the real slavery of today is slavery to ideals of goodness," which hardly elevates class-based politics as a central theme (159). Brecht saw Ibsen using forms that, by Brecht's own time, could no longer keep pace with the rapidly evolving nature of capitalist modernity. "Even to dramatize a simple newspaper report," he wrote, "one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen" (30).

Zhulina's contention that anti-capitalist critique pervades even the work of these putatively apolitical dramatists seems to run counter to these earlier assessments. But two important features of *Theater of Capital* clarify its revisionist parameters. For one, it is not so much *modern drama's* as it is *dramatic realism's* relationship to capitalism that is at the heart of the matter. One might quibble with the validity of labeling Strindberg and Ibsen as realists, given the various modes in which they worked. But Zhulina has consciously focused her analysis

on realist plays (39). She makes her viewpoint on realism quite clear, arguing (contrary to Brecht) that dramatic realism bears special potential to reveal capitalism's internal contradictions precisely because of "its intimacy to capital" (40). In this way, Zhulina steers away from the mundane notion that it is primarily expressionism, epic theater, or agit-prop that should be understood to react against the dominant political economy of the modern age. Neither is her perspective exactly that of the early Lukács, for whom plays are artifacts of the thoughts and emotions of a particular class within shifting objective historical circumstances. Lukács argued in 1909 that modern realist drama, owing to its Enlightenment origins, reflects the rationalism and self-consciousness of the bourgeoisie, but not necessarily any conscious grasp of capitalism as a system (147, 151-3). Realism, on Zhulina's account, is neither an ideologically compromised form shoring up the capitalist system, nor primarily a record of ideological development in the ruling class. Whatever its formal and attitudinal contrasts with later, more overtly political, avant-garde theater, realist drama bore the potential to critique capitalism itself.

The second salient feature of *The Theater of Capital*, then, is the distinct critical mode Zhulina brings to bear in re-assessing modern realism: immanent critique. Many realist dramas identify "intrinsic contradictions" in the capitalist system, showing how the professed ideals that guide capitalist modernity clash with its practical implementation (16). Thus while bourgeois playwrights may have eschewed overt class politics and participated vigorously in theater as a commercial enterprise, they were also able to critique the capitalist system from within. While in most cases benefitting from a class position (whether inherited or attained) far from working class struggle, Ibsen and other playwrights were all the better equipped therefore to dramatize "contradictions between society's own ideals and their practical forms" (22). Their perspectives on the absurdities, contradictions, and cruelties of capitalist society were enhanced for being oriented alongside its ruling class. With this approach, plays that might be dismissed as apolitical, or as instances of bourgeois playwrights depicting contingent capitalist social relations as necessary or natural, can be amalgamated to a broader tradition of anti-capitalist dramaturgy.

The practice of reading drama for immanent critique bears implications beyond the tradition of modern drama. By arguing that realist plays can spark consequential critique and even "inspire political action," Zhulina is making an argument that runs counter, if not exactly to Brecht, then to the conventional way of understanding

Brecht's application of Marxist cultural thought to theatrical form. Brecht had complex views of realism, and incorporated an appreciation for fine, concrete detail into his plays. But his wariness of illusionistic realist plays sprang from the view that such works lulled spectators into empathetic identification with protagonists, and impaired their capacity to think rationally about their own lives. In her recuperation of realism, Zhulina thus suggests that the ratio between a play's form and its political potential is more flexible than one might think. For if what is necessary is that a play stimulate the political imagination, and reveal intrinsic contradictions between the ideals and practices of dominant systems, and this can be done in realistic drama, then perhaps empathy, self-enclosed fictional worlds, narrative coherence, and other formal attributes may not be so important to the political efficacy of a play as has been supposed?

In her chapter on Ibsen, Zhulina reads the Norwegian playwright for immanent critique, arguing that many of his major works expose the contradictions between the ideals and reality of capitalist society. The plays examined here, *Pillars of the Community*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *A Doll's House* are shown to reveal problems intrinsic to a society increasingly pervaded by finance and debt. Ibsen's dramaturgy, as Zhulina points out, is permeated by economic problems and his characters beset by financial pressures (44). Beginning with Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, critics have mainly treated these conditions as a form of social "setting" for moral quandaries that support philosophical theses regarding the vexed condition of individuals in the modern world. Zhulina reverses this perspective. In Ibsen's contribution to the theater of capital, economic factors are prime vectors guiding the action—or lack thereof—and the theses elicited by the drama concern humanity's social being.

In assessing the critiques of capitalism Ibsen's plays enact, Zhulina selects three that highlight actions and motives shrouded by a proliferating culture of financialization (*Pillars*, *Borkman*, *Enemy*) and one that highlights the obscured productive, domestic, and sexual labor of women (*A Doll's House*). She brings these together under their shared resonance with the notion of the "invisible hand," a highly stagy metaphor with sundry, obscure, and perhaps theatrical origins. Since the eighteenth century, the invisible hand has become identified with Adam Smith's arguments in favor of *laissez-faire* economics, specifically the reasoning that when productive activity is spontaneously organized by self-interested actors, they inadvertently contribute to the "general opulence" (25-27). Zhulina explains that this notion operates

in economic discourse analogously to the *deus ex machina*—foreclosing alternative options as if by fiat, presenting market solutions as “the only viable alternative” (44).

Through highly detailed analysis and with formidable erudition, Zhulina shows that Ibsen’s plays evoke acute contradictions between the vaunted ideals of a civil society built upon private property, wage labor, and the ever-increasing circulation of money, and the lived practices of that society. In *Pillars of the Community*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *An Enemy of the People*, the unrestrained quest for profit yields all sorts of regrettable returns. Bernick’s scheming and insider trading, Borkman’s embezzlement, Kiil’s toxic dumping, along with the ignominy, incarceration, early death, and moral destruction these entail, show that Ibsen understood capitalism’s malign effects. True to the Ibsenian mold, however, these damages are not assigned to bad actors in a dramaturgy of poetic justice, but broadly socialized. As Zhulina puts it, “characters genuinely try to uphold the ideals of freedom and equality and try to do the right thing but end up succumbing to the profit motive and to capital accumulation” (63). In the case of *A Doll’s House*, a critique of commodity form emerges in Zhulina’s analysis. Nora’s richly appointed home, flush with finished goods, also houses her concealed labor and untenable levels of psychological pressure.

Theater of Capital shows that full and cogent Marxist analysis can be found in Ibsen’s realist masterworks. But is in part the sophistication of Zhulina’s insights in drawing these out that raises a lingering question: to what extent does the immanent critique method reveal a point of view held by the playwright (Ibsen), and to what extent is it dependent on a materialist point of view constructed by the scholar? To what extent is the theater of capital, with respect to Ibsen’s own intellectual agency, an excavation of latent and coherent materialist politics, a reconstruction in the terms of Marxist critical thought (which was only in its infancy in Ibsen’s time), or a revisionist project of rehabilitating bourgeois drama? For all the masterful readings that show Ibsen participating in the “theater of capital,” Ibsen’s own attitude toward capitalism, and in particular toward the class society of workers and capitalists it generates, remain difficult to assess. And Zhulina is quick to point out Ibsen’s own profit-seeking capitalist instincts (71). This suggests that she knows that reading for immanent critique, in Ibsen’s case, is reading against the grain. Yet it is also clear that for Zhulina the activity of immanent critique belongs primarily to the work of art itself. “Theater,” she explains, “represented capital,

explored economic issues, and engaged in an immanent critique of capitalism..." (5).

Rather than seeking the answer to these questions in Ibsen's biography, one might expand Zhulina's project of examining Ibsen's drama. After all, one cannot know Ibsen's soul, but one can methodically assess immanent critique in the works of art. One of Ibsen's realist plays not analyzed in *The Theater of Capital* provides a promising case in this vein: *The Wild Duck*. First produced in 1884—between *An Enemy of the People* (1882) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890)—it depicts the relationship between two middle-class families whose diverging fortunes and mutual entanglement end in a catastrophe when Gregers Werle decides to reveal to his old friend Hjalmar Ekdal that the latter's life is founded on deception. Like *Pillars*, *Borkman*, *Enemy*, and *A Doll's House*, *The Wild Duck* is saturated with economic signifiers, and the profit motive is shown to lead the protagonists into crime, exploitative relationships, and moral ruin. But it is less clear whether these conditions can support a coherent critique of capitalist social relations themselves.

The Wild Duck has been understood as Ibsen's critical swerve against the idealist stance some ascribed to him after *An Enemy of the People*. In Shaw's view, after attacking "commercial political ideals" in the persona of Doctor Thomas Stockmann, who is vilified for insisting on closing down lucrative public baths that he has discovered to be poisonous, Ibsen himself was labeled as a Stockmann-like truth teller, committed to telling the public truths that it did not want to hear. Shaw counts *The Wild Duck* foremost as "a tragi-comic slaughtering of sham Ibsenism" (95). In the play, Gregers Werle, the estranged son of timber magnate Hakon Werle, learns that his old friend Hjalmar Ekdal has married Gina Hansen, formerly a housekeeper for the elder Werle. When Gregers discovers that his father helped arrange this marriage and continues to support the Ekdals financially, it confirms his suspicions that his father had carried on an affair with Gina, and he commits himself to showing Hjalmar "that what he calls his home is founded on lie" (Ibsen 7). This results in the suicide of Hjalmar and Gina's teenage daughter Hedvig when Hjalmar comes to believe that she is Hakon Werle's illegitimate offspring, and threatens to abandon her. The rather plain thesis driven by this narrative, and the didactic exchanges between Relling and Gregers Werle about sustaining delusions—"life-lies"—make clear that Ibsen's primary argument is against those who would take him for a crusader for a simplistic ideal of truth (Ibsen 66-67).

Nonetheless, *The Wild Duck* shows signs that it may belong to the theater of capital. As in the plays Zhulina examines under this category, *The Wild Duck* is suffused with concrete details that foreground the Werles' and the Ekdals' economic lives. Ibsen accentuates the material inequality between the Werle and Ekdal homes through the transition in settings between the first and second acts. Werle's study is "expensively and comfortably appointed," while the Ekdal's studio is "cheaply but comfortably furnished and arranged" (Ibsen 3, 17). After Werle's guests have indulged in rich foods, coffee, and liqueurs, Gina is discovered in the second act worrying over the cost of butter purchased that day, and the paltry income from the family's photography business. Hedvig, hoping her father will bring her home a treat from Werle's luxurious table, complains of hunger (Ibsen 18).

What's more, the play reinforces one of the Marxist-feminist insights that Zhulina shows to be central to *A Doll's House*: "that household management plays a crucial role in the social reproduction of class society" (73). Gina is shown spending the evening poring over entries in the household budget, and we see later that she does domestic chores such as preparing meals. But whereas Nora works in her home secretly to repay a loan that enabled Torvald's labor outside the home, Gina both manages her household and does Hjalmar's job for him. Gina carries the family business almost entirely on her own back—photographing customers, placing advertisements in the papers, and pressing Hjalmar to do the retouching, which he is seen to do "slowly and with distaste" (Ibsen 34). Hjalmar tells Gregers that "as a rule" he leaves the "routine business" to Gina so that he can "retire to the living room and think about more important things" (Ibsen 41). He also allows fourteen-year-old Hedvig to retouch photographs for him despite the danger this poses to her eyesight. Ibsen shows a household in which men, including Hjalmar, Old Ekdal, and Gregers (who becomes their boarder), blithely derive not only their domestic comfort, but also their material sustenance, from Gina and Hedvig's work.

The Wild Duck also might be read to invoke the invisible hand, the principle of free-market economics, under the notion of "providence." As Zhulina shows, "the invisible hand" has taken on a specific meaning in economics that is distinct from but originally arose from an older sense referring to instances of providential design in nature and human affairs. There is a palpable sense in Ibsen's plays, including *Pillars of the Community* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, that offstage, invisible, or otherwise incompletely represented agencies shape the economic

behaviors and fates of individuals. While Ibsen was not necessarily citing the invisible hand in Smith's particular usage, Zhulina shows that the economic "dark matter" of his dramaturgy oscillates "between the providential meaning of the invisible hand and its secular sense relating to the free market" (45, 57).¹ The idea of an invisible providential force appears also in *The Wild Duck*. Gregers, after learning that his father subsidized Hjalmar's photography business and helped him meet and afford to marry Gina, observes, "Why my father seems to have been a kind of Providence for you" (Ibsen 9).

Along the lines of Zhulina's analysis, this comment may signal that the economic obligations, language, images that pervade *The Wild Duck* are part of an immanent critique of capitalism. Hjalmar initially believes that Hakon Werle is "a man with *heart*," but the play reveals him to be a rapacious capitalist whose crimes, rather than his benevolence, motivate his largesse toward the Ekdals (Ibsen 9). The Ekdals were ruined when Hjalmar's father was bankrupted and imprisoned for an illegal logging operation that he and Werle carried out together. While Old Ekdal was convicted, Werle was acquitted on lack of evidence and went on to amass a great fortune. Werle now overpays Old Ekdal for copying work, which Gregers takes as a sign of his father's guilt. While this ostensibly also explains Werle's financial support of Hjalmar and Gina, Gregers intuits that this was rather a means to hide Werle's affair with Gina and to covertly support his illegitimate child. The providence supporting Hjalmar's cozy if modest domestic life, then, is in fact just cover for the greed and sexual conquests of a self-interested, manipulative industrialist.

To further shore up this interpretation, one might construe the relationship between the Werle and Ekdal families as one defined by asymmetrical class positions. Hakon Werle has gained his fortune at the expense of his old partner, to whom he now pays wages for menial work. Despite these surreptitious payments to the Ekdals, they worry constantly about their finances. This relationship extends into complete dominance over the Ekdals, including the fact that Hjalmar is unwittingly raising Werle's illegitimate child as his own. Understood through the lens of Marxist political economy, here the working-class family is laboring to feed the child of the capitalist! Further, Gregers, while animated by a hatred of his father and possessed of a childish, destructive idealism, can nonetheless be understood to represent the unique powers and tendencies of his class. Gregers only wields

¹Zhulina cites Andrew Sofer's coinage "dark matter," which refers to "whatever is materially unrepresented on stage but un-ignorable" (Sofer 4).

destructive influence over Hjalmar because of Hjalmar's inferior class position. Hjalmar feels shame over his father's diminished state, and Werle's guests mock him for his ignorance about fine wine. He thus treats Gregers with deference, which, combined with real financial need, leads Hjalmar to allow Gregers to rent the Ekdals' spare room, despite Gina's hesitancy.

This reading, however, risks overstating the case for understanding *The Wild Duck* foremost in terms of anti-capitalist immanent critique. There is reason to see the relationship between the Werle and Ekdal families as one of diverging bourgeois fortunes rather than class-based dominance. Before his disgrace, Old Ekdal was a military officer, and the Ekdal family thus clings to some of the symbolic status that this position afforded in nineteenth-century Norway. The fact that Werle pays Old Ekdal "far, far more for his work than it is worth..." further undermines the case that the play invokes the Marxist theory of wage labor, in which the worker always does unpaid work that accumulates as value in the capitalist's pocket (Ibsen 9). The abundant economic detail in the play, moreover, at times takes on metaphorical shades that shift the interpretive ground from economism to moral philosophy. Relling ridicules Gregers' idealist *idée fixe* by referring to idealist philosophy as if it were something he tried to "collect" from the workers to whom he evangelized. When Hjalmar, confused, asks Gregers if he used to be a bill collector, Relling replies, "He certainly was. He used to go around to all the workmen's shacks presenting something he called 'the claim of the ideal'" (Ibsen 9). The inference—that idealist commitment bears costs—pivots on the double meaning of costs and suggests that Ibsen is pointing to costs that cannot be translated strictly in terms of labor time.

The Wild Duck shores up Zhulina's contention that modern realist drama contains under-acknowledged critical perspectives on the expanding effects of capitalist economics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it remains an open question to what extent this play perpetuates, or tacks against, what Ibsen did in the more overtly "financial" dramas that form the core of Zhulina's assessment in the first chapter of *The Theater of Capital*.

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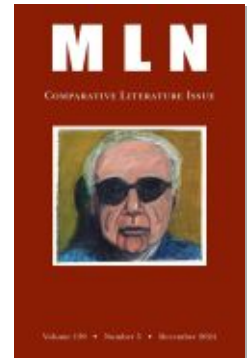
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Oikos and Ecology in the *Theater of Capital*



Sarah J. Townsend

The Economics department at my university is something of a mystery to me, and I suspect to many other faculty as well. Although it is housed in the College of Liberal Arts (as is my own department), I have no recollection of ever having served on a committee with an economist, and over the course of more than a decade I've only met two members of the department. Its website, which defines economics as "the study of how individuals, firms, and governments allocate their scarce resources," makes a plausible claim for the broad relevance of the research and teaching it fosters and the many types of careers for which it prepares students ("Prospective Students"). Yet surprisingly few of its faculty have a dual appointment with another department, and perusing their profiles leaves me perplexed. I certainly don't claim to be a specialist in economics, but most of my work revolves around culture in the context of capitalism, and concepts such as primitive accumulation, commodity chains, and financialization are central to my research and teaching. Yet none of these terms are so much as mentioned in any of the course descriptions, and the brief synopsis for ECON 407: Political Economy reads as follows (though surely it is a mistake...?): "Applications of the tools of game theory to analyze topics in collective decision making" ("Economics"). Of course, I'm not so naive as to expect orthodox economists to be peddling Marxist ideas or world-systems analysis, and I don't expect to understand exactly what happens in the multiple courses devoted to econometrics and statistical modeling. But why is there no course on the history of the discipline, or on the defining features of capitalism

and other economic systems, or on theoretical debates surrounding key concepts, including “capital”—a word that appears only once, in a single course description?

Alisa Zhulina’s *Theater of Capital: Modern Drama and Economic Life* opens with an anecdote about artists staging a marathon reading of Karl Marx’s *Capital* at the Venice Biennale in 2015, complemented by a series of performances that served as “annotations” on the text. In contrast to the economics curriculum at my university, which seems to treat capital as a thing so obvious and eternal it need not be named, contemporary theater continues to take part in a broader rekindling of critical interest in capitalism sparked in part by the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Zhulina’s book locates historical precedents for this trend by revealing how playwrights including Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, August Strindberg, Victoria Benedictsson, Anton Chekov, and Gerhart Hauptmann interrogated economic practices and ideas while “staging the social implications of the relentless drive for capital accumulation and the internal contradictions of capitalism” (5). In the late nineteenth century, Zhulina notes, the concept of capitalism was starting to gain currency following the publication of *Capital* (1869) and the growth of socialism; the field of neoclassical economics was still emerging as a separate social science; and the newfound legitimacy of financial speculation and investment as activities distinct from gambling raised unsettling questions about ethics and the economy even as the frequent financial bubbles and panics heightened a sense of instability. Novels by writers such as Émile Zola, Anthony Trollope, and Frank Norris also explored the many facets of financialization and labor exploitation. Zhulina, however, argues that characteristics specific to the theater—its multivocality, its arguably more immediate and obvious entanglement in the market, and a certain correspondence between the contingencies of performance and the risk of speculative investment—allowed modern dramatists to create plays that served as a “testing ground” for the central tenets of capitalism (34). The theater of capital, as she defines it, “exposes the rhetorical strategies and ideological constructions of economics, lays bare the process of theater’s own productive apparatus and commodification, and explores the dynamic relationship between capitalism and critique” (37).

This, for me, is the most compelling aspect of the book: its emphasis on how the modernist plays in question unravel the illusion of both “theater” and the “economy” as separate, autonomous spheres. In Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman* and *An Enemy of the People*, the invisible

hand of the free market is unmasked as a theatrical *deus ex-machina*; in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and Benedictsson's *The Enchantment*, rituals of courtship are also forms of financial speculation (an activity often associated with the theater); and in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, the "near wins" and "near losses" that drive both gambling and speculation shape the structure of the drama as the characters' financial futures are shown to be subject to chance events that even the regressions of present-day economists would have been powerless to predict. To make this case, Zhulina recuperates a more expansive sense of economics by returning to the etymological origin of the word in the Ancient Greek *oikos*—a multivalent word meaning "family" (or perhaps more accurately, "household"), "family property," and/or "family home." Aristotle and other thinkers of the time saw the *oikos* as the fundamental unit of society: in addition to serving as a locus for generating and distributing wealth, it was essential to maintaining well-being and health, and it served as the site for cultivating virtuous relations of *philia*, or friendship, that joined individuals to one another and to the polis. In what follows, I share some further reflections on the *oikos*, and I suggest some ways in which Zhulina's fruitful use of the concept might also be extended to draw out the ecological implications of many of the plays she discusses. Although not the focus of her book, or even among the most prominent problems she poses, the commodification of natural resources, ground rent, and other issues related to the "gifts of nature" are a recurring, underlying theme and (as the author notes) have been foregrounded in recent productions of the plays. With an eye toward amplifying the import of an already ambitious book, I bring *Theater of Capital* into dialogue with the work of Jason W. Moore, who draws on the related concept of the *oikeios* in developing his own argument that capitalism is not simply an economic system, or even a social and economic system, but a "world-ecology." Both "economy" and "ecology," it seems relevant to recall, share an etymological origin in the *oikos*.

The *Oikos* in an Age of Finance

In the introduction to *Theater of Capital*, Zhulina reminds readers that the gap between economics and what we now call the humanities wasn't always so yawning. Exponents of the (no longer so) new economic criticism such as Mary Poovey and Mark Osteen have done a quite thorough and convincing job of historicizing the split between literary and economic discourse, which some attribute to Romanticism and

others locate as early as the eighteenth century, with the rise of the novel and the “science” of political economy as two distinct modes of interpreting capitalism. Yet as Zhulina points out, these critics’ assumptions and propositions about how to understand culture (and literature in particular) in relation to economic factors are constrained by the privilege they accord to the novel. As is too often the case, theater is left out of the picture—notwithstanding the fact that until relatively recently it enjoyed a broader public than the novel, and its economic dimension is more obvious and immediate. What is more, the discursive association between theater and economics goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks and the *oikos*. Zhulina notes that in his *Poetics*, Aristotle makes a distinction between tragedy and comedy based on the different types of household (*oikos*) that are suitable settings for each. Indeed, we might also add that a long line of criticism has interpreted many of the classic Greek tragedies and comedies as enacting an essential tension between the *oikos* and the *polis*. Were the *oikos* simply a family or a household in the narrowest sense, this would be of merely incidental interest. But in ancient Greece, remarks Zhulina (citing Cheryl Anne Cox’s reading of Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*), the *oikos* was nothing less than “a unit of production, a unit of consumption and... a unit of reproduction” as well as the basic building block of the polis (Cox 131, cited in Zhulina 11). This long history of theater’s involvement in “oikonomic” concerns serves her argument that “[t]heater is not *mired* in commerce; rather, it refuses to treat the economy as a separate sphere, revealing instead how economic questions are at the center of our collective life” (35).

A bit more information about the *oikos* might be in order given that we are no longer accustomed to thinking about the household as the primary domain of economic activity. It is, to be sure, a major locus of consumption, and social reproduction theorists have drawn attention to the centrality of child-rearing and other domestic labor to the workings of our modern, capitalist economy. But what the rise of industrialization does is precisely to displace production from the home to other sites such as the factory, office, or industrial farm—a historical movement which, if always uneven and incomplete, now seems even more uncertain as a growing number of white-collar workers in the so-called advanced economies work from home, and as the very question of what counts as “production” becomes increasingly unclear. In ancient Greece, however, there were two main sources of wealth: on the one hand, agriculture (which depended on ownership of land), and on the other, tribute and plunder from raids and wars

with other societies. Sarah B. Pomeroy's translation of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* renders the title as "Discourse on the Skill of Estate Management," and as Pomeroy underscores, it contains a good deal of didactic agricultural advice on how to render the land productive (105 and vii). Although it was the job of the husband to attain the land (whether through inheritance or reward for military service), agricultural labor was performed primarily by slaves—who, along with the animals, were regarded as part of the *oikos*—and the *Oeconomicus* emphasizes that wives played an essential role in increasing wealth by supervising the storage and use of what was harvested while also managing all other household affairs. Production, in other words, was closely associated with the world of women and slaves, who were excluded from the *polis*.

Here I think it is helpful to turn to Richard Halpern's argument about the fate of tragedy in the age of political economy, which Zhulina briefly mentions, though not in connection to the *oikos*. Greek tragedy, Halpern says, is bound up in the "raptor economy" of imperial Athens and a strain of political rhetoric driven by the desire to liberate the *polis* from its material dependence on the *oikos* through predatory warfare and the spoils of conquest. Even Aristotle, he notes, ultimately privileges the *polis*—the realm of action, or doing—over the *oikos* and its emphasis on production, or making. In Halpern's reading, Greek tragedies such as the *Oresteia* hinge on the conflicts and dilemmas arising from "the *polis*'s dream of material self-sufficiency that renders economics in the strict sense (management of the *oikos*) unnecessary" (79). This is why political economy precipitates a crisis for tragedy: as his discussion of Adam Smith seeks to show, it devalues action and enthrones production as the highest value and path to happiness, displacing the *polis* in favor of market society and shifting the focus from individuals to aggregate populations. In sum, "Capitalism decisively shifts the balance in favor of the *oikos*" (Halpern 17).

As compelling as Halpern's overall argument is, surely this last statement is erroneous—at least if we retain the ancient idea of the *oikos* as a site that integrates production, consumption, and social and biological reproduction. This, it seems to me, is what Zhulina does. Her use of the concept to understand plays written and staged at the very time when political economy was consolidating is perversely anachronistic, but the anachronism opens up a number of possibilities. For one, it troubles the clear-cut distinction between production and reproduction, calling into question the privileging of production and the relegation of women's reproductive role to the realm of nature,

ensconced in the home and ostensibly isolated from the generation of surplus value; at the same time, it undercuts the over-emphasis on consumption underlying the marginalist theory of economics which, as she discusses in some detail, also emerged in the late nineteenth-century. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, prostitution isn't a back-alley business but a professionalized (hence the title), transnational affair that not only operates like a financial corporation but is intimately bound up in the world of financial speculation—making it questionable whether Mrs. Warren's daughter Vivie truly escapes the taint of dirty money by deciding to become an actuary. Meanwhile in her reading of *A Doll's House*, Zhulina notes that far from simply being a voracious consumer, as her husband believes, Nora secretly brings in extra income by performing odd jobs such as sewing, which (along with the money he gives her) she uses to pay back the debt she incurred for the sojourn in Italy that restored his health and his ability to work.

Indeed, we might also ask what exactly it is that Vivie and Nora's husband Torvald (a banker) produce. Not unlike today, the rise of finance in the late nineteenth century made the definition of "productive" economic activity murkier—and it is surely no coincidence that the only visible evidence of industrial-like labor in any of these plays comes in Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, which focuses on the 1844 uprising of Silesian weavers, who were still performing their labor at home through the "putting-out" or workshop system (a critical phase in the process of industrialization that illustrates capitalism's exploitation of and eventual attempt to dis-integrate the constitutive elements of the *oikos*). It is equally notable that almost all of the plays set in the present take place in non-urban settings, and many were written by authors in countries with only limited industrial activity: Zhulina notes, for instance, that industrial capitalism in Ibsen's Norway was small scale and local, and it is also relevant to recall that by this time even Britain had shifted its focus to finance, through which (as Giovanni Arrighi has argued) it facilitated the industrialization and rise of the United States as the global hegemonic power. The question of the *oikos* in an age of finance, then, raises key questions about the origin and nature of value(s)—questions that the theater, an art form that tends to trouble distinctions between production and reproduction, is particularly apt at exploring.

Oikos, Oikeois, and Value

At no point in *Theater of Capital* does Zhulina draw readers' attention to the fact that the word "ecology," like "economy," is derived from *oikos*. No related terms appear in the index, and it would be an implausible stretch to call it one of the book's major themes. Yet given the distinctly non-industrial setting of nearly all the plays under consideration it is hardly surprising that environmental concerns and the question of economic dependence on natural resources occasionally surface, as in the sections on Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, which revolves around the contamination of natural hot springs. In discussing Chekhov's plays, Zhulina cautions against a purely economic approach, insisting that for the Russian playwright economic concerns are always linked to larger questions about what we value beyond the profit motive—a preoccupation evident in Astrof's lament in *Uncle Vanya* that "forests are fewer and fewer, rivers are drying up, wildlife is wiped out, the climate is spoiled, and every day the earth becomes more impoverished and ugly" (cited in Zhulina 164). If the ancient *oikos* was often an agricultural estate, dependent on nature for the production of wealth, Zhulina similarly argues that tracing the movement of money through Chekhov's plays "allows us to notice how he asks fundamental questions about how we take care of our *oikos*, our shared home—whether it's a family estate, Russia, or the planet itself" (165). This underlying thread eventually comes to the fore in the Coda when she foregrounds climate change and the imminent possibility of ecological disaster as a reason for the recent renewal of interest in the economy and attempts by contemporary playwrights to imagine alternatives to capitalism (Zhulina 204).

I'd like to suggest that one way of drawing out these concerns and connecting them to both her focus on finance and her illuminating exploration of the *oikos* is through Jason W. Moore's conception of capitalism as a "world-ecology." Moore grounds his approach in the concept of the *oikeios*, or *oikeios topos*—a term meaning "favorable place," which derives from *oikos* and was coined by the ancient Greek philosopher-botanist Theophrastus to refer to "the *relationship* between a plant species and its environment" (quoted in Moore 35). This emphasis on relationality is what leads Moore to propose the *oikeios* as a way of viewing nature not as a "resource" but as "the matrix through which human activity unfolds, and the field upon which historical agency operates" (36). Such a view, he insists, requires us to fundamentally rethink our view of capitalism so as to understand it as a process that works through nature (just as nature works through capitalism)

rather than as something discrete that acts on it. Like Zhulina, Moore opposes a purely economic approach, arguing that capitalism can't be reduced to an economic system but is first and foremost a "world-ecology," or a "way of organizing nature" (2). Key to this argument is his addendum to the labor theory of value: while he affirms Marx's claim that the *substance* of value (in the capitalist sense) is determined by labor productivity in commodity production, Moore contends that this process hinges on a more expansive set of value *relations*, the most significant of which is the configuration between the realm of commodity production and socially necessary but unpaid work/energy—a category which includes the labor of social reproduction (most often carried out by women), coerced and unpaid labor (such as slavery), *and* the energy of nature and all the "resources" it provides. Capitalism depends on "Cheap Nature" (low-cost labor-power, food, energy, and raw materials), and every great wave of accumulation entails the opening up of new commodity frontiers, often through empire and new modes of appropriating the riches of nature.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by one such wave of accumulation via the intensified appropriation of the "free" energy of nature—a process which, as we can see once again today in what some have defined as the ongoing "extractive" turn of capital, is fueled by financialization. Citing Arrighi's argument that cycles of capital accumulation have two moments—one "material," or industrial, and the other "financial," Moore points out that "Financial expansions inaugurate new eras of primitive accumulation, as capitalists and states pursue the restoration of Cheap Nature" (103). In *Theater of Capital*, this is perhaps clearest in the chapter on Ibsen. Zhulina, for instance, notes that Ibsen wrote the world-traveling *Peer Gynt* during the construction of the Suez Canal (a monumental appropriation of aquatic energy for global commerce) and even attended its inauguration; I would also add that the finance-driven railroad booms she points to as a crucial context for Ibsen's plays (as well as Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*) were also propelled by speculation surrounding the untapped natural resources to which railroads would grant access. In fact, many of the plays register the fact that Norway was a resource-rich (if under-industrialized) country: In *John Gabriel Borkman* the protagonist's pursuit of capital revolves around the extraction of iron ore, and *An Enemy of the People* revolves around a town's attempt to achieve prosperity by profiting from its natural springs, though this is jeopardized by contamination from a tannery, which itself profits from the transformation of animal skins into leather. Could it be, then,

that the invisible hand of capital isn't only human labor (as Zhulina suggests), but also the unpaid work/energy of nature?

Zhulina's attention to gender and the role of women also offers a promising point of engagement with Moore's conception of world-ecology and the *oikeios*. Why, after all, does most of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* take place in the decaying countryside, as does *Miss Julie*? What does nature (in the more restricted sense) have to do with the "erotic capital" that Zhulina argues drives the plots of these plays? Only at the end of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* does the action move to London, as Vivie seeks to break with her mother and liberate herself from the old traditional *oikos*. But given how closely the actuarial business is tied to financial speculation, which is in turn bound up in the drive to appropriate the work/energy of nature, how might her job as an actuary perpetuate the matrix of value relations, or *oikeios*, that has long cast the work of women and the energy of nature as outside capitalism, and therefore free for the taking?

Although it is not his foremost concern or area of expertise, Moore stresses the integral role of culture in environment-making and creation of the *oikeois*. In his formulation, "science, power, and culture operate within value's gravitational field, and are *co-constitutive* of it," which suggests the importance of "thinking of value as a systemic phenomenon with a pivotal economic moment" (54-55). Scholars such as Sharae Deckard and Michael Niblett offer models of a world-ecology approach to literature, and Brian Whitener, Santiago Acosta, and others have begun to develop Moore's ideas in relation to contemporary art, film, and other mediums.¹ As Zhulina shows, however, theater reveals with unusual clarity that culture is not simply superstructural but a material and economic force, and as a performative art that (at least as it is traditionally conceived) must take a place, it is always in some sense also ecological. For those seeking to build on the possibilities that *Theater of Capital* opens up—particularly those of us coming at these questions from different parts of the world—considering the *oikos* and the *oikeois* together is one possible and (I will wager) especially generative approach.

¹For very recent work see Sharae Deckard, Michael Niblett, and Stephen Shapiro, *Tracking Capital: World-Systems, World-Ecology, World-Culture* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2024); and Santiago Acosta, Paige R. Andersson, Orlando Betancor, Victoria Saramago, and Brian Whitener, *World Ecology and Latin America: From Below and to the Left* special issue of *Mediations* 36, no. 1 (2024).

One Final, Unresolved Question

And now: Should I seek out the head of the Economics department at my university and suggest he read *Theater of Capital*?

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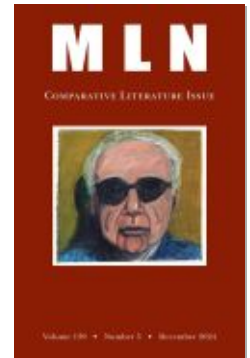
The Wild Duck and the Method of Immanent Critique: A
Response

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The Wild Duck and the Method of Immanent Critique: A Response



Alisa Zhulina

Introduction

A sense of urgency fueled the writing of *Theater of Capital*. It was not only the professional requirement of producing a book or the socio-political scope of the argument that propelled me. Pregnant with my daughter, I intended to finish the manuscript before she arrived. My material and social conditions today are different from the ones that formed the genesis and development of the book. It has thus been a rewarding experience to revisit the material with a new mindset and other concerns, under the guidance of the generous and brilliant responders of the forum. In responding to their insightful contributions, I will focus on a drama that I do not address in *Theater of Capital*—*The Wild Duck* (*Vildanden*, 1884). It has long been one of my least favorite of Ibsen's works. But motherhood changes everything. It is the Ibsen play I now think about the most. And it seems strange to me that I did not write about it in a book about modern drama and capitalism.

In his illuminating response, Pannill Camp discusses *The Wild Duck* as a bourgeois drama that reflects central features of the theater of capital that I analyze in the book, such as the immanent critique of capitalism and experimentation with different economic ideas. Camp also notes, however, that *The Wild Duck* may challenge my analysis. After all, Ibsen noted that the play signaled a departure from his earlier

works and differed “in its method.”¹ While the other three authors do not bring up *The Wild Duck*, the questions that they raise can helpfully be explored through an engagement with it. The play’s mysterious loft, home to living birds and an artificial forest, composed of “four or five withered Christmas-trees” reveals the ecological concern that Sarah J. Townsend identifies in many of the plays that I cover (Ibsen *Selected Plays* 275, trans. modified). The loft room is also, as Michael Goldman has pointed out, “the most complex and subtle stage set ever devised, certainly without parallel in theatrical history at the time Ibsen created it” (85). Thus it exposes the “constructed and deliberate” role that scenography plays in the ways realist theatre negates “the spectre of unrealized value and narrative contingency,” which Douglas Eacho notes I privilege in my reading of Chekhov’s dramaturgy (1097). Finally, the horrific and needless suicide of young Hedvig in the aforementioned garret complicates both the *deus ex machina* of capital that I examine and “the negative revelation” that Rebecca Kastleman offers as an alternative (1104).

Class Politics: Who Are the Bourgeois?

Who are the bourgeois? And what is the difference between a bourgeois and a capitalist? These are crucial questions for *The Wild Duck*, as we are confronted here with two families from disparate socioeconomic backgrounds. Camp notes that the relationship between the two families is “one of diverging bourgeois fortunes rather than class-based dominance” (1120). Franco Moretti calls this rapport “intra-bourgeois competition” and describes the patriarchs’ murky business dealings of the past as belonging to a moral “grey area” (118). Similarly, Camp asks if the “metaphorical shades” that economic details take on in *The Wild Duck* should turn our attention from economic questions to moral philosophy (1120). Ibsen’s play, however, cautions against such an interpretative move. To fixate on moral issues at the expense of economic ones is to fall into the trap of Gregers, who brings “the claim of the ideal” to the poor folk employed by his father, a wholesale merchant (Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* 252, trans. modified). Time and again, *The Wild Duck* shows how economic concerns are part of social morality. I should also note that I differentiate my methodology from mere “economism,” which I define in the book as “the tendency to interpret all phenomena in market terms” (Gagnier 5, cited in Zhulina 13).

¹Henrik Ibsen to Frederik Hegel, 2 September 1884 (Johnson 438).

As I argue in *Theater of Capital*, the playwrights of the theater of capital understood that economic questions—what we prioritize and what we do with our time—are moral, political, and even spiritual questions. Siloing the economy into its own compartment is the unfortunate legacy of nineteenth-century marginalism and twenty-century neoclassical economics. It is precisely because these playwrights were writing at a time when economics had not yet congealed into a distinct discipline and discourse that they were able to represent the economy not as a separate sphere but as “an integral part of human existence that involves fundamental questions of social morality and social organization” (10).

The relationship between the wealthy Werles and the impoverished Ekdals can best be described as one of interdependence (albeit neither equal nor fair): they continue to be connected through Hedvig and through Haakon Werle’s supposed financial benevolence. Hjalmar Ekdal’s photography studio does not bring in a lot of business. Whatever income Hjalmar and Gina earn is not enough to support Old Ekdal, who receives the money it costs to take care of him from the copying work that he does for Mr. Werle. Without the initial capital that Mr. Werle provided for Hjalmar’s training and studio, Hjalmar would have no doubt become a wage laborer, like Gina once was. How should we then label each family’s social class?

When Humanities scholars use the word “bourgeois,” as in “bourgeois drama” or “bourgeois playwright,” they often mean it as a synonym for “middle-class” or the materialistic, conventional, and philistine attitude of the said middle class. This connotation of “bourgeois” appears in Karl Marx’s writings, especially in *Capital*, where he employs it for comedic effect or as an insult.² The word “bourgeois” is so capacious and ambiguous that it can even be “little short of a synonym for all of humanity,” as it is in Gustave Flaubert’s writings (Vargas Llosa 229). But Marx also uses it in another—historically specific—way.

At the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Engels and Marx define the Bourgeoisie as the historical class that arose from the rubble of feudalism and seized the means of production through “a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange” and became the ruling class (247). While, in earlier eras, there was “a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank,” during the rise of industrial capitalism,

²It is also, as Nicholas Ridout has shown, an “act of *disidentification*.” Nicholas Ridout, *Scenes from Bourgeois Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 24.

society began to divide itself into “two great hostile camps...: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (Engels and Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 246). Class antagonisms were thereby “simplified” (246). It is clear that Marx does not mean here the English word “middle class,” but rather the most revolutionary class in human history so far that has brought forth “more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together,” which include the “[s]ubjection of Nature’s forces to man, machinery...clearing of whole continents for cultivation,” etc. (Engels and Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 249). However, just because there are now “two great hostile camps” does not mean that there are no other class subdivisions within these two positions, which, in his later works, Marx will simply call Labor and Capital (Engels and Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 246).³ It is helpful to visualize Labor and Capital as two magnets between which a whole array of different classes move, clash, disappear, and spring up—classes that Marx calls at different moments “the middle classes” (“*die Mittelstände*”), “the lower strata of the middle class” (“*die... kleinen Mittelstände*”), which include “the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants,” “the non-industrial bourgeois,” and “the petty bourgeoisie” (“*die Kleinbürger*”) (Engels and Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 251-3).

What all these classes in the middle share is their economic precarity and fluctuating socioeconomic mobility between Labor and Capital. While Moretti describes the intra-bourgeois competition predominantly in moral terms, as a “ruthless, unfair, equivocal, murky” conflict between individuals or within one person (the irresistible temptation of “the good *Bürger*” to turn into an “unscrupulous financier”), it is first and foremost a material and social struggle for the very ability to make a living (118, 131). According to Marx, the various middle classes and petty bourgeoisie plummet into the proletariat because their small capital is not enough “for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on” and drown “in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production” (Engels and Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 251-2).

³In fact, this shift already happens in *The Communist Manifesto*, when Engels and Marx write that “[i]n proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., *capital*, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their *labour* increases *capital*” (251, emphasis added).

It is not by accident that the Ekdal loft in *The Wild Duck* is located behind a photography studio. At the historical moment when photography begins to compete with theatre in rendering realism, Ibsen introduces a partially lit space that relies more on his audience's imagination than their direct perception. Moreover, during Ibsen's time, photography was rapidly developing. In 1837, the daguerreotype outperformed photogenic drawing; the launch of factory-made dry plates in 1878 liberated the camera from the tripod and spurred the mass production of small hand-held cameras. Hjalmar's technique and business are on the precipice of becoming obsolete. Seen from this vantage point, Hjalmar's obsession with coming up with an invention to revolutionize photography is not so silly after all. The problem, of course, is that he is too much in his head, whereas an actual discovery requires tinkering with the apparatus and getting his hands dirty. Capital, Marx writes, transforms "the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science into its paid wage-labourers" (Engels and Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 248). The advance of technology can even push "entire sections of the ruling classes" into the proletariat (Engels and Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 253).

Thus, it is difficult to see how either the Werles or the Ekdals are "the *ruling* class," as Moretti argues the bourgeoisie is in Ibsen (117).⁴ Even the Werles are not as affluent or influential as they wish to be. Gregers mentions that his father still resents the discovery that his late wife did not deliver "the fortune [he] counted on" (Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* 255). In Ibsen's bourgeois plays, we are always aware of another world where actual political power and dizzying wealth truly lie. Sometimes, like in *The Wild Duck*, we catch glimpses of that other world—in the brief appearance of the chamberlains who manage the royal household. Ibsen's drama is populated by bankers, lawyers, middle-of-the-road businessmen, academics—servants of the powerful, invisible to us in the theatre, as they are in real life (261). Despite the variations in status and income, what all Ibsen's characters share is their economic instability. And what makes Ibsen's plays gripping are precisely all the dynamic shifts of socioeconomic positions throughout the dramatic conflict.

⁴I believe what Moretti has in mind here is the Marxian definition of capitalist Bourgeoisie, which he then applies to Ibsen's plays.

What is Immanent Critique?

Although it is true, as Camp notes, that “Marxist critical thought...was only in its infancy in Ibsen’s time,” Ibsen’s dramas pay close attention to material and social conditions and their inseparability from moral concerns (1116). When, early in the play, Hjalmar realizes that he has forgotten to bring his hungry daughter a treat from Werle’s dinner, he hands her a menu and suggests that he describe to her the dishes so she may know how unsatisfying they were. Such a cruel scene might well have appeared in Brecht. And, while Gregers professes to divulge “the truth,” it is not clear what truth, if any, he offers his friend (Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* 261). He reveals to Hjalmar that Mr. Werle’s generosity was a ploy to get Gina, his pregnant mistress and erstwhile housekeeper, married to unsuspecting Hjalmar. Gregers’s exposures are thus nothing more than moralizing pronouncements about Gina. She is the fallen woman whom only Hjalmar’s forgiveness and love can transfigure. Gregers never explains *how* or *why* the social relations between Gina and Mr. Werle are what they are (conditioned by capitalism and patriarchy) or *how* or *why* one family rose while another fell into disrepute and poverty. Like Ludwig Feuerbach, Gregers overlooks material conditions and social relations and believes that only transhistorical universal categories such as “love” and “friendship” are necessary for the transformation of human consciousness. A Marxist would argue that Gregers offers no substantial knowledge.⁵ He obfuscates more than he reveals.⁶

Bourgeois playwrights held all sorts of fascinating beliefs about the political economy and made all sorts of contradictory public pronouncements, which did not mesh well with socialist principles. Ibsen’s “aristocratic individualism” is well-documented, for example (Figueiredo 297). “[T]o what extent,” asks Camp, “does the immanent critique method reveal a point of view held by the playwright (Ibsen), and to what extent is it dependent on a materialist point of view constructed by the scholar?” (1116). Immanent critique, I argue, allows us to circumvent the question of authorial intent and the playwright’s professed political allegiances because the very *form* of drama

⁵Although inspired by Feuerbach, Marx would abandon his philosophy. For more on Feuerbach’s influence on young Marx, see Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism: Capitalism, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*. Monthly Review Press, 2017, pp. 26-27 and 58-60.

⁶One, of course, need not be a Marxist to come to the conclusion that Gregers reveals very little. As Goldman suggests, “In *The Wild Duck* it is not clear whether anything has been discovered at all” (79).

encourages it. It should be emphasized that the immanent critique of capitalism is not a mere moral denunciation, but rather an interrogation of the constitutive norms (i.e. the fundamental principles) of capitalism, which aims to show that there are internal contradictions between those constitutive norms and the actual practical form that they take in reality. For example, one of the fundamental principles of capitalism is freedom because “both buyer and seller of a commodity... are determined only by their own free will (Marx, *Capital: A Critique* 280). When Marx performs an immanent critique of the labor market, however, he shows that the wage-laborer is *forced* to sell her labor-power because she has no property and must sell her labor-power to survive economically. She is not free to live a flourishing life.

Thus Ibsen need not have been a socialist (he was not), to respond to and aesthetically capture the internal contradictions of the bourgeois society of which he was a part and elements of which he deeply loathed. Ibsen himself was aware of this when he wrote in a letter to Hans Lien Braekstad: “I was surprised that I, who had made it my chief life-task to depict human characters and human destinies, should, without conscious or direct intention, have arrived in several matters at the same conclusions as the social-democratic moral philosophers had arrived at by scientific processes.”⁷ Because “drama allows multiple and competing voices to be heard in the most concrete way,” it encourages playwrights to dramatize the internal contradictions of their society and to let those contradictions simmer without resolution in their audience’s minds long after the performance (Zhulina 16). This is why Shaw, who was a Fabian reformist, could write drama that was more radical in its implications than his avowed politics.

It should be apparent by now that *Theater of Capital* is a Marxist intervention, meaning that I draw heavily from Marx’s analysis of capitalism to analyze works of modern drama. I do not state so openly in my book for a couple of reasons. Just as the words “finance” and “economics” can make your audience groan so can the terms “Marxism” and “historical materialism.” I wanted the book to appeal to a variety of readers. Perhaps, it is also my preference for artworks that act like Trojan horses that inspired me to do something similar with *Theater of Capital*—to hide within its pages a lesson in historical materialism. This is why it was a welcome surprise to realize that in certain instances I may not have been materialist *enough*, as Eacho suggests in his response to my reading of Chekhov.

⁷Ibsen to H. L. Braekstad, 18 August 1890, in *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn, Colonial Press, 1964, p. 292.

It is true that the chapter on Chekhov's "near misses" and "near hits" focuses more on the speculative temporality of his dramaturgy rather than on Chekhov's "apparently haphazard *mise-en-scène*," which, as Eacho points out, also reveals "the laborious construction of that quite fictional space" (1097). I do touch upon the "materiality of the text of *The Cherry Orchard*—the newly improved paper on which the play was written and published" and show how it connects to the white clay that the invisible Englishmen discover on Simeonov-Pishchik's estate (Zhulina 173). Still, a discussion of Chekhov's material stage would certainly have bolstered the central argument of the chapter, which aims to show that the social world of *The Cherry Orchard* might first appear as a casino, ruled by contingency, but, upon a closer look, is revealed to be a world of hidden labor, hereditary privileges, and monopoly on land and property.

I focus more on the dramatic text instead of the material conditions of the stage in part because the latter have already been so well analyzed in recent years, including in Eacho's own excellent work, whereas dialogue, plot, character, even the act of close reading have been labeled bourgeois and outdated (Eacho, "Performativity"). Eacho wonders if I wish to "champion the... unfashionable tradition of modern drama criticism" (Eacho, "On Chance" 1097). While I have never thought of my project in that way, I have been called old fashioned in my insistence on close reading. My close readings, however, do not serve traditional aims but rather the method of immanent critique. In *Theater of Capital*, I show that bourgeois drama is much more interesting and far more politically unsettling than experimental theatrical traditions and performance studies have given it credit. In Eacho's account, midcentury performance art introduced "performance" as "a site where the commodity form's contradictions could be accepted rather than levered open" ("On Chance" 1100). Thus I think Eacho would agree with me when I maintain in the book that "neither content nor the formal characteristics of a given performance, however radical, precludes it from participating in the accumulation of capital or promoting capitalist values" (16). Or, as Camp sums up my insight, "the ratio between a play's form and its political potential is more flexible than one might think" (1115).

Ecological Implications

Take, for example, the Ekdal loft in *The Wild Duck*. What is the significance of this theatrical space, described as "a large, long, irregularly

shaped loft with recesses?” (Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* 234). Ibsen, for one, wanted his audience to observe the mysterious loft’s changing character under different lighting. In Act Two, “moonlight falls through skylights on some parts of the room while others remain in deep shadow” (234). In Act Three, the “morning sun shines through the skylights. Some pigeons fly back and forth, others are cooing from the rafters. Hens cackle now and then farther within the loft” (241). Ibsen’s suggestions are not always followed. In 2006, Eirik Stubo directed a production of *The Wild Duck* at the National Theatre of Norway that did not allow the audience to see the loft. Instead, they were confronted by a wood wall that towered above the actors and ran uninterrupted across the stage, seemingly without an end. Whatever escape those characters had in that claustrophobic world was entirely of their imagination. One theatre critic told me they were upset they were made to stare at a wall; they did not think they got their money’s worth.

It is tempting to speculate about the symbolism of the Ekdal loft. For Goldman, it is a place of “delusion, self-deception, failure, pathetic limitation,” a spatial metaphor for theatre itself as a place of “contraption” but also of “magic” (Goldman 86-87). We can also look at it as a new *kind* of theatre, evolving away from realist theatre (the photography studio) into more experimental forms. “Modern art,” writes Adorno, “is just as determined socially by the conflict with the conditions of production and inner-aesthetically by the exclusion of exhausted and obsolete procedures” (46). And yet, perhaps, we should, as Una Chaudhuri advises us, “resist” symbolic interpretations, which, after all, are a specialty of Gregers (72). She suggests looking at “this curious space” in the literal manner that Old Ekdal does—as a way to survive the loss of the wilderness in which he once lived and hunted (Chaudhuri 73). On the one hand, as Chaudhuri notes, the Ekdal loft is a lot like the “simulated worlds of contemporary mass entertainment—the theme parks, world showcases, safari parks, tropical shopping plazas, and so on” (76). Indeed, for Old Ekdal, Hjalmar, and Hedvig, the loft is a place of escape. On the other hand, the loft is also a reminder of Old Ekdal’s “pantheistic worship of forests” (Chaudhuri 75). When the latter responds to Hedvig’s death with, “[t]he forest’s revenge,” Chaudhuri reads this utterance in “the spiritual or religious mode,” emphasizing Western civilization’s catastrophic effect on nature (75). The problem with this account is that the “traumatic relation between humankind and nature” is understood as a transhistorical fact (74). Even as humans are held responsible for ecological disasters, they are simultaneously absolved of any real responsibility because the

relationship between humans and nature is from the onset specified as antagonistic and one-sided. Humans, in other words, are bad to the bone, always already mastering Mother Nature in pernicious ways. In contrast, I would argue that we need to understand the relationship between humans and nature as a dialectical relationship, which is what Marx enables us to do.

Inspired by Townsend's response to *Theater of Capital*, I would like to offer an alternative reading of the Ekdal loft as a space that both reveals the alienation of human beings from their responsibility for nature under capitalism and allows us a peek into a more rational way for humans to engage with nature through Hedvig's acts of care. Even before he was arrested, Old Ekdal was alienated from the wilderness that he supposedly reveres, engaged as he was in the project of cutting down trees for lumber on government-owned land, all for the sake of turning a profit.⁸ Hedvig is the only character who provides a different way of relating to the environment in her commitment, however humble and childish, to taking care of the wounded wild duck.

Although I do not explicitly discuss ecology in *Theater of Capital*, I am thrilled that Townsend perceptively illuminates how "the commodification of natural resources, ground rent, and other issues related to the 'gifts of nature'" are a persistent subject that glimmers in the background of my analysis just like the flora and fauna in the partially-lit loft of *The Wild Duck* (1124). Many of the plays that I discuss take place in the countryside or near natural formations (*Miss Julie*, *An Enemy of the People*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, all of Chekhov's crumbling estate drama). "Nature takes its revenge," to borrow Engels's famous phrase, in Ibsen's *Brand* and *When We Dead Awaken*, where avalanches obliterate the characters and sweep them off the stage, straining the capacity of realist theatre (Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*). Before his death, Chekhov planned to write a play about "an Arctic explorer haunted by the ghost of his beloved and a ship... crushed by ice floes" (Senelick 106).

While the history of Marxist ecological thought is beyond the scope of this response, suffice it to note that, in recent years, it has evolved from identifying certain moments in Marx's writings where the environmental issues come to the fore (most notably John Bellamy Foster's seminal analysis of Marx's "theory of metabolic rift") to

⁸While it is ambiguous if Old Ekdal had any idea about "what he was doing" when he "drew up the survey map of the area," Mr. Werle and he "were in on that big timber sale together." In other words, Old Ekdal had a commercial relationship to the forest (Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* 218).

the fundamental reevaluation of “historical materialism as a unique method of understanding the complex relationships and interactions between humanity, society, and nature.” (Foster, “Marx’s Theory” and “In Defense of Ecological Marxism”). According to Foster, Marx argues that capitalism ultimately produces “the metabolic rift,” namely the disturbance in “the metabolic interaction between man and the earth” (Foster, “Marx’s Theory”). Because capitalism concerns itself with short-term profits it causes a depletion in the fertility of the soil. In Volume Three of *Capital*, Marx elaborates on this environmental disturbance by alluding to forests:

... the entire spirit of capitalist production, which is oriented towards the most immediate monetary profit—stands in contradiction to agriculture, which has to concern itself with the whole gamut of permanent conditions of life required by the chain of human generations. A striking example of this is provided by forests, which are managed in the common interest—and even then only to a limited extent—solely in those rare cases when they are not private property but are subject to state administration (Marx, *Capital: The Process* 745-55 f. 27).

In this way, when Haakon Werle and Old Ekdal cut down the trees on government-owned land, they were not only breaking the law but most importantly destroying the one rare sphere under capitalism where forests can still be maintained and protected for the common good. The two men were thinking of their “immediate monetary profit” and not “the chain of human generations,” namely what kind of world they were leaving behind for their offspring. Just as Marx hoped that a “conscious ‘unity’ between humans and nature” would be “a central task of communist society,” so Hedvig, without any positive models in her life, chooses to take care of the wounded wild duck and ultimately does not sacrifice her despite Gregers’s suggestion (Saito 26).

“The forest’s revenge” thus needs not be read in a mystical manner. Although unaware of the deeper significance of his words, Old Ekdal reveals that his generation has made the world inhospitable for Hedvig. The relentless drive for capitalist accumulation has eroded not only the natural world but also a father’s heart so much so that he comes to believe that his sweet, loving daughter can be a manipulative and greedy egoist. Hjalmar snaps out of this cynical thought, but it is too late. Hedvig overhears him and shoots herself in the breast.

Social Miracles

The dark ending of *The Wild Duck* provides a pertinent opportunity to address Kastleman's proposal to approach the deus ex machina as a "negative revelation...spectacularly disclosing what cannot be known" (1104). Before continuing I should stress that it is not my aim in the book to trace a history or overarching theory of the deus ex machina in the theatre. Nor do I suggest that all of Ibsen's plays employ this technique. Interestingly, for Kastleman, my deus ex machina argument does not work for the plays I identify as having one—*John Gabriel Borkman* and *Enemy of The People*—and works best for *A Doll's House*, a drama that I explicitly say does something else—"no deus ex machina makes a miraculous appearance to tie up loose ends and drive the play to a tragicomic resolution" (Zhulina 80). This inversion appears because Kastleman defines the deus ex machina exclusively as a plot device that provides an "escape for the protagonist" or "gesture[s] towards a utopian resolution," whereas I argue that Ibsen and the playwrights of the theater of capital repurposed it for the opposite aim—the representation of a political dead-end (Kastleman 1107). Ibsen's use of the deus ex machina, in my account, is an ironic manifestation of the "arbitrary power" of capital and the emergence of the logic of the market (45). Because there are no easy solutions to the socioeconomic and political conflicts (other than the overcoming of capitalism, which will not be easy) and a play must end somehow, one *formal* way out of the stalemate is to bring out a deus ex machina of capital. An externalization or incarnation of capital appears but is not glorified. On the contrary, such an unsatisfying resolution often leaves us with a bad aftertaste or even outrage. What such a conclusion communicates is: How are things solved in the real world? Capital has the upper hand and the final word, does it not? How do you like such a world?

Ibsen thus makes a theatrical chestnut (the deus ex machina) perform the work of immanent critique, which *might* inspire political action. This is what I mean when I write that while "the economic fiction of the invisible hand stifles the political imaginary," the "aesthetic repurposing of the deus ex machina in modern drama" might help expand it (45). There are, of course, other ways to achieve this. In Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1943), a player addresses the audience directly: "Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust: / There must be happy endings, must, must, must!" (109). Ibsen preferred a more negative approach. In his drama, there is first a rejection and even destruction of the old world. To find any kind of moral apotheosis

in the needless and horrific death of Hedvig is to take the position of Gregers, who believes that “[r]edemption would come through the child” (Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, 284). Still, Kastleman’s discussion of “a secular apotheosis” is intriguing and worth exploring in detail, especially as it pertains to other dramatic works (1111).

Offering a brilliant and in-depth reading of the evolution of the deus ex machina from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1992) and Elfriede Jelinek’s *The Merchant’s Contracts* (2008), Kastleman suggests that this theatrical device “signals the irruption of indeterminate knowledge into the dramatic frame” (1104). Implicit in this argument is a distrust of materialist criticism, the desire to put a God, or at least “knowledge beyond the knowable,” back into the machine (Kastleman 1108). Kastleman thus traces the tension between the material and the spiritual, the latter of which she associates with religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Implicit in Kastleman’s argument is the desire to reenchant what has been disenchanting in modernity, or at the very least to allow for some mystery to remain. It reminds me of Rita Felski’s influential argument that we should stop clinging to “the same formula and format” of critique, namely Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which comes “at the cost of ever being surprised, stirred, reoriented, replenished” (108, 114). A part of me wants to agree. Yes, let us stop demystifying works of art and feel wonder at their power. Let us not indulge in hubris and, instead, be awed by the limits of human knowledge in the way the chorus advises us at the end of Sophocles’s *Antigone*. But then I remember our current political and environmental reality. “[T]he critics of critique,” notes Terry Eagleton, “need to remind themselves that there is a lot of self-deception about.... There are indeed concealed truths, dissembled powers and illusory appearances.... As Marx once wrote, all the most important processes in class-society are carried on ‘behind the backs’ of the agents involved.” So I ask Kastleman the following: what is the value and purpose of this “knowledge beyond the knowable” in a time of crisis? While I agree with the need to check our hubris and with the idea that a certain negative force appears at the end of many Ibsen’s plays, I resist naming it “divine” (Kastleman 1108). While *A Doll’s House* (1879) relies on the Christian temporality of Christmas, as Kastleman points out, I would not describe the “miracle” (“*det vidunderlige*”) that Nora refers to as unknowable (Ibsen, *Et dukkehjem* 55). To be sure, it is beyond the representation of the stage. But we get a hint of what it might be in the reunion of Kristine Linde and Nils Krogstad. Their imperfect but real love,

a love suffocated because of material and social conditions, a love resurrected against odds and yet still fragile because of the material and social constraints of this world, gestures toward a direction. What I hear in Nora's use of the word "miracle" is not a supernatural event or an event that theatrical knowledge cannot afford us but something more humble yet also extraordinary. It reminds me of the "social miracles" that Marxist writer and activist Mike Davis mentions, which "have stunned" him in his lifetime — "the courageousness of ordinary people in a struggle" (Goodyear).

The Wild Duck too has a Christian narrative, which the play nevertheless cautions us against. As Brian Johnston notes, Gregers can be read as the Son who "descends into the world with a mission to redeem a fallen humanity suffering under the law that empowered his father" (208). He must battle with "a deceiver (Relling) who lives *below* with a 'demonisk' (demonic) companion," but then the drama veers off this narrative course (208). It is not Gregers who sacrifices himself, but vulnerable, imaginative, and deeply empathetic Hedvig.

Final Thoughts

Although Sigmund Freud is no more than a supporting character in *Theater of Capital*, I acknowledge that the other influential system of thought that emerged in the nineteenth century alongside Marxism was Freudian psychoanalysis. In his analysis of *The Wild Duck*, Goldman associates the Ekdal loft with the "the depths of childhood," in the way that it lingers in "the audience's memory, half-forgotten" (90). Emerging from "childhood," Goldman writes, "we enter history with its class conflicts, reform pamphlets, new inventions" (91). Reading the responses to *Theater of Capital* with *The Wild Duck* allowed me to remember where the first seeds of this project were sown and what experiences may have formed my materialist point of view. There are too many contradictions, so I offer you to them without a resolution.

I spent my childhood going to the Karl Marx Drama Theatre in Saratov, Russia, where I was born five years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and seven months after the Chernobyl disaster. Established in 1803, the theatre was named the Karl Marx Drama Theatre after the 1917 Russian Revolution and renamed the Ivan Slonov Dramatic Theater in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁹ When I was growing up in "the wild nineties," as the decade

⁹Ivan Slonov was one of the most famous actors of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. He performed at the Saratov Drama Theatre from 1915 until his death in 1945.

is described by bourgeois economists, and “the horrific nineties,” as Russians call it, everyone referred to the old theatre from habit as the Karl Marx Drama Theatre, or “Karl Marx” for short. Before I had any idea who Marx was, “going to Karl Marx” meant going to the theatre. Incidentally, “going to Engels” meant going to the beach, because the city across the Volga River had a better beach and was called Engels, a name it has held onto till this day.

The repertoire of my first theatre still consists of nineteenth-century bourgeois drama (the plays of Chekhov, Gogol, Ostrovsky, and stage adaptations of Dostoevsky’s and Tolstoy’s novels) as well as new works by contemporary domestic and foreign playwrights. A dramatization of Russian nihilist Nikolay Chernyshevsky’s magnus opus *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) is also in rotation, which is not surprising given that Saratov is the birthplace of Chernyshevsky, whose monument dominates the central square. Despite having one of the oldest and most famous theatres in the country, Saratov’s reputation has been permanently ruined thanks to nineteenth-century verse drama. If you tell any Russian you are from Saratov, they will immediately respond with: “to the country-side, to your aunt’s, to the middle of nowhere, to Saratov!” This is an infamous line from Alexander Griboyedov’s comedy *Woe from Wit* (1825), spoken by the family patriarch Pavel Famusov, as he warns his rebellious daughter Sofia that if she does not listen to him, he will send her away from Moscow to “a God-forsaken place,” that is, “Saratov,” which Griboyedov abused for the sake of a rhyming couplet (Griboyedov 149, trans. modified).

I wish I could say there is a production that stayed with me from those early years of theatre-going, but all I can remember are bits and pieces from a stage adaptation of Guy de Maupassant’s novel *Bel Ami* (1885). And that is probably due to the age restriction, unusual for its time, which should have prevented me from seeing the provocative production. I remember my mother insisting to the box office clerk that I was “a very mature seven-year-old.” We got in because my mother paid a small bribe.

It is difficult to find a more different place from Saratov—a city where history sticks to weathered buildings and discarded names—than Las Vegas—a city that prides itself for constant evolution, requiring demolition and complete unattachment to any architecture. Las Vegas is the city where I first immigrated to and spent the formative years of adolescence, but it is unrecognizable to me today. Every hotel that held any kind of personal memory has been imploded. The Stardust, The Desert Inn, The New Frontier, The Tropicana, all iconic

landmarks and relics of the mob era, have been reduced to rubble in a matter of seconds. The New Orleans Hotel and Casino, where my high school graduation took place, still stands today. But its days are numbered. The city's social life—restaurants, movie theatres, bookstores—happens in casino resorts, so local teenagers grow up amid slot machines, all-you-can-eat buffets, and billboards advertising kid friendly Cirque du Soleil productions and adult entertainment, such as *Zumanity*, an adult-themed Cirque du Soleil show. We also have our own Ekdal loft—the Wildlife Habitat at the Flamingo Hotel, where you can watch Chilean Flamingoes, Brown Pelicans, and several species of exotic waterfowl trying to beat the odds of desert life. In terms of notable monuments, we have the “Monument to the Simulacrum,” a permanent public sculpture by artist Stephen Hendee, dedicated to the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. It holds a time capsule scheduled to be opened in the year 2105.

In 2000, the English version of the wildly successful French musical *Notre-Dame de Paris*, adapted from Victor Hugo's 1831 novel, had its American premiere at the Paris Hotel. It closed after seven months because the pleasure-seeking crowds of Sin City are not accustomed to tragedy.

Somewhere between these two strange “hometowns”—Saratov and Las Vegas—a materialist critic was formed, with a soft spot for unfashionable bourgeois dramas of a bygone era, an intellectual curiosity about capitalism, which something called “shock therapy” violently injected into her childhood, upending everything she had known as home, and leaving her with the unshakeable belief that we are all part of history. *Theater of Capital* is her first work.

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