The Second Coming

Milo Rau

1.

Entering the US is always a bit of a gamble for me.[1] As you may know, there are some countries that are rather reluctant to welcome me. I lost my Russian visa back in 2013 when I was working on a project in Moscow with Katya Samuzevich from Pussy Riot—the other members were in prison at the time. A few years later, when I was due to receive the European Theatre Prize in St. Petersburg and couldn't even get a visa for that, the Russian ambassador said to me, "You can Google yourself."

A year ago, when I was supposed to come to the Skirball Center at NYU for *Antigone in the Amazon*, I was once again denied a visa. The reason given was that I had founded a film school in Mosul, the former capital of the Islamic State, together with UNESCO. I have to admit that I understand why the immigration authorities found this suspicious. We appealed to the embassy. After lengthy interviews in which I talked about my military service in Switzerland and other patriotic deeds, I was then, rather unexpectedly, granted a 10-year visa.

Since then, I have been interrogated whenever I have tried to come into the United States. I am taken out of the line, led into a side room, and questioned. The interrogation lasts a few hours, which I plan for as travel time, so to speak. As another European theatremaker, Bertolt Brecht, once did, my strategy is to act like a "village idiot." That is how actress Therese Giehse described Brecht's performance before the McCarthy tribunal for anti-American activities. With a mixture of zeal and irony, I express my sincere love for democracy and service to society. And with a mixture of pity and indulgence, I am then waved through.

I remember the first time I was in New York, long before I travelled to Iraq, Cuba, Congo, China, or any other country that might have made me look suspicious. For the taxi driver who took me from Kennedy Airport to the city, the fact that I came from Germany—I was living in Berlin at

1. This essay originated as a talk on 2 September 2025 at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York as part of Rau's RESISTANCE NOW TOGETHER project and Martin E. Segal Center's Down to Earth Festival. Following Rau's talk, actor, director, writer, and producer Nicole Ansari-Cox read Elfriede Jelinek's play *Endsieg: The Second Coming*, also published in this issue. —Ed.

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the time—did not seem to mean that I was a foreigner: for him, it was more a kind of additional information, because ultimately, every New Yorker came from somewhere. The next morning, the cook at a diner asked me where I was from, and again I said: Germany. With a kind of melancholic singsong in her voice, she said: "Oh, my grandfather died in a concentration camp."

All of this seemed far away, fascism had been defeated, the Cold War had ended—and the transatlantic alliance seemed indestructible. For thousands of years, Europe had been a continent of tragedies, a continent of ideologies, border wars and religious wars. But with 1989, the fall of the Wall, the so-called *Wende*, it all seemed to be over. When I was a teenager in the 1990s, Yugoslavia fell apart. Hundreds of thousands died. In Srebrenica—and other, less famous places, where no blue helmets were watching—the worst genocide since the Holocaust, this time against the Muslim minority. But even so, it seemed more like an epilog to Europe's history of violence. Nationalist savior figures like Milošević, the Serbian president at the time, seemed to be immersed in the sepia tones of a bygone era.

When I was in the US for the first time in 1999, I was 22 years old, and Serbia was being bombed by NATO. I was visiting friends near Trump Tower. At that time, Donald Trump was known in Europe only as a crazy TV personality and for the fact that Melania, whom he began dating in 1999, was Slovenian. When images of cities destroyed by air strikes were shown on television—back then, people still watched TV—my friends asked me in amazement, "Is this happening now?" The images seemed like something from another time. In short: we regarded these images as the final victory over the past, not its return.

2.

Today, a quarter of a century later, all this seems far away. Two other wars dominate European politics: the war in Ukraine, which has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, and the war in Gaza. The former TV star is president, for the second time. A few weeks ago, Ukrainian President Zelensky and seven European heads of government—including the German Chancellor, French President Macron, and EU Commission head Ursula von der Leyen—were guests at Trump's residence. As with Bertolt Brecht or my interviews with the immigration authorities, it was not a meeting between equals, but rather a kind of oral examination.

For example, according to European media reports in the run-up to the meeting, it was forbidden to say "ceasefire" because Trump had fallen in love with the term "peace." Zelensky's suit was also examined, which the American president and his vice president liked better this time than a year ago because it was less military in style. Chancellor Merz—the sad successor to Chancellor Merkel, the chancellor of the century, and Chancellor Scholz, who has already been completely forgotten—used the term "ceasefire" anyway. However, this proved to be completely irrelevant, because Trump's plans were already set: namely, to bring "peace" to Ukraine. An imperial peace, of course, a Pax Americana in accordance with the trade and raw material interests of American industry.

The theory that Trump is actually a "businessman"—the ultimate embodiment of the neoliberal spirit, who thinks not in metaphysical categories but in deals, as Melania's compatriot, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, argues—is false. A week before the arrival of the European dwarf presidents in the hall of the American grand king, Putin and Trump met in Anchorage. Even though Putin's empire is now only a shadow of the Soviet empire in military and economic terms, and the EU's economy is 10 times stronger than Russia's, Trump treats Putin as an equal.

Trump appreciates the man's toughness, his greatness, the clarity with which he embodies Russia's historical destiny, his country's promise of salvation against all logic. The modern politician, like Milošević before him and the communist leaders before that, and even earlier the fascist leaders, is not a strategist, not a businessman. He is a savior. Hitler, we remember, only accepted Stalin as his equal. He was the only other nonstatesman, the only nihilist who had no other interest than the preservation of power. The only leader in the world at that time who actually *made* history, who did not let it happen, but controlled it. In a word: the only *Übermensch* (superhuman).

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Elfriede Jelinek prefaced her play *Endsieg: The Second Coming*, which deals with Trump's return, for today's performance with a foreword. In it, she writes:

> The substitute class consciousness of the déclassés is fascism, which ultimately is hostile to the state. It grows everywhere and covers everything, like a blanket of snow. It coats all classes. If anyone feels they cannot belong to anything or anybody, there still is a brittle patriotism that deceptively unites everything. This is what Donald Trump accomplished: Make America Great Again. The personal magnetism for the masses, which will survive everything, even the heat death of the universe remains a riddle to me. I already wrote about Trump's first presidency to understand this mechanism. I can't. But writing about things I don't understand is what I love most. And the danger is ceaseless. Because these authoritarian endeavors are also increasingly popular in Europe. Since Trump's first term was already incomprehensible to me, his second candidacy, after his attempted coup was even more incomprehensible. At that time, I wrote a kind of preliminary version about the incomprehensible, which I used now for my final text, the Endtext.

And she adds, with her characteristic honesty:

> For Endsieg, the final victory, I don't even have a conceptional structure in which I could place it. The text is like the strings of a harp that someone plucks, but I no longer understand what is behind it or how it functions. Sadly, I hear how it sounds. [translated by Gitta Honegger]

Jelinek refers to Trump's re-election in 2024, but it reminds me of 2012, when Putin became president for the second time—or actually the third time. I remember how disturbed we were, not because the constitution had to be changed for this (you get used to constitutional changes very quickly in Europe), but because it happened with the support of the Orthodox Church. The church, the state, and the secret service joined forces to form what Putin would later call "managed democracy." But the craziest thing was that it happened with almost 90% approval from the Russian people. No one would ever have thought that a people who had gone through more than 70 years of communist dictatorship would once again choose a dictator.

This is what Elfriede Jelinek deals with in her text: with us, the people who, with somnambulistic blindness, elect the most dangerous, craziest, most unpredictable men to the top of the state. Men who, like Hitler once did, make no secret of their contempt for democracy, composure, and compromise. Convicted rapists like Donald Trump, war criminals like Putin. Almost as if our history as a whole were frivolous, a kind of play that we could interrupt at any time if it became too bloody. Yes, as if Trump and Putin were merely actors, performers in a historical play, modern variants of Shakespeare's Richard III.

In a speech at the very beginning of the RESISTANCE NOW! tour, I called this the "Atlantic illusion" or the "Fukuyama illusion": the conviction that with the victory over fascism and the downfall of state communism, history as a whole had come to an end. The conviction that "the West," in the emphatic sense of the term, simply digests the rest of the world, its extremisms, its tribal and feudal remnant traditions like a cow's stomach—until only pop culture, business, and a bit of liberal democracy remain.

As Hegel once did, the European spirit continues to believe that what is reasonable must inevitably become reality. What is wrong with tolerance, peace, human rights, i.e., minority rights? What is wrong with liberal democracy? What is wrong with the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number of people? What is wrong with democratic compromise instead of civil war, with morality instead of the will to power? What is wrong with a night watchman state that only bothers the people when it is absolutely unavoidable?

Well, the truth is perhaps that the history imagined by Hegel, Marx, or Fukuyama never existed. When it happened, history was always fatal for the loser. It was never tolerant, never peaceful, never

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generous, or in a word: never reasonable. As we are currently seeing in Gaza and Ukraine, human rights cease to apply precisely when the victor feels secure in his victory. When he considers his propaganda lies—or let's say, his version of history—to be convincing enough, against all facts and against all reason.

3.

As you know, a debate entitled RESISTANCE NOW is taking place today at the Segal Center. My fellow guests are Richard Schechner and Tania Bruguera, two intellectuals and artists whom I hold in the highest esteem and respect. RESISTANCE NOW is a tour that has been going on for almost exactly a year now and has taken me to a good dozen countries. The first year was a year of analysis and, if you'll allow me this somewhat naive term, of hope.

It began with an open letter to the prime minister of Slovakia, who had dismissed a number of liberal artistic directors and managers, including the general director of the Slovak National Theatre, my friend Matej Drlička. It continued with a letter that Elfriede Jelinek and I wrote to the voters of Austria: not to vote for the FPÖ, the successor party to the NSDAP, and not to give Austrian fascism a second chance.[2] But the Austrians ignored this and other appeals and helped the FPÖ achieve its best result ever. Only out of hubris—namely, the inability to form a coalition with the conservative center—was it unable to seize executive power in the country, which is why we currently have a kind of government of experts.

As the highlight of the tour, we launched a campaign at the end of last year for the introduction of a new European law on cultural freedom, reaching 100 million people in 25 countries. But then, just under two months ago, at a summit of the ETC—the European Theatre Convention, the association of European theatres—I met a high-ranking representative of the EU Commission responsible for culture. He listened kindly to our plan to enforce a new European law to protect artistic freedom and assured us of his full support. But then he made it clear to me "how things work in the Commission": "We write laws, and then we have to hope that they will be applied in the individual member states."

In other words, the end of history has come, but unfortunately only in liberal democratic institutions. And not, as Trump or Putin imagine, because these institutions are populated by weaklings, but because democracy is based on the principles of separation of powers, federalism, and minimal state intervention. This is the metapolitical imbalance of our time: on the one hand, we have institutions designed to ensure that the rules of democracy are followed. On the other, we have a completely archaic conception of power, as represented by Trump. It is a quasi-religious conception that, as state communism once did, makes facts "disappear" through linguistic intervention: facts such as the "Gulf of Mexico," political ideas such as "diversity," biological and social realities such as "female" and "trans," words that, by presidential decree, are no longer allowed to appear in official documents. It is a policy that envisions art and social discourse in the same way as the immigration authorities do in their interviews: art that speaks a state-prescribed language and illustrates the party program of the ruling party.

4.

Perhaps, and this brings me to the philosophical argument of my lecture, perhaps we need a new tragic poetry, a new tragic art. Perhaps the age of bourgeois drama—the art form of posthistory—is over. George Steiner put it this way in his book *The Death of Tragedy*: Bourgeois drama, for example Ibsen's plays, is based on the assumption that with a little more hygiene, a little more minority rights, better control of the economy, and a more honest reappraisal of the past, everything would be fine.

2. The FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs or Freedom Party of Austria) is the successor party to the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the Nazi Party). —Ed.

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The dramatic poet says, like former Chancellor Angela Merkel: The situation is serious, but "we can do it." Even if, as in the case of Merkel's refugee policy, the majority would have been against it if they had been asked. This is in line with Ibsen's liberal motto: "The majority is never right."

Greek tragedy, on the other hand, knows about the terror of the majority, the fragility of the law, the deceitfulness of language, the blindness of human decisions. Tragedy knows that truth more often follows power than reason, or as Hitler's crown lawyer, the notorious Carl Schmitt, once said: "The law follows politics"—a quote that the leader of the FPÖ, Herbert Kickl, has incorporated verbatim, like many Nazi quotes, into his program. Or as Trump once said: It's not about being the first, because that would require respecting the rules of the game. It's about being the only one: ending the game with victory. To erase the names of the defeated (and their ideas) from the history books, as Stalin once did with the victims of the Moscow Trials.

But in tragic poetry—and this, I maintain, is the mistake of all autocrats—the victor also comes away empty-handed. At the end of Sophocles's *Antigone*, Creon stands before the corpses of his family. When Agamemnon returns home after the victory over Troy, he himself becomes a victim of the violence he set in motion with the sacrifice of Iphigenia. The true tragedy is, well, tragic: it knows no victors, only the vanquished. Thus, tragic poetry knows more about power than the powerful themselves. And thus, Elfriede Jelinek, who in my opinion is the most clairvoyant tragic poet of our time, is surprised by the rhetoric of self-subjugation of the people, which only leads to ruin, just like the blind seer in the play: "I don't understand it. But unfortunately, I hear how it sounds."

That is the theme of *The Second Coming*: Why do people in Russia, the US, Hungary, Slovakia, and a growing number of European countries—the next will be Austria and Germany—follow autocratic leaders? Why do people follow a "master" whose only ideology is hollow triumphalism—the ideology of Dionysus, who proclaims in Euripides's *The Bacchae*: "What is wisdom? What is the most beautiful thing that the gods give to mortals? To press your fist victoriously on the neck of your enemy! And what is beautiful brings joy." These are the "harp sounds" that Elfriede Jelinek examines: the rhetoric of a quasi-cultic community. Music in which something mysterious and incomprehensible resonates, a tragic transformation, the downfall of the world as we know it: the apocalypse that arrives with the Second Coming of the Messiah, or, in the German title, the "final victory" of fascism. No wonder tech fascism has brought back an image of biblical horror into popular culture: an ascent to heaven without spirituality, the flight of tech billionaires from the burning planet Earth to Mars.

No matter how many pamphlets she signs with me, Elfriede Jelinek knows about our deeply tragic nature, about humanity's secret desire for destruction, because there is no other way to describe it. And so *The Second Coming* ends:

> All of us together have the burning earth and a high, burning mountain covered with burning trees, no, not high, just a hill we climb, are climbing again and again, with our backpacks behind and our rage up front and our weapons more to the side. We've been up there many times, meanwhile we can find the way there in our sleep. Now only our Lord and Master still has to come. Ah, we see: He has arrived. He is here. Now He is here. He never was away, but now he is here all the way. For us. Welcome, who are you, the best of immortals who calls us, who asks us? He does not have to, on fire, we say yes. Until we've come to our senses, we just keep saying, still on fire: yes.

5.

"Will to power," "God," "the tragic," the "superhuman": some will have noticed that I have taken a Nietzschean path. Nietzsche is the philosopher who, at the end of the 19th century, predicted the end of Christian metaphysics, the end of the bourgeois era and its moral concepts. Will to power instead of ethics, abundance of life instead of reason, rule of the superhuman instead of the welfare state, play and ritual instead of psychology, in short: tragedy instead of drama. It seems as if Nietzsche knew the world of Putin and Trump long before their time. No wonder Hitler, who had no sense of irony, referred to Nietzsche when he established his nihilistic rule over Germany and Europe.

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"The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his gaze: 'Where is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you! *We have killed him*—you and I! We are all his murderers!" Nietzsche writes in his book *The Gay Science*. The only problem was that after this murder, nothing actually happened. What followed was not just nihilism—which, incidentally, was not a completely negative concept for Nietzsche, but rather a historical and existential necessity, a transitional space to a new faith. No, after Nietzsche came organized nihilism: fascism, communism, then neoliberalism, and finally the second fascism, or techno-fascism (as if the first hadn't been just as much a techno-fascism).

Of course, progress as we knew it "after Nietzsche," that is, in the skeptical, nihilistic 20th century, could also mean liberation, emancipation, the expansion of humanity, justice, consideration, and free love. But in equal measure, and from both liberal and conservative sides, progress "after Nietzsche" meant, more quickly and more radically than ever before: technization, alienation, exploitation, isolation. A world emerged that was completely civilized, completely individualized, but without any spiritual foundation. A world that could easily fall prey to the second fascism, as Elfriede Jelinek describes it. A world that gets what it deserves: a metaphysics without a goal, apart from an exit plan for the super-rich. A metaphysics without curiosity, that is, without questioning the meaning of our collective existence. A metaphysics without transcendence that despises everything intellectual and spiritual—as long as it is not an empty, decorative ritual, such as the orthodox processions and marches, the golden halls, waving flags, and martial chorales that autocrats love so much.

So should we say goodbye to the idea of the tragic? Should we continue to defend drama against the return of tragedy? I believe we must first learn to understand the tragic. And this is where the role that Nietzsche had intended for art comes in, following the example of ancient Greece, which, when it turned away from the "old" gods, invented tragedy in order to give a new place to the ontological questions about the beginning and end, meaning and meaninglessness of life.

Nietzsche wanted to replace God and metaphysics with what he called in *The Gay Science* the "madman" and later—a term that is, unfortunately, completely idiotic—the "superhuman": capable of creating out of nothing a mythology, a belief, a religion of life. A form of existence that fills the void left by the death of God with something else. With a kind of positive nihilism: the confrontation with the tragic, with the absolute exposure of our existence.

Not through the rule of Dionysus, i.e., not through ritualized autocracy. But also not through what I have elsewhere called social democratic realism: the hope that with God, the wrath and cruelty of the gods would also disappear from the world, the hubris of rulers, the suffering of the defeated, the necessity of resistance, love, and collective meaning. Whatever one may think of the "will to power," it is perhaps the strongest driving force of human beings, as we know them from history. Look at the faces of the European dwarfs when they visit Trump's castle: how they beam as if under a sun lamp, magnetized by power. How Macron speaks his best English. How the little dwarf Merz rejoices when Trump praises his summer tan.

I would argue that Europe has never learned to shed its imperial spirit. As we know from Greek tragedies, it is difficult, perhaps politically impossible, to cope with the loss of an empire. For the state—and Hegel was right about this—is perhaps the last promise of eternity, of immortality, of meaning. I therefore think that, however secular we may be, we have never really accepted the death of God, never understood it as an individual and social possibility: as the beginning of an extreme art of living. As a prolog to the final return of humankind to earth, as a return from our imperial and metaphysical dreams to a world in which everything must be experienced and nothing conquered, nothing hoped for. As the beginning of the rebirth of society and art from the idea of life and its tragic vulnerability.

For if the gods are dead, then that means above all that there is no afterlife: no possible escape from life, no emergency exit to Mars or to a "meaningful" death. A religion of life counters this with radical immanence. As the French philosopher Bruno Latour demanded: after hundreds of years in which humans understood themselves as extraterrestrial beings, we must finally land, we must return to our planet. Like the tragic heroes of antiquity, we must come to terms with our creatureliness.

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And here, too, the sanctity of life returns, quasi as a spiritual tautology: life has no other meaning than life itself. This was what Nietzsche called "Amor Fati": the "love of fate," a positively turned nihilism that considers everything in life, including all accidents and coincidences, including suffering and loss, to be good and necessary. "To the poet and the wise man, all things are friends and sacred, all experiences useful, all days holy, all people divine." Nietzsche placed this motto by the American poet Emerson at the beginning of his reflections on the death of God, at the beginning of his *Gay Science*.

How to end? Last May, we founded the Republic of Love in Vienna. I will tell you more about it later, but the idea for the name came to me at the beginning of the RESISTANCE NOW! tour, which is making a stop here today at the Segal Center. It was in September 2024, in Amsterdam, and I was sitting on a panel with Matej Drlička, who had just been dismissed by the Slovak government. We were talking about exactly the same topic: the tragic return of fascism.

When we got to the audience questions, a man stood up, a Slovak, and asked, "Did the fascists defeat us because we were too nice, too soft, too polite?" Matej thought about it and then said, "No, because that's what we defend: our gentleness, our politeness. That's what we fight for, our humanity. And that is how we will defeat them in the end: with the power of our love."

Thank you for your patience.

TDReading

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