



# The Country in the Mist: Thoughts on Deus ex Machina



by

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*“The fairy tale is a story in which there are no accidents. The coordination of events is not accidental but precise. The manifest action of the tale is but the visible heights of a country that lies shrouded in mist.”*

— Max Lüthi,

*Das europäische Volksmärchen*

In ancient Greek theater, whenever things got too difficult for the merely mortal characters to handle, some deity would intervene. The actor portraying the divinity in question often was suspended over the stage by some impressive mechanical device intended to make the entrance properly awe-inspiring. From this theatrical form of divine intervention we get the expression *deus ex machina* — the “god from the machine.” And in modern writing, it is generally considered a major cheat.

But is it cheating?

You may have guessed from the question that I have some doubts. I would suggest that the fairness of employing “divine intervention” in storytelling has a great deal to do with the context in which it happens.

The reason that *deus ex machina* is considered a cheat is because it so often seems contrived. Simply put, it comes across as a storyteller’s cheap and easy way out of a tough situation. The resolution to the conflict — arguably the most important aspect of storytelling — does not seem to arise naturally or logically from what has already happened in the tale, but comes purely because the writer needed an easy out.

And therein lies, I think, the vital notion to keep in mind when deciding whether the serendipitous moment or godly assistance constitutes a real cheat. There are cases when divine intervention is legitimate and even, arguably, vital to the story.

## **Deus Ex Machina as Irony**

One of the cheap ways to get away with the “God (or wildly improbable coincidence, which in narrative essentially comes to the same thing) steps in and saves the day” ploy is to use it ironically. Consider a scene from the movie “True Lies.” The character played by Jamie Lee Curtis has no idea how to use the automatic weapon

she has just gotten her hands on. Desperately attempting to figure it out, she fumbles the gun, which flips end-over-end down a flight of stairs at her feet, firing all the way — and, as it goes, plugs a number of the bad guys, but not Curtis herself. This is textbook *deus ex machina* — only divine intervention could so thoroughly defy the physics of ballistics and the mathematics of probability in this manner. But since the whole film is a parody of the serendipitous spy film (ala the James Bond movies) the irony of the otherworldly good luck is well suited to the material.

To some extent, though, the same argument could be made of the very figures “True Lies” is spoofing — those icons of action and adventure movies, James Bond and Indiana Jones, to name but the two most obvious examples.

Both Indy and Bond often survive far more by luck than by their wits or their skills. In “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” our hero climbs aboard a German U-boat, but doesn’t get inside. By happy chance, the submarine never submerges on its journey — so rather than drown in the middle of the ocean, Indy lives to save the day. Bond, in “Live and Let Die,” finds himself trapped on a tiny island surrounded by hungry alligators. As luck would have it, a number of the alligators opt to rest in the water in a line all the way from the island to the shore, thereby forming a handy (if toothy) bridge over which Bond is able to flee.

But rather than booing the improbable dumb luck, most in the audience grin or cheer. We react that way because we are in the spirit not just of the individual stories, but of the universe they inhabit. Without giving it much thought, we recognize their reality is not quite ours. Theirs is more dynamic, more clearly delineated. We find very few instances of moral ambiguity or intellectual complexity in their world — the good guys are good, the bad guys are bad, the women are beautiful and the scholars are wise. Theirs is a world peopled by icons and archetypes. In it, *deus ex machina* has a kind of internal logic. Far from seeming like a desperate contrivance, in this narrative cosmos divine intervention is a totally natural aspect.

## **The Fairy Tale Grows Up**

It is no coincidence that the quotation I chose to introduce this piece — the one which inspired it, actually — mentions fairy tales. In a very real sense, the stories I mentioned above are our modern fairy tales. You may say that Indiana Jones and James Bond and all the others who inhabit their genre are hardly meant for little children. Don’t forget, though, that in their early tellings, fairy tales were also stories meant largely for adults. These were very often bloody, brutal and disturbing tales more in the spirit of Clive Barker than Walt Disney. Remember the cannibalistic hag of “Hansel and Gretel?” Think about Cinderella’s wicked stepmother slicing off the heel of one daughter, the toe of the other, hoping to make their feet fit the tell-tale slipper. Recall the gruesome discovery made by Bluebeard’s unfortunate bride, or the grim fate of Red Riding Hood’s granny. (Yes, in many versions she gets out — but that only means that the old lady was eaten alive.)

Violence and bloodshed are the least of what those old tales have in common with action adventure and other contemporary story forms. What matters more to me in this case is the iconic quality of both kinds of story. Whether we’re reading about Jack the Giant Killer or watching Luke Skywalker duel Darth Vader, we are seeing boys become larger-than-life heroes. The demons and ogres of old are replaced by the no-less evil (and arguably no more human) caricatures of Indy’s Nazis or Bond’s megalomaniacal cold war villains. The wise and scholarly guidance of Merlin leads directly to figures like Obi Wan Kenobi and Rupert Giles on “Buffy The Vampire Slayer.”

These are the personas which Carl Jung called the archetypes: iconic figures which, though they manifest themselves in countless ways, are readily identifiable across cultures and ages. The Hero. The Sage. The Rogue. The Princess. The Tyrant. The Seducer. The Innocent. The Fool.

But it isn't simply the cast of characters we find in adventure and science fiction, horror and fantasy which creates this resonance with those tales which typically started, "Once upon a time..." In both instances, we have characters who could not consistently inhabit our world. In our world, the Hero doesn't always get to confront the Tyrant, much less defeat him. In our world, the Princess isn't always beautiful and the Sage is often wrong. In our world, innocence is no defense against suffering and moral strength is no guarantee of victory. In our world, the quality of one's character often does not necessarily determine one's fate.

The characters in these stories, though, do not inhabit our world. They are not people at all, except in a cosmetic sense. They are really the denizens of, as Lüthi put it, "the visible heights of a country that lies shrouded in mist." But it's what is hidden beneath that mist which defines the nature of their domain.

Beneath the mist hide all of the weird beings, the gods and goddesses, the weavers of Fate, the pullers of strings. What happens among those visible heights is a result of their plans and machinations. They have their own agendas, often conflicting. In the tradition of the pantheons of Greece and Rome, of Denmark and Egypt, these beings tend to have very human faults and idiosyncrasies. Though unseen, they work their wills upon the iconic figures inhabiting the visible heights. We sense them in all we see and experience of that visible world. So it doesn't much surprise us when, on occasion, they make themselves seen, either "in person" (so to speak) or through actions which can only reasonably be attributed to divine intervention.

In our world, those beans Jack got for his cow would turn out to be just as worthless as his mother first fears. But when we look into Jack's sphere of icons and archetypes, we are not the least surprised that the beans give rise to a giant beanstalk which reaches to a castle in the clouds. We're also not surprised that, rather than get stomped by the giant, Jack bests him and makes his family rich in the process. Within the context of the story's universe, magic and giants, gods and monsters are all to be expected.

The same goes for many forms of contemporary storytelling. We expect a hundred henchmen to fire their automatic weapons at James Bond and miss every time. We expect the tank to swerve at the last possible second, sparing Indiana Jones from a gruesome doom. We expect the Force to guide Luke Skywalker's Death Star-destroying shot. Far from violating the laws of their stories, these examples of deus ex machina are part of the very nature of the world in which their stories take place. (Even the famous "Star Wars" opening title, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." deliberately mimics the standard fairy tale opening, "Once upon a time, in a far-off land...")

### **But is it Literary?**

All of this will no doubt leave some people — the self-appointed guardians of serious "literature" — saying, "Yes, well, perhaps deus ex machina devices can serve in those kinds of stories, but serious literature will not tolerate such things."

Well, it depends on what's meant by "serious literature." I'll certainly grant Harlan Ellison's point that "Star Wars" is not "Citizen Kane" — the former being a sweeping adventure peopled by purposefully broad personalities, the latter an intricate and nuanced examination of the complexities of its central character. But it seems

to me that the defining qualities of literature, regardless of the storytelling medium (novel or film, oral history or stage play), are relevance and longevity.

A relevant story is one that, in whatever way, speaks to something central to the human spirit. It could be a theme like (as I've mentioned in previous articles) the struggle of a Luke Skywalker or a Hamlet to overcome self doubt and do what must be done. It could be the eternal struggle of people in love trying to comprehend one another enough to make their relationship work. It could be the premise underlying virtually every mystery story ever told — the search to make sense of what seems enigmatic and thereby restore order to one's world. It could be a million other things. The point is that, when told well, these stories speak to us in ways that appeal to our spirits and our intellects. A fairy tale may do this in a fairly naked manner, while a modern novel may be far more layered, dressed in complexity. But fundamentally, the good story appeals to us on this basic level.

Longevity is, obviously, about staying power. I don't think we can identify a specific expiration date for stories, a length of time beyond which a story must still be read or told or experienced to be considered "lasting." Has the original "Star Wars" gotten there yet? Surely "The Wizard of Oz" and "Gone With the Wind" both have. If not, we can always call upon Moby Dick and Dracula, Frankenstein and Faust. We can point to Chaucer and Milton and Shakespeare and, going further back, the anonymous author of the Beowulf saga as evidence of tales that have certainly endured. The fact that so many of the stories that have lingered through decades and centuries have many fairy tale qualities to them is, I think, no mere coincidence. Rather than diminish them, their archetypal qualities make it easier for them to resonate with all of us, even down the passage of many generations.

### **The Fairy Tale Gets Smart**

The question that remains, then, is whether or not *deus ex machina* can be used effectively in a story more complex than "Star Wars" or a James Bond film. Can a story set in a more subtle, intricate world still call upon divine intervention without cheating its audience?

I would suggest that the answer to this question is: yes. Sometimes.

You can no doubt think of stories in which serendipitous turns of events come across as pale contrivances. I recently read a crime novel in which the entire plot was driven by one wild coincidence after another. The book wanted desperately to have an air of verisimilitude to it, to seem like a plausible account of police investigation. But the reliance on laughably implausible coincidence — not one but a whole platoon of gods from their machines — utterly defeated this. Remember the ending in Steven Spielberg's "Jurassic Park?" Our heroes are surrounded by ruthless, hungry velociraptors. There is no way out. The good guys are absolutely, definitely dino meat. Then, in barges the tyrannosaurus rex and chomps one raptor in mid-leap. The amazingly lucky timing of the attack — and the T-rex's decision to go after the raptor instead of the people it has chased throughout the film — flies in the face of the chaotic world the story creates before that point. No doubt you can think of numerous other examples without much difficulty.

But complex characters can inhabit Lüthi's "visible heights."

Consider Stephen King's monumental novel, *The Stand*. I realize that many critics would dispute King's credentials as a writer of "literature" but only time will genuinely judge that. I would suggest, however, that King is capable of writing brilliantly-realized characters whose experiences are meaningful and are likely to stand the test of longevity.

King's novel certainly lives in those visible heights, with much of its central action occurring beneath the mist. After a flu virus, engineered as a weapon by the US military, gets out and kills most of the world's population in a matter of months, the American survivors are drawn into two camps. One follows an old woman named Mother Abigail, the other is led by a man called Flagg. That the survivors are called by these figures in their dreams is only one obvious manifestation of that unseen world. Mother Abigail devoutly believes that she serves God, and there is little doubt that Flagg is either Satan or Satan's earthly expression — "the devil's imp," as Mother Abigail says.

Between these polar opposites, though, are a lot of characters who aren't quite so clearly good or evil. Consider the case of Lloyd Henreid. When first we meet Lloyd, he is in the process of committing a hold-up that turns into a multiple murder. Lloyd is imprisoned and nearly starves to death when his jailors all die. Then Flagg shows up. He has chosen Lloyd to be his right-hand man. Lloyd certainly isn't the nicest of guys, and he quickly realizes his boss is almost certainly the devil. But at the same time, Lloyd comes to be true to his promise of loyalty to Flagg. In the end he stands by Flagg even as Flagg's increasing weakness might make it possible for him to escape. His character has evolved from self-serving to strangely noble — despite (and, in a real sense, because of) his continuing service of evil.

Another interesting progression occurs with the characters of Larry Underwood and Nadine Cross. Larry, an up-and-coming rock star is told more than once that he "ain't no nice guy." He uses people and doesn't take much responsibility for his actions. He meets Nadine in post-plague Manhattan, and the two begin traveling together. The attraction between them is powerful, but Nadine resists the urge to consummate their relationship. Unbeknownst to Larry, she is Flagg's intended bride, chosen to bare his child and, in the tradition of sacrificial victims from ages back, must be a virgin when she is given to him. Nadine is both repulsed by her apparent destiny and darkly drawn to it — and in the end, she abandons Larry rather than risk her chastity.

When the two of them end up in Boulder, Colorado together, though, Nadine has a change of heart. She is ready to give herself to Larry and thereby deny Flagg once and for all. But there's a problem — Larry has since fallen in love with another woman. So Larry finds himself in a position to either fall back on his own ways or become that nice guy he never was before. When he turns Nadine away, it represents a pivotal moment in his evolution and cements the strength of character that will make it necessary for him to be among the few chosen to stand face to face with Flagg. But, in an ironic twist which is very true to King's Old Testament vision of a fierce sort of God, Larry's salvation is also the guarantee of Nadine's damnation.

God and the devil are all over *The Stand*. Viewed from a distance, the characters certainly seem like the puppets of divine or malign forces. But King gives us good up-close looks at these folks and (mostly) succeeds in exposing their humanity. Indeed, the very tension between acting as pawns in a celestial game and being people with free will (and all the doubts and failings that accompany it) is central to the novel. The fact that the characters become aware of the larger world beneath the mist, but are deeply uncertain of its character and geography, is what drives the story and engages the audience.

Here, however, is a vital point. Although the conflict of rational people confronted by a supernatural reality is central to the story King tells, these characters are believable and multi-faceted enough to exist outside of this world of gods and monsters. Unlike a Bond or an Indy Jones, Larry and Lloyd and Nadine and the rest wouldn't seem the least bit out of place in the universe we inhabit. As the novel starts, in fact, we feel they do inhabit our world. Part of the beauty and horror of *The Stand* is watching our pragmatic, empirical world turn into one of magic and mystery. Whether or not this transformation represents a degeneration or an evolution is also a central (and finally unresolved) question of the story.

So despite the archetypal battle of Good and Evil which defines the overarching story of *The Stand*, it is the host of moral and spiritual dilemmas that afflict the main characters which creates the real conflict in the tale. This, to my way of thinking, represents considerable complexity, and demonstrates that such nuance can indeed coexist with the forces of *deus ex machina*.

### **The Bottom Line(s)...**

Here, then, is what all this comes to. There are certain characters — whether they be James Bond or Jack the Giant Killer — who are confined to the world of *deus ex machina*. Take them out of their fairy tale environs and they look absurd. But a well-drawn character created by a skilled author can indeed inhabit the “visible world” above the deity-inhabited mist.

All the same, divine intervention is a tricky tool to use without the audience crying foul. To make it work, a storyteller has to establish throughout the narrative that hers or his is a world in which unseen forces sometimes manipulate reality. Even then, there must be something about the characters which makes the audience believe they have somehow earned the divine intervention. We cheer for Luke Skywalker because we believe he has worked to believe in and understand the nature of the Force. When he fires the shot that destroys the first Death Star, it is no cheat, but the logical culmination of events and the appropriate expression of the character he has become. The same applies to *The Stand*. King quite literally brings down “the hand of God” to resolve the conflict between the good guys and the bad. But again, all that the characters have gone through leading up to that point has set the stage for that moment. Their choices and decisions precipitate the climactic instant, so when God does intervene, it seems like the only possible natural conclusion.

In the end, I think, an author considering turning to a *deus ex machina* moment in a novel must ask this: will the intrusion seem truly divine, or will it simply feel like a ploy on the part of a desperate writer? Will the audience see God’s hand, or the author’s? If the story has, from page one, inhabited that country above the mist, then the divine might well come as a natural guest. If not, God is apt to look a lot more like that shaggy and flummoxed man behind the curtain, desperately pulling levers and pushing buttons to sustain what is, at last, a great lie.

The god from the machine is a tool essentially as old as storytelling itself. But unlike such devices as the traditional Greek Chorus, it is no less useful today than it was in ancient Athens. While it can certainly be misused, the suggestion that it is or should be forbidden is a foolish one that would instantly invalidate most of the stories which have endured the passage of ages. In the hands of a skilled storyteller, it can be employed with subtlety and great effect.



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