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Between Negativity and Resistance: Jean Genet and Committed Theatre

Carl Lavery

INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom has it that Jean Genet's political engagement started during *les événements* of May 1968, when he wrote an article for the popular magazine *Nouvel Observateur* defending Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the *porte-parole* of the Parisian students, from anti-Semitic slurs made in the French Communist Party's (PCF) newspaper, *L'Humanité*.[1] Genet's decision to abandon creative literature in the late 1960s and to put his pen at the service of numerous political groups and causes including immigrant workers, the Black Panther Party and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) would appear to vindicate the correctness of that judgement.[2] So to claim, as I intend to do, that Genet's late theatre, written between 1955 and 1961, is a sophisticated example of *théâtre engagé* is, perhaps, surprising. For some familiar with Genet's work, it might even appear foolhardy. Did not Genet repeat, again and again, that political art was pointless and that only concrete action would do?[3] However, as is often the case with a writer as deliberately perverse as Genet, comments like these cannot be taken at face value. And indeed while Genet certainly did dismiss engagement at times, there are other occasions when he articulated a more positive attitude toward committed art, claiming, for instance, in a late interview in 1982 with Rüdiger Wischenbart and Layla Shahid Barrada, that his plays are political, albeit in an 'oblique way'.[4]

Taking this obliqueness as a point of departure, I intend to go against the critical grain in this essay by claiming Genet as one of the most politically astute playwrights of his generation. The argument develops in

1. See the article 'Lenin's Mistresses' reproduced in Albert Dichy (ed.), *Jean Genet: L'Ennemi déclaré, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 6 (Paris: Gallimard, 1991). All translations (including those of titles) are my own unless otherwise indicated. I have left the 'Avertissement *au Balcon*' in French as we do not have an equivalent word for *un avertissement* in English.

2. Leading critics conventionally divide Genet's career into three stages: novelist, playwright and political activist. This has meant that the political dimension of Genet's theatre has either been overlooked

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two stages. First, I explore the political implications of Genet's short manifesto 'Avertissement *au Balcon*', which, in my reading, articulates a coherent model of political art, particularly when read through Theodor Adorno's notion of negativity. Second, I show how *The Balcony's* deconstruction of theatre calls into question the very model of negative art he articulated in the 'Avertissement'. In my view, this contradiction between theory and practice is not indicative of political nihilism on Genet's part, as some continue to claim.[5] On the contrary, it is caused by his attempts to produce a form of political theatre that would avoid appropriation by dominant discourse. This leads me to suggest in the final section of the essay that Genet's theatre can be profitably seen as an early prototype for what Philip Auslander calls 'resistant political art' – a mode of performance that shifts the focus from negative aesthetics to anti-aesthetics.[6]

THE 'AVERTISSEMENT AU BALCON*' AND POLITICAL THEATRE IN THE 1950s*

The 'Avertissement' is crucial to any study dealing with Genet's notion of committed drama. Not only is it one of the rare texts in which he reflects on the political significance of his own theatre, but its publication date in 1960 (it prefaced the 1960 edition of *The Balcony*) situates it towards the end of his second period as a dramatist – the period from 1955 to 1961, when he abandoned the neo-classicist form of *The Maids*, *Deathwatch and Splendid's* and produced his three great experiments in political drama: *The Balcony* which deals with revolution and reaction in a European context; *The Blacks* which explores how a productive, post-colonial identity can be imagined for newly emancipated countries in Africa; and *The Screens* which, as David Bradby points out, was the only French play of the time to depict contemporary events in Algeria 'while the war was taking place'.[7] The 'Avertissement' then is a key text in Genet's career. In it, he meditates on how the dramaturgy of his later plays differs from conventional notions of politically committed drama. To that extent, it is not unreasonable to argue that the 'Avertissement' affords access to what Genet's purposefully oblique notion of *théâtre engagé* might consist of. But, a word of caution is necessary. The 'Avertissement' does not function as a classic, political manifesto. Like much of Genet's writing, the argument proceeds by negation, allusion and insinuation. To understand it, we have to pay attention to what it does not say.

Surprisingly, given its importance, no commentator, with the exception of the British critic, David H. Walker, has subjected the 'Avertissement' to serious political analysis.[8] No doubt this is because the text seems to repeat Genet's standard attack on political drama for betraying theatre's essence, which, as he puts it in 'The Strange Word Urb', is only to be found in 'myth'.[9] Taking Genet at his word, however, is to miss the point. In addition to contradicting Genet's earlier statement that *The Balcony's* 'starting point was Franco's Spain', such a naïve reading fundamentally misinterprets what an *avertissement* is

or underestimated. See Albert Dichy, 'Jean Genet: Portrait of the Artist as Warrior', in Barbara Read and Ian Birchall (eds), *Flowers and Revolution: A Collection of Writings on Jean Genet* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1997), pp. 21–25; and Jean-Bernard Moraly, *Jean Genet: La Vie écrite* (Paris: La Différence, 1988). For the best accounts of Genet's politics from 1968 to 1985 see Edmund White, *Genet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993); Hadrien Laroche, *Le Dernier Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 1997); Scott Durham, *Phantom Communities: The Simulacrum and the Limits of Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Simon Critchley, 'Writing the Revolution: The Politics of Truth in Genet's *Prisoner of Love*', in *Ethics, Politics and Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 30–50; and Edward Hughes, *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature: From Loti to Genet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

3. In the 'May Day Speech' he gave at New Haven in 1970, Genet states: 'I believe that a symbolic attitude, like the conscience of good liberals, occurs when you believe that you've done everything for the revolution. It's much more effective to accomplish small, concrete acts than vain, theatrical ones'. *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 50.

supposed to do.[10] As its French etymology suggests, an *avertissement* is not a denial; it is a warning. Within the field of committed drama, this shifts the emphasis from rejection to critique. The critical dimension of the text is immediately evident in the opening paragraph, when Genet attacks playwrights who use Aristotelian methods for revolutionary ends:

> The fictional representation of an action, of an experience, generally dissuades us from the need of having to carry out that action in reality and by ourselves.
>
> The problem with any social disorder – or evil – that has been resolved on the stage is that it indicates that this disorder has, in fact, been abolished in reality, since, according to the aesthetic conventions of our time, representation can only be the representation of a fact. What happens is that we pass on to something else at the very moment we proudly identify ourselves with the hero who sought – and found – the solution to the problem.[11]

To grasp fully Genet's comments here we need to situate them within their proper historical context. In France in the 1940s and 1950s, left-wing models of political art were dominated by the *Parti Communiste Français's* doctrine of socialist realism. John Flower provides a good description of what socialist realist aesthetics were designed to do:

> The function of literature should be positive; its aim should be to instruct the public in the principles of Stalinist political truth. Not surprisingly therefore ... socialist realism returns obsessively to a number of standard themes – the virtues of the Socialist State, Stalin himself ... the French Communist Party as the only saving organisation in France, violent opposition both to any form of American interference in national affairs and to all manifestations of what were considered to be the natural repressive tendencies of a bourgeois government and society.[12]

The 'Avertissement' is hostile to socialist realism on both historical and aesthetic grounds. Historically, Genet suggests that socialist realism is flawed in 1950s France because there had not been a socialist revolution in the country. Subsequently, a French art form that glorifies revolutionary heroes and parties has no pragmatic value: it negates its own purpose. Why create a revolution when the play you are watching is telling you that it has already happened? Genet's critique of socialist realism is based on a logical reading of Aristotle's notion of catharsis, or what we might call 'an aesthetics of purification'. Like Augusto Boal in the opening chapters of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Genet argues that the fictional representation of a subversive act has a tendency to prevent us, the spectators, from carrying out that action in reality.[13] This is because vicarious or imaginary experience, what Sigmund Freud in the essay 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage' called 'compensation', is fulfilment enough.[14] *Ergo* socialist realist plays that present the revolution in positive terms as *un fait accompli* are not only politically

4. Ibid., p. 285.

5. See Harry Stewart and Rob Roy McGregor. *Jean Genet: From Fascism to Nihilism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993); and Eric Marty, *Bref Séjour à Jérusalem* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

6. Philip Auslander, 'Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Performance', in *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 58–72.

7. David Bradby, 'Genet, the Theatre and the Algerian War', *Theatre Research International*, 19:3 (1994), 226–337 (p. 226).

8. David H. Walker, 'Revolution and Revisions in Genet's *Le Balcon*', *Modern Languages Review*, 79:4 (1984), 817–834.

9. Genet, 'That Strange Word d'..', in Michel Corvin and Albert Dichy (eds), *Jean Genet: Théâtre complet* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 879–888 (p. 882).

10. Genet, 'I Have Been the Victim of an Attempted Murder', reproduced in Richard Coe (ed.), *The Theater of Jean Genet: A Casebook*, trans. Richard Coe (New York: Grove Press, 1970), pp. 90–92 (p. 91).

11. Genet, 'Avertissement *au Balcon*', in *Jean Genet: Théâtre complet*, pp. 261–262 (p. 261).

useless, they are reactionary. They disperse the very energy they ought to encourage. Although Genet does not mention specific playwrights in the 'Avertissement', his comments apply to the work of writers like Roger Vailland, André Stil and Louis Aragon, all of whom invested in the socialist realist aesthetic.[15]

If the 'Avertissement' contends that socialist realism is redundant, it is equally suspicious about the alternative form of theatre on offer in France at the time: *théâtre populaire*. As theorised first by Romain Rolland and then by Jacques Copeau, *théâtre populaire* had its roots in the French revolution of 1789. The point of this theatre, as Bradby and McCormick explain in *People's Theatre*, was to use classical texts (Corneille, Racine, Molière, Sophocles) as a way of producing a more democratic society based on Jacobin notions of *liberté, egalité* and *fraternité*. Because of the French government's desire to reconstruct a sense of nationhood and identity after its defeat in 1940, the ideals of *théâtre populaire* flourished in the late 1940s and 1950s. Jean Vilar, the director of the *Théâtre National Populaire* in Paris, attracted new, working class audiences to the theatre with productions such as *Le Cid*, starring the movie idol Gérard Philippe; and five new dramatic centres were established in regional France between 1945–1951, each of which attempted to use theatre as a medium for manufacturing a democratic consensus throughout the country at large.

While the 'Avertissement' makes no direct reference to *théâtre populaire*, the whole argument of the text is opposed to its ethos. In the last paragraph, for instance, Genet makes the following disparaging comment:

> Several poets, these days, go in for a very strange activity: they sing about notions of the People, Liberty, Revolution, etc., which, precisely because they have been sung about so beautifully, are then dispatched and nailed into some sky of abstraction, where they shine weakly as impotent stars in a grotesque constellation.[16]

The target of Genet's broadside would have been immediately obvious to his contemporaries. In the celebrated 1953 manifesto, 'The TNP–Public Service', Jean Vilar, after arguing that drama has an ethical mission to disseminate culture to all social classes, claimed that 'the art of ''popular theatre'' is a permanent revolution'.[17] For Genet, this statement is both ridiculous and disingenuous. *Théâtre populaire's* conservative commitment to 'high art' – official culture – meant that it could not hope to be anything other than reactionary. For all its talk of liberty, equality and fraternity, *théâtre populaire* supported the values of the existing regime, which, according to Genet, gave ample proof of its failure to create something new, something revolutionary. In the context of Vilar's comments about theatre, it is surely no coincidence that Roger, the revolutionary who castrates himself in Irma's salons towards the end of *The Balcony*, is a plumber. Genet appears to be deliberately poking fun at Vilar's suggestion in the same manifesto that theatre ought to be, 'a public service. Exactly like gas, water and electricity'.[18] Interestingly, in 1968 during a conference on French theatre held at Villeurbanne, the

12. John Flower, *Writers and Politics in Modern France* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 54.

13. See Augusto Boal, 'Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy', in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. Leal McBride and Maria Odilia Leal McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1993), pp. 1–50.

14. Sigmund Freud, 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage', in Albert Dickson (ed.), *Art and Literature, The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 14, trans. by James Strachey et al (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 119–127 (p. 123).

15. For a further discussion of socialist realism in France see David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals 1914–1960* (London: Deutsch, 1964); and Benoît Denis, *Littérature et engagement de Pascal à Sartre* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

16. Genet, 'Avertissement', p. 262.

17. Jean Vilar, 'T.N.P. – Public Service', in Richard Drain (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Theatre: A Sourcebook*, trans. Richard Drain and Micheline Mabille (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 193.

18. Ibid. Genet's rejection of *théâtre populaire* explains why his theatre differs from Ariane Mnouchkine's, which, along with the work of Armand Gatti,

has arguably been the most important form of political theatre in France from the late 1960s onwards. Unlike Genet, Mnouchkine sees theatre as a collective carnival, a way of bringing people and cultures together. To this extent, she is the inheritor of Vilar's legacy. See David Bradby's *Modern French Drama 1940–1990*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

delegates, many of whom had shared the aesthetic and political vision of *théâtre populaire* throughout the 1950s and 1960s, finished by adopting Genet's position in the 'Avertissement'. As Bradby and McCormick note: 'A communiqué was issued at the close of the conference in which the signatories admitted that by purveying high culture, they had been tacitly supporting the Gaullist regime, and that they had only succeeded in reaching those classes that were already cultured.'[19]

THE REJECTION OF SARTRE'S THEATRE OF SITUATIONS

As well as contesting proletarian theatre and *théâtre populaire*, the 'Avertissement' consciously distances itself from the models of commitment adopted by Sartre and Brecht – the two major playwrights of the time. Genet's difficulty with Sartrean and Brechtian engagement hinges on how they both try to use theatre for rational ends. For him, this diminishes the power of the theatrical event, which, as he explains it in the 'Avertissement', must always be affective: 'The work must be an active explosion, an act to which the public reacts – as it wishes, as it can'.[20] Taking a closer look at Sartrean and Brechtian aesthetics allows us to understand the rationale behind Genet's critique and, at the same time, discloses the full significance of the 'Avertissement's' political dimension.

Unlike Genet's affective theatre, political theatre, for Sartre is a theatre of situations, that is, a theatre where spectators are encouraged to identify with, and learn from, the actions of characters confronted with a specific limit-situation. In the manifesto 'For a Theatre of Situations', Sartre states that the situation in question will be universal – by which he means that it will correspond to the great political dilemmas of the age: '[S]ituations must be found which are so general that they are common to all. Immerse men in these universal and extreme situations which leave them only a couple of ways out, arrange things so that in choosing the way they choose themselves, and you've won – the play is good.'[21] Although he urges the spectator to identify with the characters existentially rather than psychologically, Sartre's theatre of situations is nevertheless aesthetically conservative. Little attempt is made to interrogate theatre as an always already politicised institution; crucial questions of representation are not posed; and the spectator is ultimately engaged through traditional techniques of identification and empathy.[22] By insisting on imaginary empathy, putting oneself in the same position of the other, Sartre transforms theatrical experience into judicial experience. The audience is encouraged to judge the actions of characters and then to use that judgement on itself. Supposedly, the result of this existential witnessing is to effect a real change in the world outside the theatre. In Sartre's view, art is meant to be a spur to action, a type of praxis: 'I want the audience to see our century from outside, as something alien, as a witness. And at the same time to participate in it, since it is in fact making this century. There is one feature particular to our age: the fact that we know we shall be judged.'[23]

From the standpoint of the 'Avertissement', Sartre's view of theatre is mistaken. Unlike Sartre, Genet does not believe that empathy with

19. David Bradby and John McCormick, *People's Theatre* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 138.

20. Genet, 'Avertissement', p. 262.

21. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'For A Theater of Situations', in Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (eds), *Sartre on Theater*, trans. Frank Jellinek (London: Quartet, 1976), pp. 3–5 (pp. 4–5).

22. The conservatism of the Sartrean stage is apparent in the statement in which he claimed that his theatre 'derive[s] from the Corneillean tradition'. Ibid., p. 36.

23. Ibid., p. 76.

characters placed in dramatic situations provides access to the real. On the contrary, as we have already seen, he argues that it erodes the real by replacing actual experience with imaginary experience.[24] In Sartre's theatre of situations, we are still in the realm of the aesthetic. Ironically, then, Sartre, the great exponent of concrete philosophy, has forgotten that theatre is fiction, not fact. By doing so, he falls into the same trap, implies Genet, as playwrights who invest in socialist realism – he offers imaginary solutions to real-life problems. And as Genet stresses: 'No problem presented on the stage ought to be given an imaginary solution, particularly if the problem is of socio-political nature.'[25]

While it could be objected, here, that Sartre does not provide positive heroes with whom we can identify, ultimately, the proper course of action in his plays, what Genet means by the 'imaginary solution', is always present as a default position. In *No Exit*, for instance, we are aware that the existential suffering of Garcin, Inès and Estelle would immediately cease if they were to choose freedom. And in *Dirty Hands*, Hoederer's actions, his willingness to dirty his hands, are presented as positive alternatives to Hugo's mistaken idealism. For Genet, Sartre's theatre is not, as Beckett's is, 'an adult theatre' – a theatre that encourages the spectator to exercise his freedom in the absence of definite solutions.[26] Rather, it is a childish theatre, a theatre that reduces freedom by suggesting answers and proposing proper codes of conduct. That Sartre was later to denounce his own theory of literature would seem to prove the validity of Genet's critique of juridical theatre in the 'Avertissement'.

GENET AND THE REJECTION OF EPIC THEATRE

On the surface, it would seem that Brecht's epic theatre, the theatre that so dominated critics and playwrights in France in the late 1950s, is immune from the types of criticism articulated in the 'Avertissement'. The whole thrust of Brecht's practice – is it not? – is to produce a form of drama where 'nobody gets raped by the individual [the actor] portrays'.[27] Instead of an imaginary stage, Brecht wants a 'theatre for a scientific age', a theatre where the spectator's critical faculties are left intact and where s/he is encouraged to analyse and debate.[28] Despite this shared mistrust of empathy, the 'Avertissement' is just as hostile to Brecht's epic theatre as it is to Sartre's theatre of situations. Towards the middle of the text Genet makes a statement, which, in the Brechtian atmosphere of the times, would have been calculated as a deliberate provocation: 'Let the evil on stage explode so that it shows us naked – and if possible – leaves us exhausted, having no other recourse than ourselves … Artists – poets – are under no obligation to find practical solutions to the problems of evil. They have to accept their damnation.'[29]

Notwithstanding its oblique attack on the many playwrights and critics who championed Brechtian aesthetics after the Berliner Ensemble's visits to Paris in 1954 and 1955, Genet's comments are neither gratuitous nor flippant.[30] He mistrusts Brechtian theatre because it fails to produce 'evil', which, in his vocabulary, is no longer a theological concept, but,

24. The relationship between fiction and reality troubled Genet throughout his career. On the opening page of *Prisoner of Love*, he warns the reader that his book ought not to be taken as reality: 'So did I fail to understand the Palestinian revolution? Yes, completely … Because the occupied territories were only a play acted out second by second, by occupied and occupier. The reality lay in involvement, fertile in hate and love, in people's daily lives; in silence'. Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. by Barbara Bray (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), p. 3.

25. Genet, 'Avertissement', p. 261. It is interesting to compare Genet's critique of Sartrean methods with Jerzy Grotowski's rejection of empathy. Like Genet, Grotowski rejects empathy for its political and ethical ineffectiveness: 'The audience – all Creons – may well side with Antigone throughout the performance, but this does not prevent each of them from behaving like Creon once out of the theatre.' Jerzy Grotowski, 'Theatre's New Testament: An Interview with Eugenio Barba', in Eugenio Barba (ed.), *Towards a Poor Theatre*, trans. Jörgen Andersen and Judy Barba (London: Methuen, 1995), pp. 27–53 (p. 29).

26. Roland Barthes, in Jean-Loup Rivière (ed.), *Roland Barthes,*

rather, a shattering experience that disturbs the spectator and compels him/her to confront to confront alterity, absolute otherness. Anticipating the thought of a later generation of post-structuralist playwrights from Jacques Derrida to Alain Badiou, 'evil', for Genet, is a pre-requisite for changing consciousness: it provides a pathway into difference, the very thing on which contemporary politics and ethics are judged. Crucially, when Genet rejects Brecht's 'smoker's theatre' two decades later in an 'Interview with Hubert Fichte', he castigates it, once again, for its failure to affect – and thus disrupt – bourgeois consciousness:[31]

> The choice of gesture, smoking a cigar, demonstrates a coldness towards the work of art, which is not permitted. It's not permitted by the appeal of the work of art itself. I don't know the Rothschild family, but I think that with them you'd probably smoke a cigar and talk about art.[32]

It is not surprising that Genet should equate epic theatre with bourgeois consciousness, for he is deeply antagonistic to the revolutionary claims of Marxism – the ideology that Brecht's theatre was meant to serve. In Genet's view, Marxist ideology (and, by extension, epic drama) does little to change the status quo. It remains bound to the transcendent system it is so concerned to subvert: Enlightenment thinking. Genet's view of revolution is not that of the philosopher or ideologue. In his affirmative moments, he is a utopian anarchist, dedicated to the ethical transformation of the world. In *Prisoner of Love*, his posthumously published book about the Palestinians, he says, for instance, that 'the main object of a revolution is the liberation of man . . . not the interpretation and application of some transcendental ideology'.[33] And in the essay 'The Palestinians', he remarks admiringly that: 'The Fedayeen did not want power, they had freedom.'[34]

Genet's hostility towards Brechtian theatre is well illustrated in *The Screens*, a play he was editing at the same time he was working on the 'Avertissement'. In that work, Brecht's famous line from the end of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* about the land 'belong[ing] to those who are good for it' is recontexualised.[35] Where in Brecht's play, the line is delivered by the singer, who provides a wise commentary on events, in Genet's text, by contrast, the line is spoken by Monsieur Blankensee, a European coloniser:

> MONSIEUR BLANKENSEE: In a minor German opera – whose name I no longer recall – I heard this line 'Things belong to those who can improve them. . .' I'd like to know who improved my orange groves, my forests, my rose bushes?[36]

Monsieur Blankensee's question is, of course, rhetorical. He uses Brecht's commitment to Marxist ideals of progress to justify colonial violence. This is an apt demonstration of Genet's point about ideology, for it shows that Marxist ideology does not interrupt bourgeois oppression; rather, it repackages that suffering under a different name. It is worth remembering that in *The Screens*, Saïd, the play's anti-hero, is shot by the victorious rebels at the end of the play for refusing to endorse

Ecrits sur le théâtre (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 87.

27. Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 91–99 (p. 91).

28. Ibid., p. 121.

29. Genet, 'Avertissement', p. 262.

30. I am thinking here of playwrights and directors like Arthur Adamov, Roger Planchon and Antoine Vitez, and critics like Roland Barthes and Bernard Dort.

31. While it might be argued that Genet's view of Brecht is simplistic – for instance, Brecht stressed the importance of enjoyment and audience participation in his plays – it nevertheless reflects how Brecht was portrayed in France in the 1950s by critics such as Bernard Dort and Roland Barthes.

32. Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 145.

33. Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, p. 141.

34. Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 264.

35. Bertolt Brecht, 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle', in John Willett and Ralph Mannheim (eds), *Bertolt Brecht Collected Plays*, vol. 7, trans. James Stern and Tania Stern with W. H. Auden (London: Eyre and

Cartesian rationality – the very thing that in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* resolves the land dispute between the villagers.[37]

Predictably, Genet's rejection of Brechtian aesthetics, when placed in conjunction with his desire to overwhelm the spectator with 'evil', has often resulted in his plays being read through Antonin Artaud's notion of cruelty. Within this narrative, Genet is usually perceived as a non-political playwright whose interest in revolution is essentially metaphysical in scope.[38] This is the position, for example, adopted by Christopher Innes in his influential study *Avant Garde Theatre 1882–1992*:

> Genet's politics are ... ambiguous. On the surface his dramatic subjects seem to be revolution and repression, class hatred and racial conflict, colonialism and Third World liberation. But any attempt to analyse his work in these terms inevitably leads to the conclusion that his plays are empty of significance ... In fact Genet's rejectionism is far more extreme. His work which has links with the expressionists and surrealists, presents social reality itself as illusory, and the human need for illusion as being so strong that no social order can be based on reality. [...] The means Genet envisaged for achieving this transformation of reality echo many of Artaud's characteristic staging devices.[39]

Innes's comments are problematic on two fronts. First, they assume that Artaud's theatre is devoid of politics, which, if we consider Derrida's reading of Artaud, is debateable.[40] Second, they ignore Genet's point in the last paragraph of the 'Avertissement'. Here, he argues that the way to inspire political change is not for theatre to 'sing about People, Liberty and Revolution in abstract terms'. On the contrary, political theatre must provoke evil and suffering. According to Genet's logic in the final line of the text, evil, or what we might also see as radical negativity, is what prevents the 'song from destroying its own pretext'.[41] Genet's 'rejectionism' is thus more complicated than Innes thinks. Rather than demonstrating some deep-rooted nihilism on Genet's part, it is an attempt to produce a form of political art that would avoid appropriation.

If we still want to talk of Genet's drama in terms of cruelty, then we must do so with a new understanding of that concept. In Genet's hands cruelty is not simply metaphysical; it is intended to have political consequences. This explains why Genet's political plays, with the possible exception of *The Blacks*, are devoid of positive solutions and happy endings.[42] In them, evil is a strategy for creating a more effective form of political theatre.

GENET AND NEGATIVITY

The emphasis that Genet puts on evil in the 'Avertissement' produces a surprising, but ultimately useful, parallel between his notion of commitment and that of the principal proponent of negative dialectics, Theodor Adorno. In his famous essay 'Commitment', Adorno, like Genet, highlights the contradictions involved in conventional models of

Methuen, 1976), p. 237.

36. Genet, 'The Screens', in *Théâtre complet*, pp. 571–756 (p. 634).

37. Genet's disaffected attitude towards dialectical materialism is consistent with the French Left's abandonment of Marxism in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and the PCF's reluctance to support the Algerian revolutionaries during the war of independence (1954–1962).

38. See Robert Brustein, *The Theater of Revolt* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1964); David I. Grossvogel, *The Blasphemers: The Theater of Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett and Genet* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962); and Gene A. Plunka, *The Rites of Passage of Jean Genet: The Art and Aesthetics of Risk Taking* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1992).

39. Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre 1892–1992* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 108, 114.

40. According to Derrida, Artaud's theatre is a 'festival [which] must be a political act'. See Jacques Derrida, 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', in Edward Scheer (ed.), *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 39–46 (p. 41).

41. Genet, 'Avertissement', p. 262.

engagement that use theatre as a positive tool to oppose 'a world which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads'.[43] In his analysis of Sartrean and Brechtian commitment, Adorno shows how both playwrights unwittingly undermine their own intentions. The tragic paradox of Sartre's theatre, argues Adorno, is that its distrust of formalism and investment in authentic, artless communication lends itself to easy appropriation by the very society it purports to destroy. Instead of liberating the masses, Sartre's work entertains them: 'The combination of solid plot, and equally solid, extractable idea won Sartre great success and made him, without doubt against his honest will, acceptable to the culture industry.'[44]

Where Sartre's theatre fails because it misjudges the importance of form, Brecht's theatre fails, claims Adorno, for the opposite reason. His concern with alienation, with *Verfremdung*, trivialises political reality. In the play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, Adorno says that Brecht dangerously misrepresents 'the true horror of fascism'.[45] And, in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Adorno is quick to point out that Brecht's formalism undermines the historical didacticism that he is trying to impart:

> A socio-political analysis, of the sort Marx and Engels sketched in their criticism of Lassalle's play *Franz von Sickingen*, would show that Brecht's simplistic equation of the Thirty Years' War with a modern war excludes precisely what is crucial for the behaviour and fate of Mother Courage in Grimmelshausen's novel.[46]

Adorno's solution to 'the paradox of commitment' is to call for a stage that avoids politics altogether:[47] 'This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead.'[48] Adorno's comments fundamentally alter the landscape of political art. For him, art has no need to gesture outside itself to be political; rather art is political when it abandons political content altogether, and expresses the horror of the age through negative forms and structures. From the depressed and autonomous perspective of what Adorno calls negative aesthetics, the work of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka has greater political potential than that of Sartre and Brecht: 'Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays . . . have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance.'[49]

In Adorno's memorable phrase, Beckett and Kafka 'compel the change of attitude which committed works merely demand'.[50] Their hopelessness produces an appeal that things be better, that we extricate ourselves from the disastrous state we are currently in. Douglas Kellner provides an elegant explanation for this dialectic: '[F]or Adorno ''authentic art'' provided insight into existing reality, expressing human suffering and the need for social transformation, and provided as well an aesthetic experience which helped to produce critical consciousness and the need for individual and social transformation.'[51]

42. In the final speech of *The Blacks*, Vertu holds out the possibility for an alternative form of Black identity when she says to Village that 'what's sure, at least, is that you won't be able to run your fingers through my long blond hair any more'. Genet, 'The Blacks', in *Théâtre complet*, pp. 471–570 (p. 542).

43. Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno,* trans. Francis McDonagh (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 177–195 (p. 180).

44. Ibid., p. 182.

45. Ibid., p. 184.

46. Ibid., p. 186.

47. Ibid., p. 188.

48. Ibid., p. 194.

49. Ibid., p. 191.

50. Ibid.

51. Douglas Kellner, 'Theodor Adorno and the Dialectics of Mass Culture', in Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (eds), *Adorno: A Critical Reader* (London: Blackwell,

2002), pp. 86–109 (p. 93).

Kellner's comments are useful because they show how, for Adorno, the aesthetic is both a space where authentic experience occurs, and a site from which critical thinking can begin. The crucial point is that politics are transmitted through the aesthetic experience of the work itself, not through any intentional message the work might communicate via its content (like Sartre) and/or form (like Brecht). In other words, the politics of art, for Adorno, derives from the autonomy of the aesthetic, which, in the hands of authentic artists like Kafka and Beckett, contests the debased culture of everyday life.

Adorno's deconstruction of Sartre and Brecht in 'Commitment' has an astonishing amount in common with the position Genet adopts in the ''Avertissement''. Consider, for instance, the following statement in which Genet advocates a dialectic of evil: 'The role of the artist – or poet – is not to find a practical solution to the problems of evil . . . If, in the work of art, the ''good'' is to appear, it's only through the power of song, which works to magnify the evil exposed in it.'[52] Like Adorno, Genet suggests that using art to express a coherent political message is ineffective. For him, the political value of the art work (the good) only emerges from its confrontation with negativity (evil).[53] The negative experience that Genet describes here would appear to possess what Adorno's friend, Walter Benjamin, calls 'messianic power', for in it, evil is 'indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption'.[54] Genet's commitment to an aesthetic of suffering is demonstrated most vividly in Tableau Six of the 1960 version of *The Balcony*.[55] In that Tableau, which Genet was later to cut from the 1962 text, Roger is criticised by his fellow committee members for investing in conventional notions of political art:

> ROGER: A [revolutionary] poem, yes, let's have a poem about Liberty, and the virtues of the People. . .
>
> MARC, *solemnly*: Anything but that. [. . .] We'll prepare poems and images alright, but not poems that satisfy desire. We want poems that will incite desire.[56]

Genet's sympathies are firmly with Marc in this debate. Not only is he given the last word, but, more importantly, his comments replicate – and at times duplicate – the ideas expressed in the 'Avertissement'. In both cases, the aim is to create a form of political art that incites rather than assuages desire.[57] Like Adorno and Benjamin, Marc realises that messianic power is produced through a theatre of negativity, a dramaturgy of evil. Genet underlines his commitment to this paradoxical notion of art in his other important political text, the 1956 'Preface to *The Blacks*'. Explaining the motivation behind the play, Genet says that *The Blacks* was intended: '[To] wound the white [audience], and to allow doubt to enter through that wound. To be honest, it seemed to me that only a scandalous act would make the audience question itself, make it anxious about this real problem which produces no conflict in everyday real life.'[58]

Unlike Sartre in *The Respectable Prostitute*, Genet has no interest in using his play about racism to allow white spectators to empathise with

52. Genet, 'Avertissement', p. 261.

53. Like Genet, Adorno uses the same language of good and evil to explain the political power of Kafka's work: 'He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgement that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in the resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away.' Adorno, 'Commitment', p. 191.

54. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 253–264 (p. 254).

55. It could be argued convincingly that *The Balcony* is a messianic text. The theme of revolution in the play is treated allegorically rather than realistically, which

means that many different revolutions are present at any one moment. As a consequence, the failure of the revolution in the play is inseparable from the failure of revolution in general. This corresponds to Benjamin's notion of the 'constellation', in which every revolutionary struggle for happiness is 'shot through which chips of Messianic time'. In Messianic time, chronological time – past, present, future – is superseded by an eternal present (*Jetzseit*). Ibid., p. 263.

56. Genet, 'The Balcony', in *Théâtre complet*, pp. 263–444 (p. 435).

57. This is, perhaps, why Genet cut this scene from the official 1962 version of *The Balcony*. Paradoxically, Marc's commitment to negative aesthetics provides the play with a positive dimension, making it too easy to decipher and thus too easy to appropriate as a political play. Without this scene, the play is more ambiguous, which, of course, greatly enhances its negativity.

58. Genet, 'Unpublished Preface to *The Blacks*', in *Théâtre complet*, pp. 835–843 (p. 838).

59. Ibid., p. 835.

60. We should not forget, for instance, that Genet produced three separate versions of *The Balcony* (1956, 1960 and 1962). Rather than reflecting some innate flaw in the play itself, this desire to re-write *The Balcony* draws attention to just how sophisticated

black suffering. Rather, he wants to wound the white audience and, by doing so, to transform consciousness through a shattering experience that would be communicated through the form of the work itself. For Genet, the political value of art, as Adorno realised, is essentially autonomous. To abandon that autonomy deprives the work of its political charge:

> Theatrical expression is not a discourse. It does not address itself to man's rational faculties. It's a poetic act, and it imposes itself like a categorical imperative. Faced with this, reason, though it ought not to capitulate completely, has to take a back seat.[59]

If the discussion were to end here, it would be possible to claim Genet as a modernist in the vein of Adorno and Benjamin, a playwright who believes that negativity is where the political significance of theatre is found. However, a closer inspection of Genet's work in practice, in particular *The Balcony*, disrupts such a neat interpretation. His treatment of revolution in that play suggests that even negative aesthetics is not sufficient to change the social order. This has obvious consequences for my claim that Genet is one of the most astute political playwrights of his generation. At best, it suggests that he was confused about the relationship between art and politics; at worst, it appears to underline the critical commonplace that Genet is a political nihilist. Nevertheless, we should not abandon so easily our attempts to tease out the political relevance of Genet's late theatre. An alternative possibility does present itself: namely, that Genet's doubts about negativity are indicative of postmodernist suspicions about the aesthetic as a realm of value that is somehow able to stand outside of the debased, inauthentic world of commodity exchange.

GENET AND RESISTANCE

Genet's scepticism regarding negative aesthetics is caused by a profound anxiety about appropriation.[60] Unlike Adorno, Genet realises that in postmodernity there is no distinct separation between the cultural and social realms. In the age of the simulacrum, everything, even the aesthetic, has a price on its head. As a consequence, it is too much to expect of art – as Adorno does – that it can resist commodification. In *The Balcony*, Roger is ultimately proved right when he tells Chantal, the revolutionary symbol, that she is 'the response that they [the established order] expect'.[61] Roger understands that using spectacle to conquer spectacle is futile. In the symbolic battle between revolution and reaction the forces of reaction always win out, for they promise to veil what the revolution seeks to highlight: alienation and suffering. In Tableau Eight of the play, Chantal is shot on the balcony of the brothel after the beggar, the symbol of the proletariat, cries out 'Long Live the Queen'.[62] Asked to choose between Chantal's disturbing revolutionary songs and the images of established order, the beggar chooses the established order. He is unwilling to endorse the negativity – 'the most terrible thing was a girl singing' – that Chantal represents.[63]

Genet's notion of political art is. What Genet is struggling to resist is appropriation – the process that negates the negativity of theatre, and reduces all art to the commodity level.

Chantal's defeat has serious implications for political art: it suggests that negative aesthetics are just as compromised as positive aesthetics. Accordingly, if art is to remain politically valid, it needs to rethink its *modus operandi*. What is required is not a type of work that would challenge the spectacle by insisting on its own authenticity or truth. Rather, the artwork has to insist on its own artificiality. For if, as Marshall McLuhan so famously pointed out, 'the medium is the message', it is futile to oppose a fiction to a fiction. The result will always be the same: the triumph of fictionality. To challenge the spectacle, art has to question the very nature of aesthetic experience – which it can do by showing its own processes and by drawing attention to its own collusion with the established order. In this way, art interrogates theatricality. Philip Auslander's notion of 'resistant political art' is particularly useful for allowing us to understand the necessity for this shift.

61. Genet, 'The Balcony', p. 315.

62. Ibid., pp. 324–325.

63. Ibid., p. 309.

In 'Towards A Concept of the Political in Postmodern Performance', his influential essay on the Wooster Group's production *LSD (... Just the High Points ...)*, Auslander discusses resistance in terms of Derridan deconstruction. Citing Derrida's claim that deconstruction's radical moment emerges from a process that 'use[s] against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house',[64] Auslander concludes that postmodern political performance 'simultaneously occup[ies] and resists the given structure of textual authority'.[65] Unlike negative drama which believes in the authenticity of aesthetic experience, resistant theatre deconstructs its own truth claims in the very act of articulating them.

64. Auslander, 'Towards a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Performance', p. 61.

65. Ibid., p. 66.

For Auslander, *LSD* is politically 'resistant' because it simultaneously deconstructs theatre (on-stage performance) and theatricality (performance outside of the theatre). It achieves this by creating a non-linear, performance collage out of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, screened images from the public debates between counterculture guru, Timothy Leary and the Watergate 'plumber', Gordon Liddy, and representations of the cast rehearsing *The Crucible* on acid. By highlighting both the politics of performance and the performative nature of politics, *LSD,* in Auslander's view, draws attention to their interdependence. By doing so, he concludes that the play becomes 'a figure for what Jean Baudrillard calls the ''mediatization'' of politics in contemporary society, which has broken down the distinctions between political and purely social activities'.[66] Crucially, *LSD* is not political because it offers an alternative form of aesthetic experience but, rather, because it destabilises the very notion of aesthetic experience itself. It shows that aesthetics is always already guilty because it is always already political.

66. Ibid., p. 69.

Auslander's concept of resistance allows us to understand Genet's strategy in *The Balcony.*[67] The politics of Genet's play – indeed of his theatre in general – are located at the level of representation and emerge through a rigorous deconstruction of the theatrical event. In particular, Genet's theatre asks questions about what it means to watch a play. In *The Balcony* the principal theme – the failure of revolution in the West – is bound up with our play-watching habits, with our desires to be spectators rather than actors. In the article 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', written in response to what he considered as heavy-handed political interpretations of the text, he makes the important suggestion that the

67. Interestingly, Philip Auslander cites *The Balcony* in his essay on the Wooster Group but does not expand on it (ibid., pp. 62–63). It is also worth pointing out that in *Glas*, Derrida presents Genet as an anti-Hegel, that is, a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*, which, of course, underlines the appropriateness of reading his theatre in terms of resistance.

political significance of *The Balcony* will only appear if the 'glorification of Image and Reflection' is respected:[68]

> Another thing: do not play the text as if it were a satire of this or that. The text is about – and this must be stressed in performance – the glorification of Image and Reflection. The meaning of the play, satirical or not, will only appear in this way.[69]

It would be wrong here to think that Genet is denying the satirical or political aspects of the play. Rather he is saying that these aspects will only emerge through a sustained engagement with notions of 'Image and Reflection'. Within the context of the play, the image, like Guy Debord's notion of the 'spectacle' and Baudrillard's concept of the 'simulacrum', is the fiction that produces social and individual identity. Clients or subjects come to Irma's brothel – the 'house of illusions' – to create themselves via imaginary identifications with pre-existing social roles or images.[70] In the opening Tableau, for instance, the client playing the Bishop tells us in a moment of reverie:

> THE BISHOP: I never desired the episcopal throne. To have become a real bishop, to have risen through the ranks, because of my own virtues and vices, would have distanced me from the pure dignity of being a bishop. A function is a function. It is not a mode of being. Now, to be a bishop, that is a mode of being.[71]

The case of the Bishop is typical: identifying with an image in the brothel transforms existence into essence and function into mode of being. The brothel, then, performs an important therapeutic role: it permits the clients to escape the trauma of the real by supplying them with images in which they can lose themselves metaphysically as well as sexually. This desire for substance, for a ground of identity, explains why the revolution arouses such panic amongst the brothel's clientele. The revolution is more than an ideological struggle – its primary goal is to negate the existing image repertoire of the brothel and thus throw subjectivity into chaos. Irma, as ever, is sensitive to this: 'It seems to me that the real aim of the revolt is not to take the Royal Palace but to raze the brothel.'[72]

Ultimately, the attempts of the clients to evade existential trauma – and not superior technological resources – are what allow the Chief of Police to come to power. Whereas the revolution stages a necessary encounter with lack and loss, the Chief of Police promises to cure ontological anxiety by restoring the reign of the image. In return for wholeness and existential stability, the masses, like the mythical Narcissus, are offered a mirror of death:

> CHIEF OF POLICE: Am I their only hope?
> THE BISHOP: Their only hope is in a shipwreck.
> CHIEF OF POLICE: Does that mean, then, that I am a pool where they'll come to gaze at themselves?
> THE GENERAL: And if they get a little too close to the edge, they'll fall in and drown.[73]

68. He was particularly angered by Peter Zadek's 1957 production in London and Peter Brook's production in Paris in 1960.

69. Genet, 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', *Théâtre complet*, pp. 257–260 (p. 257).

70. Genet, 'The Balcony', p. 290.

71. Ibid., p. 268.

72. Ibid., p. 288.

73. Ibid., p. 339.

The disciplinary network established here between political power and the theatrical image highlights the difference separating Genet from Adorno. For if, as Genet suggests in the play, distinctions between politics and aesthetics have been collapsed in postmodernity, then negative aesthetics are redundant. Instead of forcing a confrontation with the real, the negative work acts as a fetish; it continues to hold out the possibility of obtaining truth through aesthetic experience. To this extent, it invests in the same logic as the brothel. It permits the subject to lose himself/herself in a fiction. By contrast, to remain oppositional – and thus subversive – theatre has to be actively used against the image: the aesthetic has to negate itself as a medium. This brings Adorno's concept of negativity down to earth and situates it within the realm of everyday life. The necessity for carrying out this shift is reflected in the text of *The Balcony* itself. After Chantal, the emblem of the revolution, is defeated in her 'allegorical combat' with the dignitaries of the brothel, she is transformed into a saint.[74] Tragically, she finds herself working for the very regime she sought to overthrow. In an age of mass media communications, the negativity of her song was not enough to prevent her image – and thus her revolutionary significance – from being appropriated.

74. Ibid., p. 312.

To avoid a similar fate befalling his play, Genet self-consciously deconstructs his own theatrical practice.[75] At the end of the play, the actress playing Irma, while turning off the lights of the brothel, stops in mid-speech and addresses the spectators, effectively accusing them of colluding in their own oppression:

> IRMA: (*she stops centre stage and speaks to the audience*) But now, you've got to go, back home, where don't kid yourselves, everything is even more false than here. Go now … Take the alley, the one to the right (*She turns out the lights*). It's morning already.[76]

75. In *The Screens*, Saïd refuses to side with the newly installed government. By doing so, his song – the catalyst for revolution – remains alive at the end of the play. The fact that the play ends with a question is crucial: it suggests that the song has not been domesticated: THE MOTHER: Where's he gone? Has he become a song? (Genet, 'The Screens', p. 737).

76. Genet, 'The Balcony', p. 350.

It is no coincidence that the actress playing Irma gives the audience the same instructions the clients are given when they are about to leave the brothel. Or indeed, that the name of Irma's whorehouse, 'Le Grand Balcon', is also the name of the play that we, the real spectators, have paid money to attend. Genet suggests that the desire of the audience to watch a play about revolution, rather than actually participating in one, is tantamount to whoring: fantasy has supplanted reality. In the age of the spectacle, the only theatre that deserves the title of political theatre, the only theatre that avoids being *un bal des cons* (roughly translated as 'a ball for twats'), is the theatre that deconstructs its own premises and explodes its own theatricality, which, in Genet's view, is always bound up with power relations. 'It seems to me that power cannot do without theatricality. Power uses theatricality to hide itself.'[77] From this perspective, Irma's direct address, her move from mimetic acting to what Michael Kirby calls 'non-matrixed performing', is an act of resistance, a gesture that reminds us that theatre today, like representation in general, is always already politicised.[78] The aesthetic is thus a site of contestation in its own right. If this is accepted, then playwrights who continue to offer us politics as fictional experience have made a

77. Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 155.

78. Michael Kirby, 'On Acting and Not-Acting', in Philip Zarrilli (ed.), *Acting (Re)Considered* (London: Routledge,

1995), pp. 43–58 (p. 43).

fundamental error. Aesthetics are no longer distanced from reality, as Sartre, Brecht and Adorno all imply (albeit for very different reasons); rather aesthetics and reality are part of the same symbolic order. What is required then is a theatre that can de-stabilise that relationship without offering alternative solutions and different images. Paradoxically, then, resistance is what allows negativity to remain as an active, perhaps even utopian, principle.

CONCLUSION

Studying the 'Avertissement' in conjunction with *The Balcony* highlights the complexity of Genet's model of committed drama. Unlike conventional theories of political theatre, Genet's work rejects didacticism and positive solutions and seeks to wound the audience with an affective experience. For that reason, his plays have much in common with Adorno's notion of negative aesthetics. But where Adorno believes that negative art has the power to transform the world by itself, Genet has less faith in the aesthetic as a realm of value and authenticity. For him, the aesthetic is a site that needs to be radically interrogated and problematised. His aim is to place negativity at the heart of everyday life. To that extent, his work anticipates what Auslander calls resistance. Genet's concern with representation – with 'Image and Reflection' – allows us to situate him within an alternative history of political performance. Instead of looking back to the theatres of Brecht and Sartre, his theatre points forward to the contemporary practices of companies like The Wooster Group and La Carnicería Teatro who, as well as deconstructing theatricality, are interested in the micro-politics of gender, race and sexuality.[79] However, while Genet is certainly interested in micro-politics, he also remains committed to modernist notions of global revolution. If we are to characterise Genet's theatre correctly, we need to change the title of an important book by Baz Kershaw called *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. The contribution of Genet is not to be found between Brecht and Baudrillard; rather it is located between Adorno and Baudrillard, between, in other words, negativity and resistance.

79. I am grateful to Maria M. Delgado who pointed out the relationship between Genet and La Carnicería Teatro. In addition, Genet also seems to anticipate the work of queer performance artists such as Vaginal Davis, Annie Sprinkle and Franko B. Like them, he deconstructs ideas of race, gender and sexuality by using theatre as a site where performativity is explored and ultimately exploded. In *The Blacks*, for instance, he uses actual Black actors to play the role of Black actors, and in *The Maids*, gender and sexuality are presented as performative processes, not as fixed essences. In that play, the three characters – Madame, Solange and Claire – are essentially 'queer': they can be played by either men or women.