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Locating the Impolitical in American Theatre: Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Schechner's *Dionysus in 69*

This article examines the meaning of the 'impolitical' regarding cases of impolitical theatre and associated critical discourse, with reference to Rodolfo Usigli and Raymond Williams, among others. It is argued that 'impolitical' theatre represents social relations from the standpoint of the ideal of culture. The analysis starts with Richard Schechner's critique of the original Broadway production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and discusses this play, segueing into The Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69*. The author indicates the differences of theatre practice between the examples chosen, and shows that these theatres nevertheless participate in the same form of theatrical representation as they broach similar social questions of moment in the United States in the 1960s. John Yves Pinder has recently received his PhD from the University of Leeds. He is currently teaching at Leuphana University of Lüneburg.

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The Impolitical: A Common Ground and Form

THE ANTIQUATED term 'impolitical' may sound a little curious. The more commonly used 'impolitic' is defined as 'failing to display prudence' or otherwise as being 'unwise'.¹ While a similar meaning is given to the word's French, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish equivalents, in a number of these languages it can also denote the *unpolitical*, according to its etymology. The late Marxist philosopher and historian Domenico Losurdo combined the word's common and etymological meanings in the title of a book that presents Hegel's criticism of post-revolutionary and Romantic disillusionment, the so-called 'hypocondria' of the impolitical (*L'ipocondria dell'impolitico*) as a central thread of Hegel's thought.² Losurdo was not the first scholar to use the term. Before him, the conservative political philosopher and sociologist Julien Freund used it in a way that is faithful to its common French meaning.³ By contrast, the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito gave the term a more positive connotation. His *Categories of the Impolitical* makes the crisis of political representation in modernity the

starting point for the deconstruction of the presuppositions and categories of modern political philosophy.⁴ While Freund and Esposito's very different works share reference to Carl Schmitt, Esposito's concept is in fact adapted from Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (translated in Italian as *Considerazioni di un Impolitico*), which was published at the end of the First World War.⁵ The adjectival noun in Mann's title denotes an 'unpolitical man', that is, an artist or man of letters.

With reference to the dramatic discourse and practice of Edward Albee and Richard Schechner, this article focuses on forms of theatrical representation tied to the subject evoked in Mann's title. Before returning to definitions of culture and dramatic form, however, another translational detour will be taken to determine the 'impolitical' as a term operative in dramaturgy. To the best of my knowledge, the term has never been used by a dramaturg or writer in the anglophone Americas or elsewhere, but it has been used previously by Rodolfo Usigli. Usigli, known as the 'father' of modern Mexican theatre, uses the term as a title for his *comedias impolíticas*,

satirizing the sorry state of post-revolutionary Mexico.⁶ Peter Beardsell notes that the play on the meaning of the word *impolítica* or *impolítico* – unpolitical but also imprudent or impolite – is tactical: a way of criticizing Mexican politics during the years in which Calles was supreme chief of the revolution, while also drawing attention away from the politically imprudent character of Usigli's artistic gesture.⁷ There is no doubt that the life of the polity and politics constitutes the material of Usigli's plays. However, the term 'impolitical' can also be interpreted to refer to the perspective from which, and the way in which, Usigli writes about Mexican socio-political life as an intellectual and artist. A passage from the hundred-page long prologue to his first impolitical comedy, *Noche de Estio*, in which Usigli discusses the place and role of the writer in contemporary Mexican society, provides a precis of this position and approach:

I am not a partisan of the political writer and, after Julien Benda, I consider that it is treason to the *belles lettres* to have them serve a master so imperfect and untrustworthy as politics; the writer should be, before anything else, pure, writer. But in the particular case of Mexico, the purity is behind the impurity, and the art of the writer finds itself on the other side of the dark obstacle of politics.⁸

The comma inserted after 'pure' in the tautological statement, which makes 'writer' both a subject and object synonymous with 'pure', sets up the commonplace opposition and contrast between the debased sphere of politics and the more noble Republic of Letters. The reference to Julien Benda, author of the *Treason of the Intellectuals*, also makes explicit the liberal humanist colours of his discourse. For Benda, modern intellectuals had strayed from their cult of justice and transcendental truth because they had given themselves over to political passions.⁹ While Usigli appears to share this view, the prologue also provides a schematically totalizing critique of Mexican politics and society, which is refracted in the fictional world of the play. The prologue thus makes clear that while the world of letters and culture as conceived by a liberal humanist intellectual may be antithetical to politics, it nevertheless remains concerned with the life and destiny of the polity.

Mann's late bourgeois-Romantic defence of German *Kultur* against a threatening French *Zivilization* adopts a comparable view. In Mann's discourse, Germany was synonymous with passion and taste, style and form, war and organization, music and poetry, and, by extension, sublime purity in art. By contrast, France rhymed with reason and enlightenment, pacificism and humanitarianism, revolution and politics, as well as the impurity of formless literary prose. The socially engaged intellectual and partisan of 'civilization' personified by his brother Heinrich Mann – a champion of pacifism, French enlightenment, and Zola – was one of the targets of Thomas Mann whose nationalist discourse was the opposite of Benda's – a die-hard universalist who reviled any form of nationalism. However, as Francis Mulhern has shown, both their discourses shared the same basic presuppositions.¹⁰ For Mann, like Benda and Usigli, the intellectual reveres an ideal, or what Romain Rolland called in his critique of Mann the 'idol' of culture, eminently moral and supra-political.¹¹

Usigli's work clearly suggests that this rhetoric was not confined to *fin-de-siecle* Franco-German intellectual and ideological rivalries. As Raymond Williams and Francis Mulhern have shown, Thomas Mann's *Schlagworte* [catchwords], his two keywords turned slogans for an embattled intellectual, were, in fact, commonplace topics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary and cultural criticism.¹² Conceptions of culture could vary significantly and very often depart from the strict opposition between culture and civilization posited by Mann and others before him. Nonetheless, from the eighteenth century onwards, 'culture' came to be defined as a marginalized yet alternative value, which bourgeois humanist intellectuals but also socialists invoked against the threats inherent to bourgeois civilization, whether political (revolutions and so-called mob rule) or economic (capitalism and the industrial revolution).

As a consequence of this displacement, culture became an 'abstract' and 'absolute', which nevertheless functioned as 'a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical

social judgement and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative'.¹³ By contrast to the utilitarian and socially expedient logics of politics and economics, the sphere of culture was defined by 'its effort at total qualitative assessment', a desire for wholeness and self-realization typically embodied by the arts and learning.¹⁴ In the face of an alleged loss of social form and unity, of political instability and social inequality, practitioners and representatives of culture aspired towards a more humane and harmonious order. The inevitable deferral of its realization, however, meant that culture's promise of restored unity and organicity also functioned to ratify the containment of more radical social change.

The anti-revolutionary and anti-communist rhetoric of the disillusioned Usigli is by no means equivalent to the reactionary conservatism of European imperial elites. The distinction between culture and civilization is also – as far as I am aware – not operative in Usigli's writing. Yet, similar tropes and patterns shape his discourse. The prologue to his first impolitical comedy provides a scathing and totalizing assessment of the newly founded bourgeois state and society, while also placing particular emphasis on the historical becoming of educational and cultural institutions. Usigli's reflections on Mexico's peripheral post-revolutionary modernity also reproduce a typical corporatism. According to him, only the enlightened cooperation of different social classes (and not their abolition!) could enable the nation to achieve a peaceful form of development and cohabitation. In Usigli's corporatist imagination, the writer and the people and man and land were to be united and work for each other like the head and feet of a body. Literature, of course, was to play a key role in the self-realization of the nation:

The ex-Kaiser Wilhelm, a man of history, said of German that it professes the point of the view of the frog: it looks and takes matters from the bottom up. This has been until now the situation of the Mexican writer with regards to the literary and moral materials of his country . . . A change in position is everything. Politics and human sentiments are the despicable and commonplace materials of life. To take them and to convert them with

force and talent into literary material, subject to laws of the most wonderful language in the world and to the balanced harmony of the artwork, is the proper work of the writer.¹⁵

It is this work of conversion and the decisive shift of perspective on the polity that this article examines in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69*, two seminal North American works. The argument will be that the impolitical is an active dramatic form in both plays, which represent an expedient, post-revolutionary American modernity from the standpoint of a more wholesome but unrealized ideal of culture. This argument does not only find its basis in a reading of Usigli's work. It has been shaped by a reading of Mulhern's study of 'condition of culture' writing, which, according to the critic, is a specifically English genre of novel.¹⁶ Along with other theoretical and critical references, this article will also return to Williams's dramatic and cultural criticism, which contain undertheorized indices of the form in question.

In his later, more properly sociological work, Williams defines a form as 'a particular stance, an appropriate selection of subject matter, a specific mode of composition'.¹⁷ A form actively determines what is shown and seen, heard, and spoken, while also shaping how something is shown, seen, heard, or spoken. Producers and audiences also share forms because they refract a common and communicable social and historical experience. Finally, forms are tied to alterations in what Williams called larger types such as bourgeois drama. Thus, Williams could speak of naturalism or expressionism as forms defined by a common attempt at (re-)presenting the truth of bourgeois modernity while reaching beyond it or, as Usigli puts it, 'converting' it.¹⁸ The analysis will examine how the form accommodates significant variations in convention and style and also bring into view the character and ambivalences of impolitical social critique. The plays at hand will be shown to be forcefully iconoclastic and imprudent, as Beardsell suggests. However, it will be concluded that their critique also functions

as a moral supplement that ratifies the society and state criticized. Starting with Schechner's criticism of Albee's play, the following analysis concentrates on character and speech, action and space, including aspects of production and reception.

The Truth and Lie of America

In her comprehensive account of the relation between theatrical, literary, and cultural criticism in the post-war transatlantic context, Shannon Jackson shows that many drama critics reproduced anxieties regarding the commercialized character of American theatre that were typical of humanist cultural criticism.¹⁹ This is precisely the standpoint that the young Schechner adopts in one of his first editorials at the helm of the *Tulane Drama Review*. Quoting the writer and critic Stark Young, Schechner passes judgement on American theatre as follows:

The productivity and characteristic quality that our theatre manifests is saleable but largely devoid of any real content, of any shadows and light and of any fruits that mature experience is supposed to provide. Our theatre has a strange gift for progressing from adolescent pains and merriment to smart sterility and a morning-after taste, bilious with disillusion, impatient and infertile – the lack of fertility is the most serious part of it. Behind that lack is an essential poverty of conceptions, or, if you like, of culture.²⁰

The oppositions between saleability and content, immaturity and experience, frivolity and gravitas, sterility and fertility, subserve the more fundamental distinction between culture and mainstream American theatre. As Jackson recounts, this commonplace view of theatre made the search for alternatives all the more vital for committed critics who otherwise could occupy quite different positions on the ideological spectrum. Schechner was no conservative southern agrarian. However, his editorial, written some months after Young's death, is structured by a comparable set of oppositions, presuppositions, and judgements.

Like Young, Schechner professes that American theatre is plagued by a 'pragmatism

of the soul' on account of which it is unable to participate in culture and cast 'truth' into form.²¹ All is not lost, however. According to the young critic, St George's Episcopal Church's *The Play of Daniel* is an example of a ritualistic and liturgical performance that invites the audience to participate in a transcendent collective truth and experience. It is hard not to hear in Young's remarks regarding 'maturity' echoes of T. S. Eliot's assessment of the classic in literature, which was published two years prior to Young's article. Although twice removed, something similar could be said of Schechner's own judgement.²² Eliot and the young Williams still writing under Eliot's influence were concerned by the weakened capacity of prose to establish conventions capable of shaping collective emotion and experience into dramatic form.²³ For them, verse provided drama with a way of doing this. Thus, Williams writing in the early 1950s could see in Eliot's liturgical verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* 'the best example . . . of the discovery of form' and 'completeness' in recent drama.²⁴

Schechner's judgement regarding American theatre's lack of 'culture', that is, the gap existing between its ideal and reality, provides a key to understanding the impolitical way of seeing – American modernity viewed from the standpoint of the ideal of culture. Although it is not alone in doing this, this way of seeing typically presents the allegedly lamentable or blocked condition of art and literature as symptomatic of a broader social contradiction or malaise plaguing the polity. This rhetorical move is particularly visible in Schechner's 1963 critique of Albee's controversial play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which premiered on Broadway in October 1962. It is exactly what *The Play of Daniel* is not. If the latter represents a commitment to truth, Albee's play represents 'the lie of our theatre and the lie of America', the 'lie of decadence' that has to be fought.²⁵ It has been argued that Schechner's criticism of Albee's play was shaped by anti-theatrical prejudice.²⁶ However, it could be argued that the moralistic tone and related homophobic references to Albee's sexuality figure, more simply, the desublimation of an ideal whose capacity

to elevate society (its truth) the virile critic takes upon himself to protect and reinvigorate in the face of alleged decadence. (Usigli writes of the vulgarity, exoticism, and mediocrity of Mexican letters.)

The following analysis shows that this feature of Schechner's discourse finds a different yet recognizable parallel in Albee's dramaturgy, which translates it into fiction while also condensing it. About one of his early one-act plays, Albee wrote that 'the play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen.'²⁷ This statement and its references to the loss of virility and moral integrity suffered by the nation recall Schechner's. However, they could also have been written for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The latter's 'scene' is George and Martha's living room, situated in a small New England college where George is employed as an assistant professor in the History department. According to the director Alan Schneider, the set of the original production subverts the verisimilitude of a naturalistic set design by introducing all kinds of 'planes and angles' that suggest 'a hole' in which characters are trapped.²⁸ Following the logic of *pars pro toto*, Martha and George's hellish *huis clos* [enclosed space] represents the nation itself, which is indexed by the early American period oak furniture, the colonial eagle, and a reversed American flag.²⁹

If the living room is not just a domestic scene but also symptomatic of a broader social predicament, the equally representative characters play a key role in viewing the social situation from an impolitical standpoint, that is, from the point of view of subjects of culture. The protagonists are named after the first President and First Lady of the United States. However, Albee's George is a historian and humanist, not a military commander or plantation owner. In Usigli's play *The Impostor*, a failed academic and historian called César Rubio deceives his colleagues, family, and the nation by claiming to be a revolutionary who had the same name as his, and who

embodied the true, ethical ideal of the revolution. Rubio ends up believing his own lie and is taken in by the idea that he will be able to rekindle the truth and ideal of the revolution against its actual legacy.³⁰ Although the context is different and the political metaphor in Albee's plot is less explicit, a comparable crisis of inheritance within the cultural institution the protagonists represent provides the premise of the Broadway play.

By the end of Act 1, it is revealed that the intelligent, educated, and ambitious Martha had to forgo her status as daughter of the college's president to wed George, who never lived up to his expectation and would never be able to take over from her father. As suggested by New Carthage, the name of the small New England town where the college is situated, the institution is associated with decline. The same holds for the father whom Martha equates with the institution itself ('he is the college').³¹ Once associated with an aristocratic ideal of completeness and potency (tradition and longevity, union of body and mind), the figure of authority is now referred to as a red-eyed, albino lab mouse.³²

George and Martha's domestic war, their so-called 'fun and games', which take place in the presence of their late night guests Nick and Honey and give Act 1 its name, should be understood as an expression of this crisis in the institution of culture, which corresponds to what Williams refers to in a different context as 'the impossibility of fulfilling the vocation of the ideal' under the weight of a corrupt and degraded inheritance.³³ This crisis is also figured by how George, Martha, and their guests undermine received ideas of civility in their interactions with each other. Their lack of civility, which includes profanity, was and still is one of the most shocking, memorable, and frankly enjoyable aspects of the play. However, as a distilled version of one of George's attacks on Nick quoted below indicates, the four-way 'fun and games' in Act 1 also play a key role in crystallizing the play's impolitical form:

It's very simple, Martha, this young man is working on a system whereby chromosomes can be altered ... [...] the genetic make-up of a sperm cell

changed, reordered . . . [. . .] All imbalances will be corrected, sifted out . . . propensity for various diseases will be gone, longevity assured. [. . .] Everyone will tend to be rather the same . . . Alike. Everyone . . . and I'm sure I'm not wrong here . . . will tend to look like this young man *here*. [. . .] There will be a certain . . . loss of liberty, I imagine, [. . .] diversity will no longer be the goal. Cultures and races will eventually vanish . . . the ants will take over the world.³⁴

George's pastiche of the Huxleyan motif is a key element of Act 1's caustic humour. However, his remonstrances also function as a monological meta-commentary in which the representative of a displaced humanist value articulates his opposition to civilization. If Martha's lab-mouse father is a declining master, Nick personifies Weberian *Zweckrationalität* (instrumental rationality) or what Lacan more appropriately called the 'discourse of the university':³⁵ expedient scientificity that aspires to total and objective mastery and power (it is suggested that the ambitious Nick might succeed where George has failed), which, however, turns out to be debased and impotent. Nick stands in for a 'mechanical' civilization, whether that be an American dream that is fast losing its sheen in the wake of the growing civil rights movement and feminist consciousness, or the stagnant post-Stalinist Soviet state alluded to in George's rant (Nick's name is sometimes thought to be a reference to Khrushchev).³⁶ The scientist's consort, the daughter of a rich preacher from the mid-west, supports the first possibility.³⁷ Either way, the Herderian humanist is the last rampart against what the young Schechner calls pragmatic soullessness. In Martha's eyes, George may be a 'swamp' and a 'bog' – in other words an Usiglian frog – but he is a noble and embattled one with whom part of the audience is also likely to sympathize, given how Martha flirts with and ends up trying to sleep with Nick.³⁸

A similar pattern is at work in Martha's utterances, although further reflection on the form of speech itself is required first, since it is key to the play's impolitical perspective. George's rant reveals that the impolitical way of seeing constructs an opposition between the bearer and protector of a

displaced humanist value (in Weberian terms, *Wertrationalität* or value-orientated rationality) and a modern society that is antithetical to it. The displaced and degraded state of the value identified with is also what turns it into the normative object of the historian's desire. This structure is a defining trope of *Culture and Society*. A less widely examined variation of this structure, however, is found in Williams's diverging readings of naturalism. As previously evoked, one of Williams's interpretations was that naturalism in theatre never succeeded in giving form to collective experience, an idea which was rearticulated in his later work as naturalism's inability to stage the historical interrelationship between individuals and society in a dynamic way. The other reading Williams advances, which also tends to merge with a positive re-evaluation of what he calls 'major' or 'high' naturalism, comes closer to the pattern discussed here.³⁹ As the *New Left Review* editors point out, the latter shares more in common with Georg Lukács's early, pre-Marxist theory of the novel than with the latter's later critique of naturalism.⁴⁰

For the young and still Romantic Lukács, the absence of organic community in a degraded capitalist modernity was reflected in the form of the bourgeois novel, an impure epic for modern times in which the heroic realization of authentic values and 'totality' in the face of an alienated society is deferred.⁴¹ The literary and drama critic Peter Szondi excised the more Romantic dimension of Lukács's early work relating to this loss of value and authenticity. However, his account of modern drama used the Lukácsian and non-Brechtian term of 'epic' to denote the novelization of modern drama, which reflected what Lukács would go on to call by the Marxian-Weberian term of reification. For Szondi, this meant that new monological forms of interiority and non-communication, narrativity and meta-commentaries, as well as modern drama's mixed and unwieldy temporalities and durations, undid classical dramatic unity.⁴²

George's speech, pitting the isolated individual against society, reproduces some of these patterns. However, a reference to

Williams's dramatic criticism can be useful here to specify further the impolitical character of the opposition he sets up between culture and its subjects, on the one hand, and the threatening, alienated civilization, on the other. For Williams, dramatic modernity was the fruit of an internal critique of the bourgeoisie expressed in forms comparable yet distinct from both those of the young Lukács and Szondi. Williams thought that modern dramatic form could at best represent the often failed attempt at realizing a repressed humanist truth and value in the present. In *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, Williams describes this critique performed by 'a uniquely representative figure (representative of "humanity", of "Man")' as an attempt to 'search for the means of defining the humanity that cannot be lived . . . which cannot be realized in any available life'.⁴³ This trope, which reappears in his reworking of *Drama in Performance*, finds a fuller development in *Modern Tragedy*, a work that combines both dramatic and historical analysis centred on the socio-historical category of revolution.⁴⁴

George's defence of this blocked humanity, of which he is a prime example, finds a parallel in Martha's utterances, which similarly embody the tragic contradiction between ideality and actuality. Her 'epic' speech at the beginning of Act 3 testifies to this. In a soliloquy, the despondent Martha declares that George is the only man to have ever made her happy. It is a moving moment, which by virtue of its lulled tempo and melancholic mood contrasts with the franticness of much of the rest of the play. She describes George and her relation to George in the following terms:

George who is good to me, and whom I revile; who understands me, and whom I push off; who can make me laugh, and I choke it back in my throat; who can hold me, at night, so that it's warm, and whom I will bite so there's blood; who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. George and Martha: sad, sad, sad.⁴⁵

The series of anaphoric oppositions gives this passage a verse-like quality and elevation that contrasts with the drunk soliloquizing that

opens the act and the preceding dialogue in which Martha lambasts Nick and 'civilized society' for being impotent. Like George's speech, Martha's reified yet absolute expression of love comes as a reflection on a shared predicament. However, there is no aggressiveness or transgressiveness here. Her speech, directed at herself just as much as at Nick and the audience, comes closer to what Lev Vygotsky would have called 'inner speech'.⁴⁶ Both a personal and social truth are to be heard in her address, which makes the couple's intimacy and love the degraded yet unmatched value by which all other relations and infidelities can be measured and dismissed.

Martha's truthful declaration sets up the final game, the last act's 'exorcism' through which the truth is finally revealed and the domestic war brought to an end. The last game is triggered by Martha mentioning to Honey in Act 1 that George and herself have a son. The son is in fact a fiction. George's decision to kill the couple's imaginary son comes at the end of Act 2, after he throws a copy of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* against bell chimes in protest to Martha and Nick going off to have sex. The drunk and semi-comatose Honey, who was offstage, is woken up by the sound, which she misinterprets as someone ringing the doorbell. This gives George the idea of pretending that he received a message announcing the death of the son ritualized in Act 3 through the performance of a Latin mass.

The imaginary son, like the opaqueness of character background and motives, undermines received naturalist conventions.⁴⁷ However, the son is much more than a plot device. With the topic of female fertility and sterility, the parthenogenetic fantasy condenses the problem of domestic and social decline. As the couple share memories of the child's development and life with Nick and Honey in the final dialogue, it becomes clear that the child is the product of an unbearable void or gap that they are desperately trying to fill:

GEORGE: Lies? All right. A son who would not disown his father, who came to him for advice,

for information, for love that wasn't mixed with sickness [. . .] who could not tolerate the slashing, braying residue that called itself his MOTHER. MOTHER? HAH!!

MARTHA: (*cold*) All right, you. A son who was so ashamed of his father he asked me once if it – possibly – wasn't true, as he had heard, some cruel boys, maybe, that he was not our child; who could not tolerate the shabby failure his father had become . . .

GEORGE: Lies!

MARTHA: Lies? Who would not bring his girl friends to the house . . .

GEORGE: . . . in shame of his mother . . .

MARTHA: . . . of his father!⁴⁸

The two-way repetition that fuels the serial accusations and reversals shows how the son reflects the conflict and division between George and Martha. The diverging memories of the monstrous child, however, do not only reflect the couple's destructive and narcissistic rivalry. Rather, the shared storehouse of memory is the locus of their cherished but impossible ideal which, as Keir Elam suggests, never quite coincides with itself.⁴⁹ If Christ exemplifies how ideals find their origins in love for the dead, then the Catholic rites of mourning recited in Latin and the symbolism of the sacrificed son signal the rebirth of a community and ideal to which both George and Martha become subjects.⁵⁰ The sacred ritual is the contrary of the play's whirlwind of aggression and profane language, which the rite dissipates. The sacrifice transforms Martha into a secularized lady of sorrows, while, through the son's death rite, which in anthropological terms guarantees historical continuity in human societies, the humanist 'preoccupied with history' recovers authority and historicity that were all but lost to a present haunted by ghosts.⁵¹ The son's symbolic, second death on the day of his alleged majority (twenty-first birthday) thus clears the ground for a way of communing, which negates America's capitalistic Protestant ethic.⁵²

The expiation that concludes Albee's 'modern secular morality play' also invites the equally divided and fascinated audience to change position, as Usigli would have it, and assess the 'scene' differently, that is see it in its totality.⁵³ The audience, like Nick and Honey

who leave shortly before the end, can now assess the *whole* truth and elevate themselves to a higher moral ground. This reversal, which marks a new beginning in the couple's and the nation's life, is nonetheless ambivalent. The couple's desire for a child finds neither realization nor compensation, real or fictional. Despite having to accept these limits, the renewal of the domestic union carries a utopian charge – the nightmare gives way to a new dawn for the couple and a modern nation that is yet to fulfil its potential and promise.

Dionysus President!

The analysis has shown that, for Albee and Schechner, the theatre represents a social malaise, which is viewed from the standpoint of a nobler but thwarted ideal of culture. Both discourses, as the last act of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* testifies, are attempts to 'reach again for control', to reassert the authority of the ideal over its threatening rivals.⁵⁴ As a counterpoint to the foregoing analysis of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, this last part discusses one of Schechner's most famous artistic co-creations: The Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69*. Although only a few years separated Schechner's production from Albee's, the socio-political and artistic contexts were significantly different. *Dionysus in 69* opened in New York in the summer of 1968. 1968 was a high moment for left-wing political activity as the anti-war and student protests were in full swing (the occupation of Columbia University took place in the spring). However, the year when Martin Luther King was assassinated, which came on the tail of the so-called 'long, hot summer of 1967' when 159 riots set the country on fire, was arguably already a moment when the early victories of the civil rights movement were giving way to political frustration.

The title alone, an allusion to the sexual position and the upcoming presidential election, communicates the group's intention to give a theatrical form to the passion for social and political change characteristic of those years.⁵⁵ The play was based on Euripides' *The Bacchae*, but it was in fact a textual collage that integrated classical references alongside

other texts, including the group's own compositions, which made explicit references to the contemporary social world.⁵⁶ Many critics interpret *Dionysus in 69*, performed at The Performance Garage in a neighbourhood now called SoHo, as a counter-cultural celebration of sexual liberation that put into practice Schechner's 'environmental theatre' principles, and formed part of Off-Off Broadway's revival of Artaudian theatrical philosophy.⁵⁷ Needless to say, the piece could not be more different in convention and style to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It would today be more readily associated to what is termed 'post-dramatic' theatre.⁵⁸

The critic Stefan Brecht notes that the play's putative libertarianism, just as shocking and attractive to audiences as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, reversed the alleged conservatism of Euripides' original.⁵⁹ However, what Brecht overlooks, and what the artists and other critics only partially acknowledge, is how the adaptation should be placed within a longer (post-)Romantic cultural history key to understanding the play's impolitical credentials – the manner in which it construes its critique of the social from the standpoint of the ideal of culture.⁶⁰ In The Performance Group's performance, it is the figure of Dionysus who condenses this history. While Friedrich Hegel viewed Protestantism as a progressive forerunner of the French revolution, disillusioned German Romantics and nationalists, many of whom converted to Catholicism, yearned for a mythology capable of providing a new foundation for an atomized and divided post-Enlightenment society. For some early Romantic poets and philosophers, the new myth was the Dionysian ideal of art, which Nietzsche would go on to champion in *The Birth of Tragedy*.⁶¹

Through a critical reference to Herbert Marcuse, Schechner and The Performance Group inscribed itself on the left of this predominantly conservative lineage. Marcuse's classic essay 'On Affirmative Culture', which Williams viewed as a precursor to his own study, was an early Marxist foray into the terrain of cultural criticism.⁶² The key reference in 1968, however, was Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, a now half-forgotten but, at the

time, influential Marxist inquiry into another classic in the genre – Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*).⁶³ For Freud, culture and civilization – terms he used synonymously – sublimated and reproduced the destructive drive out of which they emerged. Marcuse's claim, by contrast, was that the development of productive forces was such that civilization's repression had become surplus, and labour could be liberated. Marcuse placed this sublation of repression under the aegis of art and Dionysus.⁶⁴

By contrast to the final rites in Albee's play, this play opens with the ritual of Dionysus' second birth. As the audience has settled around the space, the exiled god addresses the audience in the following way:

Good evening. I see you found your seats. My name is Joan MacIntosh, daughter of Walter MacIntosh and June Wyatt. I was born twenty-three years ago in a hospital in Newark, New Jersey. I have come here for three important reasons. The first and most important of these reasons is to announce my divinity. I am god. The second is to establish my rites and rituals. As you can see they are already in progress. And the third is to be born, if you'll excuse me.⁶⁵

The stress on the here and now of the event, the prosaic coming in and out of character, and the autobiographical narration that marks the discrepancy between the actors and their roles contribute to breaking the enclosed diegetic-mimetic space of theatrical representation. These are often conventions associated with the 'post-dramatic'. However, when examined within their broader structure, they are arguably also 'epic', in the sense of the word previously mentioned.

In his discussion of Szondi's concept of epic modern drama, Hans-Thies Lehmann stresses the importance of J. W. von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller's classic distinction between the epic and drama in Szondi's work, and argues that the term is inadequate for understanding more contemporary developments in the theatre. However, this is, at best, a very partial genealogy of the term 'epic', which also elides its connection to the social category of reification in Szondi's *Theory of Modern Drama*.

On the contrary, it is argued in this analysis that the above-mentioned features belong to an impolitical dramatic discourse that is indeed 'epic'. They organize the opposition and conflict between a reified world and the exiled Dionysus whose person and value finds an extension in theatre-makers gathered around Schechner, the director, critic, and university professor.

The collective rotation of roles, including of the director working as front-of-house staff, and the equally collective performance of rituals and erotic play provide the means of challenging the atomized and repressive world of Dionysus' cousin Pentheus, the priggish king of Thebes, who in the eyes of the gods lacks legitimacy. In a comparable fashion to Albee's play, the rivalry between two competing rationales and their representatives, Pentheus and Dionysus, is played out through game-like structures in a space evocative of an imaginary Thebes just as much as the liberal-democratic space of the American *polis*.⁶⁶ The only elements of verticality in an otherwise horizontal performance space are provided by wooden towers on and around which spectators sit and look over the pit-like centre stage. The free movement of actors, including that of the entranced chorus, around the space means that audience perspectives on the action are always fragmented.⁶⁷ Like the collage and role rotation, the 'environmental' but fragmented architectural space and the equally fragmented chorus chants filling the space give form to the opposition between an ideal linked to organicity, complexity, wholeness, and moral value, on the one hand, and a reified world empty of these, on the other.

True to form, Schechner presents the rivalry pitting a mechanical civilization against a more organic and demonic counterforce in the following terms: 'Underneath whatever repressive machinery civilization constructs to keep itself intact, a counterforce of great unifying, celebratory, sexual, and life-giving power continues to exert its joyful influence.'⁶⁸ The counterforce is manifest in such diverse phenomena as hippies, Black insurrections, campus protests, the unsuspecting patios and living rooms of suburbia,

the ancient rituals of the Oroloko people of New Guinea, the Greek chorus, and discotheques. The list is eclectic but that is precisely the point: for all these phenomena share a 'qualitative link', called Dionysiac or simply 'theatrical', which has the potential to reactivate the communal and transcendent character of theatre lost to a disenchanted, protestant modernity.⁶⁹ In the last instance, this potential is to remain repressed and thwarted for reasons now familiar: the modern incarnations of this counterforce are symptomatic of a decline and crisis. They can neither 'match the Greeks or the medievals', nor the sacred ceremonies of the Asmat or Oroloko. Modern expressions 'become either mish-mash or bloody riots', while political protests and marches are found to be 'styleless'.⁷⁰ As in Albee and Usigli, Schechner turns the historical becoming and destiny of the polity into the narrative horizon of his discourse, the pessimism of which clearly contradicts received wisdom regarding the play's alleged liberatory spirit.

Schechner has always stated that the tale is cautionary. Dionysus returns to the city to regain the place denied him by the 'rationalist' Pentheus. Pentheus' downfall and murder at the hands of his mother is precipitated by Dionysus' deceit, but also by Pentheus' own failure to liberate himself from a repressed authoritarianism lacking in real legitimacy. (The play includes a scene where Dionysus and Pentheus kiss.)⁷¹ By contrast to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the sacrifice does not result in a renewal. Instead, Dionysus, the jealous god and would-be presidential candidate, ends up usurping Pentheus.

Standing on one of the towers to announce his candidacy for the next election, he also curses Thebes in the following terms:

Dionysus, son of William and Dorothy, and still not recognized as a true god by everyone in this garage. When you have known me, you did not. And even now you're not sure. Dig it. I came to New York, the city where I was born, and I came to this garage and I told you who I was. But instead of saying, 'That's nice. He's Dionysus. I dig that,' you made fun of me. . . . You did not love me. Therefore, I will reveal to you the results of your mistrust and rejection.⁷²

While in the end the hysteria that grips the city abates, Dionysus' narcissistic wanting does not. Performing the Nazi salute, he condemns everyone to a life of suffering. In a variant of the finale, the performative cursing is also directed at the other artists of the ensemble who are condemned to performing their theatrical labours until the day they truly recognize Dionysus as a god. This, of course, will never happen, as the performance event can only ever be Promethean, that is, a productivist parody of a true Dionysiac celebration. In a profoundly ironic inversion of Marcuse's utopianism, Dionysus ends up embodying a form of 'ecstatic fascism', a kind of perverse symptom of the American cult of liberty.⁷³ The end thus negates the Dionysiac spirit, but in doing so it also affirms the play's Apollonian moment, so to speak, which solicits the spectator's moral consciousness and sense of measure in the face of Dionysus' murdering fury.

The strength and intelligence of this conservatism lies in its critique of both the status quo and of naive utopianism. As Schechner stated in a reply to his *New York Times* critics: 'neither the repressive and prurient spirit of Pentheus nor the ecstatic revelries of Dionysus offer a pleasant model for society.'⁷⁴ However, it could be argued that this conclusion also forms the basis of a radical negation of politics as such. If Dionysus and the 'theatrical' are synonymous with a demonic but nonetheless wholesome counterforce and potential, political power is synonymous with cursed closure and negation of this potential, as suggested in the following, when Dionysus says to Cadmus:

It is your fate to lead a great black army of black panthers. With its host so large its numbers cannot be counted, you shall burn many cities to the ground – Detroit, Cleveland, San Francisco, New Orleans, Chicago, Newark. Finally, your army will come to New York and plunder the Harlem shrine of Apollo. There your homecoming will be perilous and hard. Yet in the end the great god Ares will turn you into a honky and bring you to live among the blest.⁷⁵

Rumours regarding burning and looting in Paris and the destruction of art at the hands of embattled *communards* in 1871 nourished

the tragic discourse of a horrified Nietzsche.⁷⁶ The allusions to the riots of the summer of 1967 may be more sympathetic. However, the threatening mobs and the burning and the looting figure mass political action as either apocalyptic destruction or redemptive absorption (a 'honky' living among the blest). In the end, a similar consolation is offered to SoHo's bohemian Thebans: as Dionysus exits the garage, spectators pour out on to the streets after their would-be-president and newfound idol, who is sometimes lifted high on the shoulders of his supporters. His victory is pyrrhic, as the ideal that Dionysus stood for is negated. However, this negation also reproduces and sustains the ideal as an unrealized absolute.

Conclusion

This conclusion draws the elements of the analysis together to reflect on American impolitical theatre as a form defined by comparable stances, subject matters, and modes of composition. The conclusion concentrates on the plays themselves, leaving aside Schechner's criticism and Usigli's prologue from which the term 'impolitical' was derived.

There are certainly stark differences between the practices discussed above. Despite those differences, however, what this article seeks to demonstrate is that comparable stances, subjects, and modes define these practices. Impolitical theatre in this context represents the condition of post-revolutionary, modern America from the standpoint of the humanist ideal of culture. In both plays, this ideal is associated with specific activities (the arts and humanities), as well as with certain representative individuals and groups (artists and intellectuals such as George, Martha, The Performance Group, and Dionysus) who become subjected to this ideal. The analysis shows that the bearers of this ideal affirm and defend it against other, more expedient rivals representing modernity (science and biology, politics and 'commercialism'). This opposition exists at different levels. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the living room of the college provides an image of the sick and divided nation uniting through the ritualistic

revelation of truth. In *Dionysus in 69*, the opposition is given form through the environmental yet fragmented space, which is equally symbolic of a divided society that seeks to reconnect to a lost value. A comparable pattern shapes the 'epic' aspects of the dialogues and characters. George rants about the state of civilization, Martha versifies soliloquies on love, and Dionysus gives a narrative of his own birth, which also relies on a prosaic coming in and out of divine character, shaping the subject's affirmation of the ideal in the face of a degraded and reified world. The analysis thus shows that impolitical subjects are isolated subjects, in spite of their search for what Schechner would soon call 'wholeness', 'organic growth', 'transcendental experience'.⁷⁷ They enjoy superior authority and oversight while also feeling an acute sense of loss and displacement in the face of a social reality over which they struggle to regain control.

Undoubtedly, the representation of this predicament gives rise to forcefully imprudent social critiques. Albee's play presented a shocking critique of America's phantasmagoria at a moment when the country was emerging out of the ideological slumbers of the conservative 1950s. By contrast, *Dionysus in 69*, written at the end of a decade of domestic political agitation and change, which was soon to run out of steam, subverts naive utopianism by showing in quasi-Derridean fashion that, while a subversive force may always exceed the bounds of theatrical and political representation, the realm of representation remains inescapable.⁷⁸

Some reflection on the limits of this theatre's critique is here needed. The analysis shows that beyond refracting the present, the implicit horizon of these impolitical theatres is America's post-revolutionary bourgeois modernity as such. This modernity is figured through representative men and women whose rites and individual or group trajectories are linked to the potential renewal of history and the (re-)legitimation of the polity. However, in both cases, this image of renewal and (re-)legitimation is ambivalent: a subjunctive mode by which the realization of the alternative value is always deferred – à venir – just like the return of the son is linked

to a resigned pessimism inseparable from a utopian hope and promise.

This ambivalence is perhaps most visible in *Dionysus in 69*, where the yearning for authentic values and experience does not lead to a break, as it does in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Despite functioning as a cautionary tale, *Dionysus in 69's* symbolic end re-actualizes the status quo through its sham electoral ritual. In fact, the end pinpoints how an impolitical critique performed in the name of culture functions as a supplement that ratifies the state it represents. The performative curses and rituals through which order is re-established at the end of the plays are exemplary of how the trajectories of the protagonists and the outcomes of these plays shadow the political, defined as the equally performative power to reorder the whole of society. For this reason, a critique of politics as a sphere of action synonymous with closure and fascistic monstrosity is inseparable in *Dionysus in 69* from its oxymoronic and obscene opposite: a carnivalesque celebration of Dionysus President. The renewal of the union performed at the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* looks comparatively more optimistic. However, the outcome is still resignation to a world and reconciliation to a truth ritualistically revealed and imposed. In this respect, these impolitical theatres, which produce reconciled distance out of an all-absorbing and fascinating rapture, remain resolutely pre-Brechtian. By contrast to the latter, the locus of these play's critique remains the moral consciousness of the petite bourgeoisie (intellectuals, artists, hip bohemians, and so on), for whom resigned indignation and protestation are typical, although not the only possible stances.

Notes and References

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