

## **Aesthetic Politics: The Tendency of Anti-Visual Rationality and its Political Potential in Jean Genet's *The Balcony***

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### **Abstract**

Greek philosophy emphasizes an eternal present, where the immediacy of vision fixes fleeting appearances into a static essence of existence. Particularly during the Renaissance, the invention of perspective placed the eye focused on the vanishing point at the center of absolute viewing, initiating the process of privileging modern vision. Descartes posited that seeing is knowing, asserting that the fixed images observed visually represent the inherent essence of reality, leading to a dualistic epistemology. Perspective art has always dominated the theater, positing that by creating illusion, inactive vision allows audiences shrouded in darkness to grasp the nature of things directly through their eyes, forming a rational consensus that reinforces identification with political ideology. The politics of Genet's theater is aesthetic politics, emphasizing the dual potential through sensory redistribution. However, in studies of Genet's *The Balcony*, prioritizing visibility has become a dominant strategy, leading to a representation of politics in the theater as something recognizable and solvable, establishing a hierarchy in which theater subordinates itself to political functions. This study argues that in *The Balcony*, Genet reconfigures the tradition of perspective in theater through a Baroque visual arrangement, showcasing a tendency to degrade visual rationality while enhancing visual perception through dazzling effects. Drawing on Deleuze's and Benjamin's theories of the Baroque, combined with Rancière's theory of aesthetic politics, this study will utilize textual data and analysis to discuss how Genet's theater in *The Balcony* redistributes the visual regime of the stage, disrupting the fixed relationship between things and meanings within the power dynamics of the visible and the invisible, and achieving a democratic visual construction of theater amidst uncertainty. The discussion will focus on the visual configurations of perspective and allegory, offering new possibilities for realizing aesthetic politics in Genet's theater.

*Keywords:* visual, aesthetics, politics, sensory redistribution, Baroque

### **Introduction**

In the aspect of aesthetics, theater realizes the renewal of self-value by subverting the old theater paradigm and emphasizing the autonomy of aesthetics. On the political side, theatre is always defined as the object of politics and has politics

(Lehmann, 2006). In the post-modernism era, research on aesthetic politics emphasizes that theater can realize new ways of perception through sensory redistribution, which always strangely induces uncertainty, thus triggering the occurrence of politics in an indirect aesthetic way (Rancière, 2009). The representative scholars in this field are Adorno (2002), Lehmann (2006), Rancière (2009), Tomlin (2019) et al.

However, a privileged paradigm of visual rationality is dominant in theater (Jay, 1993), overshadowing the political potential of sensory redistribution. In the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy, the eternal present becomes a fixed manifestation of truth, demanding that vision grasp all elements in space through instantaneous illusion (Jonas, 1954). This implies that vision, as the basic sensible element, allows the mind to conceive of eternal ideas. The interplay between eternal truth and instantaneous perception creates an idealized visual experience of the present.

With the Renaissance and the invention of perspective, the world became measurable. The technique of perspective transformed three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional canvas, completing a process of de-narrativization. According to Jay (1993), the vanishing point of perspective establishes a completely fixed viewpoint, akin to a sovereign eye. It led to the belief that through the fixed gaze of spectatorship, the eye could directly grasp the essence of things, representing a purely visual experience in the mind. Perspective turned the world into observable objects, labeling visual representations as reality while emphasizing the fixed nature of intrinsic essence, positioning the eye as the center of the visible world, and establishing a privileged regime of modern vision.

In theater, the art of perspectival rationality has always been dominant (Jay, 1993). According to Smith (2017), the use of stage lighting since the 1980s has further reinforced the supremacy of visual elements in theater. Audiences, seated in darkness, adopt a spectator's viewpoint, maintaining a fixed distance from the stage and other viewers. This distance allows spectators to believe they can effortlessly transform perceived objects into objects of cognitive reflection. For instance, Brecht emphasized the use of the alienation effect to establish an observational visual paradigm (Zhou, 2009), enabling audiences to engage in dialectical thinking based on visual rationality and fostering political consensus. According to Jay (1993), speculation involves a form of self-reflective pure knowledge that constitutes a unified movement of reflecting its own integrity. These dynamics subordinate the aesthetic form of theater to political intentions, undermining the autonomy and diversity of visual perception.

## **Literature Review**

In past political studies of *The Balcony*, prioritizing visibility has become a dominant strategy, leading to representations of politics in theater as recognizable and solvable experiences. This includes analyses of political metaphors related to visible power imagery, creating a hierarchy where theater is subordinated to political functions (Dort, 1979; Goldmann, 1979; Lucas, 2020; Rosen, 1992;

Shevtsova, 1987). According to Lavery (2010), Genet's theater embodies an aesthetic politics that is consistently based on sensory redistribution. However, the visual as a foundational sensory element has not been systematically explored. Furthermore, research that invests political attention in visual analysis is lacking. For instance, Fieni (2006) examines how *The Screens* uses visual imagery to critique mass media technologies and consumerism, while Melcer-Padon (2020) focuses on the political metaphor of mask visibility in Genet's works.

### **Research Methodology**

This study will use *The Balcony* (1966) as a research case, which was published in 1966. We will select visual elements as primary data and collect much more secondary data through a literature review. Then through textual analysis, applying the relevant theories to form a detailed analysis. This paper will explore the specific ways in which aesthetic politics is realized in *The Balcony* through Genet's reconfiguration of visual elements. It can change the perspective and explore the new relationship between theater and politics from a sensible dimension. A focus on visual elements can provide detailed research for aesthetic politics, supplying the research gaps.

### **Findings & Discussion**

This text argues that *The Balcony* forms a Baroque-style visual configuration, subverting the traditional visual privilege system in the theater and realizing aesthetic politics. According to Lehmann (2006), traditional theater has always required sensory elements to submit to the despotic model of the plot within the illusion of comprehensibility. Especially in the era of image bombardment, people's emotional perception of visual elements has gradually weakened, leading them to develop the ability to process abstract information only at the rational level. However, the Baroque vision emphasizes the effect of visual surplus in the chaotic interaction between surface and depth - dazzling and distorted, it refuses any holistic rational vision in its instability (Jay, 1993). This means that the Baroque style always possesses a radical potential for self-division, thoroughly negating a true world of truth and knowledge and completely liberating the perceptual elements from the oppression of hierarchical relations. This text believes that this Baroque vision in *The Balcony* is mainly manifested in the devices of perspective and allegory.

Regarding perspective, the stage directions in the first three acts of *The Balcony* provide typical perspectival scenes. The perspectival device is mainly composed of the vanishing point and the fixed viewing distance, thus creating an illusion of depth within a fixed viewing (Jay, 1993). However, this text argues that Genet acknowledges the legitimacy of perspective but deliberately exposes the falsity of the illusory stage, constituting both the basic stable form of the visual scene and a questioning of the overall visual function. This is because only by using the perspectival device can the falsity of the illusion be revealed, and only by

exposing the illusion can the legitimacy of perspective in the theater be questioned. The exposure of the laws of perspective forces the visual to be reduced within the scope of the visible, forming a rhythmic mode of viewing that makes the visual intuition lose both the stability of space and the continuity of time, refusing to produce any rational consensus in the uncertain.

Meanwhile, these devices do not assume any signifying function between each other, breaking the privileged status of visual signs, forcing the visual to only stay in the illusory depth of the material surface, rejecting any intentional understanding of the essence of things in experiential meaning. In sum, the perspectival devices in *The Balcony* subvert the privilege of traditional visual subjectivity, rendering ineffective the way of seeking truth through visual contemplation. They constantly manifest an anti-rationalist tendency within perspective, unleashing radical subversive potential in their peculiar internal tensions, renewing the aesthetic value of the theater, and enhancing perceptual rather than rational judgment. This new visual configuration also continuously deprives the authority of recognition or interpretation under visual despotism, rejecting the predetermined power center in the gaze, and possessing the political potential to provoke questioning.

The prop resources on Genet's Baroque stage are always redundant, liberating the subject from rational thinking and directing them toward a questioning of the central position of the eye. Each questioning gives rise to a multitude of scattered and mixed metaphors, rendering any epistemological intention ineffective. The perspectival devices undergo constant transformation and recombination with other materials, forming a kind of Baroque allegorical device in redundancy and excess. According to Benjamin (2003), allegory is a material, artificial form. Unlike symbols, allegory emphasizes the distance between the object represented by the sign or image and its meaning, rejecting any fixed meaning. It challenges the identity of form and content, constantly reversing the dialectical tendency of binary opposition. The Baroque exaggeration not only opposes a priori epistemological truths but also manifests the laws of perspective in new ways, emphasizing an illusion about illusion (Holly, 2018).

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin, 2003), the Baroque style is regarded as a modern theater theory that inverts the Aristotelian hierarchy of theater. According to Benjamin (2003), Aristotle emphasizes a mimetic drama centered on action, particularly tragic plots or myths, while downplaying the theater's material and sensual attributes. In contrast, Baroque theater liberates material from the tyranny of form, placing a burden on the development of the plot, thus embodying an anti-dramatic quality. The allegorical device of the Baroque is primarily manifested in *The Balcony* through the depiction of the subject's body and elaborate decorations. In *The Balcony*, the subject's body is often frozen in specific poses, *THE BISHOP (with a foolish look): Stiff? I'm stiff? A solemn stiffness! Final immobility. ...* (Genet, 1966, p. 13).

The body, in its stillness, disrupts the continuity of the plot within linear time, removing the intentionality behind the action. Genet's depersonalization of the flesh creates a non-mimetic tension that subverts the Aristotelian model of plot-driven theater. The elaborate costume changes in *The Balcony* create a veritable

masquerade, where the extravagant portrayal of images satisfies the illusion not by creating it, but by excessively flaunting it. The towering external images overturn any preconceived consensus and the intent of representational illusion. Thus, *The Balcony* relies not on the development of the plot, but on the display of dazzling effects, appealing primarily to the external sensations, especially visual effects, rather than to the meaning of representation.

According to Deleuze (1993), the Baroque style emphasizes matter. In *The Balcony*, Genet repeatedly highlights the luxurious tones of various decorations, resonating with the material qualities to enhance the specificity and richness of material expression. In other words, Genet emphasizes the material attributes of the decorations over their functional properties or symbolic meanings. Consequently, when the eye attempts to actively simulate through illusion, it is disrupted by the surplus of material, color, and texture, resulting in passive visual mechanics that undermine the distance between subjective awareness and the imitated object. In the concept of the Baroque perspective, the viewpoint does not belong to the predetermined agency of the viewer but operates with significant autonomy. The absolute power of viewing from a traditional perspective is deconstructed by the redundancy and variability of material conditions. The increased resistance to viewing extends the temporal dimension of the visual experience, thereby destabilizing the stability and intuitiveness of visual space.

### Conclusion

In Genet's Baroque world, the transparency of the symbolic system gradually becomes obscured, as images and materials express themselves in their unique forms, making the poetic a pure vehicle for the representation of beauty. On the artificially constructed visual stage, all essences are canceled by lavish appearances, and things are endlessly aestheticized through rhetoric, creating a non-mimetic Baroque theater. Visual elements permeate the entire space, elevating the perceptual effect of vision to prominence amidst suspended meaning. This presents an anti-rationalist tendency that disrupts the visual traditions of conventional theater, emphasizing pure visual effects. In the dual suspension of meaning and perception, a new perception mode of visual continuously validates the power of sensory elements to express themselves autonomously, achieving a de-hierarchical distribution that holds radical political potential. In summary, Genet realizes aesthetic politics in *The Balcony* by reconfiguring the sensory elements of visibility. In perspective devices and allegorical devices, the Baroque tendency to devalue visual reason is shown.

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