

The Political Potential of Autonomous Time Generation in Jean Genet's *The Balcony*

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ABSTRACT

With the development of timekeeping machinery in the late Middle Ages, time became publicly visible on mechanical dials. This way of spatializing time aimed to crystallize the flow of time and experience into eternity at a single moment, reaching its peak in the 19th century. The natural rhythm of time and the discrete temporality of personal experience were strictly unified into a series of points, distributed along a historical timeline that never turns back. This unidirectional arrow of time remains evident in the study of *The Balcony*. Research on *The Balcony* has primarily focused on its political expressions in space, often overlooking the potential of theatrical temporality. This indicates that studies of the political aspects of *The Balcony* are overly focused on the dimension of visibility, neglecting the exploration of theatrical invisibility. This article will utilize textual data and analysis, based on Deleuze's theory of Aion time, to develop a discussion on the pure formal time in Genet's theater, incorporating relevant political concepts to explore its autonomously generated political potential further, focusing on the characteristics of theatrical time that continuously provoke questioning and ambiguity.

Contribution/Originality: This study is among the few that explore the political potential of autonomous time in *The Balcony*. It aims to fill a gap in the existing research on time in *The Balcony*, change the dominant situation of space research, elevate the discussion to a political dimension, and establish a connection between theater and politics through the perspective of time.

1. Introduction

According to Harvey (1989), with the advancement of timekeeping machinery in the late Middle Ages, time emerged as a publicly visible entity on mechanical dials, fundamentally transforming how people perceived and interacted with its passage. This marked a significant shift in human consciousness, as time transitioned from an abstract concept to a tangible, measurable force. This new approach to spatializing time sought to

crystallize the continuous flow of time and human experience into a single, eternal moment, reaching its zenith in the 19th century with the introduction of more sophisticated timekeeping devices, such as precision clocks and railroads.

These advancements facilitated greater synchronization of social life, as communities began to adhere to standardized time schedules, fundamentally reshaping daily routines and interactions. The distinct temporality of individual experience was meticulously unified into a series of points along a historical timeline that relentlessly moved forward, never to return. This linear perspective fostered a sense of progress and development, encouraging the belief that human society was on an inevitable path toward improvement and enlightenment. The once fluid and organic relationship with time became rigid and structured, leading to collective anxiety about productivity and efficiency.

In this context, the 19th century also saw the rise of narratives emphasizing the significance of historical moments, as events were meticulously documented and celebrated, reinforcing the idea of progress. As time became a commodity, the experience of living increasingly centered around the quest for efficiency and control, leaving little room for the spontaneity and unpredictability that characterize human experience. Ultimately, the transformation of time from an abstract notion to a quantifiable measure reshaped not only individual lives but also the very fabric of society.

Since Aristotle, the Western world has established a principle of fictional rationality. According to [Rancière \(2022\)](#), the division of time is always transformed into a rational causal chain, creating understandable patterns of human behavior. This blurs the clear boundaries and contrasts between fictional realities and historical facts in pure experience. Moreover, this rational causal relationship not only categorizes human behavior into temporal hierarchies based on time control but also aligns these hierarchies with spatial hierarchies, creating an ordered distribution of spatiotemporal conditions and a framework of rational governance. [Rancière \(2022\)](#) argues that despite claims in modern society that "grand narratives" have ended, they can still be traced back to Aristotle's fictional logic.

Time is deliberately portrayed as the fourth dimension of theater in *The Balcony*, where speed and force are presented in a non-material auditory manner, creating a practical practice of becoming through the fluidity of musicality, resulting in different experiential modes of time. [Deleuze \(2006\)](#) notes in his study of ontological politics that becoming refers to the difference of a thing from itself, while contingency signifies the differences or distributive differences among all things. Becoming always involves the generative force, which must also enter a perceivable process. Time, expressed as a rhythmic duration, embodies the generation of intensity and the opposition of forces, subverting the continuous chronicle time representing narrative events in Aristotelian theater through disharmony, thereby forming a perceptual intuition of temporality with the democratic potential to overturn any temporal hierarchy and fixed order.

In previous studies, the autonomous time of Genet's theater has often been replaced by singular historical time and subordinated to spatial systems of expression, particularly evident in discussions of *The Balcony*. This paper will illustrate how Genet subverts the deterministic order of time by reconstructing theatrical time, further generating the potential for political transformation. In this process, the sequential representation of

time continually generates a pure form of time-*Aion*-within rhythmic intervals. In the eternal time concerning death and wounds, Genet uses the intensity of dice-throwing to affirm the contingency of all generations in time, connecting the instantaneous with the eternal, creating a problematic structure of questioning that grants him a continually ambiguous political potential.

2. Literature review

Scholars focusing on Genet's theatrical space often address its political construction (Bougon, 1998; Nield, 2006), concentrating on visible dimensions such as social space symbols (Dort, 1979; Shevtsova, 1987), bodies (Pietrobruno, 1992; Jones, 2001; Durham, 2004; Stephens, 2006; Lavery & Woodward, 2006), and developing political research directions related to identity (Clark, 1980; Koth, 2000), race (Millett, 2016; Finburgh, 2006; Lavery, 2009), and gender (Bersani, 1994; Creech, 1997; Eldridge, 2005), while also integrating spatiality into psychoanalysis (Meehan O'Callaghan, 2020). Among these, Lavery (2010) provides the most systematic study, interpreting *The Balcony* as a spatial and allegorical satire of a spectacle society, emphasizing utopian politics. He begins to establish a research project that seeks to achieve political through aesthetic autonomy but lacks a cohesive framework. These space-driven studies do not fully liberate the political dimension from real experiences. They often remain tethered to critical art's exposure of social conditions, subordinating the aesthetic dimension to the representation of political ideology, which overlooks the aesthetic construction of political consensus and leads to a symptomatic reading tendency.

Meanwhile, Melia (2007) situates the study of theatrical space within a specific historical context, aiming to explore a series of broad yet coherent issues in late 20th-century French and European cultural and intellectual history, focusing on the ideology's transplantation into theater. In his analysis, time is reduced to a specific historical moment, positioning Genet as a playwright with clear political aims. This suggests that Genet's work dramatizes and particularizes social and historical issues while his nomadic lifestyle contributes to the instability of identity and spatial constructs in his works, revealing a coexistence of subjective and historically objective research.

De Gennaro (2003) publicly opposes this teleological historical time, arguing that Genet calls for a theater capable of breaking the common concept of time and history. The rejection of historical time is a key driving force in his aesthetic theory. This paper contends that much of the research reduces theatrical time to passive historical facts, underestimating its autonomously generated political intensity. This trend, which keeps the invisibility of time subordinate to visible space, creates an internal hierarchy in the theater, leading to factual logic replacing aesthetic fictional logic, thus forming thematic interpretations of social politics and rational consensus. This fixed logic undermines the potential for expanding the political dimension and has yet to receive systematic correction.

In his analysis of Genet's language, Watts (1992) emphasizes the appropriation and alienation of imagery within the poetic register, where the deliberate focus on surface features allows characters' language to yield to timeless logical imagery, thus creating a temporal distance in the language. However, the author focuses on the imagery analysis of poetic language and does not extend the notion of temporality to the overall dimension of theater's autonomy. Additionally, the author demonstrates an incomplete

political inclination, highlighting Genet's rejection of political aims while grappling with the paradox of relying on political discourse in his work. In this perspective, Genet sacrifices political pursuit for literary autonomy, limiting the political potential of theater to a teleological understanding of real experiences and failing to address the dual possibilities of autonomy and politics.

[Boisseron and Ekotto \(2004\)](#) emphasize the construction of pure temporal forms in their study of *The Blacks*. The incomplete layering of theatrical space creates an embedded plot pattern that immerses the audience in a postmodern interstitial time, presenting time in a collage manner and revealing the performance through interruptions. [Hardt \(1997\)](#) focuses on temporality in Genet's novels, stressing that revolutionary and ritual time exhibit infinite fluidity and continuity through excessive exposure and openness. In summary, the exploration of the temporal politics in *The Balcony* has lacked systematic research, particularly regarding the emergence of theater's autonomy. This paper aims to uncover the political potential expressed through the autonomous of theatrical temporality, steering clear of interpretations that serve fixed ideologies.

3. Methodology

This paper will utilize textual data and analysis, drawing on [Deleuze's \(1990\)](#) interpretation of *Aion* as a theoretical foundation for exploring the political dimensions of pure temporal forms in theater. According to [Deleuze and Guattari \(2005\)](#), *Aion* refers to a pure form of time characterized by the indefinite generation of speed, emphasizing infinite extension in any direction in a linear manner. It can dissolve and generate pure speed within autonomy without adding extra dimensions, liberating time from sequences, and allowing it to become a purely rhythmic natural expression. In contrast, *Chronos* embodies temporality and relativity, emphasizing a fixed time scale that creates a circular sequence.

This study argues that Genet's democratic liberation of theater's autonomy is first reflected in the release from temporal hierarchies and causal sequences. He uses the temporal form of *Chronos* to reveal the generation of *Aion*, allowing cyclical time sequences to acquire diverse temporal reference points in countless arbitrary moments. The present merges past and future, unfolding and condensing to create the potential for infinite generation. *Aion* continuously threatens the validity of *Chronos* by replacing the causal order of significant events with numerous interrupted time gaps, thereby forming a problematic temporal structure. Genet replaces the historical concept of positivistic time with a fluid pure temporal form, creating an antagonistic relationship with space while interacting with it, achieving a strong autonomous expression that disrupts spatial stability and forms a dynamic spatiotemporal field.

According to [Laclau and Mouffe \(2001\)](#), antagonism is the essence of "the political", defining the boundaries of every objectivity and revealing the impossibility within any interpretable objectivity. This contradictory structure creates a situation where ultimate reconciliation is impossible, leading to a dual suspension in the perception and understanding of the antagonistic dimension of the political. [Mouffe \(2011\)](#) emphasizes that every order is political; the opposing sides acknowledge each other's legitimacy within their differences, collectively revealing the contingency beneath the appearance of hegemony.

In *The Balcony*, the temporal manipulation of agonism is released through the cracks in the subject, allowing the theater to exploit its political potential by reconfiguring sensory order in a new temporal mode. For [Rancière \(1999\)](#), politics is not a pre-existing order or experience, but an operation that reconfigures the order of experience, with the key to the political lying in transforming established orders into divergence and opposition. This means that political efficacy can only be expanded by establishing a shared object or relationship of dispute between two incommensurable orders.

[Rancière \(1999\)](#) also argues that any consensus reached is a form of counter-politics, always underpinned by a spontaneous logic of hierarchy. Consensus, as a regime of the perceptible, eliminates any gaps that could provoke democratic dispute within pre-established opinions and rights. It is a mode that makes reality entirely self-identical and exhaustively present, reinforcing hierarchical identity distribution. Therefore, this article aims to emphasize the sources and pathways through which the autonomous time of theater gains its political potential through divergencies and non-consensus.

4. Discussion

In *The Balcony*, the past, present, and future are distinct and integrated, showcasing a state of pure nihilism regarding time. As [Deleuze \(2006\)](#) asserts, a moment can only become past when the present coexists with both the past and the future. Conversely, if the present does not simultaneously encompass the past or the future, it will never become past, nor will the future ever arrive. Each distinct moment is a synthetic amalgamation of now, past, and future, establishing its relationship with other moments. According to [Deleuze \(1990\)](#), *Aion* represents a disembodied organization of time, forming two juxtaposed temporal systems that simultaneously negate time in both directions. On one hand, it consists of an instantaneous present that infinitely compresses the past and future. As [Rancière \(2022\)](#) states, the chaos of time is the coexistence of heterogeneous elements, where the privilege of the present is, in fact, a privilege of coexistence. On the other hand, *Aion* is also composed of past and future, endlessly slicing into the present to create an empty now, representing a non-coexistence of time. This temporal paradox liberates *Aion* from the weighty relationships imposed by *Chronos*, revealing a rhythmic musicality.

In *The Balcony*, the heterogeneous forms of time present an interplay of temporal intensity through different sequential combinations, generating instantaneous differences and ruptures in asynchronicity at their boundaries, always appearing in forms of internal contradiction. They reject any totalizing time that leads to an internal conclusion through repetitive differences, continuously altering the configurations of present, past, and future via rhythmic forms of contraction and expansion. Reality no longer relies on external experiences; instead, new connections emerge at the fractures of time, where time undergoes differentiation through internal evolutionary forces, forming the rhizomatic configuration described by [Deleuze and Guattari \(2005\)](#).

The rhizomatic system rejects binary hierarchies, focusing solely on linear intensity flows. This implies that the line of pure time may break at any moment, reconstituting itself and offering multiple entry points. It lacks unified principles or connections, instantly accommodating the diversity of temporal expressions amid its changing nature. At the boundaries between two elements, there exists an intermediary dimension where time continuously configures and transforms between past, present, and future, negating all beginnings and endings. As [Deleuze and Guattari \(2005\)](#) state,

this is a rhythmic interlude where power centers oscillate within the tension of ambiguity, generating energy and intensity of confrontation that transcends all hierarchies and rhythms, liberating all perceptions of reality within time.

In Scene Six, daybreak and dusk create a murky moment during the transition between night and day, generating divergent temporal sequences within the fractures of time. They resonate within chaos, breaking symbolic boundaries of time and forming an interconnected openness. According to [Deleuze \(1990\)](#), the confrontation between the infinite forces of night and day gives rise to a zero point of intensity or moment. At zero point, a false connection regarding light occurs, where both states manifest as productive differences, resulting in limitless movement and shifts in force. The day inherently contains the zero-negative intensity of night, with each constituting the other's tension and strength. The illusion of the descending zero-point contrasts with the rising noon sunlight, creating a continuous transformation: the day has yet to begin, and the night has already ended, dividing time into "has been" and "not yet". These moments are both recent occurrences and imminent events. In the chaos of time, one moment becomes the image of death within another.

Pure time with its different vectors creates a dual mechanism of death: one is about physiological death, signifying external and accidental demise; the other is collective eternal death, always accompanied by open-ended questions. The first type of death ultimately returns to the second, which implies that true death is merely an abstraction, lacking both a temporal beginning and a definitive end, and is never fully realized. Death has an extremely definitive relationship with the subject; it is grounded in the subject yet pertains solely to itself, causing the subject to endlessly fold into itself through its fragmentation. In *The Balcony*, death manifests through an extreme fantasy, revealing the isomorphic differences and cyclical relationships among diverse subjects and images, forming the primal force of eternal repetition of difference. The subject is always dying in fantasy but has never truly died; events are already in the past yet still not arrived. In this sense, death signifies the death of time itself, a reflection of the dilemma of time turned upon itself ([Day, 1999](#)).

The text presents a profound reflection on the mechanics of death. It describes how the will to confront death opposes the guilt associated with it, immersing the subject in an infinite flow of time that transcends conventional experience. This inversion extracts the content of temporal experience and organic structure, reorganizing the dimensions of time within the realm of spiritual will and allowing pure force to influence the process of the subject's simulation. In other words, death is a simulation that generates infinite differences, eroding everything within itself while affirming everything and leading to the continual proliferation of differences among various subjects and images through repetition.

As [Deleuze \(1993\)](#) noted, the significance of eternity lies not in transcending or retreating but in coinciding with each arrival that aligns with the sequence of time, as well as with all the living presents that compose the world, thus forming a representation of diversity and repetition of differences. The process of death perpetually returns to itself in an infinite future, evading the experience of death within the paradoxical nature of time, while simultaneously mocking the historical sequence of time. It manifests as an eternal agent, showcasing a powerful formlessness about itself, which implies that eternity is intrinsically regenerative; it is both the moment of the present and the cyclical recurrence, creating an inherent paradox and duality.

Wounds, like death, create a chasm on the surface, establishing eternity in the present and constituting a pure event concerning time. According to [Deleuze \(1990\)](#), a wound is not an accident; rather, it lies hidden within the occurrence of events that must be expressed and understood through the scar. Wounds compel us to gain new life from the event of death, becoming descendants of ourselves. They are always directed from the present towards the past-future, meaning that the past-future of a wound can only be evaluated from the ever-vanishing present. The pure past and future become integral components of the wounding event, a non-human characteristic [Deleuze \(1990\)](#) refers to as “*counter-actualization*” (p.151). Counter-actualization views events as a developmental process of uncertain outcomes, implying that time is continually affirmed within the relationship of movement, and movement is part of events. Therefore, time is the events of events.

Time is not an attribute extracted separately from objects, but rather an expression of the qualities of things. It separates events from the reality of temporal sequences and points to all other possibilities. Time extracts and measures everything within the moment, freeing itself from all material content and corresponding causal relationships, always concerning and unfolding itself within the blurred intervals. In other words, this autonomously generated *Aion* detaches from the individual or the historical time of realization, disrupting the stagnation of synchronic systems and the unified coherence of grand narratives, manifesting pure contingency without fixed meaning in the intensity generated at the moment.

In *The Balcony*, the simulated subject repeatedly enters an abstract time of death through current contemplation. In [Deleuze and Guattari's \(2005\)](#) words, death shakes the organic life of the subject, prompting a passive cognitive function in the subject. In the first act, The Bishop says,

And when the die is cast. ... (Genet,1966, p.8)

This means that the contingency of death is intertwined with the powerful force of throwing dice. According to [Deleuze \(1990\)](#), within the rules of dice, each roll expands the affirmation of contingency within an endless time, embodying the simplest power relations established among the specificities drawn by chance. All moments of dice rolls constitute an eternal line, where each moment of a roll communicates and resonates with another moment, creating an endless movement. Just as noon and midnight form fragments at dawn and dusk, creating eternal temporal fissures at the boundaries of space, they continuously point toward a question structure in confrontation. This allows the theater's autonomous time to gain disagreement political potential.

According to [Deleuze \(1994\)](#), “I think” also means “we have yet to think”, indicating that only the unthought future can be contemplated. True freedom and the greatest power of thought lie in the ability to formulate new questions. The key to a question is not in the reality content of the past or present but in its intensity of openness toward the future. Thinking is like the death game of rolling dice; each roll represents a process of inquiry, and only through repeated questioning can one continue to respond to inquiries. This leads to instantaneous rolls and an eternal time in infinite generations.

Questions unleash an arbitrary, infinite power of time, rejecting any complete totality, thus possessing revolutionary potential for interpreting time. *The Balcony* reconfigures the formal conditions of time through numerous intense pauses and infinitely extended

silences, achieving a confrontation between minimal and maximal time. Within the pure form of time that is infinitely divided and extended, it realizes the political potential for the theater's generation of multiplicity, channeling the political force of subversive ideas. In *The Balcony*, each roll of the dice of thought generates political reflection and resonance. The political does not negate the autonomy of the theater; rather, it embodies an openness to inquiry and a generative power that affirms all negative heterogeneous forms within the theater, allowing its autonomy to persist and remain vibrant. Genet establishes the conditions for questioning in the theater but leaves the solutions unresolved, positioning political as a problematic force within the theater's overall framework. Political engage with the theater by posing questions based on the demands and conditions it provides. In other words, the political force acts as a disruptive force of heterogeneity, consistently questioning the autonomy of the theater and maintaining an open state of de-essentialization and decentralization amidst the complexities of time.

5. Conclusion

In *The Balcony*, the concept of time is liberated from the cyclic and orderly confines of a circle, generating a self-developing, twisted form that expresses and revitalizes itself through a state of alternating semi-fixity and semi-fluidity. It attempts to achieve a new temporal consensus amid dissent, which Mouffe (2013) refers to as a "*conflictual consensus*" (p.9). Within a linear timeline made up of instants, singularities resonate through endless displacements along the line, creating infinite distances. In this intermittent distance, no subject or event can fully occupy this formless pure time (*Aion*). However, it is precisely within the cracks of constant deviation from itself that time generates an intensity that traverses all things, forming a disjointed resonance. Thus, the eternal time concerning death or wounds in *The Balcony* is not a stasis but a generation of time.

In a rhizomatic configuration, nothing is terminated, as nothing truly begins. They always achieve new connections and transformations of interstitial motion. The effort to weave the disharmony of time into a divided community creates a new shared time within its unique spiritual line, which is an active process of liberation. Time appears cyclic and endless, yet it consistently focuses on the ineffable perceptual validity of the theater, achieving a redistribution of sensory experiences within a non-hierarchical temporal rhizome.

According to Rancière (2004), the characteristic of democracy is merely another form of power division; at a deeper level, democracy signifies a sharing of the sensory, a redistribution of sensory spaces. Similarly, art cannot provide a viable blueprint for a new social order, nor can it fully detach from the existing social framework; it can only realize itself and generate political intent through an ongoing process of questioning. Therefore, the construction of autonomous time in *The Balcony* rejects all rational consensus and recognition, endowing the theater with the potential to generate infinite possibilities through the ongoing stimulation of questions, thereby achieving a dual potential of autonomy and the political.

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