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Excess represented: the aesthetics of the "paradoxical party" on the British contemporary stage

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1. Quite unexpectedly, showing a party that has become dull, undistinguishable from a banal everyday activity, revives its excessive essence (in the etymological meaning of the term, that is the Latin verb "*excedere*": "to go out or beyond"). The dramatists under study challenge the spectators' resistance by placing them in front of the display of Dionysian, usually unconscious dynamics prone to renew the process of reception. Moving from actor of a party to spectator, one becomes more aware of the interplay of drives and unconscious mechanisms at work. Therefore, more deeply committed in what is taking place on stage, the audience relates to it in a different way. Such festive occasions become both strange and disturbing objects that involve a primal, original nature otherwise ignored. In his latest essay devoted to British contemporary theatre, Aleks Sierz observes that "theatre is part of a widespread conversation about who we are as a nation, and where we might be going"[1], articulating dramatic aesthetics with sociological considerations so as to approach a characterisation of Britishness. Interestingly enough, the same could be asserted about partying. Indeed, it is generally admitted that festive occasions also involve social gatherings and more often than not lavish entertainment. The various forms that such excess takes are likely to arouse curiosity.

2. Looking back to the origins of drama, one is struck by the contiguity of theatre and festivities. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche traces it back to medieval Germany, and even further back to Ancient Greece, when for instance the Bacchic chorus was coupled with Dionysian celebrations in satyr plays.[2] Numerous essays have strived to describe and analyse the social and anthropological dimension of festivities, intriguing manifestations linked with natural and seasonal cycles — one can mention Durkheim, Duvignaud, or Malinowski[3]. But philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche,

1 A. Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, 1.
2 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings,* 17-18.
3 See for example É. Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse : le système totémique en Australie* (1912); J. Duvignaud, *Le Don du rien : essai d'anthropologie de la fête* (1977); B. Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927).

Hegel, and more recently Eliade[4], and psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan have also been very much interested in this phenomenon[5]. Yet, all those prolific and multifaceted discourses have hardly been systematically articulated to more æsthetic and literary concerns, except for such essays as Laroque's *Shakespeare's Festive World*.

3. Etymologically the place where things are to be seen, theatre introduces an intrinsic distance between the spectator and the performance. Paradoxically, when an excessive festivity is shown on stage, it stands clear of the audience, since representing, as Sibony has it, "is to make a presence active by projecting it onto a space in which it becomes more eloquent. It amounts to moving data into a more playable frame"[6]. If theatre is a celebration in itself, as the historical correlation between the two tends to establish it, then representing a party should result in the advent of a new, metatheatrical dimension through *mise en abyme,* potentially contributing to the revelation of the "presence" that Daniel Sibony evokes. When on stage, when turned into an object of observation, parties and excess are taken to a whole new level.

4. This article will attempt to articulate the different discourses — philosophical, anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytical — held on the festive phenomenon with a corpus of contemporary British plays in which parties take place in order to analyse the æsthetic consequences of the representation of excess on festive occasions. The dramatists I focus on have all had to write in an original historical context, in the aftermath of the Second World War. In fact, as Elisabeth Angel-Perez underlines it in her essay *Voyages au bout du possible*, the mass destruction and unprecedented barbarity in such places as Auschwitz or Hiroshima have led to reconsider any attempt at representation. Going to the theatre after the holocaust has become both an æsthetic and ethical experience, leading to new forms of epiphany. Such trauma has informed the dramaturgies of British playwrights since the 1950s, ranging from Samuel Beckett to Dennis Kelly, the most contemporary, including Harold Pinter, Mike Leigh, Caryl Churchill and David Storey. All those dramatists are concerned with exploring trauma, lack, absence, vacuity and yet, paradoxically, they have also staged parties, which in such context might seem almost inappropriate. However, I wish to contend that the modalities of partying have very much changed since the Elizabethan festivities described by François Laroque. They do not involve a clear-cut distinction with everyday

4 See for example Plato, *Laws* (881 AD); F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871); G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807); M. Eliade, *Aspects du mythe* (1963).

5 See for example S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, (1923), or J. Lacan, *Les Complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu : Essai d'analyse d'une fonction en psychologie*, *Autres écrits*, (1938).

6 D. Sibony, *Le Jeu et la passe,* 153: "C'est rendre active une présence en la projetant sur un espace où elle est plus parlante. C'est déplacer des données sur un cadre plus jouable." (translation mine).

routine anymore. So what happens when parties and their constitutive excess are relocated on this renewed stage, in a confined theatre? How can the new festive modalities in contemporary Britain and their æsthetic representations be construed? And in the end, what essential reality(-ties?) does such staging bring to light?

5. In order to elaborate on those questions, we will first resort to a historical and phenomenological approach so as to identify the traditional lineage between theatre and celebrations, and study the traces of a former Dionysian energy in contemporary British plays dealing with parties. Then, we will focus on the consequences of the re-presentation of parties on stage, as excess is gradually curbed with the introduction of distance (instead of participation) and the desire to keep the party clean. In the end, the poetics of excess are reinvented in these unconventional celebrations that renew the whole process of reception. Focusing on the spectator, we will be led to appreciate to what extent excess is reintroduced in new, "paradoxical parties" that we will try to characterise.

The traces of a former Dionysian energy on stage

6. As François Laroque shows it, theatre and festivities used to be tied together in Elizabethan England and involved spectacular performances, including demotic figures like the "clown" of popular celebrations, together with the dramatic structure of "Morris dances", "folk plays", or entertainments such as "Masques" and "pageants". Such coincidence between festive and theatrical traditions can still be traced in contemporary British drama.

The potential theatricality of the festive phenomenon

7. A mere phenomenological observation of celebrations can account for the dramatists' interest in festivities. Diachronically, the festive reality in England can be said to have evolved from "celebrations" or "festivals" in the Elizabethan era to contemporary "parties". The former involved a certain religious solemnity associated with mystery cycles, miracles (based on the lives of saints), and allegorical moralities (treating man's struggle against death and sin), when the latter appear more erratic, and conjure up eating, drinking, lavish entertainment. In traditional celebrations, what ex-ceeds, what goes beyond receives a religious connotation, and has to do with an unattainable deity. Theatre took on a ritualistic value that still surfaces in the contemporary corpus. In both plays and celebrations, it is possible to trace an original order with differentiated elements organised in a

complex and articulated arrangement that breaks with everyday routine. The cyclic and ritualistic aspect of celebrations matters to the dramatist, also concerned with form, as Aristotle underlined it when he metaphorically referred to well-made plays as properly-sized "bodies"[7]. Such formal expectation lives on for contemporary dramatists. The macro-structure of a play like Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957) echoes the specific temporality associated with celebrations in its meta-theatrical value. The play comprises three acts of equal length, respectively taking place in "[a] morning in summer", the "evening of the same day" and "the next morning"[8]. It appears just as if the different steps of a well-wrought play (exposition, complication, denouement) were designed to correspond to the temporality of Stanley's birthday party, with its preparations in the first act, followed by the actual, climactic party in the second act, and its epilogue in the third. Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1957) also seems organised according to an unsettling, drinking ritual, since the main character regularly leaves the stage for a drink. The audience witnesses a sort of solitary party, the sad remnant of a celebration whose only perceptible echo is to be heard in the recurring "*pop of cork*"[9]. The precision of the stage directions points to the careful organisation of the play, in which time is measured to the second: "*Ten seconds. Loud pop of cork. Fifteen seconds*" (KLT, 216). The ritualistic organisation of celebrations lends itself perfectly well to the formal expectations of a play, all the more as, just like at a party, theatre brings together people willing to share a common experience in the same place, with a role for everyone. In *The Contractor* (1970), David Storey has his actors actually erect a marquee on stage for a wedding. The posts immediately conjure up the traditional image of the "May pole", a tall, colourful wooden pole decorated with ribbons placed in the middle of English village squares to celebrate May Day, signalling the beginning of festivities. If celebrations and performance were clearly differentiated thanks to the criterion of audience participation, the theatrical revolution introduced by Artaud blurred the limits and contributed to reinvent the genre. According to Derrida, with Artaud, "there is no more show, no more spectator, there is a party".[10] The French playwright advocated an active theatre, in which staging was paramount, centred around an active audience, a "revolving show" spreading "its visual and oral outbursts over the whole mass of spectators"[11]. The "fourth wall" has become a fragile construction; actors tend to mix with the audience, to let people on stage, or even to go and meet with potential

7 Aristotle, *Aristotle on the Art of Fiction,* 27.
8 H. Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, 16.
9 S. Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 216.
10 J. Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence,* 359: "[Il] n'y a plus de spectacle, ni de spectateur, il y a une fête" (translation mine).
11 A. Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 67: "spectacle tournant […] qui […] répande ses éclats visuels et sonores sur la masse entière des spectateurs".

spectators like the artists from Welfare State International. Thus, historically, theatre and celebration have shared a common potential for excess up to today, which appears clearly when one considers their contiguity.

Party animals: staging the body and its excesses

8. Another common characteristic is the approach to the body. The contemporary stage brings theatre back to its most concrete aspect, and significantly insists on the physical presence of the carnal. Commenting on Artaud's inheritance, Derrida asserts that the "theatre of cruelty expels God from the stage"[12]. Theatre is no longer theological. Contrary to the old tradition, no choir is introduced between the actors and the audience, and performance today tends to abolish distance in favour of what Sibony calls a "proximity between the public and the Acting-Body".[13] Excess does not lie in a form of transcendence anymore, but is relocated in an empirical, physical experience. *The Contractor* by Storey could be read as a collective preparation for the staging of a wedding. Indeed, the dramatist himself refers to his work as "[a play] about the erection of a marquee for a wedding"[14] (note the sexual signifier). The cheerful characters are reminiscent of Auguste clowns, just as the marquee evokes the circus tradition. The play is riddled with extremely specific stage directions and technical lexicon such as "muslin ridges"[15], "the pulley rope", "the 'pegs'" (TC, 17)... The actors' body is regularly manifested in its physicality: Fitzpatrick and Bennet eat a sandwich on stage, Gleddening stammers ("I...I...I...I...I...I..." — TC, 12), Bennet calls out to Ewbank (and to the audience) when, referring to his rheumatism, he asks: "Have you ever had anything like it?" (TC, 5), as if to invite the spectator to take part in the party that is being prepared. In Storey's theatre, laughter also allows a physical participation in the festive community, hence the recurrence of the stage direction "*[They laugh.]*" in *In Celebration* (1969). Staging parties allows overindulgence in eating and drinking (which Laroque calls "grand manger" and "grand boire"[16]). The sociologist Caillois goes as far as to suggest that such excess constitutes a "law" of parties: one should dance, sing, eat and drink to the point of becoming sick.[17] Such necessity seems to apply perfectly to the representation of parties on the contemporary stage, and even to inform them. The circulation of food is exposed, from its ingestion (one can think of Didi and Gogo's famous carrot in

12 J. Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence,* 345: "[Le] théâtre de la cruauté chasse Dieu de la scène." (translation mine).
13 D. Sibony, *Le Jeu et la passe,*174. In French: "*proximité* entre public et Corps-acteur" (translation mine).
14 D. Storey, *Plays: II*, introduction.
15 D. Storey, *The Contractor*, 11.
16 F. Laroque, *Shakespeare et la fête,* 52.
17 R. Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, 124: "De jadis ou d'aujourd'hui, la fête se définit toujours par la danse, le chant, l'ingestion de nourriture, la beuverie. Il faut s'en donner de tout son soûl, jusqu'à s'épuiser, jusqu'à se rendre malade. C'est la loi même de la fête."

Waiting for Godot by Beckett, or characters from *In Celebration* by David Storey, or *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter, heavily drinking on stage), to its expulsion (Didi regularly leaves the stage to relieve his bladder; Shaw, in *In Celebration*, belches loudly). Such cycle lends its rhythm to the plays. In the first act of *Top Girls* (1982) by Caryl Churchill, the waitress tends to the guests' needs as she "pours wine"[18] and "enters to clear the plates" (TG, 17). As she does so, the discussion is brought back to prosaic and physical subject matters. Just before talking about religion, Marlene declares for example: "What I fancy is a rare steak" (TG, 5). A sense of "kinship"[19] is created, reinforced by a shared meal, as Freud explains in *Totem and Taboo*. Both during a celebration and the performance of a play, individuals are brought closer by the feeling of sharing a common substance. In contemporary plays, the fourth wall sometimes finds itself abolished, and everyone's instincts are invoked. When Shaw claps his hands and calls out "[o]n with the dance"[20], the ellipsis of the verb and the thematisation of the adverb "on" turn the syntagm into a dynamic, performative injunction that extends to the audience. Instincts can potentially be unleashed. In *The Birthday Party*, Pinter puns on an erotic subtext during Stanley's birthday. For instance, Goldberg invites Lulu to sit on his lap, and tells her: "you're a big bouncy girl" (TBP, 58). In the end, it appears that a specifically theatrical dynamics is generated when bodies are placed in excessive, festive circumstances, since, as Duvignaud has it, "seeing involves the body"[21].

From celebrating to partying: debasing the sacred

9. Even though parties are characterised by entertainment and excess, the other side of the coin involves a more serious aspect: the sacred. The same applies for theatre. Numerous folklorists, such as Nagler, Prosser, or Kolve have studied the medieval English stage and commented on the pageant wagons on which processional mystery plays called the "cycles" were performed. The opportunity for theatrical representation was therefore intertwined with religious celebrations in the first place. Eleanor Prosser even draws a parallel with festivities in Ancient Greece, writing that "[a] national audience of such size may be rivalled only by the one that attended the festival of Dionysus"[22]. Celebrations delineate two different temporalities, as Plato underlines it in *Laws*: "taking pity on this suffering that is natural to the human race, the gods have ordained the change of holidays as times of rest for labour"[23]. A contrast then becomes apparent between a "regular,

18 C. Churchill, *Top Girls*, 2.
19 S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 135.
20 D. Storey, *In Celebration*, 118.
21 J. Duvignaud, *Le Don du rien,* 59: "Voir engage le corps."
22 E. Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays*, 5.
23 Plato, *Laws*, 653d, 33.

peaceful routine", characterised by "a system of interdictions", and on the other hand a form of "excitement"[24] linked with festivities (as Caillois puts it). Celebrations should contribute to making qualitative distinctions between the profane and the sacred within our linear time. This double temporality can be traced in *Krapp's Last Tape*, where celebrations appear under the form of traces, remnants. The hero's birthday is evoked at the beginning of the play when a recording he made on his thirty-ninth birthday is played. Beckett lays a disquieting emphasis on linear time, precisely measuring the number of years Krapp has lived rather than insisting on the cyclic aspect of birthday parties. Still, as the spool revolves around itself, in a circularity that mimics the letter **o** included in the nearly Cratylian signifier "[s]pooool" (KLT, 209), Krapp commemorates his birthday. The sacred dimension is reduced to vague religious references, more prone to arouse anguish. Thus, the famous quote from *Genesis (3:19)* "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" is echoed in Krapp's epanorthosis "when all the dust has — when all *my* dust has settled" (KLT, 209). The time of celebrations seems to be over. The sacred has become a vague reminiscence prone to breed a feeling of dereliction in the here and now. *In Celebration* opens with Steven arriving at his parents' house, and with the word "Dad?" (IC, 93). This profane version of the New Testament's parable of the Prodigal Son interestingly questions the presence of the father. In Pinter's *Celebration*, the characters regularly raise their glass, with sometimes a pagan form of benediction: "God bless", "God bless you all"[25]. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud elaborates on the killing and eating of the totem animal during the sacrificial meals in primitive cultures, and the gradual substitution of "the blood of the animal victim" by "wine"[26]. The psychoanalyst presents the celebration of the totem as a regular re-enactment of the sacrifice of the venerated figure, the totem, an equivalent of the father, followed by a ritual meal that allows "the appropriation of the father's attributes"[27]. Such metonymic value of the props used in the ritual is made explicit by Duncan in *Love and Money* (2006) by Dennis Kelly, as the character drinks with Debbie in a shabby bar, and declares: "I want to take [your chewing-gum] and chew on it because I think that by chewing on something that someone like you has chewed on something of you will become some part of me, like I might become infected by your goodness"[28]. The absence of punctuation reinforces the bluntness of this spectacularly shortened version of Freud's analysis. The object of a celebration, just like the play that stages it, would therefore consist in reactivating an original myth with profane props so as to

24 R. Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, 123. Caillois opposes "la vie régulière, (...) paisible, prise dans un système d'interdits" and "l'effervescence de la fête" (translation mine).
25 H. Pinter, *Celebration*, 63.
26 S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 134.
27 *Ibid*, 145.
28 D. Kelly, *Love and Money*, 262.

reveal a link with the sacred (the distant, what is separated from us). The aim of a celebration is to "*show*"[29] the original myth, according to Eliade, who significantly insists on a verb that conjures up the very essence of theatre. Yet, in contemporary theatre, it seems that the religious quality of such festivities has less in common with the Latin root of the word *religare* (conveying the idea of a connection with a deity) than with its other possible etymology *relegere*, in other words reading again, re-examining, with the underlying suggestion of a cyclic return reminiscent of the regularity of theatrical performances. The plays that prevail today on the British stage tend to subvert those original myths rather than celebrate them. The first scene of *Debris* (2003) by Dennis Kelly is entitled "Cruxicide". The neologism is then developed in Michael's monologue, a sort of hypotyposis in which he describes his father's suicide by self-crucifixion. This grotesque image of Jesus on the cross "fat bastard"[30] debases the biblical intertext, as when Michael repeats one of his father's last words: "My son, my son, why have you forsaken me?" (D, 15), replacing the traditional "my God" by "my son". The sons have taken over the fathers in this carnivalesque subversion. Celebrations have turned into mere parties, and a new order (or rather disorder) is born. Only vague rituals, spectral images of the sacred remain; therefore, eating copiously, drinking heavily, celebrating have lost touch with an original meaning. Such evolution is shown on the British contemporary stage and yet, the question of the value of those parties shown on stage remains. What is added to a party, an essentially metatheatrical event, when it is placed on a stage? What other dimension is revealed in this relocation of an intrinsically excessive phenomenon?

Representing parties today: excess contained?

10. If traditionally, parties used to semiotise the end of comedies, for instance under the form of a wedding, or to be endowed with a dramatic function by favouring physical encounters, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, it seems that on the contemporary stage, they are much less colourful. The correlation between real and staged parties is not that obvious anymore since the definition of parties has changed in our societies characterised by the absorption of the sacred by the secular, and a new organisation of working time. As a result, festive activities have become duller, almost "grey" as we will qualify them. Contemporary British dramatists unveil this original festive order that requires new modalities of representation of the excess associated with parties. The subversion they involve

29 M. Eliade, *Aspects du mythe,* 31: "[I]l ne suffit pas de connaître le mythe de l'origine, il faut le réciter ; on proclame en quelque sorte sa science, on la *montre"* (translation mine).

30 D. Kelly, *Debris*, 13.

radically challenges the symbolic landmarks and reintroduces a critical distance with a new form of social phenomenon. The modalities of identification for the spectator are redefined in the process.

The sociological context: a "grey party"

11. Numerous sociologists today analyse parties as mere extensions, and even parts, of everyday life. For Dumazedier, parties "merge into everyday life and, correlatively, they have lost their explosive, or even cathartic quality"[31]. Caillois appears less radical and admits that "some miserable vestige of the collective frenzy that characterised ancient communities"[32] still remains, but "on a backdrop of drabness"[33], in the monotony of our daily routine. According to him, the democratic man lives at a time when "the possibility of turbulence has disappeared"[34]. Parties are kept rather clean, turned into a banal activity, in our drab routine in which nothing seems to stand out. The only moments of overindulgence one can observe have already been undermined and integrated into common practise (smoking a cigarette or a joint, having a drink or two). Such homogeny, such lack of differentiation is made obvious in the first act of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. The play stages six motley female characters among whom Isabella Bird, a Victorian explorer, Pope Joan, who allegedly reigned from 854 to 856, and Dull Gret, the character from a Brueghel painting. In an atmosphere of anachronistic derealisation, the protagonists exchange views and sometimes their words overlap, which is manifested by the specific typography devised by Caryl Churchill ("when one character starts speaking before the other has finished, the point of interruption is marked /", TG, lviii). In such a context where all words are evened out, where all individuals are placed on an equal footing, where monotony prevails, the expression "grey parties" appears suitable. This colour represents the Beckettian inheritance quite well, as Noudelmann underlines it when he writes that "Beckett's grey corresponds to a white whose colour has been hollowed out"[35]. In fact, such shade applies to Krapp, with his "disordered grey hair" (KLT, 215). The character is constantly drunk, as opposed to the exceptional state of Dionysian inebriation commented on by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy.* Yet, alcohol still seems to be of consequence in *Top Girls*, when Pope Joan ends up vomiting at the end of the first act, after long soliloquies in Latin interspersed with swear words.

31 J. Dumazedier, *Vers une civilisation du loisir ?,* 6: "[La] fête se dilue dans la vie quotidienne, et corrélativement, elle a perdu son caractère explosif, voire cathartique" (translation mine).

32 R. Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, 124: "quelques misérables vestiges du déchaînement collectif qui caractérise les anciennes frairies" (translation mine).

33 *Ibid.*, 123: "[L]es fêtes appauvries ressortent (...) peu sur le fond de grisaille que constitue la monotonie de la vie courante" (translation mine).

34 *Ibid.*, 161: "[L]a turbulence n'est plus possible" (translation mine).

35 F. Noudelmann, François. *Beckett ou la scène du pire,* 138: "[Le] gris de Beckett correspond à un évidement de la couleur au sein du blanc" (translation mine).

The popularity of binge drinking exemplifies a haste to "get to the point" of being drunk as quickly and efficiently as possible to get out of a dull routine. The audience is faced with the representation of the specific party of the *homo economicus*, carefully placed in the continuity of an engrossing professional activity. In *Top Girls*, Marlene organises a party at the restaurant, claiming: "I haven't time for a holiday" (TG, 1). David Storey's plays also take such change of perspective into account, so much so that, as Hutchings points out, "[t]he contrast between the devalued traditional rituals and the more significant non-traditional ones is a central thematic and structural principle underlying and uniting Storey's diverse works"[36]. The title of a play like *In Celebration* is deceptive, since the subject matter of the play does not seem to lie in the Shaws' fortieth wedding anniversary that their sons Andrew, Colin and Steven have come to celebrate. In fact, as the party gets going, the brothers start arguing about their social status. Again, the party is undermined by professional concerns. In Elizabethan England, parties functioned politically and ideologically to reinforce monarchy by allowing temporary transgressions; they are now reduced to a continuation of the social power game informed by capitalism. Excitement now stems from power exerted on others. In Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977) for instance, Beverly, the hostess of a home party, clearly runs the show and bullies everyone into listening to a wailing Demis Roussos. She keeps filling her guests' glasses against their will, including frail Sue's, and this threatening, petty power game continues to the final breaking point, when Laurence Moss suffers a heart attack. In the end, in the general drabness of our so-called developed societies, it all happens as if excess in contemporary plays were redirected. If no specific temporality is attached to celebrations anymore, if the dramatic potential of parties dies away, what is left to say about the theatre that stages them?

The Brechtian heritage: representing to introduce distantiation and denegation

12. If we are constantly taken in a smooth temporality in which partying is merely one of the possible modalities, then going to the theatre should be no different from going shopping or brushing one's teeth. And yet, theatre retains its exclusion from the mundane, particularly thanks to the æsthetic distance it implies. In *La Crise de la représentation*, Bougnoux praises re-presentation for its ability to introduce a "delay", a "distance", a "semiotic breach". He then writes that "representation is therefore no enemy to presence, but somewhat alters it. It semiotises it, frames it or introduces a hierarchical order"[37]. Representing allows the reintroduction of a specifically

36 W. Hutchings, *David Storey: A Casebook,* 17.

37 D. Bougnoux, *La Crise de la représentation,* 167. The author uses the French expressions: "retard", "mise à distance", "coupure sémiotique." He then adds: "la représentation n'est donc pas l'ennemie de la présence, mais elle modifie quelque peu celle-ci. Elle la sémiotise, la cadre ou la hiérarchise" (translations mine).

theatrical system of differentiation, and is prone to favour a renewal of perception, a mediation of the contemporary, festive phenomenon. By artificially recreating an original, festive order on stage, a new place is given to the audience, freed from absolute identification and able to consider those grey parties from a distance, in keeping with Brecht's ideas of a rejection of theatrical illusion in favour of a distancing performance allowing the spectator to use his critical judgement. The German dramatist advocated the use of artifice that remind the audience that they are attending a pure dramatic construction.[38] What is valued in Brecht's approach is the spectator's critical work, suspicion, and denegation rather than illusion. Thus, in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, social conventions associated to celebrations become almost threatening. In act II, Goldberg authoritatively manages the party's guests, so much so that Meg ends up using the modal "should" to find out what she is expected to do when she asks: "what should I drink?" (TBP, 53), and even "[w]hat do I say?" (TBP, 54). Then, Goldberg sets the stage for the toast Meg is to propose to Stanley. A real stage director, he even seems to influence the actual lighting of the performance and to exceed his prerogatives as a character when he claims: "Wait a minute, the light's too strong. Let's have proper lighting" (TBP, 54). This transgressive exhibition of theatrical sham is sometimes associated to an exhibition of the artificiality of language itself. A text like *Top Girls* can potentially sound quite challenging and might require some effort to be understood. In fact, the characters in the first act appear enigmatic, and because of their various nationalities, potentially speak with heavy accents. Moreover, Caryl Churchill resorts to a peculiar codification of her text, with symbols such as / or *, leading the actresses to sometimes all speak at once. If the excitement associated with the party is made palpable by such torrent of words, the audience might not be able to follow their actual content and by extension the plot itself, hence a reduced involvement in stage action. A text like *In the Republic of Happiness* (2012) by Martin Crimp could also illustrate this taste for artificiality with its seemingly erratic use of unusual punctuation such as slashes that break sentences at unexpected points ("This is all your / fault"[39]), or spaces that tear holes in the text and invite the stage director to ponder over ways to actually show such syntactic confusion. Confronted to this new type of parties "marked with a negative sign"[40], as Anne Ubersfeld has it, denegation is generalised. Placed at a distance from this lacklustre party, the spectator can potentially sense its interstices, its gaps, the spaces deprived of signifiers. Indeed, one of the properties of representation

38 See B. Bertolt, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic,*179-205.
39 M. Crimp, *In the Republic of Happiness*, 26.
40 Ubersfeld borrows this expression from Mannoni, (A. Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre* (volume 1), 137: "marquée du signe moins" (translation mine).

is to "make presence or the present itself accessible, even optional"[41], according to Bougnoux. If distantiation paradoxically leads to presence, what does such party lacking excess manifest?

The advent of a new perceptive dimension: closer to the unconscious mechanisms

13. Quite unexpectedly, showing a party that has become dull, undistinguishable from a banal everyday activity, revives its excessive essence (in the etymological meaning of the term). Moving from actor of a party to spectator, one becomes more aware of the interplay of drives and unconscious mechanisms at work. Such festive occasions become both strange and disturbing objects that involve a primal, original nature otherwise ignored. In *Celebration* by Pinter, as all the characters sit at the same restaurant table, the pace increases during the introductions. Each of the six characters is named and greeted with a "hello" followed by his/her name, before greeting the others in turn. A festive ritual is thus shown on stage and exaggerated, as the mechanical conventions are enacted in an almost musical, stichomythic variation. Actually, songs are sometimes incorporated in the fabric of the text. In *The Birthday Party*, McCann whistles "The Mountains of Morne" several times, an Irish tune that potentially sounds like a threatening nationalist anthem for an English audience, in spite of its smooth melody. In Crimp's *In the Republic of Happiness*, Debbie and Hazel sing an air together entirely invented for their family. The extremely violent lyrics deal with the way they see themselves kill their future husbands in the future ("I'll pump his balls with lead" — IRH, 18), which contrasts with their seemingly loving intention ("We want to sing for you just like we did when we were little" — IRH, 18). Music can stir up suppressed instincts; it contributes to the shock felt by the audience in front of such elusive message, partially out of language. A mysterious rhythm animates festive moments such as the first act of *Top Girls*, which can be traced to the text (the score?) with its unusual punctuation ("/", "*"...), its duos and arias. The spectators' attention is diverted away from meaning and led to feel the musicality of the chain of signifiers. Then, not only is the invocatory drive (whose object is the voice) involved, but also the scopic drive that defines theatre. Performance, by definition, calls upon the audience's gaze. The marquee in *The Contractor* is an obvious example, especially when, at the end of act II, a solemn moment of silence is observed by Paul as the construction comes to an end: *"For some little while Paul works quietly at the flowers"* (TC, 69). The stage direction insists on a contemplative silence at this stage, after two acts of strenuous efforts on the actors' part. Interestingly, many contemporary playwrights have explored the potential of film: Beckett directed

41 D. Bougnoux, *La Crise de la représentation*, 167: "rendre la présence ou le présent disponibles, voire optionnels" (translation mine).

Film, starring Buster Keaton, Pinter played Krapp in Ian Rickson's adaptation of *Krapp's Last Tape*, the director Mike Leigh started out as a dramatist... Confronted to the representation of those strange celebrations, the audience is led to experience a sort of original order (or rather disorder) correlated to basic urges, beyond language. Yet, the full satisfaction of those visual, auditory, and even gustatory stimulations is refused from the outset by the very theatrical situation that delineates two spaces: the audience and the stage (even though the latter notion is changing). Representing parties in their unsatisfactory essence allows a finer approach to what Lacan calls "object a"[42], the object responsible for desire that usually remains inaccessible. The psychoanalyst narrows it down to four different kinds: the object of suction (the breast), the object of excretion (the fæces), the voice and the gaze. This detachable object always separates the subject from a full satisfaction of his fundamental request. It is being placed between the word and the thing. One can therefore read the deficiency, the dullness of the grey party, as well as the geographic distance the spectator has from the stage, as necessary conditions for the advent of a new experience, that of a lack at the core of what is usually deemed by essence excessive. Consequently, the presence of this fundamental lack revives desire. Reconsidering excess through the representation of parties introduces new modalities of reception in contemporary theatre. In the end, what is played out in those parties as they appear to the estranged spectator? How is a party as an event thus redefined? What exactly is revealed?

The new form of excess in the "paradoxical party"

14. Excess is traditionally perceived quantitatively and associated with the fact of going "over the top". It usually results in crossing a boundary between two clearly delineated spaces, one characterised by moderation, goodness, fairness, reason, restraint, the other by extremism, irrationality, evil, abnormality, insanity. In the same way, the common etymology of the word "party" with the noun "part" or the adverb "apart", also intimates a dramatic, agonistic essence, in keeping with such moral separation what is acceptable and what is not. I wish to contend that this essential quality of parties, this tension, leads to the revelation of a continuum rather than a dichotomy in contemporary plays, thanks to the hindsight allowed by representation. The new form of excess, deprived of any moral connotation or underlying ideology and only shown as a phenomenon, allows the epiphany of a reality in which oppositions co-exist without boundaries, just

42 J. Lacan, *Le Désir et son interprétation*.

like on a Moebius strip. Spectacularising parties is thus no common form of entertainment. We will name "paradoxical party" this represented party in which excess highlights the contradictory experience of a groundless sense of morality, the interpenetration of profusion and lack, the interplay between *jouissance* and desire.

Beyond morality

15. Originally, celebrations were essentially religious, and less on the side of frivolity. In Elizabethan England, they were even coupled with an ideological stake, as Laroque notes: "the celebration of various annual festivals provided an opportunity for the spread of culture on the wing and for the ideological peddling of […] the wandering word"[43]. Yet even then, festivals were fundamentally ambivalent, for sometimes they "served as a solemn ratification of boundaries, points of reference and dividing lines", but "other times […] gave a community a licence to transgress those boundaries and abolish those dividing lines"[44], as he underlines after alluding to May Day or Midsummer Day, granting people the right to steal flowers, timber and trees from adjacent parks. The paradoxes of festive occasions as they are shown on the contemporary stage, however, tend to restrict their potential ideological reach and emphasize ambivalence. Towards the end of the first act of *Getting Attention* (1991), tension rises and the characters' violence seems to increasingly threaten four-year-old Sharon, who never appears on stage. Suddenly, "*[a] heavy thump like a fall is heard*"[45], followed by two overlapping dialogues between Carol, Sharon's mother, and her new companion Nick on the one hand, and Milly and Bob, the neighbours. Milly suspects Bob, infuriated by the noise, to be the cause of the noise, to which Bob replies: "[i]t was me, love", "[h]aving a party". The party therefore assumes a disquieting aspect, almost grotesque when Bob "*grins alarmingly*" (GA, 136). The party's excesses turn out to be threatening in Crimp's play, and even reprehensible (it is associated to destructive alcohol abuse, or child molestation). Such representations challenge the audience's conceptions of morality. While a moralising stance still remains, any symbolic, unequivocal interpretation of what would be a "message" is doomed to fail. In Beckett's *Quad* (1981), the square scene is organised around five mathematically placed points named A, B, C, D, and the centre E. The characters' trajectory is strictly codified by a system of letters, ending up in complex stage directions like "Course 1: AC, CB, BA, AD, DB, BC, BC, CD, DA"[46]. An enigmatic message appears to write itself, a new topological space is drawn in this

43 F. Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World*, 12.
44 *Ibid*, 14.
45 M. Crimp, *Getting Attention*, 135.
46 S. Beckett, *Quad*, 451.

absurd ceremony, whose meaning remains inaccessible. Symbols no longer make sense, signifiers are exhibited, celebrated, in their very ambiguity. If the party as an institution used to generate a set of expected moral behaviours, advocating positive models to imitate and norms to be respected or transgressed, what happens when such a party is questioned and submitted to critical judgement? In the absence of symbolic landmarks to account for it, the paradoxical party would result in the mere intimation of morality, whose nature and lessons remain unclear, numbed by a hypertrophy of feelings. For instance, beyond morality and its reassuring lessons, the audience is confronted with distressing guilt in Pinter's play. In *The Birthday Party*, it is difficult to grasp what explains why Stanley is submitted to cruelty on his birthday. When Goldberg promises Meg to organise a party, he declares: "[w]e'll have a party", which becomes "we'll give him a party" (TBP, 32). The signifier "party" exceeds its common meaning to turn into a synonym for punishment. The party is presented as expiatory, in the same way as *Abigail's Party*, in which Beverly behaves in turn as a harrowing hostess and a polite torturer to the final breaking point when Laurence Moss dies on stage. Both in Pinter's and Leigh's plays, the vestige of catharsis can be traced in such mixture of terror and pity, as in both cases an expiatory victim is designated. As arbitrarily chosen scapegoats pay for no reason, the spectator experiences what lies beneath or beyond morality.

Lack as a source of excess

16. The paradoxical party deserves its epithet inasmuch as it sheds light on the contiguity between excess and lack, rather than polarising them. An interesting dialectics is revealed in the representation of parties. In fact, it should be noted that in times of shortage or political oppression, the desire for parties is revived. Sierz opens his book on "*in-yer-face* theatre" with the following reminder: "since censorship in Britain was abolished in 1968 theatre has been a much freer cultural space than film or television"[47]. This recontextualisation in British history conjures up the subversive potential of theatre, multiplied by the representation of essentially transgressive parties. As Freud notes, "excess is of the essence of a festival: the festive feeling is produced by the liberty to do what is as a rule prohibited"[48]. It is therefore just as if desire for excess were feeding on oppression and censorship. The proliferation of swear words such as "fuck" or even "cunt" in Caryl Churchill's or Dennis Kelly's plays is prone to unsettle a self-righteous audience. Churchill's *Top Girls* was written during the deeply conservative Thatcher era, and yet it stages powerful women such as Pope Joan, who presumably concealed her gender up to her execution, or *femmes fatales*

47 A. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre,* 7.
48 S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 140.

like Nijo, a concubine of a Japanese emperor in the thirteenth century (she finally assaulted him). Those feminist heroines go as far as swearing and vomiting on stage. Festive excess is all the more rampant as oppressive and conservative ideologies dominate. Besides, festivities intensify extremes. Caillois defines festive occasions as the reproduction of a mythical time "that presents itself under the antithetic forms of Chaos and Golden Age", and adds that "the absence of a dividing line attracts just as much as it repels disorder and instability"[49]. Excess in paradoxical parties manifests the necessity of a lack, of nothingness. Such dynamics informs the choreography of *Quad* by Beckett, performed around the point called E — a vowel that is inherently connected to femininity —, here "*supposed a danger zone*" (Q, 453). In the German filmed version of the play, entitled *Quadrat 1 + 2*, an actual hole was made in the middle of the stage. This dance is organised around a fundamental void, a visual image of what occurs during a party, made perceptible for the audience. The paradoxical party oscillates between excess and exhaustion, which reflects in the specific laughter it sometimes causes. In *The Contractor*, one can imagine the spectator getting tired of Marshall's running joke, as he sings "Down Mexico Way" ("Ay, yi, yi, yi...") whenever Gleddeninh stammers "I...I...I...I...". In this play, the party takes place offstage, between act II and act III, and only the result is shown: "The tent has suffered a great deal" (TC, 77). The workers/actors' activity in the first two acts is therefore jeopardised, and the last act is devoted to a cheerful dismantling of what remains of the tent. Storey changes the usual perspective by focusing on the preparations and the day after the wedding. The audience is led to see what usually passes unnoticed. Finally, the proliferation of "tellies" in Dennis Kelly's theatre and more generally in contemporary staging is reminiscent of Sibony's remarks on the common origin of the words "spectacle", "species", "aspect" and even "spectral"[50]. TV screens both show and exclude the body, making presence merely spectral. The inflation of images can be seen as a giveaway of the awareness of a fundamental lack when it comes to representing parties. Yet it still allows new modes of perception to be experienced.

The paradoxical party, between *jouissance* and desire

17. Finally, one of the major consequences of representing parties, by nature spectacular, lies in the passage from the order of pure and unlimited *jouissance* to the order of desire. In *L'Homme sans gravité*, psychoanalyst Charles Melman makes a distinction between "*jouis*sance" and its more moderate counterpart "pleasure". The former refers to "the way a subject functions insofar as he or

49 R. Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, 133: "[le temps mythique] se présente sous les aspects antithétiques du Chaos et de l'Age d'Or"; "[l]'absence de barrière séduit autant que repousse le défaut d'ordre et de stabilité" (translations mine).

50 D. Sibony, *Le Jeu et la passe*, 180: "Aux racines du mot 'spectacle' il y a l'*espèce*, l'*aspect* […] *le spectre*".

she tirelessly repeats such and such behaviour with no idea of what forces him to stay — like a river — in the bed of this *jouissance*"[51]. He identifies a "new psychic economy" that is not characterised by suppression, as in Freud's time, but rather by an assertion, an exhibition of *jouissance*, whose excessive essence is prone to destroy the subject. *Jouissance* annihilates desire that precisely relies on dissatisfaction and lack. Reading Artaud, Derrida resorts to the term "festival" to describe the abolition of distance between the spectator and the theatre of cruelty. He adds that "the festival of cruelty lifts all footlights and protective barriers in front of the 'absolute danger' which is 'without foundation'"[52]. An Artaudian staging can therefore make a point of showing, exhibiting some crude scenes of the contemporary dramatic corpus, and unveil *jouissance* in its morbidity. The opening scene of *Debris* proves to be a good illustration of this point, as Michael depicts his father's self-crucifixion. The number of anatomic details and the vulgar wording ("Fuck! That hurt, that really hurt!", D, 14) make the obscene palpable, as in the following sentence: "He wheezes and gurgles, his lungs filled with fluid, and snot, sweat, and spittle dribble down his fat chops" (D, 15). The alliterative musicality of the /g/, /f/, /s/ and /d/ consonants makes those graphic noises more perceptible. Yet, the stage director retains the possibility not to go too far into this morbid exhibition and stick to the textual counter-blason and hypotyposis. The paradoxical party would then play out somewhere between *jouissance* and desire. As in paradoxical sleep, in *jouissance* the body experiences changes reminiscent of sexual satisfaction, in body temperature, in cardiac and respiratory rhythms, with contractions of face muscles... The body muscles are relaxed, but dreams occur at this stage, hence an intense brain activity and rapid eye movements. This eye stimulation mirrors the scopic drive that theatre stimulates. The representation of parties can be deemed paradoxical for on the one hand, it invites the spectators to give in to scopic satisfaction with the presence of powerful images (Dennis Kelly's "cruxicide", Laurence Moss's death at the end of *Abigail's Party*, Pope Joan's vomiting in *Top Girls*); but at the same time, such representation relies on the distance between the audience and the stage (sometimes the screen), a distance that matters in its ability to create a space in which desire can bloom. The locus of otherness is preserved in this absence of total identification with what is acted out on stage, in this awareness of a gap. In the second act of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stanley, forced to play blind man's buff, gets hold of Meg and starts strangling her, but McCann and Goldberg stop him before a general blackout: "*There is*

51 C. Melman, *L'Homme sans gravité,* 252: "le fonctionnement d'un sujet en tant que celui-ci répète inlassablement tel ou tel comportement sans du tout savoir ce qui le contraint à rester — telle une rivière — dans le lit de cette jouissance" (translation mine).

52 J. Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence*, 359: "La fête de la cruauté enlève les rampes et les garde-fous devant le 'danger absolu' qui est 'sans fond'" (translation mine).

no light at all through the window. The stage is in darkness" (TBP, 64). The spectators go through the disturbing experience of finding themselves in complete darkness, close to potentially threatening characters such as Stanley, on stage, whose reaction towards Meg remains unaccounted for. The playwright chooses to inhibit the spectators' gaze, depriving the audience of a potentially enjoyable display of violence. On the contrary, a stichomythic exchange is heard, as so many addresses to an unidentified Other (for instance Goldberg asks: "What's happened?", or "Where is he?", "Who's this?"). The anaphoric pronouns have no referent anymore, and, through identification with those characters who are lost in the dark, the spectator of this paradoxical party is brought upon contact with that obscure, elusive object of desire that motivates speech and addresses to the Other.

18. By trying to articulate the multiple theoretical discourse on the festive phenomenon with its æsthetic representation, one realises the truth in Duvignaud's claim that festivities "tear a hole in the fabric of discourse"[53]. Surely, celebrations and theatre have always had a peculiar contiguity owing to their history, their organisation, their Dionysian economy, their buoyant physicality coupled with a particular link to the sacred. But considering contemporary parties (rather than festivities), sociology and subjective experience lead us to observe a change in nature. Indeed, taken as they are in a daily routine characterised by work and individualism, they have lost their vibrancy, and have become difficult to differentiate from an everyday activity. What is left of former Dionysian excess lies in fast and efficient alcohol consumption. Those "grey parties" are frequently staged and appear rather unsettling and disquieting. The estranged audience is made to watch the exposure of social conventions and the disintegration of language into empty formalities. The participation in such parties thus occurs from a distance, thanks to an exploitation of the spectators' deepest drives, auditory and visual perception, favoured by technological advances. By associating monotony and strangeness to the festive representation, by playing on the distance between stage and audience, a new form of excess is born, that manifests itself in paradox, in the in-between, in the hiatus opened by representation. The festive moment then reveals its ambivalence, its contradictions, its absence of definite contours. This "paradoxical party" radically and rather lastingly destabilises moral landmarks that were once reasserted when the party was over, and uncovers the fundamental lack at the heart of excess. Depending on the dramatic choice to underline or not insist on such antithetic dynamics, the performance can therefore free the spectator from a pressing and morbid *jouissance* and place him/her at a salutary distance thanks to representation, so as to catch a glimpse at what

53 J. Duvignaud, *Le Don du rien*, 33: "[L]a fête troue le discours" (translation mine).

desire implies in terms of want.

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