Jorge Ibargüengoitia's Carnival Pageantry: The Mexican Theatre of Power and the Power of Theatre

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Vincente Leñero entitled a study, published in four parts in 1987, "Los pasos de Jorge (Ibargüengoitia, Usigli y el teatro)." Among its various resonances,[1] Leñero's wording evokes Lope de Rueda's festive skit, *El paso de las aceitunas*, which remains synonymous with a primary acceptation of the term *paso*. An exploration of Ibargüengoitia's theatrical persona and his "drama criticism" actually reveals what Mikhail Bakhtin terms carnival spirit, a comedic élan that reaches its zenith on the stage in *El atentado* (1962), Ibargüengoitia's final, most critically acclaimed play. While Lope de Rueda drew from daily life, Ibargüengoitia recasts theatrical and national experiences in the carnival idiom in order to cultivate zestful irreverence toward Mexican sovereignty. In the play's preface, the writer confirms his transgressive intention by calling *El atentado* "*una farsa documental*"; apropos this oxymoronic designation that ludicrously blends theatrics and fact, Ibargüengoitia inverts the canonical caveat of fictionality: "*Advertencia: si alguna semejanza hay entre esta obra y algún hecho de nuestra historia, no se trata de un accidente, sino de una vergüenza nacional*" (9). The preface undermines conventional distinctions between burlesque performance and history in anticipation of the play's clownish exposé of the state's calculated manipulation of Mexico's past for the purposes of regime legitimation. The play's own travesty of the events and leaders of early post-Revolutionary Mexico clearly partakes of carnival's essential relativization of political authority. By treating official, Revolutionary myths as farce, *El atentado* debunks institutionalized political discourse as deceptive theatricality, defined by Diana Taylor as public spectacles that are shams "dedicated to democracy and social integration" (192). In embodying Mexican history as farce and farce as political reality, Ibargüengoitia establishes an anarchical vision that makes nonsense of the PRI's ideological scripting of its Revolutionary heritage or credentials. *El atentado* unmasks Mexico's theatre of power, that is, the leadership's showmanship and stagecrafting through which the political order

fabricates for itself from "behind the scenes" a progressive image based on a "triumphalist" history that encourages popular "identification, even a merging with . . . heroic figures" (Taylor 4, 50, 48). Ibargüengoitia's mocking deconsecration of his own potency as dramatist and of the canons of Mexican theatre correlates intimately to *El atentado*'s mischievous (mis)representation of the polity as buffoonish spectacle and of Mexico as a proscenium upon which authoritarianism grotesquely masquerades as popular, radical governance.

In numerous anecdotes on his professional experiences in the theatre, Ibargüengoitia assumes the ambivalent persona of an incompetent yet wise jester. The memoirs of his decade-long career as dramatist (1953-1962) and remembrances of the period 1961 to 1964, in which he served as drama critic for *Revista de la Universidad de México*, *Novedades* and *¡Siempre!* commit to print episodes of public decrownings. The portrayal of personal debacles often combines anticlimax *with* spectacle:

> Mi primer estreno ocurrió [cuando] yo no era tan joven, pero todavía estaba en la edad esa en que cree uno que vive en una sociedad ansiosa de descubrir talento. '¡Por fin!', decían los encabezados de mi imaginación. . . .
>
> El teatro estaba lleno. Se apagaron las luces, se abrió el telón. ¡Que horror! . . .
>
> Al final, unas tías mías gritaron '¡autor!, ¡autor!', la actriz vino a jalonearme, subí al foro furioso, dicen, di las gracias, cayó el telón, cesaron los aplausos y cada quien se fue a su casa. . . .
>
> Nadie dijo '¡por fin!' y el crítico que mejor me trató dijo que la obra era 'graciosa', que en boca de un mexicano es uno de los insultos más grandes. (*Autopsias* 53)

Ibargüengoitia selects very public forums for his checkered accounts of debasement—his biweekly column (1969-1976) for the Mexican daily *Excélsior* and "En primera persona," his monthly column for the cultural journal *Vuelta*. Quite clearly, he cultivates for mass distribution an image of luckless ineptitude. Such "self-ridicule is itself a characteristic gesture of [the popular festive] form" (Bristol 133). Debunking of the authorial self furthers iconoclasm toward Mexican sacred cows when it functions as a mask for the clown, who Bakhtin describes as "a synthetic form [between the rogue and the fool] for parodying high pathos, seriousness and conventionality" (*Dialogic Imagination* 162, 404-405). Ibargüengoitia's clown insistently taunts what he terms the fatalistic emotionalism of *mexicanidad*, "¡Esta mala suerte que nos persigue en todos los

órdenes!" (*Obras* 276), a histrionic orientation he finds exemplified not only in himself but also in Mexican theatre and in the state's ideology.

Ibargüengoitia's recurrent epithet for himself, *dramaturgo subvencionado*, points to the major source of grievance and jeers—governmental patronage of artists, which in modern Mexico serves to legitimize the regime and to co-opt dissidents. Jonathan Kendell summarizes that "through a sophisticated policy of financial inducements and prestigious awards, writers, painters, and film directors were encouraged to deal with the Revolution, the pre-Columbian Indian heritage, populism, the countryside, nationalism and related themes that had official approval" (qtd. in Sanders 19). Ibargüengoitia exploits the Achilles' heel of state sponsorship of culture—the subservient quality of the esthetic products. His burlesques of commissioned plays mock the efficacy and subtlety of the regime's covert political agenda. Parodies of "historical" dramas make the political project laughable by transcribing epic situations, gestures and stagecraft into the code of melodrama. One histrionic finale exemplifies Ibargüengoitia's derision of commissioned theatre:

> entre los cadáveres, el Cura Hidalgo nota un movimiento. Es un herido. Hidalgo lo separa del brazo tieso de un ranchero guanajuatense y lo arrastra hasta dejarlo recostado en una roca, de manera que lo ilumina de lleno un *spot* azulado que se enciende en ese momento. Es un capitán español—de Dragones—que tiene una herida horrible en el pecho.
>
> —¿Quieres agua? —le pregunta el Cura Hidalgo. El otro contesta con voz entrecortada:
>
> —Quiero un sacerdote, porque me muero.
>
> El Cura Hidalgo mira al público, después al cielo, crispa los puños 'con ademán impotente', y volviéndose al capitán, le dice:
>
> —No puedo darte la absolución, hijo mío, porque he sido excomulgado.
>
> El capitán muere en pecado. (*Autopsias* 55-56)

Ibargüengoitia also plays pranks on *indigenismo* or what he calls *la corriente tenochca del teatro mexicano*. The clown forwards a synopsis of his five-hour, bathetic contribution, assured publication by Fondo de Cultura Económica despite its likely failure at the box office. Entitled *Xochitotzin*: "Presentará, como todas las obras de este género, una visión paradisiaca del Anáhuac en vísperas de la llegada de los españoles: [los laboriosos mexicas] . . . sacan los dientes a los muertos para ponérselos a los ricos, descubren nuevos sahumerios para aumentar la fertilidad, otros se entregan de lleno al comercio, por

ejemplo, cambian mujeres por pencas de nopal. Se puede, inclusive, agregar una escena en la que varias madres de familia inventen los tamales . . ." (*Autopsias* 66). In sum, Ibargüengoitia's impish transgressions of the official cults of pre-Columbian nativism and the patriots of Independence undermine the regime's attempts to foment a mythical view of Mexico's past and of the state as the legitimate heir of glorified ancestors.

Voluntary adherence to nationalism provokes the same ludicrous misrepresentation. The re-encoding actually becomes farce when the clown engages in a literary hoax. Indignant at not being mentioned by Rodolfo Usigli as a noteworthy Mexican dramatist, Ibargüengoitia transcribes in a "letter of protest" appearing in his regular column for *Novedades*, his one-act script, "No te achicopales Cacama":

> CORTES: Soy Cortés, pero valiente.
> MARINA (aparte): En mi sexo se funden dos mundos.
> CACAMA: Tu prisionero soy, Malinche, Azatlán está a tus pies, mátame de una vez.
> . . .
> CACAMA: ¡México, creo en ti! (1) (Muere.)
>
> (1) Si la pieza la montan en el Seguro Social, se puede agregar: 'Y en tus escenógrafos'.
> . . .
> (El cielo se torna violeta. Cortés se estremece. Marina da a luz. Los indios, bajo la dirección de Xochipoxtli danzan alrededor del recién nacido, mientras cae lento el... TELON). (qtd. in "Los pasos" 37-38)

This practical joke (less than 100 lines) was obviously never meant for performance. But, its collapsed spatiotemporal dimensions, the facile rhymes and the prosaic, anachronistic speeches of its historical characters do not just ridicule *Corona de fuego*, Usigli's attempt to reintroduce Greek tragedy in Mexican theatre. Ibargüengoitia received most of his formal theatrical training under Usigli and both considered the younger writer the elder's disciple (*Los pasos* 9, 15). In one critique from 1961, Ibargüengoitia praised Usigli's *El gesticulador* as Mexico's preeminent drama whose "'actualidad más importante . . . consiste en ser uno de esos rarísimos casos en que alguien ha dicho en México una verdad política sin histeria'" (qtd. in *Los pasos* 77-78). The disciple takes issue, however, with the master's ideological perspective and grandiloquent tone in the *Corona* trilogy. There, "Usigli's theatre is intended to stimulate the audience's faith in the myth figures . . . such as Maximilian and Montezuma, who constitute

superior cultural symbols. The goal of this theatre is to make it possible for the audience to perform an act of faith in itself, by experiencing a catharsis with those national sentiments and values that most ennoble it" (Tilles 37). "No te achicopales Cacama" parodies not only Usigli's mythologizing of the past but also the conventional interpretation of Mexican history as epic or tragedy, common to official rhetoric and the dominant literary culture. Thus, Ibargüengoitia's hoax represents a seriocomical blasphemy that challenges the national milieu of politicized myths and the accompanying cult of artistic solemnity.

Rather than the heroic, Ibargüengoitia expresses preference for the comedic, a critical rather than a humorous posture he associates with George Bernard Shaw: "lo que a él le interesaba era lo comédico, es decir, un señor que estando borracho y teniendo dificultad para caminar, pretende hacerse pasar como perfectamente sobrio" ("Los historiadores" 133). Moreover, Ibargüengoitia relates his comedic intention with his antisolemn view of Mexico: "si no voy a cambiar el mundo, cuando menos puedo demostrar que no todo aquí es drama" (*Autopsias* 125). In sum, Ibargüengoitia's irreverent disposition approximates what Bakhtin describes as "the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks . . ." (*Dialogic Imagination* 163).

The application of drama criticism to the Mexican regime underlines Ibargüengoitia's conceptualization of the state in the spatiotemporal dimensions of the stage. In one column, he first envisions *PRIistas* as inept playwrights or performers and their political maneuvering as a poorly written script. Subsequently, he offers an alternate explanation of national politics as avant-garde, ineffectual stagecraft:

> lo que estamos presenciando es un nuevo estilo teatral (teatro pri), en que la obra está escrita chueca y los actores hablan de perfil, dirigiéndose a un costado del escenario, con el objeto de producir en el espectador la ilusión de que está entre bambalinas, y por consiguiente en la intimidad y que entiende y ve el tejemaneje del asunto.
>
> El defecto fundamental de este nuevo estilo es que no es fácil discernir a qué género pertenece la obra que está uno viendo. No se sabe nunca si lo que está pasando en el escenario es farsa o sacrificio ritual—con muerto y todo. (*Obras* 159)

El atentado takes the paradigm of Mexico as theatre into the realm of carnival by incarnating the polity as farce. The play so countered the official

model of the post-Revolutionary order as the natural embodiment of peace, stability, national interests and popular will that, despite its La Casa de las Américas award in 1963, *El atentado* remained unstaged in Mexico until 1975, primarily because, according to the preface, "las autoridades advirtieron que iban a poner dificultades para la representación, porque les parecía que la obra era irrespetuosa para la memoria de varias figuras de nuestra historia" (7). Bureaucratic surveillance of dramatic content and supervision of playhouses resulted in informal censorship of *El atentado*. Both Cuban and national functionaries judged the play seditious and vested with a countervailing authority of its own. Both the obstruction and the prize imply belief in *El atentado*'s performative force derived from convictions that "'the raised place of the stage' continually alludes to its antecedent in 'the raised place of power'" and that "the 'power' of [such] theatre . . . lies in its *formal* parody of the 'theatre' of power" (Pechey 61).

Juan Bruce-Novoa and David Valentín study *El atentado* as a literary parody of Martín Luis Guzmán's *La sombra del caudillo* (1929); they maintain that Ibargüengoitia's play attempts to demythologize the artistic and the popular cults of violence. But, the dramatis personae comprehends all germane figures of authority (clerical, judicial, legislative and military). Borges and Vidal Sánchez, president elect and lame duck executive, appropriately top the cast of characters, as their real counterparts hold hegemonic control in the Mexican system. The name Borges itself evokes the infamous Borgias of Italy to initiate correlation of the characters/farceurs with expedient, dissimulating political actors. Therefore, the play's iconoclasm deals more with governing institutions, attributes of authority and official symbols than with sociality or collective beliefs. The play's equation of politics with buffoonish theatrics amounts to carnivalesque deconsecration of systemic and executive sovereignty. Bureaucratic obstruction of the play's premiere coincides with Octavio Paz's assessment that "En México hay un horror que no es excesivo llamar sagrado a todo lo que sea crítica y disidencia intelectual. . . . Esto es particularmente cierto por lo que toca al presidente: cualquiera crítica a su política se convierte en sacrilegio" (54). Converting readily recognizable Revolutionary generals cum Presidents Obregón and Calles into characters in a farce represents a very public prank given what Carlos Fuentes describes as "la concresión teológica del Presidente de México" (130). As a fact-based or historicized travesty, *El atentado* trifles with the founding tenets and the initiators of contemporary public order in Mexico. Bakhtinian analysis permits a fuller comprehension of the play's deep subversiveness and affords insight into administrative resistance to its staging, tantamount to public impunity for the drama's playful irreverence toward

individual icons and symbols of legitimacy that underpin the entire political system.

Defining carnival as "the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 124), Bakhtin extols carnivalization, the novel's incorporation of the festive philosophy of humanistic liberation "from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truth" (*Rabelais* 34). Michael D. Bristol's monograph, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*, heralds the application of Bakhtin's seminal work to geographic, temporal and artistic realms that the Russian critic dismissed or failed to consider—namely, Third World, twentieth-century parody in dramatic form. Bristol maintains that dramatic carnivalization poses a *substantive* "alternative to a political theodicity of [a specific] nation-state" (200) when the carnival "'pathos of radical change and renewal' is given narrative form in dramatic actions organized around royal or political succession and the successful or unsuccessful transfer of authority" (197). *El atentado* revolves around just such an historical moment of transition and structural ambiguity: Obregón's constitutionally questionable re-election, his assassination by a Catholic fanatic while functioning as president elect, Calles' *caudillaje* while in or out of the presidency and the "resolution" of acrimonious Church-State relations. *But*, these actual national traumas are enacted as seriocomical pageantry. *El atentado* forces the collision of two realms of discourse (official history and farce) and plays with inherent ambiguities of theatre as performance to transmogrify the epic of national passage into a ludicrous, acted spectacle worthy only of jest.

In part because he maintains that the stage can replicate the public square of festive mimesis, Bristol argues for theatrical space, rather than the novel, as the vital, privileged site of carnivalization. This contention stresses, however, drama's ability to imitate both the masquerade and the travesty of political allegory that the phenomenon of carnival itself entails. Thus, theatre and carnival share the metalanguage of costumes or masks; "just as in a stage play, [in carnival] identity is in fact both guise and *dis*guise, a social integument rather than a 'true native form'" (Bristol 70). *El atentado* plays with garb and being when it displays three actors playing multiple characters (3 journalists, 3 congressmen, 3 secret police, 2 lawyers, a juror, a bishop and miscellaneous bit parts in crowd scenes) who sometimes change stereotypical roles and props (e.g., Stetsons, handlebar mustaches, pistols) on stage. Blatant substitutability and puppet-like actuation/dissemblance correspond to the play's embodiment of the past as a burlesque show. Scenes in pantomime with speeded-up, repetitive movements reminiscent of slapstick and silent films also underscore the pretense and gamesmanship of the national stage of power. Slide projection of scenic

captions and photographs of political rituals, such as campaigns and a state funeral, equally suggest, through their visuality and anti-"fourth wall" convention, that gesticulation and simulation characterize the real order in Mexico. Furthermore, a soundtrack of martial and patriotic music plus canned applause stress the artifice and spectacle of Mexican politics.

Ibargüengoitia's frankly presentational stagecraft has stimulated comments on his Brechtian experimentation (e.g., *Los pasos*; Schuster; Bixler). The cartoon-like antics and the anti-illusionist strategies do function to undermine the audience's uncritical diversion or empathy for the characters. The histrionics and countermimetic devices also establish an absurd framework for the play's central debunking of its historical protagonists. Identity and pretense, representation and misrepresentation, are intentionally fused and ambiguously confused when venerated public figures appear on stage *and* as staged characters. The actors' portrayal of thinly disguised and therefore undisguised personages promotes the recognition of the historical individuals as gesticulators, impostors and farceurs. Dramatic incarnation of Calles and Obregón as posturing marionettes parallels the creative process underlying popular effigies that display for public ridicule three-dimensional caricatures of leaders. Resurrection of dead *caudillos* in a seriocomical cosmos divests them of mythical status since they are presented, in Bakhtin's terms, "without epic or tragic distance . . . in a zone of immediate and even crudely familiar contact with living contemporaries" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 108).

El atentado manipulates other stage conventions to further its unmasking of historical personage as hypocritical playactor. The orality of theatrical performance can coincide, according to Bristol, with "a serious dislocation of authority . . . [as rhetoric is] reconcretized here and now" as contingent speech and visible gesture rather than sacred text (111). In a crucial *mise-en-abyme*, a stagy Borges rehearses his calculated delivery of a facile political allegory:

> La Historia vuelve los ojos horrorizada, como púdica matrona, para no contemplar el espectáculo de una jauría indomable que festina los restos de nuestra Nacionalidad... No. (*Se mira en el espejo un momento. Con voz más drámatica.*)... que festina los restos de nuestra Nacionalidad. Sí. (*Se aclara la garganta. Consulta los papeles.*) Me refiero, señores, al clero católico. No, no, no. Me refiero, señores al clero cató... No, no, no. Me refiero, señores al clero... Bueno. Me refiero señores, al clero católico... (*Líricamente*). Hidra de mil cabezas. Eso es. Hidra de mil cabezas que.... (24)

While the character views his reflection as a means of confirming his empowerment of words, the audience sees the duplication as a negation of authenticity. Borges also ignores any implications of insincerity in his private admission that the speech is ghostwritten. His positive evaluation of the speech's rhetoric, "Tiene todo lo que necesita un discurso: resonancia, profundidad, y es tan arrebatado que nadie puede ponerlo en tela de juicio" (25), indicates a desire not for rational persuasion but for grandiloquence "intended to imprison, to subjugate or mesmerize the reader-listener, and thus to inhibit interpretation . . ." (Ross 209).[2] Borges' public, rhetorical persona is also decrowned by his private, pragmatic self. Spontaneous talk reveals his declaimed anticlericalism to be a blatant subterfuge: "los católicos . . . son todo México . . . ¡Sufragio Efectivo! El día que lo tengamos, eligen Presidente de la República al señor Obispo. Nada de parlamento. A perseguirlos, aterrarlos, reventarlos para que estén en orden" (43-44).[3]

"Mirth in death" often serves both as the instrument and as the capstone of festive uncrowning. Death as a joke takes on special relevancy with monarchs, dictators or presidents for treating death as a laughing matter, like the danse macabre, "refutes the hopes and expectations of power and privilege" (Bristol 195). *El atentado* approaches Borges' assassination with gallows humor. Preparation for a glorious death clashes with the extremely mundane context of the real demise. In absurd contrast to his premeditated deathbed oration, "muero bendiciendo la Revolución" (43), Borges speaks his final words to a waiter: "Estoy muy lleno. No me traiga cabrito, sino unos frijoles" (63). The character's final phrases represent a *reductio ad absurdum* version of the physical circumstances of Obregón's assassination. While he lost an arm during the Revolution, Obregón actually "muere de bruces en un plato" (Castañeda Iturbide 55) during a civil banquet celebrating his re-election. Borges' ludicrous death thus ultimately debunks the state's cult of Obregón as Revolutionary martyr. The official myth is perhaps most evident in the Monumento a Obregón, an imposing architectural memorial that preserves the bullet-riddled platform where Obregón sat when he was murdered and exhibits the general's severed arm in a jar of formaldehyde. Obregón was the first of many autocratic executives to cultivate his identification with the Mexican populace and soil through the appellation, *Presidente Agrarista*. Ibargüengoitia's very first stage directions describe Borges acting "'como Cincinato moderno'" (11). With carnivalesque poetic justice that takes him back and *down* to earth, Borges dies requesting a Mexican staple.[4]

Borges' assassination does not end *El atentado*; it merely concludes the third of five scenes from Act II. This dramatic placement works to demote Borges to the status of one among king-pretenders in systemic misrule, which obtains from the play's opening. In the first scene, the legislator Balgañón proposes a

"rectification" of the constitution: "Dice así el artículo en cuestión: '...el Presidente entrará a ejercer su cargo el primero de diciembre, durará en él cuatro años y nunca podrá ser reelecto.' Propongo que se agregue lo siguiente: '...pero pasando un periodo constitucional, el ciudadano que haya desempeñado el puesto, podrá ser reelecto por una sola vez'" (13). The emendation represents a nonsensical inversion of the article's intent. Subsequent legislative approval, therefore, signifies an exercise in illogicality that results in a grave travesty of constitutionalism. The political maneuver also contradicts the original plank of Francisco Madero's call to arms against Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship. Madero's democratic motto, "Sufragio efectivo, no reelección," enshrined in the 1917 Constitution's ban on more than a one-term presidency, still serves as the seal for official Mexican documents. Within this real context, Borges' candidacy and re-election are at heart counter-revolutionary, despite the legalistic veneer. Borges' implied responsibility for the murder of two rival candidates and his private repudiation of the democratic right to vote represent ironic confirmations of Obregón's famous quip that "la revolución degeneró en gobierno" (qtd. in Mondragón 135).[5]

Calles, Obregón's colleague/rival/predecessor/heir and the clergy, one of Obregón's principal enemies, suffer in turn carnival unseating. Absolutism, demagoguery and lawlessness survive the systemic disruption of Borges' individual death. Ibargüengoitia jeers at zealotry's confusion of patriotism and faith in the abbess who beatifies executed rebels: "¡Qué orgullo para nuestra Nación! ¡Otros cuatro santos mexicanos!" (38). Her idolatry encourages Pepe's murder of Borges. Unlike José de León Toral, Obregón's assassin who died at the scene, Pepe is interrogated and implicates the abbess "porque quería ofrecerle su coronita . . . del martirio" (75). At the trial, "tantamount to dealing in 'bad faith'" (Schuster 268), she reneges on any responsibility. With her plea of not guilty, she rejects martyrdom, making a mockery of herself and religious fanaticism.

As new Lord of Misrule, Vidal Sánchez commutes the abbess' death sentence "por veinte años de destierro en las Islas Marías" (78). This public display of benevolence masks despotism. In a previous conversation on Borges' death, the *caudillo* admits to the Chief of Police his fusion of personhood and the body politic:

> SUAREZ: Mi general, mi más sentido pésame, por la muerte de un colaborador tan...
> VIDAL SANCHEZ: Nada de pésames, Suárez, felicítame. . . .
> SUAREZ: General, cuánto me alegro. Ahora sí, la Revolución será la que debe ser...

VIDAL SANCHEZ: Mía. (*Ambos ríen*). . . . (55-56)

Private sarcasm reveals the ethical bankruptcy of the absolutist "tendency fatally to confuse individual desire with political will" (Bristol 188).

Vidal Sánchez's Machiavellianism becomes preeminent after the assassination. In secret, he engineers a false confession implicating clerical accomplices to "ese tiranicidio heroico" (57). To the contrary, he stacks the trial "para apaciguar a los borgistas" (58), permitting Borges' "canonization" as a crucified Christ and Pepe's condemnation as an oedipal "regicide." Clemency for the abbess receives the bishop's quid pro quo, a declaration that Pepe "no es un mártir ni mucho menos, sino un asesino con atenuantes" (79). Just before the final curtain, Vidal Sánchez, by fiat, terminates violent Church-State conflict. The abruptness of events coincides with the suddenness of the play's ending in the final embrace of Vidal Sánchez and the bishop, under the banner, "AMAOS LOS UNOS A LOS OTROS, DIJO CRISTO" (80). Pepe's execution denies this gesture of peace and the Christian doctrine of brotherly love. The accelerated pace of the unexpected denouement reflects the expediency and caprice of despotism, pragmatism and misrule. The carnivalesque structure of this topsy-turvy, incongruous finale confirms the preceding events as buffoonery.

El atentado does not merely engage in personal invective nor limited travesty of past political icons. Ibargüengoitia's own assault carnivalizes personalities synonymous with the current structure of institutional authority in Mexico. The legitimacy of the presidential regime and of the PRI as the ruling party depends upon their self-proclaimed, organic bonding with the Revolutionary tradition of Obregón and Calles. As a consequence of the former's death, Calles began institutionalization in 1929 through establishment of the first state party of *national unity*. Fuentes deconstructs the founding tenet as an official fiction, as "una quimérica 'armonización de intereses'" (193). *El atentado*'s denouement suggests that, from the beginning, the principle of national unity is a sham. Furthermore, the play's protagonists exemplify arbitrariness and absolutism of executive hegemony, two disavowed yet essential attributes of sovereignty in post-Revolutionary Mexico. Gamesmanship if not outright duplicity typify not only the fictional characters but also the early national leadership since "en la historia mexicana, después de la muerte de Obregón, se consolida el 'Maximato' con Calles como 'estadista tras el trono,' pero en el discurso del propio Calles (1° de septiembre de 1929) éste hablo [sic] de 'falta de caudillos' y de que México debe pasar de la condición histórica de 'país de un solo hombre' a la de 'nación de instituciones y leyes'" (Domenella 73). Calles' dominance and posturing are commonly referred to as "the Calles puppet show"; *El atentado* gives a quite literal form to this popular image.

The coalescence and collusion of clerical and civil authorities that end *El atentado* allude to a modern Mexican theocracy of a deified president who Fuentes describes as "padre protector, salvador sexenal" (130) who distributes "excomunicaciones a los descontentos, absoluciones a los arrepentidos . . . " (67). Bruce-Novoa and Valentín term the play's denouement a cynical "all's well that ends well" (20). In apparent accord, one Polish and another Cuban company found the ending overly pessimistic and, according to the author himself in the play's preface, decided not to stage *El atentado* "por considerar que el final no era positivo" (7). To the contrary, David Schuster advocates the play's uplifting populism: "Despite the invalidation of Pepe's act by the clergy, the People themselves confer the palm of martyrdom on him and elevate him to the status of secular saint. By distancing themselves from the 'unholy alliance' of Church and State, the Mexican populace comes into a realization of its own strength" (277). For many playgoers and readers, however, Schuster's commentary runs counter to three aspects of *El atentado*. First, *el pueblo* always appears only as backdrop. Second, it lacks uniformity; some bystanders applaud while others jeer the public performances of Borges, Vidal Sánchez, the abbess, the bishop and Pepe. Third, despite being bottom-up rather than top-down cultism, Pepe's popular veneration is tainted by the play's overall desanctification of civil and religious idolatry.

A different case, however, can be formulated for the play's communal spirit. Its farcical account of official history coincides with popular derision of Mexican potentates. President López Portillo, for example, became the butt of collective ridicule for his blatant corruption and recourse to demagoguery:

> when only a few weeks before the devaluation he told the country in a speech defending his economic policies that sacrifice was necessary, that he would fight like a dog for the peso before he would submit to the dictates of foreign capitalists, [his forty-four bedroom mansion built on government land] immediately was dubbed 'casa del perro'. . . . Peddlers in the chic Zona Rosa nightclub and tourist area began selling pesos with a small plastic dog attached. And when the ex-president appeared in retirement in Rome, he was followed by a group of young Mexican tourists, barking away. (Sanders 48)

Like these anonymous taunts, *El atentado* relies on the "vulgar" forms of farce, carnival and *humor negro* to undercut authority and to privilege the common response of mockery as a challenge to the abuses of power.

Similar to Bakhtin's critical re-examination of folk laughter, the Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla's treatise on the sociology of humor contains a re-

evaluation of popular *humor negro*. Portilla describes Mexican black humor as an expression that invites the listener to assume a dissident attitude, "especialmente frente a los aspectos dolorosos, sombríos o siniestros de la existencia" (75). While manifesting stoicism, *humor negro* represents a powerful value judgment and a potentially efficacious act upon the world: "Opera sobre el índice de adversidad de la realidad, mostrando que su magnitud carece de significación definitiva. Señala que, después de todo, la situación no es tan grave . . ." (77).[6] Portilla's commentary not only echoes Ibargüengoitia's contention that "no todo aquí es drama" but also affords an initial framework for interpreting black humor as a form of conceptual empowerment of the Mexican community.

Ibargüengoitia himself formulates an essential distinction between the Mexican populace and the nation's authorities based on opposing world views. He expresses firm belief in mass cynicism in contrast to the political elite's sanctimoniousness: "el país no es solemne, sino cínico, los solemnes son los personajes públicos que lo adornan" (*Autopsias* 124). *El atentado* applies the distancing, diminishing force of black humor to the nation's superstratum, divesting the governing "Revolutionary family" of respect. In Bakhtin and Portilla's terminology, moreover, the play's public derision affirms the strength of the community of the governed by establishing the audience's role as the scoffing judge of the ruling clique.[7] The play activates the generative perspective of popular skepticism that even "if we cannot change all of our circumstances, we can change the way we think of them and the power we symbolically grant to them . . . " (Gunn 89). Ibargüengoitia's carnival politics subverts the regime's ideological model of itself as the stable, unifying Revolutionary force of progress for the masses. Locating the victorious generals cum progenitors of the modern polity at the interface of history and burlesque portrays personages as chameleons and the official version of events as disinformation. Political allegory proves vulnerable to snide revision while secular authority "has been changed into a festive effigy and symbolically destroyed" (Bristol 212).[8]

Classifying the theatre as a social forum like other mass media (television, newspapers, radio and cinema), the Mexican regime informally managed *El atentado* as a potentially significant public threat to its symbolic legitimacy. Ibargüengoitia's flippancy toward the politically sacrosanct would not be aired until a period of widespread public disillusionment. The state's massacre of non-violent protesters at Tlatelolco in 1968 led to a severe credibility gap. President Luis Echeverría's *apertura democrática* was a partial response to the crisis of political legitimacy. While the policy itself was short-lived, resistance by the intelligentsia, artists and the public survived. *El atentado*'s premiere in 1975 testifies to the regime's diminished capacity after 1968 to command respect and to regulate dissent. Jacqueline Bixler maintains that "on-stage debunking of

institutional history is by extension a dramatic metaphor of the erosion that continues to afflict a decrepit party whose last shreds of credibility disappeared along with many of the ballots from the past [1988] election" (163). Economic crisis in the 1980s provoked open, mass hostility toward the Mexican state. *El atentado* only anticipates and does not, of course, generate the broad-based but diffuse alienation of the 1970s, which preceded active political opposition after 1982. By encouraging his audience "to 'see double,' that is, to see through one level of performance into another" (Bixler 165), Ibargüengoitia displays the political elite's simulated spectacle of Revolutionary Mexico. Disempowering official history as farcical propaganda, the play contests "the elaborate show of supposedly democratic politics [that] blatantly works to obfuscate the authoritarian reality we are not meant to see" (Taylor 4). But, since "theatricality is not simply what we see but a way of controlling vision" (Taylor 4), making visible the stagemanaging of the authorities restores critical perspective to the spectators. *El atentado*'s carnival debasement of the theatrics of power in Mexico thus demonstrates that the theatre can function as a potent sociopolitical arena and as a popular counterweight to ideological dominance.

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Notes

1. The phraseology also performs a reverential bow to Ibargüengoitia's last novel, *Los pasos de López* (1981).

2. Despite his self-satisfaction, Borges' articulation fails his own criteria of oratorical eloquence vis-à-vis the play's audience. Borges becomes a stooge as Ibargüengoitia engages in what Bakhtin identifies, in *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, as double-voiced discourse or misquotation; the character's utterance contains within it the author's contradictory, scoffing intention. Borges' histrionic pursuit of hyperbole and sentimental effect contains yet another parodic double in the actor's recital of Borges' words. Since on one level acting embodies feigning or the will to deceive, Bristol suggests that "the more reverently the word is pronounced from the stage, the more it is derided, because it emanates . . . from a professional dissembler . . ." (116).

3. This revelation of expediency and the allegorical speech represent an intentionally mismatched pair that manifests the play's overall tendency to linguistic hodgepodge. The mixing of normally exclusive speech genres (political or religious oratory alongside vulgar talk by legislators, politicians and clerics) relates to the play's underlying grotesque realism, a term Bakhtin coined in *Rabelais and His World* to encapsulate carnival degradation of the sublime, especially through contamination with "the lower bodily stratum" of the genitals and buttocks. *El atentado* engages in low comedy to debase with the promiscuous logic of grotesque realism. A Catholic zealot's attack on Congress backfires; his abortive bomb only annihilates one stall of the men's room. He laments his star-crossed fate while griping that the nuns only send him bowls of the same consommé. One deputy's eyewitness account of the explosion contains crass details of biological functions and

personal bath, rendered in tedious legalese. After deciding not to leave flushing to the next occupant, the forgetful congressman returns to the bathroom, pulls the chain and, thus, unwittingly triggers the innocuous bomb. Padre Ramírez inspires a parishioner to abandon his mundane concerns about his wife's sexual frustrations by converting himself into a Christian Soldier, taken at the crudely literal level of assassinating the anticleric Borges.

4. Bristol emphasizes that "In popular pageantry, traditional religious and political symbols are combined with humble objects from the kitchen and the workshop, and with images of bodily functions, especially those relating to food and eating. . . . The comprehensive rethinking of the social world in terms of common, everyday material and physical experience is central to 'uncrowning'—the fundamental transformation downward of popular festive imagery. . . . Carnival brings all knowledge of social reality down to earth and places the body, its needs and its capabilities, at the center of the social process " (67).

5. True to Obregón's quip, the play fashions an upside-down jurisdiction where governance equals antipodal lawbreaking. For his assistant, the Chief of Police develops an inclusive list of suspects in the abortive bombing of Congress. His catalogization of possible culprits reflects the pyramid of authority and the illegal, irrational, unprincipled rules of the covert game of politics: "Primer sospechoso: el señor Presidente de la República. (*Ambos hacen una leve inclinación de cabeza.*) Seguno: el Presidente Electo. (*Inclinación de cabeza.*) Tercer sospechoso: el Ministro de Gobernación. Cuarto: el Presidente de la Cámara. Quinto: los católicos. Sexto: el Ministro de Guerra. Tampoco hay que descartar la posibilidad de que se trate de una simple rivalidad entre dos partidos que luchan por conseguir el dominio de la Cámara, o bien, de dos individuos que luchan por conseguir el de una misma mujer. Podría ser también cuestión de celos. . . . Quizá, inclusive, no hubo siquiera una razón, bien puede tratarse de una mera equivocación, o de un capricho, o bien de un ensayo . . . " (15-16). The president is immersed in this chaos; he reigns over, not above, the folly. Dictatorship is not an aberration but the rule in this dystopia. A preposterous form of justice prevails, according to Bruce-Novoa and Valentín, when the fanatic "is arrested, tortured and deported, but only because the president and president-elect discover that neither one of them ordered the bombing--then the insignificant act becomes a threat. The author reduces terrorism to little more than an intramural sport among *caudillos* who consider it a laughing matter as long as it remains their game, but regard it as a crime when the terrorist is an outsider to their circle" (18).

6. Portilla explains that "Las cosas varian bastante si contemplamos la historia bajo el signo del progreso o bajo el signo de la decadencia. La acción de un hombre o de una comunidad será diferente en uno u otro caso y el aspecto del mundo resultará decisivo para su acción, decisivo por lo tanto para el aspecto que el mundo adquiere después de esa acción.

Ciertamente, nada cambia en el mundo con mi cambio de actitud, sino yo mismo. Pero en la medida en que yo soy una parte del mundo y en que estoy esencialmente referido a la realidad, mi cambio puede ser el comienzo de un cambio del mundo" (63).

7. Morson and Emerson emphasize that "the parodic words we use are important not because they can change reality (they need not), but because they increase our freedom of interpretive choice by providing new perspectives. As Bakhtin was later to develop this more or less stoic idea, true human freedom and responsibility lie not in the ability to change concrete facts, but in the contemplative power of the 'witness and the judge'" (435).

8. Ibargüengoitia conceived of puppetry and operetta as other resources for the creation of effigies. He imagined though never wrote a musical comedy on Santa Anna. Years after completing his prize-winning, historical play, *La conspiración vendida*, he envisioned its ironic staging through *papier maché* figures for the roles of Hidalgo and La Corregidora. Besides *El atentado*, however, he only completed one other dramatic carnivalization. *Los buenos manejos* (1960) satirizes the vested interests and institutions of the colonial world. While the mayor and fray Horóscopo plan a provincial town's transformation into a profitable way station for religious pilgrims, the crafty upstart, don

Serafín, enlists sly prostitutes in his plot to overthrow don Sepulcro and doña Algebra, usury aristocrats. Appropriate to the time frame, the *comedia de enredo* emplotment translates into a scenic masquerade with prostitutes dressed as *gente decente*. Don Sepulcro's death allows the succession of pretenders; the prostitutes receive medals of honor while the mayor proposes marriage to the aristocratic widow. Fray Horóscopo's blessing of the "new" order ends this as yet unstaged three-act musical comedy. Ibargüengoitia's festive *manejos* of choreography and the music of light opera resemble the auditory and visual code-switching of his final drama.

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