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Rhetorical disenchantment and the theatre of the American Dream
Retoryczne odczarowanie i teatr amerykańskiego snu

Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary theatre reflects and reconfigures the rhetorical condition of disenchantment through the analysis of Leila Buck's *American Dreams* and Panayiotis Mentis's *Foreigners*. Drawing upon Max Weber's notion of the *disenchantment of the world* and Michael McGee's theory of the *ideograph*, the study explores how the American Dream has shifted from an aspirational ideology to a disillusioned cultural residue. Both plays dramatize the erosion of persuasion as a form of social cohesion, revealing how national myths lose their force under the weight of contradiction and exclusion. Buck's interactive satire transforms the process of naturalization into a participatory spectacle that implicates audiences in the mechanisms of granting citizenship as a prize in a live game show, while Mentis's domestic tragedy stages the ethical aftermath of disillusionment within the Greek immigrant family after they had been granted citizenship in the United States. The analysis proposes that theatre serves as a rhetorical laboratory where the collapse of ideological enchantment is made visible and emotionally intelligible. Disenchantment, far from being the negation of meaning, emerges as a mode of critical awareness that enables new forms of ethical reflection.

W artykule ukazano, w jaki sposób współczesny teatr zarówno odzwierciedla, jak i przekształca retoryczny stan „odczarowania" (ang. *disenchantment*), na przykładzie dramatów *American Dreams* Leili Buck oraz *Foreigners* Panayiotisa Mentisa. Odwołując się do koncepcji „odczarowania świata" Maxa Webera oraz teorii ideografu Michaela McGee, autorki analizują proces przemiany idei amerykańskiego snu z obietnicy sukcesu i lepszego życia w rozczarowującą kulturową pozostałość. Oba dramaty przedstawiają proces erozji perswazji jako mechanizmu społecznej spójności, ukazując, jak narodowe mity tracą swoją moc pod naporem wewnętrznych sprzeczności i różnorodnych form wykluczenia. Interaktywna satyra Buck przekształca proces naturalizacji w widowisko angażujące publiczność w mechanizmy przyznawania obywatelstwa jako nagrody w teleturnieju. Natomiast utrzymany w tonie tragicznego dramatu rodzinnego utwór Mentisa ukazuje etyczne konsekwencje rozczarowania przeżywanego przez grecką rodzinę imigrancką już po uzyskaniu obywatelstwa amerykańskiego. Analiza dowodzi, że teatr działa jak retoryczne laboratorium, ponieważ pozwala dostrzec i emocjonalnie przeżyć moment, w którym ideologiczne „zaczarowanie" (ang. *enchantment*) ulega rozpadowi. W takim ujęciu odczarowanie nie oznacza zaniku sensu; przeciwnie, staje się formą krytycznej świadomości, która otwiera drogę do nowych sposobów refleksji etycznej.

Key words

American Dream, rhetoric of disenchantment, ideograph, contemporary theatre
amerykański sen, retoryka odczarowania, ideograf, teatr współczesny

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Rhetorical disenchantment and the theatre of the American Dream[1]

Part I. The rhetoric of a vanished promise

The American Dream, once a luminous and unifying concept within twentieth-century U.S. discourse, has in recent decades lost much of its rhetorical enchantment. In the wake of widening economic inequality, racial polarization, and the erosion of social mobility, the Dream's persuasive aura, with its promise that diligence leads to prosperity, has become fractured and increasingly anachronistic.[2] Yet the myth continues to circulate as a form of spectral rhetoric: it is invoked incessantly, although its capacity to inspire genuine belief has been profoundly diminished. This paper contends that the contemporary theatrical stage constitutes a vocal arena for dramatizing this condition of rhetorical exhaustion. Through Leila Buck's *American Dreams* (2018) and Panayiotis Mentis's *Foreigners* (1998), theatre exposes how the Dream's narrative of meritocracy and inclusion has devolved into a ritual of disillusionment, in which the symbols that once animated national identity now evoke irony, skepticism, and a quiet sense of grief.

The issue discussed in this article is not merely the failure of a political ideal behind the American Dream, but the gradual erosion of its persuasive architecture, which entails the disintegration of the rhetorical edifice that once sustained

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2. The concept of the American Dream emerged as a cultural ideal in the early twentieth century and has since served as a central trope in U.S. political and literary discourse. James Truslow Adams first articulated it in *The Epic of America* (1931), defining it as "a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable." Subsequent analyses have traced its transformation and ideological uses in American culture, most notably Jim Cullen's The American Dream: *A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2003) and Lawrence R. Samuel's *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (2012).

collective conviction and social cohesion. This paper argues that the American Dream operates as what Michael McGee (1980, 15) identified as an *ideograph*, that is, a high-order abstraction such as *freedom*, *equality*, or *progress*, which condenses intricate networks of ideological commitment into a single, affectively charged signifier. When such an ideograph loses its animating force and its symbolic power no longer galvanizes assent or authenticates communal belonging, the culture that once depended upon it enters a state of rhetorical *disenchantment*, a condition in which inherited systems of belief and representation cease to organize experience or legitimize authority. This disillusionment, however, extends beyond the emotional sphere; it is both epistemic and ethical, since it marks the moment when persuasion itself becomes an object of suspicion and when audiences cease to recognize their own reflection in the narratives that once unified and defined them.

The analysis of the two 21st century plays, American and Greek respectively, situates Leila Buck's *American Dreams* and Panayiotis Mentis's *Foreigners* within this larger rhetorical crisis. Both plays interrogate the mythos of the American Dream not only as a social promise, but also as a discursive construction that mediates the relationship between belief, identity, and belonging. Through radically different dramaturgical strategies based on Buck's interactive game-show structure and Mentis's domestic realism, each dramatizes the moment when the ideological foundations of the Dream are stripped of their enchantment. Both plays render visible the disjunction between rhetoric and reality, exposing the persuasive exhaustion of a national narrative that once animated collective imagination.

To understand this crisis of belief, the paper draws upon Max Weber's concept of "the disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*) which describes the historical process by which modern rationality erodes the mythic and sacred dimensions of meaning, reducing existence to instrumental logic and bureaucratic order (Weber 1946, 155).[3] For Weber, disenchantment was a hallmark of modernity, a process in which human life became governed by calculation rather than faith (Greisman 1976, 496). Yet, as we argue, disenchantment can also be read rhetorically: as the loss of symbolic enchantment that once gave social myths their affective legitimacy. When the moral magic of the American Dream dissolves under the pressures of capitalist rationalization, we witness not only the rationalization of economy, but the rationalization of persuasion itself. In this sense, disenchantment is not merely a sociological condition, but a rhetorical one, in which the persuasive power of transcendental ideals diminishes under the pressures of modernity. McGee's theory of ideographs complements Weber's notion by demonstrating how abstract political terms acquire and lose their

3. Weber develops this notion in *Science as a Vocation* (1918) and in *Economy and Society* (1978), where he associates disenchantment with the rationalization and bureaucratization of life.

rhetorical force as they circulate through discourse. Together, these frameworks illuminate how both Buck and Mentis articulate a double movement: the exposure of ideological fatigue and the search for new modes of persuasion capable of reanimating civic and moral imagination.

By focusing on the rhetoric of disenchantment, this study aims to expand the scope of rhetorical criticism beyond the analysis of argument and style toward an understanding of persuasion as a historical and affective process. The plays under consideration not only reflect the breakdown of a cultural narrative, but also perform that breakdown through their very form. American Dreams stages the *American Dream* as spectacle, turning citizenship into a game of chance and popularity, while *Foreigners* traces the emotional and moral aftermath of that spectacle's failure, depicting the wreckage left once the dream has lost its promise within the domestic sphere of postwar immigrants (Debord 1984). Buck transforms the American Dream into a literal game, complete with voting, scorekeeping, and spectacle, while Mentis exposes its ruin. Together they chart the arc from enchantment to disenchantment, from the seductive promise of becoming American to the wreckage left once the dream has lost its promise. In this sense, Buck's play can be read as the rhetoric of enchantment in crisis, and Mentis's as the rhetoric of its aftermath, namely the tragic recognition that belonging may be forever deferred.

The understanding that persuasion draws its power from forms of enchantment can be traced back to classical conceptions of rhetoric, where affect and belief were inseparable from reasoned discourse. Plato's dialogues repeatedly associate rhetoric with magic (*goēteia*), suggesting that the orator enchants the soul through language. Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* describes speech as a "powerful lord" capable of "putting an end to fear, removing grief, creating joy, and increasing pity" (Section 8). The early rhetorical tradition thus viewed language as an art of bewitchment, a means of shaping belief through aesthetic force rather than mere logic. When Weber declared the modern world disenchanted, he implicitly named the loss of this magical conception of language: a shift from rhetoric as spell to rhetoric as system. In the bureaucratic modernity of the United States where citizenship, identity, and success are codified in procedural terms, the American Dream survives as a rationalized myth, no longer a poetic enchantment, but a managerial promise. The rhetorical task of contemporary theatre, then, is to reintroduce the pathos of belief precisely at the site of its collapse.

Buck's *American Dreams* literalizes this process by transforming immigration and naturalization into a televised contest. "It's a game. It's a show. It's AmERica!" the host proclaims, as contestants compete for U.S. citizenship (Buck 2018, 11). Here the Dream's rhetoric is refracted through the idiom of entertainment: belief

becomes participation, and the audience's laughter masks complicity. When the play's final twist reveals that not all contestants can be accepted, the spectators confront the cruelty embedded in the Dream's meritocratic logic. The spontaneous cry of "This isn't fair!" from an audience member in Buck's production illustrates the very form of ethical awakening that the play's carnivalesque design aims to generate. In Weberian terms, Buck's theatre reenchants the rationalized procedure of citizenship by exposing its absurdity, transforming disenchantment into a collective catharsis.

Mentis's *Foreigners*, by contrast, inhabits the aftermath of the Dream's collapse. Set in the home of a Greek-American family in New Jersey, it presents a domestic tableau of second-generation immigrants who have achieved formal citizenship but remain existentially alienated. Their disillusionment is not spectacular, but slow, cumulative, and corrosive. Elizabeth (Beth), the widowed matriarch, confides that she came to America seeking "another sea, another land," yet, finds only "hell." As she poignantly articulates, "The promised land is non-existent… I desire a mountain… I desire a sea… Another sea, a mountain, a plain; here is its soil. To dig, to hide" (Mentis 2001, 25). Her sons, each scarred by economic struggle, war, or moral compromise, embody the tragic exhaustion of the Dream's promise. Where Buck stages the moment of rupture, Mentis dramatizes its aftermath: the long decline of rhetorical faith into silence and despair. The two plays, taken together, chart a diachronic trajectory of disenchantment: from the exuberant parody of belief to the quiet devastation of its loss.

This study thus advances three interrelated claims. First, that *disenchantment* – traditionally a sociological term – can be reinterpreted as a *rhetorical phenomenon*, describing the breakdown of shared ideographs and the consequent loss of collective persuasion. Second, that the American Dream, understood as a national ideograph, now functions rhetorically as a site of *crisis* rather than cohesion, with its symbolic power undermined by the very modernity it once justified. And third, that *performance* provides a unique arena for enacting and interrogating this rhetorical condition. Theatre, by staging belief and disbelief simultaneously, exposes the enchantments of ideology and the pathos of their undoing.

In advancing these claims, the paper aligns with recent rhetorical scholarship that foregrounds affect, materiality, and embodiment (Boyle 2018; Edbauer 2022; Gries 2015; Gunn 2010; Hawhee 2015; Rickert 2013). These scholars collectively illuminate how rhetorical energy circulates through bodies, objects, and environments, producing atmospheres of belief that can just as easily dissipate as they can inspire. From this perspective, disenchantment signifies not only the decline of mythic faith but also the material and sensory depletion of persuasion itself. Disenchantment is thus not merely a cognitive recognition of

falsehood; it is a bodily and emotional experience of rupture. When audiences laugh uneasily during Buck's game-show satire or watch Beth's family unravel in Mentis's domestic tragedy, they participate in a shared affective dislocation, or a performative reenactment of rhetorical collapse. The plays do not merely represent disillusionment; they make it felt.

Ultimately, the argument that follows proposes a rhetoric of *disenchantment* as both analytic and ethical lens. If the Enlightenment project sought liberation through reason, and modern rhetoric prized rational deliberation as civic virtue, these plays remind us that persuasion depends as much on enchantment as on logic. When belief falters, rhetoric falters with it. In the ruins of the American Dream, what remains is the question of what new forms of speech or performance might once again make belief possible.

Part II. Disenchantment as a rhetorical and philosophical concept

The modern sense of *disillusionment* is often treated as an emotional or historical condition, namely, a loss of faith in progress, nation, or self. Yet its deeper structure is rhetorical. To become disillusioned is to experience a failure of persuasion, a moment when the symbolic forms that once shaped collective belief cease to compel assent. The power of a word like *dream* depends not merely on its referential meaning, but on its affective resonance, which involves its ability to enchant. The history of disenchantment, therefore, can be read as a history of rhetoric itself: the long oscillation between language as *magic* and language as *mechanism*, between speech that enchants and speech that merely informs (Austin 1962; Josephson-Storm 2017; Ong 1982; Searle 1969; Taylor 2007).

The intellectual genealogy of disenchantment begins with the tension between mythos and logos in Greek thought. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates repeatedly defines philosophy in opposition to the poetic and rhetorical traditions that preceded it. The *Phaedrus* famously likens rhetoric to "psychagogia," the leading of souls by means of words – a practice at once divine and dangerous. In the *Gorgias*, rhetoric is accused of being a mere knack (*empeiria*), a form of flattery that persuades without knowledge (Blank 1993). Yet even as Plato rejects rhetoric's seductive power, he cannot fully banish it. The philosopher's dialectic itself depends on a carefully crafted performance of reasoning, a rhetorical theater in which belief is reshaped through dialogue. The Platonic suspicion of enchantment thus inaugurates the double bind of Western rhetoric: it must both enchant and unmask enchantment.

This ambivalence reemerges in Augustine's *Confessions*, where persuasion becomes a means of spiritual awakening rather than deception. The preacher, Augustine insists, must move and delight as well as teach, for the truth must be

"sweetly spoken" to win the heart (Augustine 1961 [426]). The Christian rhetorician inherits the magician's role under divine license; language, properly used, enchants in the service of salvation. But with the rise of scientific rationality and secular modernity, this synthesis begins to collapse. The Enlightenment redefines rhetoric as the art of reasoned discourse rather than inspired utterance, and in doing so, drains it of its mystical aura.

Max Weber's *disenchantment of the world* marks the canonical moment of this transition. For Weber, modernity is characterized by the rationalization of all spheres of life: religion, art, politics under the logic of efficiency and calculability. The enchanted world, in which nature and society were animated by divine or moral meanings, gives way to a world governed by instrumental reason. As Weber (1946 [1918]b, 155) writes, "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather… one can, in principle, master all things by calculation." The bureaucratic rationality of capitalism and the nation-state replaces the sacred with the procedural. Therefore, legitimacy derives not from charisma or revelation, but from rules.[4]

Yet Weber's notion of disenchantment is not merely sociological; it is also rhetorical in nature. It describes the decline of charismatic authority, the loss of persuasive power that once emanated from leaders, rituals, and myths. In his typology of authority, charisma is precisely that mode of persuasion that cannot be reduced to legality or tradition; it is the enchantment of followers by the personal aura of a leader. The modern state, by contrast, legitimates itself through documents, laws, and bureaucratic procedures, which constitute forms of rhetoric that are depersonalized, routinized, and therefore, in Weber's sense, disenchanted. To apply this insight to the American Dream is to see that its erosion is not merely economic or political, but rhetorical: the myth has lost its charisma.

The American Dream, once a charismatic narrative of self-making, has become procedural: a matter of visa categories, work permits, and economic quotas. Buck's *American Dreams* dramatizes precisely this rationalization. The process of naturalization is reimagined as a televised competition structured by rules, scores, and digital votes, transforming citizenship from a bureaucratic procedure into a public spectacle. When the host instructs the contestants to recite the Oath of Allegiance, the moment that should embody transcendence becomes an absurd ritual of mechanical repetition. As the character declares the words "on oath that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty," the audience laughs, sensing that

4. It is worth recalling that Weber himself used *disenchantment* not to celebrate rationalization but to lament it. His 1918 lecture "Science as a Vocation" concludes with the melancholy recognition that modern intellectuals must live "without illusions," sustained only by the inner discipline of their vocation. In this sense, Weber's disenchantment already contains the seeds of existential rhetoric: persuasion addressed to an audience that no longer believes.

the ceremony's symbolic gravity has dissolved (Buck 2018, 68). The oath has become a script without spirit, like a Weberian parody of legitimacy.

If Weber diagnosed the sociological condition of disenchantment, later thinkers elaborated its cultural and philosophical dimensions. Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God" (2001 [1882], §125) anticipates Weber's diagnosis, but with a distinctly rhetorical inflection: the death of transcendence entails the death of ultimate meaning, and therefore of any language that claims universality.[5] For Nietzsche, the collapse of metaphysical belief is also a collapse of rhetorical faith, signifying the recognition that all truths are interpretive fictions sustained by will and style. The American Dream, in this light, is a modern secular theodicy: a story that justifies suffering by promising eventual redemption through work and perseverance. To lose faith in that narrative is to experience a Nietzschean disillusionment; a recognition that the promise was rhetorical all along.

Adorno and Horkheimer radicalize this insight in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002 [1947]), where they argue that reason itself, in its drive to mastery, becomes mythic. Enlightenment, they write, "dissolves the symbols of magic… only to reproduce them in its own way" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947], 5). The rationalized world does not escape enchantment; it replaces the priest with the administrator, the ritual with the protocol. The rhetoric of the American Dream exemplifies this dialectic: it presents itself as a rational social contract (if you work hard, you will succeed), but functions as a mythic incantation sustaining faith in an unjust system. Buck's and Mentis's plays, each in their own idiom, reveal this inversion. In *American Dreams*, the rationality of the game show with its measurable fairness conceals its cruelty. In *Foreigners*, the protagonists' economic success masks spiritual collapse. Both are testimonies to what Adorno might call the "false clarity" of modernity: the belief that progress and prosperity are transparent and attainable, even as they perpetuate domination.

The disenchantment of the Dream thus parallels the disenchantment of rhetoric itself. Classical rhetoricians conceived persuasion as the art of shaping belief through ethos, pathos, and logos through the harmonious interplay of character, emotion, and reason. Modern bureaucratic rhetoric, however, privileges the procedural and propositional, reducing persuasion to information and compliance. The citizen becomes an audience of data rather than of stories. It is no accident that in *American Dreams*, the contestants are judged by multiple-choice answers: the language of affect is replaced by the logic of the test. The host's smiling

5. Nietzsche's view of persuasion as aesthetic performance, particularly in *The Birth of Tragedy*, provides a useful counterpoint to Weber. For Nietzsche, tragedy re-enchants life through art, transforming suffering into form. In both Buck and Mentis, theatrical performance fulfills this Dionysian function, momentarily restoring meaning through spectacle or pathos.

performance: “America, are you ready?!” is both an act of persuasion and an admission that persuasion no longer works (Buck 2018, 13).

This condition corresponds to what Jürgen Habermas (1975) later called the “legitimation crisis”: the moment when the state’s rational procedures fail to produce genuine consent, and communication collapses into spectacle. Habermas (1984) argued that modern societies compensate for this deficit of meaning through “communicative action,” an attempt to restore mutual understanding through dialogue rather than manipulation. But Buck’s play suggests that such communicative redemption is itself theatrical, sustaining a fantasy of inclusion that masks exclusion. The audience’s participation in voting for the “new citizen” simulates democracy without enacting it. The laughter of the crowd substitutes for deliberation and empathy becomes entertainment. The performance thereby stages Habermas’s crisis as affect, allowing spectators to feel the very failure of rational discourse that defines modern politics.

Charles Taylor extends this genealogy in *A Secular Age* (2007), describing disenchantment as the emergence of the “immanent frame”, namely a worldview in which meaning must be generated within, rather than beyond, human experience. In this frame, belief persists not as certainty, but as fragility, always haunted by its own contingency. Taylor’s secular subject is not liberated from enchantment yet nostalgic for it. This nostalgia, we suggest, is the emotional ground of contemporary performances of disillusionment. Both Buck and Mentis craft worlds where characters yearn for transcendence in a flattened moral landscape. When Beth in *Foreigners* cries out for “another sea, another land,” she articulates precisely this Taylorian longing for re-enchantment, namely the desire for a world that still speaks to the soul.

Disenchantment, then, is not the end of rhetoric, but its transformation. In an enchanted world, persuasion operates through faith and myth; in a disenchanted one, through irony and critique. Yet irony itself becomes a new form of enchantment as a way of reanimating belief through its negation. Buck’s satire enchants the audience by revealing their complicity; Mentis’s realism moves them through its austerity. Both playwrights exploit what Kenneth Burke (1966) called the “symbolic action” of language, that is, the capacity of words to transform perception even in the absence of faith. Burke, writing in the shadow of disillusionment after World War II, insisted that humans are “the symbol-using animal,” forever seeking new vocabularies to restore meaning. The theatre, by embodying symbols in living form, becomes a laboratory for such restoration.

It is in this sense that the plays under discussion perform a *rhetoric of disenchantment:* they enact the breakdown of ideological speech while simultaneously demonstrating its persistence. The American Dream may no longer

persuade, yet it continues to organize emotion, identity, and desire. The immigrant characters of Buck and Mentis do not merely reject the Dream; they inhabit its ruins, speaking its language even as they expose its falsity. Their rhetoric is tragic because it recognizes that disenchantment offers no outside realm beyond ideology. As Adorno (2001 [1951], 103) observed, "There is no true life in the false." The theatre of disillusionment, in this way, evolves into a rhetoric of survival, a means of speaking through and beyond the shattered remnants of meaning.

Part III. The rhetoric of disenchantment on stage: performing the collapse of belief in *American Dreams*

If disenchantment signifies the loss of persuasive faith in a social myth, then Leila Buck's *American Dreams* stages this loss in real time. The play does not merely depict disillusionment; it orchestrates it as a participatory event. Through the fusion of televised game show aesthetics and theatrical liveness, Buck transforms the process of naturalization into a collective ritual of irony. The audience's complicity in judging the "worthiness" of immigrants becomes a dramatization of what Weber (1978 [1922]) called the *routinization of charisma*, in which the sacred gives way to the procedural and affective engagement, is supplanted by algorithmic logic. In this sense, *American Dreams* performs the rhetoric of disenchantment as both theme and form: it literalizes the moment when the ideograph of the American Dream collapses under the weight of its own performative logic.

Spectacle and the bureaucratization of belief

At first glance, *American Dreams* appears playful, even celebratory. "It's a game. It's a show. It's America!" the host announces, establishing the premise that citizenship itself has become entertainment (Buck 2018, 11). Buck's play unfolds as a five-round game show in which three immigrant contestants compete for the grand prize of the U.S. citizenship. The characters: a Mexican-American Dreamer medic, Alejandro Rodriguez, a Pakistani cartoonist, Usman Bhutt, and a Palestinian chef, Adil Akram Mansour, represent distinct immigrant narratives, and their very identities foreground issues of race, nationality, and exclusion. The show proceeds through several rounds: *How America Works*, *America's Favorites*, *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*, *American Dreams*, and *The Hot Seat*, each parodying a different aspect of the U.S. immigration process. In one round, contestants answer questions drawn directly from the official citizenship test; in another, they perform talents to demonstrate their "extraordinary skills." These sequences operate as rituals of rationalization: complex questions of belonging are reduced to measurable performances. When the Pakistani cartoonist answers a trivia

question about baseball, or the Mexican medic attempts to guess America's "favorite food," Buck invites the audience to witness the absurdity of quantifying cultural assimilation.

This satirical structure mirrors Weber's description of modern bureaucracy as "a system of rationally ordered actions… oriented toward calculable rules" (Weber 1946 [1918]a, 196). Citizenship becomes a game of compliance, stripped of transcendence or moral depth. Yet the theatrical form complicates this rationalization. Because the audience votes to determine which contestant "wins" citizenship, they are forced into the position of both judge and participant, experiencing firsthand the moral discomfort of bureaucratic decision-making. As a contemporary account notes, the play's game-show format "keeps the tone light," but "spark[s] discussions of consequence and conscience" (Rockwell 2018). The humor draws people in, yet they are implicated in the ethical stakes (Buck 2018, 43):

> SHERRY:
>
> For viewers just joining us, my friend Chris here was an officer in the United States Marine Corps.
>
> What that means in civilian terms is that he is an official representative of the United States government.
>
> CHRIS:
>
> And today, so are you.
>
> *(SECURITY hands CHRIS and SHERRY manila folders)*
>
> SHERRY:
>
> Our top-clearance teams around the world have already screened each contestant for security and eligibility.
>
> CHRIS:
>
> So right now the only thing that stands between them and citizenship,
>
> CHRIS AND SHERRY:
>
> Is YOU.
>
> *(SHERRY moves up into the audience for the following)*
>
> CHRIS:
>
> In this round, you will have the chance to ask each contestant a question before you decide which of these men you want to be
>
> CHRIS AND SHERRY:
>
> your neighbor.

The laughter that punctuates the show is uneasy; it functions as what Freud (1960 [1905]) called "tendentious humor," which is laughter that releases anxiety by revealing social truth.

Here, the play's rhetoric of disenchantment becomes affective. The spectators' enjoyment gradually shades into guilt as they recognize the ethical stakes of their votes. The structure of the performance thus transforms belief into complicity: the audience's faith in the fairness of the game is steadily eroded as they sense that no choice is just. In the climactic moment, when the winning contestant recites the oath of citizenship, only to discover that not everyone will be accepted, the ritual of inclusion turns into a revelation of exclusion. The words of the oath are delivered with theatrical sincerity but received with irony; the sacred formula of belonging is revealed as hollow incantation. Buck's dramaturgy turns Weber's diagnosis into a spectacle: the bureaucratic procedure becomes its own parody, exposing the moral void beneath the rational form.

The carnivalesque as temporary re-enchantment

Yet *American Dreams* is not purely cynical. Its carnivalesque tone, in Bakhtin's sense, offers a brief and ecstatic re-enchantment of the political ritual it satirizes. Carnival, as Bakhtin (1984, 7) famously wrote, "celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order." The play's audience participation structure embodies this liberation. Spectators are invited to cheer, vote, and even question the contestants directly during *The Hot Seat* segment. The form blurs distinctions between actor and observer, official and outsider, echoing Bakhtin's vision of carnival as a collective inversion of hierarchy. For a moment, the audience experiences what Turner (1969, 96) called *communitas*, meaning a liminal fellowship that transcends ordinary social roles.

But Buck's carnival is not entirely joyful. Its laughter is tinged with the melancholy of irony, a knowing awareness that the suspension of hierarchy is temporary and theatrical. The host's exuberant tone in "This is your final opportunity to decide once and for all who you think deserves to be our next citizen" rings with both invitation and accusation (Buck 2018, 62). In one scene, the host cajoles the audience to make their decision quickly, reminding them that "it's time for a quick commercial break" (Buck 2018, 25). This intrusion of capitalist logic into the ritual of citizenship underscores the play's central paradox: the very mechanisms of freedom and inclusion are framed by market rationality. What appears as liberation is, in fact, another form of discipline.

This ambivalence reflects what Charles Taylor (2007, 300) calls the "cross--pressures" of the secular age: the coexistence of longing for transcendence and skepticism about its possibility. The carnival reenchants only to reveal the

impossibility of genuine re-enchantment within a commodified public sphere. *American Dreams* thus transforms Bakhtin's "world turned upside down" into a rhetorical mirror: the audience's laughter at the absurdity of the system becomes the very means by which they confront its permanence.

Rhetorical rupture and the crisis of faith

In rhetorical terms, *American Dreams* dramatizes the failure of the ideograph *the American Dream* to produce identification. As McGee (1980, 8) observed, ideographs derive their power from collective consent; they function as "political language preserved in rhetorical documents" that evoke a sense of shared purpose. Buck's play reveals what happens when that consent dissolves. The phrase "the American Dream" is uttered repeatedly by the contestants, each time with diminishing conviction. The Palestinian chef speaks of wanting "a home that is safe and free" (Buck 2018, 49); the Mexican medic describes the dream as the chance "to serve this country as a paramedic; to continue my studies to become a Physician's Assistant; to hold my girlfriend's hand" (Buck 2018, 38). These lines transform the lofty abstraction into concrete vulnerability. The ideograph no longer unites; it fragments into personal stories of survival.

In performance, this fragmentation manifests as a crisis of tone. The audience does not know whether to laugh or grieve. When the final "winner" is announced, applause mingles with discomfort, creating a collective hesitation that marks the moment of rhetorical collapse. The ideograph's spell is broken; the dream has been demystified. Yet Buck does not offer cathartic resolution. Instead, she leaves the audience suspended in what Victor Turner (1982, 44) called the "subjunctive mood" of performance, or the space of "what might be," where belief and disbelief coexist. The rhetorical enchantment of the American Dream is neither restored nor destroyed; it hovers in ambiguity, forcing spectators to dwell in the liminal state of critical awareness.

This unresolved tension gives *American Dreams* its rhetorical potency. By inviting audiences to participate in a system that is simultaneously fair and cruel, the play re-enacts what Habermas (1975, 95) described as the *legitimation crisis* of modernity, that is the inability of rational institutions to secure emotional allegiance. The show's hosts and digital interfaces simulate democratic participation, yet the outcome exposes the emptiness of procedural justice. The audience's collective vote, being a quintessential act of modern citizenship, becomes a hollow performance. In that hollowness lies the drama of disenchantment.

The ethics of disillusionment

The ethical dimension of Buck's theatre lies in its refusal to offer comfort. In a media environment saturated with sentimental narratives of immigrant success,

American Dreams insists on ambivalence. It replaces triumph with irony and empathy with implication. The audience is not invited to admire the characters' resilience, but instead to question their own participation in the mechanisms of exclusion. As one reviewer noted,

> If the play's subtext is writ large, it's still true that "American Dreams" makes you soul search. Adil, Alejandro and Usman may be fictional, but choosing whose hopes to dash — whose safety to jeopardize – involves angst, moral reasoning and moving beyond any cozy box of complacency (Wren 2020).

That self-reflexivity is central to the rhetoric of disenchantment: persuasion becomes moral confrontation rather than consolation.

In this sense, Buck's work exemplifies what Kenneth Burke (1966, 45) called "perspective by incongruity", referring to the rhetorical act of revealing hidden meanings by juxtaposing incongruous frames. The sacred oath of citizenship, uttered amid game-show confetti, becomes a grotesque comedy; the rhetoric of national pride is recontextualized as absurdity. This incongruity forces audiences to experience what Burke called the "equipment for living" function of art: the ability to confront uncomfortable truths through symbolic enactment. The laughter in *American Dreams* is therapeutic not because it absolves, but because it reveals the limits of persuasion.

Through this process, Buck's play redefines rhetoric itself. No longer the art of convincing others, it becomes the art of revealing disbelief. The disenchanted audience, aware of its own complicity, exemplifies what later interpreters of Weber have termed the *tragic consciousness* of modernity, meaning the recognition that individuals inhabit systems they neither fully believe in nor can wholly escape.[6] *American Dreams* captures this paradox with theatrical precision. Its carnival of citizenship both enchants and condemns; its humor both delights and indicts. The play's power lies in making the collapse of belief visible, performable, and shared.

Part IV. Disillusionment and domestic tragedy: the rhetoric of ruin in Panayiotis Mentis's *Foreigners*

If *American Dreams* enacts the moment of rhetorical collapse through carnival and irony, Panayiotis Mentis's *Foreigners* lingers in its aftermath. Where Buck's audience experiences disillusionment as a collective event and a flash of ekstasis, Mentis's characters inhabit it as the texture of everyday life. His play transforms disenchantment from a spectacle into a condition: the slow corrosion of meaning,

6. The phrase *tragic consciousness* does not appear in Weber's own writings. It is a term developed by interpreters who emphasize the tragic dimension of Weber's account of rationalization and modernity. See Kalberg (1994, 62–64) on Weber's "tragic awareness," Whimster (2007, 88–90) on Weber's "tragic vision of modernity," and Löwith (1982, 35–41) for an early reading of Weber's tragic sensibility.

the exhaustion of the symbols that once promised redemption. In this sense, *Foreigners* represents what might be called *postrhetorical existence* in a world in which the ideographs of freedom, success, and belonging have lost their performative efficacy, leaving only habit, resentment, and despair.

From ideograph to emptiness: the post–American Dream condition

Set in a modest New Jersey home, *Foreigners* stages the lives of Elizabeth (Beth) and her four adult sons. They are second-generation Greek Americans whose citizenship provides the legal stamp of inclusion yet never culminates in genuine belonging, since the communities around them continue to question their legitimacy, their identity, and even their right to feel at home. The American Dream, which animated Beth's migration after World War II, has devolved into its opposite: a reality of alienation, moral fragmentation, and unfulfilled longing. Early in the play, Beth recalls her decision to emigrate, describing her youthful hope for "another sea, another land." The phrase, poetic and incantatory, recalls Odysseus's *nostos* – a homecoming that never arrives. It encapsulates the pathos of Weber's disenchantment, for the traveler discovers that the sacred geography of aspiration has given way to a bureaucratic landscape governed by visas, mortgages, and the obligations of war. When Beth later laments that "the promised land is non-existent. There is only hell," her speech marks the moment when the American Dream, as McGee's ideograph, has emptied itself of rhetorical force. The words remain, but their charisma has fled.

This transformation parallels what Weber described as the *routinization of charisma*, the process through which originally inspired or extraordinary authority becomes stabilized through rules, offices, and bureaucratic procedure (Weber 1946 [1918]c). The Dream that once summoned sacrifice, now justifies survival. For Beth's sons, the myth operates less as inspiration than as demand: an injunction to achieve success, to assimilate, to forget. Peter, the eldest, embodies the capitalist version of routinization. Having married Sheila, an American executive, he has achieved material prosperity but lost moral coherence. His success is transactional, devoid of enchantment. Jim, by contrast, preserves the dream's rhetoric, but inverts its meaning. He invokes "freedom" and "individual choice" to rationalize infidelity and exploitation. The ideograph persists as verbal residue, detached from ethical substance. Mentis's play captures this hollow eloquence: the rhetoric of a dream that no longer dreams.

The rhetoric of silence: disenchantment and the failure of speech

If Buck's theatre of disillusionment thrives on noisy participation, Mentis's tragedy unfolds through silence. Dialogue in *Foreigners* is punctuated by pauses,

interruptions, and monologic outbursts, marking the linguistic symptoms of alienation. Beth's lengthy reminiscences, often ignored by her sons, function as fragments of a dying rhetoric. She speaks to preserve meaning in a world that no longer listens. In one of her most poignant monologues, she recounts disguising herself as a man to work in postwar America, an act of survival that simultaneously erases and reaffirms her identity. This gesture of masking to endure echoes Bakhtin's notion of the *grotesque body*: the self that transforms to persist in an oppressive order. But here, the carnival is stripped of festivity. What was once regenerative inversion becomes existential adaptation.

The play's silences also recall Weber's melancholy in "Science as a Vocation": the modern intellectual's solitude in a world "bereft of gods and prophets" (1946 [1918]b). Beth, too, is a disenchanted prophet, bearing witness to a moral order that has vanished. Her sons' inability to respond underscores the crisis of rhetoric itself. Communication fails not because words are absent, but because belief has withdrawn from them. As Kenneth Burke (1950, 172) observed, rhetoric depends on *identification*: persuasion occurs when speaker and audience share a vocabulary of motives. In *Foreigners*, that shared vocabulary has disintegrated. When Beth pleads for compassion or faith, her words fall into a void; no communal ethos remains to animate them.

This failure of speech exemplifies what Adorno and Horkheimer (2002 [1947], 27) described as the *dialectic of Enlightenment*: the process by which reason, stripped of imagination, becomes barbaric. The sons' rationalization of their moral decay: Jim's infidelity, Peter's opportunism, Steve's despair, reflects a culture that has learned to justify everything and believe in nothing. Steve, the youngest, embodies this contradiction most tragically. Having fought in America's wars, he has fulfilled every requirement of the Dream's moral economy, only to be discarded by the system he served. When he declares that he has "no flag, no father, and no country," the line reads as both confession and epitaph. The triad – flag, father, country – condenses the sacred signs of national rhetoric, only to reveal them as void. The ideograph has collapsed into pure syntax.

Moral rationalization and the logic of despair

In Weber's schema, disenchantment leads to a world governed by instrumental reason, where value is measured in efficiency and success. Mentis's play dramatizes this rationalization at the level of character. Peter's pragmatism, Sheila's opportunism, and Jim's cynicism exemplify the triumph of calculation over conscience. Their actions are logical, even sensible, yet they hollow out the very meanings: family, loyalty, dignity, which once justified them. The American Dream has become an ethics of survival, producing what Charles Taylor (2007,

307) calls “the buffered self”: an individual insulated from transcendence, closed to grace.

Mentis further strips away the layers of the American Dream in this regard: through Beth’s eldest son, Peter, he highlights the moral degradation of a man who, despite achieving economic success or cultural and social assimilation, has lost all traces of humanity, compassion, and morality, prioritising his own interests above everything, sucked by his wife’s dynamic and selfish personality. Peter aligns most closely with the ideals and expectations of the American Dream of all Beth’s sons: he is married to Sheila, an American executive at a Manhattan construction company, and is completely cut off from his mother and siblings. Peter and Sheila attempt to reconnect with Beth after many years of alienation when they seek to serve their financial interests, having learned that Beth is about to sell her estate and restaurant, both situated in an up-and-coming area where Sheila wants to invest with her construction company. Economic prosperity is thus accompanied by the alienation of wealth and consumerism, alongside a detachment from family ties.

In one key scene, Peter and Sheila visit Beth not out of filial love but to secure her property for investment. Their conversation, dominated by financial jargon, turns the maternal home into a commodity. The rhetoric of intimacy is replaced by that of acquisition. When Beth protests, reminding them that “a home is not a business,” her words sound archaic, spoken from a moral universe that no longer exists. The exchange encapsulates the play’s central irony: that disenchantment appears as progress, even as it corrodes the foundations of meaning.

The logic of despair culminates in Steve’s suicide, the ultimate expression of disillusionment with the American Dream. His death, though offstage, reverberates as the play’s moral center. It transforms disenchantment from intellectual condition to existential fact. In Weberian terms, Steve represents the modern individual “condemned to be the specialist without spirit, the sensualist without heart” (Weber 1958 [1904]). Yet Mentis resists pathos; the tragedy lies not in excess emotion, but in its absence. The family’s reaction is muted, procedural. “He was sick,” one brother murmurs, reducing moral reckoning to a soulless diagnosis. The rhetoric of the Dream has not only failed to inspire; it has anesthetized.

From carnival to catharsis: the counterpoint to Buck

When juxtaposed with *American Dreams*, *Foreigners* reveals the full temporal arc of disenchantment. Buck’s play captures the ecstatic rupture when the belief collapses in laughter, while Mentis depicts the long aftermath: the monotony of living without enchantment. If Buck’s audience experiences *ekstasis*, Mentis’s characters endure stasis. The difference is not merely stylistic, but rhetorical. Buck’s

carnival still relies on the energy of contradiction; Mentis's realism confronts the exhaustion that follows when irony itself has lost its charge.

Yet both plays share a moral imperative: to bear witness to the collapse of persuasion. In *American Dreams*, the host's jubilant tone seduces the audience into complicity before turning judgment back upon them. In *Foreigners*, Beth's weary eloquence pleads for empathy in a world deaf to such appeals. In both cases, the rhetorical situation with its speaker, audience, and medium is destabilized. The traditional Aristotelian model of persuasion, which presumes the possibility of shared understanding, no longer holds. What replaces it is what we call *rhetoric after belief*: speech that knows it will not persuade, but speaks nonetheless, out of ethical necessity.

This form of rhetoric refuses closure. It speaks in fragments, in irony, in silence. Beth's final longing for "another sea, another land" resonates not as an expression of hope, but as an articulation of profound weariness. It is the voice of someone who has watched every ideology dissolve, leaving behind only the residue of lived experience. Yet even within this exhaustion, meaning continues to flicker. Her desire for an elsewhere, however unattainable, signals a residual enchantment, the stubborn persistence of imagination within the very atmosphere of disenchantment. The rhetorical act endures precisely because it gestures toward a fulfillment that can never be secured.

Tragedy as rhetorical knowledge

Tragedy, Aristotle wrote, produces *catharsis*, understood as the purgation of pity and fear through imitation. But in a disenchanted age, catharsis itself becomes problematic. If belief in moral order has vanished, what can tragedy purge? Mentis answers this question by redefining catharsis as recognition rather than purification. The audience does not leave *Foreigners* morally cleansed, but intellectually awakened to the emptiness of inherited ideals. The play's rhetorical function is diagnostic, not didactic: it reveals the pathology of a culture still haunted by its own myths.

In this respect, *Foreigners* aligns with what Burke (1945, 59) called "representative anecdote", a symbolic condensation of social reality. The immigrant family becomes a microcosm of modernity: alienated, rationalized, and spiritually exhausted. Each character's linguistic habits – Beth's nostalgic storytelling, Peter's managerial jargon, Steve's fragmented speech – constitute distinct rhetorical modes within the disenchanted world. The tragedy lies in their incommensurability. The family cannot speak the same language, and thus cannot share the same reality.

Mentis's achievement is to render this rhetorical fragmentation theatrically vivid without resorting to sentimentality. His realism functions as a disciplined gaze that refuses to embellish suffering. The play's power arises not from spectacle but from restraint. From the silence that follows words that no longer persuade. If Buck's carnival exposes the mechanisms of belief, Mentis's tragedy exposes its absence. Together, they map the emotional and rhetorical topography of modern disillusionment: the moment when the enchanted language of national mythology yields to the near-speechlessness of moral fatigue.

Part V. The rhetoric of disillusionment: from enchantment to ethical awareness

Disenchantment, as both Weber and McGee teach us, is never simply a loss. It is the transformation of belief into reflection, and myth into critique. What Buck and Mentis achieve through *American Dreams* and *Foreigners* is not the eradication of enchantment, but its rhetorical reconfiguration, transforming the collapse of belief into a site where faith becomes conscious of its own vulnerability. Their theatre does not merely lament the demise of the American Dream. Instead, it interrogates the linguistic, ideological, and affective mechanisms that once sustained it. Through laughter and silence, carnival and tragedy, they compel audiences to recognize that disillusionment is itself a rhetorical act, one that arises precisely at the moment when persuasion encounters its own boundaries.

From persuasion to perception

The American Dream, long enshrined as a civic myth of mobility and meritocracy, functioned for over a century as one of America's most successful rhetorical inventions. Like McGee's ideographs of *freedom* or *equality*, it condensed complex ideological commitments into an emotionally resonant abstraction that could justify national policy and personal aspiration alike. Its power lay not in truth but in *believability* in the affective enchantment of its promise.

Yet as both plays reveal, such persuasion depends on conditions that modernity can no longer sustain. Rationalization, bureaucratization, and commodification, which are the very forces that Weber saw as defining the modern world, undermine the enchantment necessary for collective belief. When citizenship becomes a quiz, and freedom becomes a market value, persuasion falters. The result is not simply cynicism, but a new rhetorical condition, where speech, stripped of its incantatory force, is uttered out of duty rather than conviction.

Buck's *American Dreams* captures the instant of that collapse. Its audience experiences the dream's death as laughter that turns to unease. The show's carnival of citizenship, complete with voting, confetti, and applause, invites the public to

celebrate their own complicity in the bureaucratic absurdity of belonging. The familiar rhetoric of inclusion is reenacted as farce, but in that exposure lies the possibility of renewal. For a brief moment, laughter reawakens awareness.

Mentis's *Foreigners*, by contrast, reveals what follows after that awakening: a world in which rhetoric continues, but belief has withdrawn. The disillusionment that Buck performs, Mentis endures. His immigrant family's words echo the American Dream even as they disprove it. The effect is not catharsis, but recognition that rhetorical forms outlive their persuasive force, haunting the disenchanted world as linguistic ghosts. Their theatre persuades not by offering belief, but by making disbelief visible.

Thus theatre accomplishes what philosophy can only theorize. Where Weber mourned the loss of meaning and Habermas sought to restore it through rational discourse, the stage allows audiences to *feel* disenchantment as a lived experience. In doing so, it redeems rhetoric from sterility by returning it to the body, the voice, the shared moment of performance. The power of Buck's and Mentis's plays lies not in what they persuade us to believe, but in how they compel us to perceive our own belief's dissolution.

Toward a rhetoric of the disenchanted world

The implications of this analysis extend beyond theatre. In an era of global migration, political polarization, and post-truth communication, the condition these plays dramatize has become ubiquitous. Public discourse oscillates between over-enchantment (demagogic spectacle) and total cynicism (the refusal to believe anything). Rhetorical studies must therefore learn to account for the in-between disenchanted space, where persuasion falters, but meaning persists. *American Dreams* and *Foreigners* model a rhetoric suited to that space: a rhetoric that neither reasserts the myth nor abandons it, but inhabits its ruins with awareness. The audiences do not leave persuaded, but awakened and aware that language still matters, precisely because its magic has faded.

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