

THE THEATRES OF BOREDOM AND DEPRESSION Two Gateways to Imagination

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*Without a certain disposition to melancholy, there is no
psychism, but only acting out or game.*
Julia Kristeva, *SoLeil Noir: Dépression et Mélancolie*

To propose boredom and depression as gateways to imagination, as working tools for theatre — indeed as master teachers—contains a fair share of provocation. In looking to boredom there is an overt rebellion against models of imagination that monopolize our sense of creativity. To want to dwell on depression leads into a far more delicate terrain. It opens up a quest for depth and meaning in areas where one encounters much psychological suffering, remote from, if not opposite to, what theatre creativity usually implies. The use of psychology's terminology and clinical descriptions in theatrical explorations underlines a paradoxical phenomenon. It provokes a metaphorical reversal that is a mutation of the same grave reality; like two sides of a coin, one face presents void and despair while the other a fulfillment of meaning.

The first time I came to define these working terms was during a seminar in Bologna. I was confronted with wonderful actors, sparkling with the imagination of Italian Commedia dell'Arte. Most of their image-making took place at this quicksilver, witty, finely stereotyped, popular, Harlequin level. The antidote of boredom and depression was not meant to dampen this particular kind of brilliance, but to give the actors a different perspective toward it. It meant finding ways to create a distance between actor and character, a detachment from too exclusive and blinding an adherence to only one archetype of imagination. Boredom and depression hollowed out a new psychological space where the lightness and sentimentalities of Commedia, its emotion and insights, could echo with different repercussions and gather weight, that is, depth and another dimension of meaning. Interestingly, the other major theme in Bologna was *sensual pleasure*, the accuracy and eloquence of its display. Its dynamics and reflective challenge were similar to those of the work on depression, affording the actor a luxury of time and giving substance, weight to his presence.

The Academy of Boredom

“The Academy of Boredom” was the aggressively senex subtitle of Pantheatre's 1987 Theatre Seminar. It became a leitmotif antidote to three figures who are constantly stealing the limelight as well as our notion of imagination: the archetypes of child (baby), of puer (young boy), and of drama itself. They were banned from the Academy of Boredom (at least officially), because all three are tributary to *imagination as surprise*. Their emphasis is on “over-taking” the present (the literal meaning of “surprise”), and, as such, they turn their dynamics constantly to the future. They are actors of the future, anticipating, original, unpredictable, wonderful, but too pervasive and shallow. In the Academy of Boredom one had to take one's time, taking the present, and remembering the past.

Let us look closer at the theatrics of these three upstagers: (1) the baby and the spontaneity of curiosity. Creativity is seen through this archetype as the acting-out of curiosity, that is, the unmediated “cure” of needs and whims. The actor who usually justifies his initiatives by saying, with a seductive smile, “I did it because I felt like it. ...” (2) The puer, a bit older, who opens up the world of invention: clever and marvelous. He seeks surprises and the differentiation of utter and stunning

originality. His imagination is that of exceptions, newness and change.² (3) The archetype of drama itself— a surprising eviction from a theatre context! This character craves contrasts, scandals, catastrophes to sustain itself on intensity alone. He is the actor who is compelled to dramatize everything for subjective reasons: a drama/adrenaline addict, over-dramatic and often meaningless.

Boring One's Way into the Present

Inherent in the behavior of our three otherwise indispensable culprits is an egocentric need which precludes the taking in of the world's information and state of soul: no consideration, no adaptation. The Academy of Boredom, on the other hand, is rabidly obsessed with a sense of being it calls "the present." When it considers the presence of an actor, it means it literally: is he present? Is he picking up the obvious, the predictable? Does he realize what he is doing? Does he see what he is looking at? These questions may appear to be truisms, but are very complex when one gets involved in metaphors: can he see that the chair is the cloud of which he is speaking?

The Academy cringes when imagination is presented as an elusive elsewhere, a fantastic alternative. It places imagination in the object-world and cultivates it as an (actively) passive faculty, as observation, listening, attention. Imagination as "a great subtle ear" or as "the mind's eye"— in any case, as a *form of perception*.

This stubborn grounding in the present is in fact very difficult to grasp in acting. The imagination of theatre (imagination defined here simply as "image-making") is generally associated with conjuring a replacement ethos. Its caricature is the actor-magician, spraying landscapes onto thin air, in grandiloquent declamation and with romantic looks at an imagined horizon. Or willfully ordering ghosts to appear, to come illustrate his literature, in pantomimes of "*terribilila*."

For example, let us take an actor saying the word "father"; next to him there is a clock. The academicians of boredom will watch intently how he allows/makes word and object meet. What metaphorical syntheses (images) are achieved through his presence? Presence becomes here the manifest intelligence of the image, a quality of poesis. The word "father" and the clock meet through the actor's body and voice. Does he carry the clock? shout at it? ignore it? turn it upside down? This requires *presence of mind*, a receptivity to what the image (clock + father) is saying—its metaphorical radiation. A good image, held by a good actor, makes for a "rain of metaphors" on the spectators. Too poor a presence of mind, and associations become aleatoric, random, escape him and bypass us without consequence. Too much intervention on the other hand, too much emphasis, underlining, or selection, and the image is reduced to an emblem, an allegory, a symbolic encounter. The spectator no longer imagines, he interprets.

Once one enters this area of image-making, it is utterly compelling and, of course, anything but boring. It challenges our apperceptions and the imaginative inertia that always drags us into the same creation stereotypes. Through intense focus on the present, the Academy of Boredom tries to achieve *respect for the object-world*. The word "re/spect" contains a double look which creates a gap between looking and seeing. Through this gap the actor realizes what image he is involved in. To allow this imaginal sense of reality the possibility to reveal itself, the Academy of Boredom demands predictability (reading and unfolding the implications of what the image wishes) and simplicity, the kind that costs the earth. Then one can drill, "bore" one's way into the present. Imagination and reality meet, again like two sides of a coin, leaving no room for illusionistic alternative tricks.

A Hateful Interlude

Another master teacher sometimes present during the work on boredom and depression was *hate*. Psychologically, both boredom and depression contain hateful implications in their loss of enthusiasm for life. In fact, the French language uses the word *ennui* for boredom; it comes from *in odio*, "in hate"! (Boredom turns Spaniards into donkeys: *aburrirse*, to become like a donkey!) What emerged from these strange working premises is the sharpness, the incisiveness of hate's cruel glare and relentless perspicacity, to the point of cynical corrosion. Hate is a great linguistic and rhetorical

teacher. It sustains most fanatical preachers. Words are chiseled out, exposed in cold if vicious lucidity, subverted. It strips off the surface veneers, searching for deeper understated layers. It can be very eloquent and revealing, if paranoid. Savonarola often visits our workshops. A remarkable recent example of hate's insight was Shakespeare's Juliet, tried out as a sixty-five-year-old down and out alcoholic, in the Styx street gutters, reciting in bitter remembrance her youthful speech "Give me my Romeo." The arrogance of the teenage text was dipped into the acid developer of hate, giving its figures of speech a hilarious if awesome transparency.

Expression and Depression

Both these words are built on the dynamics of pressure: one pushes out (ex-pression), the other pulls down (de-pression). I am here going to polarize them as a tandem. The expressivity I am putting into question is that which exaggerates the pressure to "show" personal emotion. It makes us believe that imagination is only an outpouring, an emotional confession, only genuine if personal. Its "method" stores and activates biography, emotional memory. Text is appropriated and animated as a personal enterprise. Identification and "having something to say" become all-important as personal achievements of depth and meaning. This expressivity, and its wild version called "expressionism," has a history of manic trend swings in recent art fashion. During the seventies much of dance exiled it and took off into a limbo of pale, so-called neutral choreographies of poker-faced intellectualism. Then back charged the grotesque hordes of punk expressionism, counter-distorting the rapport between imagination and emotion.

Introducing depression into these tides is not meant to eliminate emotion. On its first approach, it seeks to de-pressurize something, to take a certain pressure away from acting. That is the pressure that places the responsibility of imagination on the actor's ego and the ego's emotional output. It is the pressure that makes acting an intensely personal affair. Depression teaches another approach and sensibility to depth and meaning, where, again, personal intention is subdued for the sake of attention. Like boredom, depression is a tool to establish a dialogue with the object-world, beyond personal psychology and its expressivity.

The observation of an actor dealing with nothing other than an object is probably the most revealing exercise for this kind of sensibility. Usually it will be a large and abstract object, too large to control cleverly, like a large piece of material, or cardboard, or a metal coil reel, or a set of bamboo sticks, etc. Respectful handling of such an object (and not "manipulating" it) will bring out its autonomous movements and sensual qualities, its "will" and *caprice*. The goat (*capra*) in this last word connects with the goat-god Pan (Panthéâtre is named after him), who is in many ways the God of improvisation, of spontaneous emotion and its concomitant panic—a great drama teacher.⁴ Thus, without words or scenario, the actor has only the inherent metaphorical potentialities of the object to develop as "text." Depression keeps characters and their subjective scenarios at bay. What emerges is another kind of intensity: that of observation, engagement (how to engage the object *outside of projections*) development. The emotion one encounters in these exercises comes from dealing with "otherness," what I have called "objective imagination" Rather than expression, emotion becomes a transparency where one can see the impact of image on the actor, "what the image recognizes in him." The motion and emotion of image-making are no longer under personal pressure. Meaning and depth rise out of dimensions that bypass personal will. If boredom deals with the addiction to renewal, depression confronts us with the impersonal abyss of meaning.

The Portico of Depression

In a recently published book on depression and melancholia, Julia Kristeva writes of depression as "an adjournment of hate, and of the desire to possess"⁶—an adjournment of the acting-out of hateful destruction and of personal possession. Speech from a clinician's point of view, her terms run parallel to those used in this article, but with inverted implications, as if the whole subject had been turned inside out. In effect, she speaks of this "adjournment" as the result of a "symbolic abdication" which

can equally well be a sinking into the “whiteness of asymbolism,” as a giving up in front of an “overwhelming chaotic profusion of ideation.” Depression is a stalling, out of an inability to “make sense,” either because of a blank void or a chimeric excess: nothing, or too much.

Inscribed on the portico of depression is the word “suicide.” Kristeva writes that the adjournment that depression allows is often the last barrier before suicide. Suicide is the conclusion to the “abdication,” the failure to make sense, to renew meaning. The collapsing of personalistic structures of meaning and the quest for other sources of creativity—for other, if “altered,” states of consciousness—have appeared in different ways in theatre. Grotowsky’s “beyond tiredness” was one of these quests. They imply the death of a certain ego, a form of “imaginal” suicide, a reaching for other levels of imagination. The “adjournment” that depression allows can create a new psychic space, from where one can evict personal “possessivities,” rhetorics and hermeneutics. It can create a blank but open space of attention that can face and contain the “chaos of ideation,” the plethora of “other” images that assault our insecure understanding. Here statements gather weight and autonomy: what is sought for is *semantic density*, the thickening of polysemic complexities, and the gravity that pulls statements down into deeper layers, into sedimentations, repercussions, associations, implications.

There are clear parallels, at least in the first stages of this theatrical approach, with clinical phenomenology: devitalization (relaxation), stupor (slowing down), heaviness (gravity), monotony (repetition), and “a certain non-tragic lucidity of despair” Depression implies also *loss of identity*. In theatre this means accepting a poetics that dissolves character identification, which is the touchstone of traditional acting. To identify with a character is after all like replacing ego with alter ego. But when distinctions are blurred and played with—between person, actor, dramatic persona and literary subject—one’s sense of identity disintegrates into a creative if menacing “chaos.” One becomes an imaginal entity suspended in relativity; depression allows us to engage the anxiety of this relative ethos, ultimately affording us a new sense of freedom.

The Deus & Machina

The deus ex machina of these theatre processes, of the works beyond the portico of depression, in whose realm identities disintegrate, is Hades. Theatre becomes a rehearsal antechamber for his realm, the underworld. Hades, as deus ex machina, controls the levers that open the ontological traps beneath our acting. His are the underworld cellars, the vast echo chambers of depth, where our statements and our various selves sink in grave repetitions, gathering “image-sense”⁷ in slow dense waves, metaphorizing themselves, gathering memory, like baroque ornamentations, full of protean figures, filling the rooms with meaning. We see his sedimentations that are the substance and metaphorical body of what we are calling here imagination.

Hades abducts our statements into depth; his is an archetypal perspective that implies a confrontation with death as an ultimate artistic reference. The actor/artist seeking depth confronts the fantasy of Hades as an esthetical “Last Judgment,” where all contents are valued by the way in which they confront, accept, incorporate death. Such a Plutonic mannerism rapes and, in a sense, corrupts and perverts our innocent identities. Statements fall, decay into metaphorization, losing their ontological security. We are raped out of our literal and literary refuges, where we protect ourselves from the burning cure of Plutonic exposure. Inviting Hades into theatre implies such *exposure*, a word that shifts the expressionistic emphasis. It is an exposure that is an “e-ducation,” a being “led out” of ourselves.

Tantalizing Theatre

One meets, in the underworld corridors of contemporary theatre, many figures enacting a depression complex, suspended in slow-motions or stuck in the violence of repetition. I am thinking specifically of the very important impact on contemporary theatre of three creators: the drained, dusty puppet-actors of Tadeuz Kantor; the ghostly catastrophic symbolisms of the slow motions of Japanese butto

dancers; the desperate domestic connotations of the repetitions of Pina Bausch's choreographies. I link them to what Kristeva calls "white activities": in the case of woman's depression, she describes the white void of depressed behavior seen in the violent, murderous revenge cycles of the abandoned wife or seen in her exhausting herself senselessly in domestic chores/ choreographies. The artistic and mythological transposition of these figures is tantalizing. They become Tantalos, Ixion, the Danae, Sisyphus, and Hercules, stuck in depressive labors, most of them because they had a problem with the meaning and timing of death. These are mythical figures who could not depress their acting, clinging to possessions, even to life itself. The contemporary creators I mention give us back the shadow figures of our manic concretism, of our "liveliness." And they thoroughly tantalize contemporary audiences.

Baroque Realization

I have often referred in previous paragraphs to both archetypal psychology and to baroque esthetics. Archetypal psychology inspires theatre image-making through the role it gives psychoanalysis. By giving image and imagination archetypal perspectives it renews a poesis which respects its logos (image-sense). It acknowledges and enhances the traditions and the impact of image, while studying and relativizing them within both personal and cultural references.

In conjunction with the concept of analysis, I often propose the term "synthesis" in theatre. Theatre as synthetic image-making. I also place theatre, or at least my proposals in Pantheatre, within the synthetic tradition of baroque esthetics. By this I refer to the cultural attitude born in the sixteenth century out of a rift that questioned the rapport between image and reality, between language and the concrete world. Baroque emerges as a celebration of the imaginal; it plays with and against this rift. It is an art of reflections and deflections, a playing with insightful contradictions and provocative paradoxes that move psyche into metaphorical realizations. Baroque art's surface promiscuity opens up abysmal onto-logical questions, where meaning is displayed against a backdrop of beauty and death, vanity and nihilism. It is a celebration with a Plutonic background or, rather, underground.

The creation patterns and pedagogy that I expose here, from the academic ironies of boredom to the sobering rites of passage of depression, make theatre an education into complexity, into baroque oxymorons (which literally mean "to irritate our stupidity"), into *archetypal realization*. To "realize" implies a shift into metaphorical awareness. Through analytical insight, reality is seen through. Through theatrical synthesis, this insight is "realized," made imaginal reality. Theatrical realization both edifies and deconstructs our imagination. It is like the construction of a baroque puzzle, which the actor has to "solve," in the alchemical sense of "solution"—that is, to suspend in a different medium, in another density, in another realization. So it is a dissolving, a distention, a depression, a poetic mutation of our sense of time and space and of the very formation of meaning. Image retains the wholeness of its complexities, but its information and emotional impact are analyzed/synthesized, taken in, digested, thanks to a depressed solution and tempo.

A Song of Disenchantment

One of the most fervent and eloquent contemporary French philosophers on baroque esthetics, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, describes baroque's paroxysmic images as being built fundamentally in and from the body.⁸ She remarks that this is done in counterpoint to the fact that baroque imagination rises from the ruins of a "loss of (ontological) body": the sixteenth-century collapse, referred to above, of "substantialist ontologies." It was a collapse of those faiths in reality that gave body to our need for concrete foundations to existence. This is the "loss" implied in the most famous of all baroque metaphors: Calderon's "Life is a Dream," Shakespeare's "All the world is a stage." Dreams, theatre, language — the stuff of baroque edifications.

To link this sense of "loss of body" with depression, there is a Spanish word which is at the core of the baroque schism: *designing*. Its literary translation is "disenchantment." It combines a sense of undeceiving with a tinge of disbursement. It has a drop of bitterness, a flavor of anxiety, a falling out

(decadence) of innocence, a disillusioning. It carries the lucidity of disenchantment, its sobering realization that gives quality to the edifications of imagination within the Academy of Boredom or through the Portico of Depression. The baroque song is built on disenchantment. Singing—the work on the voice being fundamental to this work—contains, again, the oxymoronic synthesis of an enchantment based on disenchantment, a corporeal musical edifice built on “loss of body,” an imaginal suicide that leads to metaphorical realization.

The Festivities of Tolerance

If the Academies of Boredom and Depression, the Theatre of Hades, yield only funerary stereotypes of Plutonic melancholy, heavily draped academicians professing profundities in slow disengaged movements, we are falling into a literalist trap. If anything, baroque connotes exuberance (overabundance of fertility) and extravagance (a capacity to break boundaries). Disenchantment actually leads to *the festivities of plurality and tolerance*; it “adjourns,” to return to Kristeva’s word, and dissolves fanatic concretisms, hateful exclusions, possessive identities. Hades welcomes to his theatre *all figures of soul*, as long as the actor can detach from them in such a way that their literal identities fall into Hades’ reflexive imaginal trap. Because the God can dissolve the ontological foundation of any figure, his theatre is full of all sorts of figures who have come off their pedestals to mingle in the great baroque celebration of disenchantment.

The Wages of Imagination

A final look at the Academy of Boredom’s trapping of bored, depressed, suicidal figures reminds us that there is a price to pay for imaginal realization in theatre. That price is *total engagement*. Engagement means paying a price. It is a commitment that puts forth a wager on a gamble, the baroque gamble. The prize, or miracle as it has often been referred to, can conjure joy and meaning on the premises of such pessimism. It is acting that walks through the gate of suicide and celebrates itself as metaphor. In theatre this means the engagement of all one’s body, offering all one’s concrete physicality to fiction—activating, responding with, exposing every cell in order to realize imagination. This passionate gamble is an engagement with the highest payoff rate, built on the abysmal foundations of Plutonic lucidity. It is a celebration that achieves a mourning of reality through imaginal realization.

1. This title was inspired by an article by Stephen Simmer, “The Academy of the Dead: On Boredom, Writer’s Block, Footnotes and Deadlines,” *Spring 1981*: 89—106.

2. Rafael Lopez-Pedraza makes very relevant commentaries on the puer aeternus’s timing and tempo, and the synchronizing of emotion and ideation: “Conciencia de Fracaso” (Consciousness of Failure), in *Ansiedad Cultural* (Caracas: Ed. Psycologia Arquetipal S.R.L.).

3. François Didier, “Hercule et la Métaphore d’Objet,” in *Essais: Panthéâtre* (Malérargues: Panthéâtre, 1987).

4. James Hillman differentiates Pan’s spontaneity, which always contains emotion, from random events—in *Pan and the Nightmare* (Spring Publications, 1972).

5. A statement by James Hillman quoted in my “Dis-membering Dionysus: Image and Theatre,” *Spring 1984*: 163—79.

6. Julia Kristeva, *Soleil Noir: Dépression et Mélancolie* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1987), my translation.

7. James Hillman, “Image-Sense,” *Spring 1979*: 130-43.

8. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Folie du Voir: De l’Esthétique Baroque* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1986), my translations.

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