

TOWARDS NEW PERCEPTIONS: A PLAY IN THREE ACTS AND FIVE ACTIONS

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

Characters A (male), B (female), C (f), E (m), F (m), G (f) and O (m).

ACT 1 - BEGINNING

SCENE 1: Empire Diner



[Behind the glassless windows of a diner with live soccer TV. Unintelligible background chatter. Flickering lights from the TV set fill the room. A and E sit eye to eye on benches on two sides of a Formica table.]

E - *[With contempt.]* The football game ... Spain-Chile, I couldn't care less! *[Looking away from the TV set towards A. Indolently.]* We should start thinking about the Summer School in Genoa. *[Pause.]* How to organize the two weeks? *[Pause. Looking at A.]* Are you coming for the final jury, by the way?

A - *[Still watching the match.]* I don't know yet. *[Pause.]* For now, I'm studying the subject of Psychiatric Hospitals. *[Looking at E.]* I'd like to know more about it.

E - Well, we could divide tasks. You could do a magical and nostalgic study and look for the souls of the buildings in their past. *[Smiling.]* I could make a paranoiac-critical study and see the unseen through the association of delirious phenomena. There is so much to learn from Salvador Dalí!

[Flickering lights change into a Dalinian delirium of colors.]

A - All right. *[Studiously thinking.]* I really like this bipolar version of the architectural disorder. It reminds me of something ... *[Pause. Looks at E.]* Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas More wrote In Praise of Folly and Utopia side by side. One is the reverse of the other.

[Flickering lights change into Slo-Mo, deep brown tones.]

E - *[With contempt, low voice. Looking away from A.]* Those two were so boring, man! *[Pause. Looks at A.]* A psychiatric hospital is ultimately a specialist hotel, you know. *[Sounding admonitory.]* We should avoid too obvious associations with insanity as the main theme. I thought of Dalí because he saw shapes and stories in things that, before his vision, were neither forms nor stories. This is the paranoiac-critical method. *[Pause.]* But, to be honest, in this case I don't really like the word paranoia because it's too connected with mental asylums. *[Looking*

away from A towards the window.] Although paranoia is something different from madness, of course. [Pause. Looks intensely at A's eyes.] It's a very contemporary condition, perhaps our main condition.

A - I quite agree with you on everything, actually. *[Half-closing eyes.]* Dalí's fine. In his works, he bordered reverse utopias which then expanded into the places where he lived or simply observed. *[Eyes wide open.]* But let me remind you of something: in a psychiatric hospital everything has its origin in the act of separation. It was a device that selected people's fate at the entrance. *[Briskly.]* Have you seen Scorsese's film Shutter Island? *[Flickering lights change into a succession of white flashes.]* In that movie there is all the unequivocal contemporary paranoia you are talking about, and even a bit of Dalí.

E - Yes, I saw Shutter Island. *[Shrugging shoulders, shaking head.]* But I'm not quite sure I got it. Maybe I have to see it again...

A - *[Sounding scholarly, looking around.]* You should. It's a mental and architectural thriller. It talks about role reversal, and about the sense of space, and about the interior and exterior enigma, and Di Caprio is great. *[Looking at E.]* Did you know Brad Pitt is an architect?

[Flickering lights gradually dim into total darkness. Curtain.]

SCENE 2: Cyberpost

[Large text beamed on the waving curtain. Off-stage non-emotional, bureaucratic reading of the text. Two voices.]

A month later, by e-mail

Hi. I'm working on my lesson for Genoa. I thought I'd do a triple somersault and bring together Mercè Rodoreda, Byung-Chul Han and Salvador Dalí. The purpose is to make clear the possibility of 'seeing things where there's nothing', of thinking about our contemporary condition, and of understanding that there is hope.

How's the course going so far?

Call me when you can.

E

Here's all right, we have the students assigned and today we'll present the content of our different points of view on the topic. I'm reading "L'istituzione negata" by Franco Basaglia, the Italian psychiatrist who proposed closing all hospitals in 1978. I'd like to translate Basaglia's medical point of view into an architectural point of view: his argument revolves around the theme of power and violence and how they are reflected in the spaces we inhabit.

Bye,

A

Perfect! As for me, I want to discuss how the usual interpretation of Foucault's theories about prisons, hospitals and schools being instruments of power and architectures of violence, no longer holds true in the 21st century. This is the analysis of Byung-Chul Han, the German philosopher I'll speak about in my lecture next Monday. This way, between the two we can link the three moments of the buildings: their origin, their demise, and their resurrection. Let me know how everything goes in Genoa.

Cheers,
E

[Last text dims into total darkness.]

ACT 2 – IN THE MEANTIME

SCENE 1: Before lunch



[Generic workshop classroom. Large windows on one side only, bright light outside. High table, high stools. Some characters standing. A clock on the wall shows 11:30.]

E - *[Trying to sound encouraging. Looking around the group.]* Well, what do you think?

A - My first impression is very basic. *[Pause.]* These are huge unused complexes placed at fine locations. We have three initial conditions: size, function and site.

E - *[Looking at A.]* What puzzles me is that there have been 40-plus years of continued failed attempts at using them. It never happened! *[Pause.]* And these complexes are increasingly becoming an unsolvable paradox.

A - There are several possible reasons for this failure: *[Pause.]* persistent lack of dynamism in the region, and various public/private legal issues. It all adds up to an extremely unstable investment environment that keeps them from being transformed.

E - Yeah. *[Pause.]* But there is one important reason above all: these complexes don't exist in citizens' minds. Or, if they do, they are perceived as painful limbos to be avoided, or burnt down. *[Pause. Looking around the group.]* Do we want that? Only a change in this perception can lead towards a significant reappropriation of these facilities for the city.

B - *[Looking at E inquisitively.]* And how can we do that?

E - *[Looking at B.]* Well, better begin with a starter operation specifically addressed to that change. *[Pause. Looking around the group.]* We can use surprise, paradox, emotion to bring these great buildings under a new light, to create interest and visibility. Then incremental changes can happen after that.

G - *[Briskly.]* To begin with, we should keep the still existing original function, this time with 21st century standards. *[Looking around the group.]* And interfere it with a series of operations that work as counterintuitive instruments to force a rereading of the original buildings.

O - That sounds great! Now the best thing to do is go and discuss it over lunch!

All *[in loud voice]* – Yeah!

[Curtain.]

SCENE 2: After lunch

[Same generic workshop classroom. Dim light outside, dim artificial light inside. High table, high stools. Some characters standing. A clock on the wall shows 17:30.]

B - They are so huge, these buildings. *[Raising questioning voice, looking around the group.]* Hey, why should we build even more buildings there?

F - Hmm. *[Looking inquisitively at the group.]* Do you really think that they tried hard and good enough to transform them?

C - *[Looking at F.]* Don't know, but listen, people here really want to move forward and get back into the picture! *[Pause. Looking at the group.]* Genoa wants to regain importance, and this could be an excellent opportunity to show an avant-garde attitude towards heritage.

F - And, to be honest, who wants yet another gentrifying scheme, eh? Who? *[With vivid contempt.]* Another wellness center, really? You must be kidding, man!

G - *[Hesitatingly.]* So... this is our first mission, isn't it? *[Looking around the group.]* We help people to like this place!

C - *[Briskly.]* And we help other projects to happen!!

[Loud clapping in the hall. Lasting very long]

B - *[Excitedly.]* I got an idea!! Why don't we propose a toolbox of five actions that

are capable of starting to change things?

G - *[Briskly.]* Yes!! Let's do that!! It's so boring to do a project in August!

B - Hey! This way each of us can propose an action. Good idea!

F - Remember the crazy lesson about Byung-Chul Han and Dalí? *[Briskly.]* Perhaps we can use that paranoiac-something to create a new perception of the buildings! And ...

C - *[Interrupting.]* There was also a writer, wasn't there?

F - Yeah. And it's also a good idea to work without a program, right?

O - Right! *[Excitedly.]* Fuck the program!

[Cheering chorus joining the observation. The audience is invited to join in by beamed messages.]

C - *[Looking down. Almost hushing.]* But then Scelsi and Pizzigoni will be mad at us! *[Looking up again. Pause.]* If the program is not important, *[excitedly, looking around the group]* why don't we just use the bloody brief and work with that??

O - Yeah, guys. *[Briskly.]* Let's be strategic!

G - *[Very emotional. Raising voice.]* And please, please, let's keep the madmen, please! They deserve to see their building improve!

[Great applause and hoorays required from the audience, some loud whistling too. Curtain.]

ACT 3 – MUSICAL ENDING

[For both scenes: All characters onstage in total darkness, placed in a grid pattern at regular intervals facing the public. When each character starts talking, a light beam towards the public illuminates him/her from behind, blinding the audience. Bluish light for scene 1, yellowish for scene 2. Texts are liturgically recited.]

SCENE 1: Quarto's Transformer



C - *[At the background sound of **Make up.**]* Confronted with the dichotomy of interior/exterior, choose neither and propose a simultaneous perception of an interior as an exterior and viceversa. *[Pause.]* A selective cut through the building brings together both realities to create a new, unified complex perception.

G - *[At the background sound of **Take a walk on the wild side.**]* Eliminate any perimetral promenade around the building and enter through a new way meant as a public space. *[Pause.]* A narrow yellow brick road that is capable of reorienting relationships and give hope to the hopeless.

O - *[At the background sound of **Vicious.**]* Cycle in the clouds or swim above the entrance. Run for your life and feel disoriented in the never-ending track, either coming in or leaving without knowing exactly why, just like in real sports centers. *[Pause.]* And an homage to Dalí, the egg that brings life and holds inside a meditation room for this fatigue society.

B - *[At the background sound of **Perfect Day.**]* Show the variety of situations a simple act can produce. A perfect set of 25 spots meant either as voids or volumes that punctuate a specific area. *[Pause.]* Show the potential of adding a new layer of meaning to a building overcharged with memories.

[Lights gradually dimming to total darkness.]

SCENE 2: Cogoletto's Miles



F - *[At the background sound of **'Round midnight.**]* Recompose a lost communal order by enhancing individualities. *[Pause.]* At night a new reality emerges by laser fields that create virtual carpets at random. And connect the ensemble veritably together for the first time.

G - *[At the background sound of **Bye bye blackbird.**]* Change the access and enter through a new gate. Change the promenade and create a path in which processions and choreographies can happen. *[Pause.]* Exorcisation exercises to reappropriate Cogoletto for everybody and say bye bye to black memories.

O - *[At the background sound of **Dear Old Stockholm.**]* Or the possibility of a syndrome. Feel renewed by relaxing in this disconcerting spa where you can take showers almost in the outside and steam baths almost in the inside. *[Pause.]* A platonic cave as an homage to De Chirico. *[Pause.]* Really?

All *[Shouting. All lights beaming on characters. At the background sound of **All of you.**]* Place a grid that relates all the buildings in an unexpected way. *[Pause.]* But don't be so sure that you have solved anything. *[Pause.]* Don't believe that order alone can solve everything. *[Long pause.]* Even the grid has personality problems and can't decide between above and beneath!

[Sudden curtain.]