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Gilles Bonnet, *La Pantomime noire (1836-1896)*. Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2014. 348 pp. Acknowledgements, notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. 35 €. (cl). ISBN 978-2-7056-8884-4.

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Gilles Bonnet's *La Pantomime noire (1836-1896)* represents a logical development from his anthology of *Pantomimes fin-de-siècle*.^[1] Many of the earlier work's selection of pantomimes figure prominently in this detailed examination of the generic, theoretical, aesthetic, and, to a lesser extent, historical dimensions of the form that he calls "black pantomime" to distinguish it from the "white" version associated primarily with Jean-Gaspard Debureau, the celebrated pantomimist of the Théâtre des Funambules from the first half of the nineteenth century. This book continues in spirit the critical exploration of the allegory of the artist as acrobat or clown in the nineteenth-century literary imagination: Jean Starobinski's *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* and Louisa E. Jones's *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots*.^[2] Its more direct precursors are Robert Storey's *Pierrot: A Critical History of a Mask and Pierrots on the Stage of Desire*, and Jean de Palacio's *Pierrot fin-de-siècle, ou les métamorphoses d'un masque*.^[3] As well, Bonnet's book engages with and builds on recent work by Arnaud Rykner and Ariane Martinez, in particular, the representational dynamics of pantomime as theatrical and textual performance in the intersections of gesture/body, word, and image--graphic, photographic, cinematic--facets largely missing in those earlier studies whose focus was primarily literary.^[4] For his theoretical analysis of the Pierrot of black pantomime, Bonnet draws extensively from a variety of non-pantomime/performance-related sources, including the writings of Pascal Quignard (particularly from his *Dernier royaume* series), Roland Barthes's lecture course on the neutral as absence of meaning (*Le Neutre*), Jean-Louis Cabanès's study of negativity and the destructive component of the modern aesthetic in nineteenth-century literature (*Le Négatif*), and to a lesser degree from the philosophical essays of Maurice Blanchot (*L'Entretien infini*), and Gilles Deleuze (*Critique et clinique*).^[5]

Notably, Bonnet's expository style and the overall organization of the book reflect the influence of these authors. Although he arrives at many of the same defining concepts as Paul Bouissac and Yoram Carmeli in their studies on the semiotics of the circus (the circus ring as metacultural discourse, as defined by vertigo, fragmentation, focal chaos and indeterminate space and time, the paradox of the acrobat as both subject and other, the performance of the impossible, etc.), he steers relatively clear of the strong nineteenth-century relationship between (and often shared space of) circus and pantomime, acknowledging it sparingly and then, only in the last chapter of the book in an unavoidable characterization of the Hanlon-Lees troupe's breed of pantomime as acrobatic.^[6] This de-emphasis is understandable given Bonnet's concentration on pantomime as silent theater, on pantomime performance as defined by gesture, and on the pantomime booklet as stage direction (white pantomime) and as textual description or performance replacement (black pantomime), the latter intended for reading.

Bonnet's concentration on pantomime as theatrical performance without considering the semiotics of acrobatics and clowning makes his choice of Boutes as emblematic of black pantomime's Pierrot initially problematic. Boutes was a crewmember of the Argonaut who could not resist the call of the sirens and jumped overboard to what should have been certain death had Aphrodite not saved him. To support the

introduction's general association of the diver with black Pierrot, the book cover features a plunging diver from a reproduction of the section of the ceiling painting from one of the temples of Paestum. The inner flap, for its part, offers a poster image of the Hanlon-Lees' pantomime *Superba*, and depicts a white-faced clown mid-dive through the midriff of an unfortunate bourgeois. By means of these images, Bonnet introduces some of the dominant themes of his study: black Pierrot is suspended in an in-between non-space, captured visually, whether in flight or on paper, as a zigzag shape that, in the case of the *Superba* poster, symbolically crosses out the social codes that the bourgeois character represents, challenging both the spoken and the written word as signifiers and issuing in a state of non-sense. In a way, Bonnet's privileging of a dive over a leap, the latter epitomized by the acrobatic clown soaring ever upwards in Théodore de Banville's "Le Saut du Tremplin" (*Odes funambulesques*), serves implicitly to distinguish between the two entertainments and to clarify his objectives.[7]

This distinction is unstable, however, since soaring bodies can eventually become falling bodies, notably in the example of the Hanlon-Lees in *Le Voyage en Suisse*, whose bodies threaten to come crashing to the ground as they are thrown from a stagecoach only to end in masterful somersaults with each acrobat lined neatly along the proscenium. The Hanlon-Lees, who straddle pantomime and circus arts equally, figure prominently in Bonnet's examples of black pantomime, in particular in his description of Pierrot's space as not only lacking a center, but as being multifocal. If they are everywhere on a stage at once—and they were one of the few fin-de-siècle pantomime troupes practicing such gymnastic feats in France, and certainly the sole acrobats in Bonnet's fin-de-siècle black pantomime inventory—it is because their skill and their manipulation of social-cultural codes spring from circus play. These particular disruptive qualities, associated with circus performance, contribute equally to the perception of a dark side to fin-de-siècle pantomime. This is not to suggest that Bonnet needed to incorporate a lengthy examination of those moments involving an overlapping of the semantic registers of acrobat and pantomimist. However, the sometimes implied and otherwise occasional but largely undeveloped references to acrobats and clowns that do appear in this work seemingly minimize the fact that these two popular performance mediums attracted the attention of and were co-opted by the same writers—Romantic, Realist, Decadent—who often discussed them in interchangeable terms, sometimes in the same breath.

In chapter one, "La Pantomime blanche," Bonnet does trace briefly the common origins of the modern circus and pantomime (as distinct from that associated with the traditional commedia dell'arte interpretations under the ancien régime) through the leap. The category of pantomime practiced in the first decades of the nineteenth century, *pantomime sautante*, identifies the mediums' shared history in the acrobat's and pantomimist's signature jumps, the former belonging to the circus format's display of gymnastic agility and prowess, the latter, as Bonnet notes, to the statutory requirement that pantomimists enter the stage by any means other than on their feet. The assumption that follows logically from this legal constraint is that early nineteenth-century pantomimists were as a rule also acrobats that possessed the ability to make such physically demanding entrances. The two mediums also shared initially the same geographical space: the fairgrounds located at urban peripheries. As Bonnet observes, this literal marginalization carried over into the figurative space—first, on the stage, later, on the textual page—as well.

In this chapter, Bonnet describes the defining qualities of white pantomime and its dominant stock character Pierrot, qualities against which the following chapters will contrast the medium's evolution into black pantomime. White pantomime's Pierrot begins and ends with Deburau, as the chapter heading "Pierrot-Deburau" so clearly demonstrates. This subsection's reference to the confusion of actor and role possesses, as Bonnet explains, multiple layers. In historical terms, the ample white costume that to this day is associated with Pierrot was the creation of Deburau, and in this sense they go hand in hand. Given the limits on the length of book reviews, condensing what happens on a semiotic level cannot do justice to the complexity of the development of Bonnet's argument: Pierrot functions both as screen and as tableau.[8] As screen, the whiteness of his costume reflects back to the spectator his/her own desire(s): spatially he is present, but representationally he is absent. As tableau, inhabiting a time

other than that of the other characters, he is both now and then. Structurally, presence/absence points to the multiple carnivalesque oppositions—as described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*—that define white pantomime, among which the most characteristic are high/low (physical, aesthetic, etc.), sacred/profane, order/disorder.[9] And, as with the conclusion of carnival as disruptive festival, with the wave of the fairy’s wand, white pantomimic restores harmony.

In chapter two, “1836: la pantomime hors les murs,” the paradise restored of the *féerie* is lost. Bonnet introduces the moment that he identifies as instrumental in the shift from white to black pantomime. In 1836, street and stage intersected when a young man relentlessly insulted Deburau, spewing taunts intended for Pierrot while Deburau walked, cane in hand, down the street. Pushed to the limit with the confusion of person and character, Deburau effectively transformed Pierrot’s stage prop baton into a real cane. He brought it forcefully down upon the worker’s head, a blow from which the young man did not rebound unscathed like victims in a *féerie*. This death left its mark on Deburau, who, upon his return to the stage, “peine à s’arracher le masque pour dévoiler le comédien” (p. 108). Reality and fiction became inextricably and disturbingly linked. Cot d’Ordan’s scenario for *Marrchand d’habits* (1842) marked the entrance of death from which there was no magical recovery, the entrance of the repressed that mercilessly returns, and of inanimate bodies (mannequins, statues, etc.) and ghosts (real and figurative) that come (back) to life. The latter are so plentiful across post-1842 pantomimes that Bonnet interprets them as “une volonté de parodisation de l’étape du *renouveau*, désormais reformulé en *revenance*” (p. 120): the spectacle of rebirth associated with white pantomime’s *féerie* mutates into the “spectRaculaire” (p. 137). While one appreciates the rich trajectory Bonnet traces in analyzing the shift from white to black pantomime in chapter three, “Spectre et représentation,” it is hard to forget that this shift also reflects the gradual appropriation and sacralization of a once-popular entertainment by an elite cultural group—a small coterie of men of arts and letters—and their catering to a significantly less diverse audience. This shift from a diverse to a distinct audience equally entailed a privileging of reading over performance, the primacy of which Bonnet does address in chapter four, “Un texte spectral,” in his definition of the stage directions of the white pantomime of performance as prescriptive and the reviews, recountings, and pantomime booklets of fin-de-siècle black pantomime as descriptive.

In chapter five, “*Zig, zag...*: poétique du heurt,” Bonnet takes Tombre’s signature gesture from Jean Richepin’s *Braves gens* as a gestural/graphic emblem of the transition from white to black pantomime.[10] The former, he notes, was defined by the harmonious arabesque, a curving “S,” the latter by a deviation from narrative linearity, a dislocating “Z.” Bonnet interprets the zigzag in its double duty as gestural and graphic image as bridging, not the historical gap separating white and black pantomime, but the formal gap between stage and page (p. 257). White pantomime’s fairy whose wave of a wand returned characters and audience to a reassuring order disappears in black pantomime, in which there is no return, no rebirth, no transcendence, only non-sense. While the argument is elegant, Bonnet’s claim that disjunction and non-sense were the purview of black pantomime collides with the historical reality of censorship against narrative coherence in traditional and white pantomime that had been in effect since the eighteenth-century. A palpable possibility of insurrectional chaos often threatened the *féerie*’s movement towards a happy ending and the restoration of order.

The title of chapter six, “Paf!: en plein dans le neutre,” completes Tombre’s description of the gesture suited to modern pantomime, but is used here specifically to represent a final distinction between white and black pantomime, the former defined by carnivalesque binary oppositions, the latter by a third term, variously identified as the neutral, the void, focal disequilibrium, and the impossible, responsible for the suppression of (textual) movement toward meaning, and embodied in the frenetically repetitive motion of the performances of the Hanlon-Lees, a motion that Bonnet defines as the gestural equivalent of gibberish (p. 320). There is, indeed, a difference between the white and black pantomime: “La pantomime noire est une pantomime blanche qui tourne mal” (p. 227).

La Pantomime noire is a dense volume whose theoretical twists and turns often imitate the narrative irregularities and convolutions that the author and other scholars describe in nineteenth-century pantomime. It is designed for the specialist of both the theatrical medium and the literary genre that appropriated, refashioned, and sacralized it. Only those conversant in the history and literature of, and scholarship on, nineteenth-century pantomime will be able to follow Bonnet, and appreciate and savor his erudite and playful expository style and arguments. He makes an important contribution to circus and pantomime studies in his reformulation of black pantomime as simply referencing Pierrot's fin-de-siècle suit, to black pantomime as expressing an altogether different aesthetic.

NOTES

[1] Gilles Bonnet, ed., *Pantomimes fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2008).

[2] Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Genève: Albert Skira, 1970); Louisa E. Jones, *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots: Literature and the Popular Comic Arts in 19th-Century France* (Lexington, Kent.: French Forum, 1984).

[3] Robert Storey, *Pierrot, A Critical History of a Mask* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978) and *Pierrots on the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jean de Palacio, *Pierrot fin-de-siècle, ou les métamorphoses d'un masque* (Paris: Séguier, 1990).

[4] Arnaud Rykner, ed., *Pantomime et théâtre du corps: transparence et opacité du hors-texte* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009); Ariane Martinez, *La Pantomime, théâtre en mineur: 1880-1945* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2008).

[5] Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre: cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)* (Paris: Seuil-Imec, 2002) ; Jean-Louis Cabanès, *Le Négatif. Essai sur les représentations de la simplicité dans le discours critique au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011); Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997 [1969]); Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* (Paris: Minuit, 1993).

[6] Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Yoram Carmeli, "Performing the 'Real' and 'Impossible' in the British Traveling Circus," *Semiotica* 80.3 (1990):193-220.

[7] Théodore de Banville, *Odes funambulesques* (Alençon: Poulet-Malassis et De Broise, 1857).

[8] Arnaud Rykner first described Pierrot as a body/screen in "La Pantomime comme réponse théâtrale aux nouvelles images du XIXe siècle," in Pierre Piret, ed., *La Littérature à l'ère de la reproductibilité technique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), pp. 151-167.

[9] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).

[10] Jean Richepin, *Braves gens, roman parisien* (Paris: Dreyfous, 1886).

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