

# English version

How can cabaret save the world?

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## Introduction

How can cabaret save the world?

Save the world — save humans — from what? From their neuroses, most likely; and, in a kind of ultimate rescue, from death itself, one might say. But really, what is the problem with death?

The problem is not death in itself; the problem is our finitude — and that is an entirely individual matter.

So it is not so much about saving us, but about changing the way we look at the world (and at ourselves) through the prism of our ego.

We must therefore tackle the worm inside the apple — the apple being our consciousness, and the worm being the part of us that believes it owns everything for itself: the ego distorted by individualism.

What I believe is that art — and more precisely theatre, and even more precisely cabaret — possesses virtues that no therapy, no treatment, no medication will ever be able to replicate.

If theatre is a mirror of society, cabaret is a mirror pointed directly at the ego. This mirror shows us that the ego itself is a one-way mirror, behind which our inner self, our consciousness, is hiding.

To develop this idea of cabaret-as-mirror facing the ego, I propose that the needs cabaret responds to, in my view, are:

- **interaction**
- **astonishment**
- **expression**

And to this we must add a story of trickery, involving many mirror-neurons and cognitive mechanisms.

## Interaction

When I speak of interaction, I mean **organic interaction**, as opposed to screens and virtuality.

It would take hours to describe the interwoven effects of this organic interaction in our lives, so dense it is. Not because it is complicated to understand, but because it is omnipresent in nature — of which we are part.

Inevitably, this interaction is omnipresent in our needs as well; we cannot escape it.

This organic interaction binds us to others — first, in the relationships we have with our fellow

humans: the need for consideration, the need to belong to a social group, friendship, love, etc.

And it also binds us to nature, without limit, through the conscious or unconscious relationships we maintain with it: the passage of time, sunlight, the seasons, the weather, the plant world, water, animals, bacteria, and so on.

## Astonishment

When speaking of astonishment, I should clarify that I mean a kind of “hope for astonishment”, because I see astonishment as the engine that moves us forward. More than an engine, it is a carrot. But above all, it is a surprise.

We talk a lot about addictions linked to social media. But what lies behind them?

When we check our messages or scroll endlessly — especially when we are expecting nothing — what are we really hoping for, deep down, if not the unexpected?

We hope for a surprise, a piece of news, an update, or a message that might suddenly change the course of our existence, in the short or long term.

Ultimately, what is this if not a desire to access a new perception of the world and, in the end, of ourselves?

This example clearly illustrates our more or less conscious desire to move on, to move toward something better.

But it also reveals the insidiousness with which, nowadays and almost imperceptibly, we dress up the astonishments we seek without knowing it.

This very impulse once drove our prehistoric ancestors to explore new lands, to the point of circling the globe — without planes, without GPS, without the slightest map.

This impulse is still in our genes. It is what pushes us toward adventure and curiosity.

And if we settle for second-hand astonishment — living an adventure through a good TV series, for example, and borrowing a bit of curiosity from the characters we observe, all through the magic of our mirror neurons — it is still this impulse that drives us to open books, watch films, go to the theatre.

This impulse carries the hope of answers to the questions of our human condition — answers we expect from every film, every show, every book, and ultimately, every encounter.

## Expression

Why do we express ourselves?

To satisfy a fundamental need: the need to enter into interaction with others, because it is only through this that we learn how to exist in the world.

I say “**express**” and not “**speak**”, because speaking is only one way of expressing oneself.

And the moment we speak, we shape our thoughts. Your inner voice, when it formulates your thoughts, uses words, builds syntax — and no matter how you articulate your thoughts:

1. It will always be with words that were taught to you, words that existed before you.
2. Words are like whole numbers — fixed values that contain no nuance, whereas your consciousness is nothing but nuance.

In short, our consciousness is subjected to a thought process that is completely biased by a verbal language that is standardized and framed, a language that represses the infinite nuances our consciousness is capable of.

Our thinking is rationalized by language.

“Rational” comes from rationalis, “based on reason”; and reason comes from ratio, meaning “calculation”.

This reveals something important: language is not spontaneous at all.

We must also keep in mind that we live in a world where our identities, our personalities, are completely cemented.

Let me remind you that Western civilization is built on the idea that one becomes “someone” the moment one possesses something.

It was with the Romans — a civilization adored by billionaires — that a person became a person by owning property, power, a title, or a notable connection.

## Raw Thoughts

And on top of that, we can mention all the neurological studies that increasingly show that the feeling of being “oneself” is anything but free will in relation to our brain.

Yet raw thoughts — spontaneous thoughts that escape the rationality of language — do exist.

They might be what we call instinct, or dreams, for example.

But inevitably, they slip away from us, because our ego prefers thoughts that are rationalized by language, since our ego is shaped by this rational thinking.

If these raw thoughts escape us, how do we catch them?

Through meditation, for example — though sometimes we experience a paradoxical need to be active.

And this is where artistic expression becomes ideal.

You can express yourself with words — that becomes poetry, or fiction.

You can express yourself with music, drawing, dance, or by arranging pinecones collected in the forest.

In all cases, the goal is not to “make sense”.

It is a free expression that responds to no logistical necessity.

The problem is that with the technological progress of our civilization, logistical needs keep increasing — and as they increase, they give ever more space to rationality.

This is a vicious cycle: it feeds itself.

So what we observe is that our need to express ourselves is ultimately — and primarily — the need of the ego; a need to express itself that is limited to laying down the markers of our identity.

And these markers are material and rational.

It is a rather unfortunate form of self-fulfillment, when we know that the combinations of fulfillment are infinite (and creativity is the only way to approach the infinite).

## Ancient Cabaret

At the origins of cabaret, we know there was the café-concert in the 19th century.

But what existed before the café-concert?

Let us return to Antiquity.

Before the Romans and their ego-driven expansionism, there were the Greeks — and their theatre.

But here, there is one detail on which I disagree with historians.

That detail is this: what the Greeks were doing was **not** theatre.

It was **cabaret**.

For several simple and concrete reasons.

**First**, there was a blending of genres — music, singing, dance, acrobatics — entirely inherent to every performance.

And this blending of genres was already present at the origins of these events, which were celebrations, festivals...

1. In fact, the word comedy comes from komodos, meaning "singer in a festival".

**Second**, if we go back to the earliest sources, to the time of the thymelé (the ancestor of the stage — a stone altar dedicated to Dionysus, god of wine and theatre), the audience was active.

2. People danced and sang around this stone, and if someone felt inspired to climb onto the altar to express themselves, they did — exactly as one could climb onto the small stages of the old café-concerts.
3. **Third**, the famous catharsis. I am not questioning its effects in theatre, but the Greeks, with their cabarets, used it with far greater awareness because one essential element distinguished their practice from what we call theatre today: **they constantly played with the fourth wall** — that imaginary barrier separating stage and audience — and this wall was under the control of a true master of ceremonies: the **coryphaeus**.
4. **Fourth**, the keys to performance were satire, derision, exuberance. One could explore introspection, probe the deepest layers of the individual and the mind...but this never prevented festive trance — on the contrary, trance was a tool that prevented pathos and excessive seriousness. Masks were used; transformation was radical and unavoidable; the performer was not meant to be visible as themselves. The Greeks disliked seeing performers become stars, because the stage was not a place for ego overflow.

This last point is crucial because it has a considerable impact on the trickery we will examine later, and it also caused a misdirection that deeply affected cabaret by blurring its intentions (we will explore this misdirection in the second part).

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## Dionysus

Regarding Dionysus, god of theatre (and cabaret), there is something fundamental to know.

Dionysus means “**twice-born**”.

And by being born twice, he splits existence in two: on one side, rationality; on the other, instinct.

His father is Zeus — that is, the ego, and all the rationality it demands.

His mother is Semele — etymologically, the earth, the humus, with all the instincts tied to it.

This god therefore embodies the entire dichotomy of our way of being in the world:

between what we think we are (the self-image claimed by the ego)

and everything we are without knowing it — a hidden side, a kind of “wild self” that we repress.

And the more we repress it, the more insistent it becomes.

Chase away the natural, and it returns at a gallop.

This “natural” is nothing other than your genes.

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## What Is Theatre?

Once these elements are laid out, what remains of theatre?

Because yes, they spoke of theatre at the time — theatron, they said.

But theatron does not mean “text that is performed”.

It means “**the place from which one sees**”.

Theatre is a gathering of people who watch, who listen.

That is the theatron.

Then come the questions of what these people watch and listen to — and what the other people, the ones being watched, are doing.

This is where the trickery begins.

What we see are people who, through spoken or sung words, through music, dance, costumes, **pretend to inhabit another reality** — an enhanced, transfigured, stylized, or “tragified” reality.

A caricatured reality.

The trick is that this other reality is validated by all the people watching.

And today we know that this reality is even experienced as real, thanks to (or because of) our mirror neurons.

Now, let me twist your mind a little — here is the operating mode of this trickery:

The people watching pretend to believe that the people pretending to be in another reality are **not** pretending;

and the people pretending to be in another reality pretend to believe that the people watching are **not** pretending to pretend to believe them.

Is that not a magnificent trick?

And does this trick not resemble the global co-optation of our expansionist egos in our individualistic societies?

Everyone knows... and everyone acts as if nothing were happening.

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## Distinction Between Theatre and Cabaret

Sometimes, the people pretending to inhabit another reality act as if the people watching them are not there.

This is the effect of the famous “**fourth wall**” — and that is theatre.

In cabaret, one step is removed.

One layer of “pretending” disappears.

Because in cabaret, **there is no fourth wall**.

This missing step is crucial for the receptivity of the people watching, as well as for the people performing the “other reality”.

It is also crucial for another reason — one that again involves our mirror neurons: the possibility that I, as a spectator, might imagine myself in the place of the performer, might project myself onto them.

I will return to this in the second part, focusing on an approach that intertwines and blurs the boundaries between the person on stage and the person watching.

Because it seems essential, given what we now know from neuroscience, to consider the cognitive mechanism that arises from this projection.

What we see on a cabaret stage — whether we enjoy it or not — **fascinates**.

To fascinate comes from fascinare: “to cast a spell, to enchant”.

We must now examine the nature and purpose of this enchantment.

One can be the most extravagant creature imaginable — a being with nothing realistic about them — and still address the audience directly.

The audience is acknowledged; it is taken into account.

However fantastical the reality may be, it is ultimately assumed as a fantasy.

With this equation:

**surreal creature + direct address + validation by the audience**

suddenly, the trickery of the stage becomes clear — and consciously so.

And that is cabaret.

**Theatre is the art of pretending.**

**Cabaret is the art of claiming that one is pretending.**

If we can assert that the origins of cabaret are far older than we think, the origins of theatre lie not in history but in each individual.

The origin of theatre is at the beginning of every life: **childhood**.

When we play, when we pretend to be a fairy, Spiderman, a mother, when we pretend to cook or drive a tractor — we are doing theatre.

We reproduce the life we observe around us, through mimicry.

And by adjusting it, little by little, with our own ideas, we perform transformations.

Through these transformations, we develop not one but all the personalities we will inhabit throughout our lives — because these transformations are infinite, constantly renewing themselves.

I believe that astonishment — the “hope for astonishment” I mentioned earlier — is something we seek without knowing it, but we also have the potential to **create** it.

Not by waiting for the improbable to appear before our eyes — or in our inboxes — but by activating this prism through which we perceive the world, allowing us to witness our own transformation.

What we want is to **see ourselves becoming**.

As long as we are becoming, we are alive.

So it is the transformation within us that we must seek and provoke.

“Art” comes from artis, meaning “a way of being”.  
What does it mean to master the art of being someone?  
And what does the art of another shape within me?  
What does the other transform in me?

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## Pluridisciplinarity

Cabaret, in its most common definition, is **pluridisciplinary**:  
it is music and theatre and dance — and in truth, there is no limit to the artistic disciplines cabaret can combine.

If I insist on distinguishing theatre from cabaret, it is certainly not to banish theatre; theatre is part of cabaret.

I insist because I want to highlight something:  
if this pluridisciplinary practice goes so far back in the history of Homo sapiens, it is not by accident — **cognitively**, it makes perfect sense.

The more our senses are stimulated — and in turn stimulate different regions of our brain — the more we provoke **ecstasy**.  
Ecstasy comes from ekstasis, meaning “to be outside oneself”.

The best example is sexual orgasm — a true cerebral fireworks display:  
**90% of the brain activates at the moment of orgasm.**

With cabaret, we can flirt with that.

When we see several people performing a choreography, dance becomes a vector of sympathy toward others.  
The sight of synchronized or coordinated movement activates our **cingulate cortex**, a region of the brain involved in constructing meaning.

Suddenly, through dance, our search for meaning finds an outlet —  
a search for meaning that is not tied to what we possess to assert our identity (as we saw earlier),  
but to the need to belong to a social group,  
to the vital need for consideration —  
in short, to the need to have a place in the world.  
If these needs are met, I guarantee your search for meaning becomes far less heavy and pressing.

What our cingulate cortex perceives, when watching dance — beyond a body language that escapes rationality — is a group of people, whoever they may be, **harmonizing**, becoming one while remaining diverse.

Dance fosters altruism, provokes empathy, and encourages cooperation.

Music, too, has countless virtues.  
The mere fact that it predates spoken language says a great deal.  
It activates more regions of the brain than speech;  
it has remarkable resilience in memory;  
it helps us cope with stress;  
it generates trust and complicity;  
it plays directly with our emotions, yet also allows us to distance ourselves from them — or even to provoke them.  
And that is only scratching the surface — we could speak for hours about singing alone.

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## Completeness

When you stand on a stage, facing an audience, that audience performs a remarkable feat:  
it creates the evidence of your place in the world.

And I don't want to sound mystical, but I believe that this feeling of completeness — the one you can experience when facing an audience — almost lets us flirt with death.

In that moment, you might think:

**“You know what? I wouldn't be afraid to die right now. This feels right.”**

And then — another marvel of our mirror neurons — all the consciousnesses watching you, in that moment of bliss that frees you from the fear of death, perceive that serenity.

And that serenity can reach them in return.

With this pluridisciplinarity, we have:

- **Theatre:** telling stories, pretending, facing our consciousness which regains a bit of freedom because it escapes the ego, because we escape ourselves and the rigidity of our fixed identity.
- **Dance:** provoking otherness, cooperation; allowing the body to become legitimate in surpassing the ego and its rationality.  
It is no longer the ego speaking — it is the body.
- **Music:** the very foundation of primal mimicry, pure abstraction, freeing us once again from rationality, with a universal emotional language.

Cabaret is the greatest invention of humankind.

Because with its pluridisciplinarity, it allows us to confront the trickery of the ego, dismantle its individualism, and catch up with its expansionism.

**Cabaret is the art of trickery used to outwit the trickery of the ego.**

Let me say that again.

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## Trickery Versus Trickery

This mirror — the cabaret stage, combining the expressive modes of theatre, music, and dance — is the only tool that allows us to catch the ego's trickery, and to do so consciously.

What happens is no more complicated than what a microscope allows us to see — something invisible to the naked eye suddenly becomes clear.

The stage illuminates (under the spotlight!) the fictional dimension of our lives, and everything the ego manufactures for its own benefit — a benefit made automatic and invisible by centuries of habit, practice, and habituation.

And this illumination happens right before us, in flesh and bone, in that shared moment with the audience — an audience that validates the reality of what it witnesses.

It is Hamlet's ruse: staging, before Claudius, the very trickery Claudius himself orchestrated.

To this mechanism we add the opportunity to finally express ourselves beyond the rationality of language.

When an artist creates a painting, a sculpture, or poetry, they summon unprecedented perceptions of the mind — perceptions tested by new prisms of interpretation, new ways of making meaning, or of refusing meaning altogether (through absurdity, for example).

This expressive detour is a chance to better explore what we are beyond the rational identity.

The added value of the stage is that every creation performed there **engages interaction** — and cabaret claims this interaction in every possible way.

And what is wonderful is that, thanks to what the theatron represents, this interaction is entirely **organic**.

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## Cabaret Logistics

When we think of cabaret venues, the first image that comes to mind is chairs and tables facing the

stage.

In theatre or opera, the audience sits in aligned rows of seats; you see no faces, and the room is plunged into darkness.

In cabaret, the audience is never in darkness.

They sit around tables, from which they can see the stage while also facing other spectators. With its café-like layout, cabaret is the most ideal public space for making society.

Whether on stage or in the audience, you interact with the audience — you are part of the show.

A show that breaks the fourth wall.

You contribute to the construction of the illusion; you accept it, validate it, provoke it.

You are teased, challenged, enticed, sometimes even unsettled — only to be better caught by surprise and playfulness.

By every means, you are invited to enter the show and become one with it.

Everyone knows the fundamental need to belong to a social group — and everyone knows the pain and psychological damage caused by exclusion.

Cabaret is a social group.

And it is a social group that unites beyond all other social groups.

Cabaret is the place where the outdated and the avant-garde coexist, the tacky and the prestigious, sobriety and extravagance, truth and illusion, vulgarity and refinement, the obscure and the rational. It is also the place where all social classes coexist.

And in cabaret, this coexistence is legitimate — even harmonious.

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## Extravagance

Among the many reasons for cabaret's "inter-class" success, one has long intrigued me:

this habit of **transfiguring reality**.

But not in just any way — cabaret transfigures reality by making it sparkling, dazzling, even flamboyant.

If I had to summarize this characteristic in one word, it would be: **extravagance**.

Where does this extravagance come from?

Why extravagance rather than Brechtian distancing, operatic tragedy, or vaudevillian farce?

This extravagance is always tinged with a dose of self-mockery — a way to force perspective on oneself, to prevent us from taking ourselves too seriously.

And to avoid taking ourselves too seriously, we must be willing to make ourselves criticizable.

To do that — as caricature demands — we must exaggerate, amplify, augment ourselves, in order to better reveal the flaws of our identities.

The tools used to embody this extravagance vary:

costumes, makeup, music, dance, words that reveal our cracks while highlighting them with glamour.

In cabaret, extravagance combined with self-mockery says:

“Look how I shine, look how life seems to succeed through this grandiose version of myself...

and look how, in reality, this is not life at all — it is the stage.

And look how this is not me — it is a creature.”

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## Creature

A creature is **not** a character.

A character, on stage, is tied to a narrative — it serves a story.

A creature does not tell a story.

A creature tells **other versions of us**; it is a manifestation of our consciousness freed from the constraints of identity.

You may have created your creature from scratch, but it is still you shaping it, for yourself.

And however fabricated it may be, this creature is no more artificial than the “non-creature” you are in daily life.

The great difference is this:

your stage creature is **aware** of being a creature.

It is cabaret fully conscious of its own trickery.

This transformation is a perfectly suited tool for questioning who we are —

and it is the ideal tool for reaching toward the transformation that constantly seeks to emerge within us.

It also allows us to betray everything we manufacture in our everyday lives.

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## Extravagance Versus Supremacy

In cabaret, extravagance is heavily marked by the codes of femininity — for obvious reasons.

What we manufacture daily includes all the alienations society imposes, particularly those of **phallogentric and patriarchal supremacy** toward women and minorities.

It is easy to understand why these codes of femininity become a rich source of material for shaping creatures that, in turn, reflect these codes back to us — amplified, caricatured — to question what may not be functioning properly in our world.

Again, this transformation can occur through costume and makeup, but also through words, music, mime, or any medium one chooses.

This caricatural prism is perfectly embodied today by the drag movement — a brilliant example of self-mockery and the essential need not to take oneself too seriously.

And what does seriousness want?

Order.

Autocracies have always censored stories, because stories expose — in plain sight — the stories that justify the autocrats' power.

Order and power do not like creatures either.

Because one never knows who is hiding behind them, and because creatures expose the autocrats themselves — who are also creatures, unconscious and supremacist.

It's a bit like The Wizard of Oz.

Forbidding people to become creatures (as was the case under the system of privileges during Napoleon's rule), just as forbidding people to tell stories (censorship, ideological control, propaganda, rewriting of History, even the annihilation of imagination), is a way to control people's identities — to ensure that no one hides a stranger, an opinion, a belief that might disturb the rigidity of unconscious, supremacist creatures.

Yet it is precisely the mystery of what hides behind a creature that intrigues and excites every consciousness watching it.

It is from this mystery that we must expect astonishment.

When we hope for a surprise — a shattering surprise — that might change the course of our existence, what else could it be but a **meeting**?

A meeting that disrupts our way of being, our “art of being someone”, confronted with another art of being someone.

The creature standing before me — what will it reveal about me that I do not yet know?

This frightens some people.

Or at the very least, it unsettles them.

But what does it unsettle?

What else does it disturb but the norms and framework of my fixed identity?

What else does it disturb, ultimately, but the certainty of being what I think I am — a certainty that rests on... nothing.

It is only once this seriousness is reduced to its own ridiculousness — to its unfounded values — that we understand it is nothing but bluff, the façade of a rigid identity, and that the fear it builds around itself is just as unfounded.

This seriousness — the creature turns it into confetti.

And what cabaret offers, with its creatures and its confetti, is the exact opposite of seriousness and rigidity:

**integrity, creativity, instability, elusiveness, impulsiveness**, and ultimately all the unknown from which we expect astonishment.

This is the irrepressible force of cabaret — irrepressible because no one truly resists its aura.

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## Mutations

As with all good things, there is always a way to make profit from it.

With cabaret, at the end of the 19th century, we quickly shifted from the practices of academia — its seriousness, its inaccessible language — to the practices of capitalism.

Capitalism suddenly celebrated a new era: the era of the loud, flamboyant ego.

Be someone — and to be someone, buy things. And while you're at it, be rich.

(Capitalism loves to pretend that wealth is within everyone's reach.)

This is when the most important mutation of cabaret — and perhaps of the commercial world — occurred:

**the birth of the music hall.**

Music hall is cabaret appropriated by capitalism, using a bouquet of cabaret's best ingredients to attract ever larger crowds.

Very quickly, the focus shifted to the exhibition of women gradually undressed — an extension of the upheaval caused by something we don't talk about enough: the **French Cancan**.

I'll return to that.

Music hall does cabaret on a grander scale, on vast stages, in increasingly spacious and luxurious theatres where tables and chairs were removed in favor of rows of velvet seats — like at the opera — to welcome as many people as possible and, subtly, to suggest order and decorum.

This mutation was a radical and unprecedented turning point.

It is here that the entertainment industry and the star system were invented — and endlessly developed.

What triggered this shift?

**Business.**

When we study the history of cabaret, it becomes clear — contrary to what is sometimes said — that cabaret was never banned or outdated.

It underwent **mutations** — mutations that theatre and opera did not experience (because the entertainment industry had no interest in them; theatre and opera are not profitable).

Why is cabaret profitable?

Because it was never appropriated by the elite — who serve power — whereas theatre and opera were largely appropriated by the elite, since they were under royal patronage.

What the elite wants is exclusivity, privilege, a sophisticated language that only the initiated can understand, so they may identify with and claim access to aristocratic circles.

Unfortunately, in the commercial world, exclusivity is not very "bankable".

By not being appropriated by the elite, cabaret preserved an authenticity, generosity, accessibility, and capacity for reinvention that fueled its rise.

The mutations I mention range from café-chantant to grand music-hall revues, passing through

café-concert and artistic cabaret, eventually leading to television (less so cinema, which is a more complex branch riding the star system), and later Myspace, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc.  
All mutations of cabaret seeking one thing: **to provoke our astonishment.**

All these mutations are consequences of industrialization, capitalism, globalization — forces that encourage individualism and egocentrism.

Café-concerts were places of organic interaction.

Today, these places are algorithms.

This heritage of cabaret now sits in our pockets, in our phones.

Except it is no longer organic — and all the vital interactions mentioned earlier become completely distorted.

Cabaret, in its original form, took a hard hit by becoming an omnipresent screen.

But if we are aware of these mutations, we can understand something essential.

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## The Wrong Turn

Cabaret experienced a double rise:

→ **A rise fueled by curiosity**, because everyone talked about café-concerts — they were wild, funny, and carried the voice of the people.

→ **A rise fueled by the hope of glory**, because it became an accessible way — for anyone who dared hope — to become a star and earn money.

It is this second rise, the rise of glory, that triggered the birth of the entertainment industry.

And unsurprisingly, those who benefited most were the venue owners, the directors of theatres, TV channels, media companies — all those who profited off the backs of countless artists.

The path taken by music hall, riding the hope of glory, was a **wrong turn**.

Believing that we seek glory is being fooled by our own ego.

What we truly seek — often without knowing it — is **interaction (organic), consideration, the other**.

And glory is none of that.

This hope for glory is precisely the operating mode of capitalism (which rides the hope for astonishment) and produces a completely illusory satisfaction — I would even call it an addiction, given what happens in our brains when we observe the mechanisms of social media, doomscrolling, etc.

All of this highlights what art truly is — and what makes it salvific.

Art has never existed to create little glories.

Art allows the ego to step back.

Art allows expression.

Art allows escape from oneself.

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## Meanwhile, at the Ball

Parallel to the rise of café-concerts, another domain was thriving: the **ball** (also called guinguettes).

These balls took place outdoors or in dedicated halls, with a large open floor where people danced, accompanied by a small orchestra.

Police were everywhere to prevent eccentricities:

women dancing alone were forbidden — they were not even allowed to enter the ball alone — and only authorized dances were permitted.

In 1825, something revolutionary was invented: the **“solo cavalier”**.

A brief moment of improvisation inserted into the highly codified, aristocracy-inherited dances from

which society struggled to break free.

Of course, this solo moment was for men.

The gentleman improvised while the lady waited — yet another opportunity to be ornamental.

But then, some courageous women dared to break the rules.

Little by little, women began to use this “solo cavalier” to improvise as well.

It caused scandal.

What upset the authorities was not only that women were emancipating themselves — but that they were **expressing** themselves.

And given the movements (doing everything forbidden, in a collective, liberating exultation), it was easy to label these women as indecent and debauched.

Etymologically, extravagance means “to deviate from the path”, “to digress”.

This extravagance through dance became known as “**chahut**”, then “**cancan**”.

And of course, the cancan was banned.

Except something unexpected happened:

**it made money.**

Men — whether aristocrats or workers — went wild for it; they all rushed to see it.

And women were stunned by such freedom.

Astonishment was total.

On electrifying music, women would burst into the ballroom from every corner, running and shouting; once gathered in the center, more would appear — the audience was completely mesmerized.

And when they danced, they lifted their legs to their heads, thrust their hips, mimed masturbation, all while constantly revealing their petticoats...

In short: **the French Cancan.**

Music hall quickly seized this phenomenon — not out of feminism or love for a revolutionary dance, but to make money.

And to make even more money, revues became larger, more luxurious (and increasingly undressed) to attract wealthier audiences.

Approval from the intellectual elite no longer mattered — they no longer held power.

Power now came from commerce and fortune.

And the new bourgeoisie cared less and less about academicism — convenient, since supremacy was changing its face.

Another example of commercial appropriation, and an invention linked to cabaret: **SACEM** (ASCAP in the US), created after the 1847 lawsuit involving the café-concert Les Ambassadeurs.

Copyright already existed, but SACEM introduced a machine into the negotiations — supposedly to defend artists, but mostly because it made money.

Exactly like Amazon or Uber.

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## Tinsel and Illusion

Where grand music-hall revues deliver a masterful wink is in their embrace of **tinsel**.

Almost unknowingly, music hall celebrates tinsel — the illusion of being someone through ostentatious signs of wealth.

Luxury is nothing but ostentation.

And music hall delights in this game of dupes, this true/false ambivalence.

What is true is that it **shines** (and we cannot help looking at what shines — a cognitive glitch).

What is false is that shining does not make us more of a person in real life.

But when we shine, we attract attention (thanks to that cognitive glitch).

We then believe we are at the center of thrilling interactions.

But what does this shine say about us?

The music-hall showgirl says:

“Look, I wear aristocratic feathers and I am covered in precious stones; I parade proudly, like you — I am one of the elite...”

Except she is naked.

It is the “Naked King” of Schwartz.

But unlike that king, she knows she is naked — she revels in showing herself in her simplest form, claiming her body and her raw femininity.

Once again, this is cabaret fully conscious of its own trickery.

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## Conclusions

Throughout its history, cabaret has made its **rebellious intention** shine unmistakably.

Rebellious — yet unifying.

Exactly what power fears.

In every social crisis — the French Revolution, the Commune, wars, May '68, the rise of nationalisms, all forms of oppression — cabaret resurfaces, in its original form and intention.

Today, as the world faces a multifaceted crisis, we once again witness the resurgence of cabaret — though twenty years ago it was dismissed as outdated and dusty.

Ultimately, extravagance is nothing but the expression of awakened consciences rising against all forms of social oppression.

And what better way to escape the dictatorship of the ego and its quest for glory than to mimic, to self-mimic, to take distance from oneself, to make oneself criticizable — before an audience far more willing to question itself if we adopt this posture?

Cabaret belongs neither to the elite, nor to any power, nor to any corporation.

**Anyone can do cabaret.**

And beyond that, cabaret reminds us that art is not a practice reserved for an intellectual or commercial elite.

Art is a **cognitive process**, nestled in every brain.

Cabaret is a lung of the people — essential, unalterable, inextinguishable.

Everything it urges us to express is irrepressible.

Because it is integrity.

And that, the audience knows, is not a trick.