

## POLITICS OF THE IMAGINATION.

### A lecture by Stephen Lowe. For “The distinguished lecture series” at Leicester University. October 20<sup>th</sup>. 2004.

One thing I’ve learned from life is it’s always good to apologise at the outset, because you never know what state you’ll be in later. So, sorry if this turns out not to be quite the kind of lecture that you’re used to. It may be less polemical and more personal, less didactic and more diversive, more anecdotal than argumentative. I like to get the alliteration out of the way at the beginning. There are no major conclusions here- it’s more a monologue composed from some of the flotsam and jetsam that’s washed up on the beach from a life-time of being submerged in the sea. And the sea is the imagination.

It’s a personal statement. As I believe that art – the sublime expression of the imagination- always is, for all the talk about it attaining universal truths. For me, art does not aspire to the objective or even, most of the time, to the rational. It is by its very nature subjective, a celebration of the uniqueness of each individual maker whilst at the same time possessing the extraordinary capacity to reach out and to touch the head and heart of another- often building bridges across massive divides of age, gender, race, lands separated by seas and mountains, time-travelling across aeons of history to collide with the imaginings of unimagined witnesses. And to provoke in turn new “subjective” creations. The Latin for Priest is pontifex- the builder of bridges. For me the that word is more applicable to the artists.

And I marvel at the variations of the artistic mass, the moment of sharing. .

The Kwakiutl Indians of North West America would meet their neighbouring tribes in an ceremony, part feast, part gifting of art, part sharing of tales- which they called a *potlatch*. Their neighbours were not necessarily their best friends. Indeed, this ceremony was a dangerous, delicate meeting ground between two forces often in conflict. But they perceived it to be more dangerous if there was not this sharing, this attempt “to connect” as E.M. Forster would say. The threat of remaining locked in their own separate tribal fantasies, where they were the only humans and their gods the only acceptable divine, reinforced an image of the neighbours as the opposite “THE OTHER”– the non-humans. The dark side of life.

This vision of the potlatch –this remarkable, human meeting ground of almost infinite complexity and staggering simplicity was the reason we named our small, experimental theatre company Meeting Ground Theatre. And its principles lie at the very heart of work.

Theatre is the great communal art-form- so many people creatively involved in a multitude of ways, actors, musicians, dancers, photographers, film makers, directors, designers of set, costume, lighting, prop makers, wardrobe, poster and publicity artists... It’s an almost endless list and one of the key on stages for me as a playwright on route to make my potlatch with an audience is to inspire their imaginations, because it is the combined imaginations of us all in a united form that will finally inspire the imagination of the audience. What a thirteen century Japanese Monk, called Nichiren Daishonin, expresses as Itai doshin- many bodies with one mind.

This desire to inspire others rather than just require to paint sets by numbers or assemble a play like a car on a Ford's construction line- led me to become fascinated by the imaginative process of others, as well as my own. I've studied theatre design, directed, worked as assistant stage manager, made short films, and was an actor for some years with Alan Ayckbourn's company in Scarborough, until I realised two things about acting- the first, that if you did a full length play under the old licensing laws you could never get a drink, and the second was that in general one only played one part per night and that normally a part close to yourself, if Freddy Eynsford-Hill, and Richard Rich in *Man for All Seasons* we really close to myself- and that my imagination desired desperately to become a childless woman at the end of war, a Tibetan shaman, a young boy of mixed race wanting to set up a flea circus, a ghost of my grandfather, a multiple murderer, an old woman, the young mixed race child, the Tibetan lama or shaman, a multiple murderer- and to discover how the world is seen from their differing points of view.

I wanted desperately to be multiple. Psychiatrists can make what they want, but if you are going to be multiple, playwrighting is a great career move. You can imagine anything, no one locks you up but yourself, and sometimes you can get paid. And what am I selling?

Imagination. We sometimes talk about the imagination as though it's something that, if we just had a bit more spare time, we can all do. *Give me an extra week's holiday and I could write a novel*. If only.... Half the population of the country think they could knock off a *Coronation Street* script in a morning and still have time for a game of golf. Dream on. So the first question we face is quite simply- is the world divided into "the creative" and the "receptive"- the makers and the audience, on one side those rare individuals whose lives hover above the mundane, constantly swooping and rising through "the agony and ecstasy" and the rest of us poor souls who had least can feed off their the rich pickings?" To answer this question we have to explore what is that imagination that lies as the force behind it all. We have to go back to source. In this case mine.

My post-grad research was largely spent in the splendid reading room of the British Museum. My thesis was- Consciousness and the Artist- and focused on the relationship between magic and the artist's imagination. Well, it was 1969. It centred on the occult order of *The Golden Dawn* at the turn of the C20 and its extraordinary collection of artistic talents, which included not only the totally barking mad but legendary figures like Aleister Crowley (later unjustly judged as *The World's Most Evil Man*), the poet, W.B. Yeats, and his partner in founding the Celtic Twilight movement, the extraordinary actress, Florence Farr. And I practised ritual magic, attempting to reach the highest state of human consciousness- IPSISSIMUS. Unfortunately before I got there the grant ran out and I came crashing down to what is called reality, and forced employment as temporary assistant clerical officer at the Department of Health and Social Security. In those days, with no protective glass between the staff and their audience it was a constant show. I wrote a TV piece about it called **Fred Karno's Bloody Circus**, the title of which about summed it up. The job's only advantage to an artist was that although appalling paid for ten- twelve hour shifts you were entitled to a half day paid holiday for every 28 days worked. I saved these up and combined them with the Easter holiday, so that I had five full days and

locked myself in a room to start and finish a play from scratch. And almost immediately I had this wonderfully impossible idea, which was sparked off by a George Orwell essay on the seaside postcards of Donald McGill and realising that Orwell was talking about the very artworks from which I had learned practically every I knew about sex. Frightening but true. And I set out to write a piece where little henpecked dad, and big fat mam, and buxom blonde and her brylcreemed boyfriend were in fact played by models posing for the cards, and we'd be backstage – or actually on the beach - as they prepared for the “photo shoot”. Strangely, years later I discovered that was actually how the very early Bamforth postcards were made. The play **CARDS** was my first play to be professionally staged, then re-directed by Alan Ayckbourn and ultimately turned into a TV piece called **Kisses on the Bottom**. But my point here is that, in this rare five days totally dedicated to my imagination, this delightful idea leaped out, and it just flowed until... It stopped. Like running into a brick wall. I couldn't see where the ending was and I panicked.. And I realised that whilst I was intellectually forcing the piece to some unknown solution, I could no longer see it, the life had gone, the characters had become more static than the post cards themselves. They wouldn't improvise for me, they refused to play. They were packing up to go home. I could not animate the piece- and the word of course from the Latin for “to give breath to” “to inspire”. Dead in the water, or rather on the beach at Skeggie. I was furious, panic stricken, and then two things occurred that radically changed my life. Two simple sets of images.

I was trying the classic *bang your head against the wall for inspiration* technique. Willing a simple scene, two characters, to come alive. And then there was a completely different image, unexpected, initially undesired. I suddenly saw my own backstage. It was a small empty room and inside it was a child, a young boy . I recognised him and I knew that only a few hours before he was as high as a kite having come up with this wonderful open-ended crazy vision of a play but now.... Now there was a shadow in the room, and the shadow was holding a gun to his head, and yelling PLAY PLAY PLAY. And I've been haunted ever since, not so much by the child, who I think of almost daily, but who is this in me that can hold a gun to his head?

I will return to that question later.

That night, having “given up”, totally exhausted, depressed, and curiously ashamed, I went to sleep with all my fantasies of being a writer falling around me like autumn leaves in a sudden storm. And I dreamt. It was a simple dream. Banal in content. Rich in provocation. I was outside a door to a party. I didn't know whose. My nightmare is entering rooms where I don't know most of the people inside- *you can perhaps guess how I feel tonight-* but I entered, and nobody took any notice of me I simply passed slowly across the crowded room, weaving my way through the people. A few minutes, that's all. And I awoke sweating. I could recall it all- it was fully animated. There were no gaps. Everyone I passed was fully dressed in their own particular fashion (without my making any decisions about it or indeed about them) , the fragments of conversations I heard in different dialects and tones were all utterly convincing, there were no blanks, the room and all its contents were fully realised- I didn't have to search in my memory to select for a possible sideboard, or coffee table, rejecting this one, going for that- all was totally consistent, totally complete, totally alive.

I was furious. I was being mocked by my own imagination. Far from being the supreme occult artist possessed by the rare touch of the divine, I came thumping back to earth but to a different one. Here nightly all of us, whether we recall or not, have this extraordinary capacity to image with apparent freedom, without thought, intent or effort. All of us inside have infinite resources of the imagination. But to bring them into the light, to combine with our waking consciousness, to go beyond surrealism or fantasy, is a challenge to us all. This is the meeting ground, the potlatch of creativity.

So this weekend, with the financial patronage of the D.H.S.S., really centred the questions for the rest of my life. Who holds the gun that steals the child from play, what is this control we feel a need to enforce, do we fear of the child, how do we build a bridge within ourselves between the conscious and unconscious, and how, in a wider sense, do we celebrate and support this individual, innate possibility within us all?

But is this imagination that I speak of really ours?

In the mid-nineties, I was in Bulgaria, in Sofia, trying to set up a co-production with the BBC and Bulgarian film-directors. I have met many of them a few years earlier, when travelling with my old friend, Professor Malcolm Griffith. Then it was just after the fall of their tyrant, Zhivkov and the death of his insane daughter, Ludmilla, whose particular passion was “culture” had wiped out almost everything that may genuine claim to that word. For the first time, the artists were breathing freedom, they were enervated by what to imagine now the gun had been taken from their head. On my final visit, playtime was over- another gun had been placed at their head- that of economic necessity inflicted by the carpet-baggers of the West. Their studios in the mountains outside Sofia had been bought and taken over by Western entrepreneurs. They were allowed to play again, making pornography, starring their partners, their sons and daughters.

I’m reminded of a sixties song by Donovan - *freedom’s a word I rarely use without thinking...* And thinking about those artists, I realise that whilst the outsize “forms” may change, the artistic struggle – to find one’s own truth, romantic as that may sound- is still the great challenge. But is that all I’m saying- just restating the old romantic notion of the purity of Byron’s Childe Harold –that all inspiration and creation is good, life-enhancing, transforming, revolutionary even.

Well, not quite. There’s a major caveat- that the Bulgarians artists were well aware of. Our imagination is totally a product of the world we live in and as it may influence that world, it in turn is also influenced. Perhaps somewhere in the farthest highlands of our soul there is a clear mountain stream but in track of it like the salmon heading home we have to struggle through polluted waters first. We, ourselves, have to make the rivers and sea safe to swim in. Then perhaps its purity may be rediscovered and re-affirmed.

So let us return again to the gun at the head- to with what the south American theatre director Augusto Boal calls “the cops in the head”, and I call the “guardians of the gate.”

I want to talk for a moment about the Fascism of the imagination.

Goering is attributed with saying- *When I hear anyone speak of culture, I reach for my gun.*

But paradoxically tyrants can be said to love art. Or at the very least, they certainly value it more highly than most of us woolly liberals do who tend to put it way down on the political agenda, somewhere behind free access to Zimmer frames and portable bidets and , in a good year, a little head of sewage and waste disposal. But to misquote T.S.Eliot, "*The Tyrants come and go, talking of Michelangelo*". When the military junta seized power in Greece in the seventies, on day 1, they closed the theatres- not just the contemporary venues but the ones most Greeks thought were there just for the tourists- the amphitheatres performing the great classic canon. When Stalin began his own purge (or as he believed purification) of the imagination, he killed not just obvious critical artists like Mayakovsky but just as significantly nature poets, like Mandelstam who died in the Gulag in 1938. Half of Hitler's top ten hit list when he came to power were artists including a woman mainly known for turning a chair round the wrong way, sitting on it in her underwear, and singing with a top hat on. Madame Mao so understood the power of theatre that she totally obliterated it, to replace it with six operas of her own creation. And here we see their deep understanding. They were wise enough to perceive that perhaps the imagination could never be fully eradicated, but that it could be controlled, it could be turned to their ends. The central thesis of course of Orwell's **1984**. In 1934, Stalin, at the height of the purges, set out his own aesthetic- the only "accepted" forms of art were those that complied with his doctrine of "Soviet socialist realism", a misnomer as it was neither socialist nor realistic. Anything else was decadent. To this day, whenever I see a tractor I still catch a fleeing image of that beautiful young couple, smiling their way as they drive on into the promised utopia of fields of beetroot and barley. In the late twenties and early thirties, world cinema was largely led by the extraordinary imaginings of Berlin film makers like Von Stroheim, and Fritz Lang. Not quite to Hitler's taste, but he didn't close the cinemas. He replaced them with work based on his own aesthetic. The clearest example of what that is is **Der Jud**, a film so nauseating that all of us, I'm afraid, should see it to understand the dark depths of the fascism of the imagination. It is a call for genocide. It is a snuff movie. Not all we imagine is good.

In Spain in the thirties, Franco's friends were quick to take a young, passionate gay poet into a field of olives and blow his brains away. And as equally quick to champion the construction of the demented fantasies of an apocalyptic architect. I was recently in Barcelona and watched the tourists scramble from their buses to take photos of Gaudi's nightmare cathedral. Compared to the Cathedral of Sagrada Familia, Bosch's vision of Hell looks like a Saga Holiday. Now it's largely viewed as some monument misplaced from Disneyland . We can see it that way largely because the context of its aspiration has been taken away- the back up is no longer omnipresent. And what was that back-up? Gaudi's belief and membership of an ultra-conservative Catholic sect- Sant Lluc- set on world domination, and centred on personal redemption by scourging and flagellation. But whilst we speak that, for the moment, its context may have been taken away, perhaps it's just been moved. Mel Gibson's father is a member of the same cult and Gibson himself, in interviews on his sado/masochist PASSION OF CHRIST has stated similar views. And it's also worthy

of note that that Gaudi has just passed with flying colours round one on the process of beatification.

We may marvel at the apparent madness of Stalin in having his thought police track down flower poets and idle dreamers? What challenge to his system can such poets be? How can such stanzas on stamens and pollen threaten the very bedrock of his state? And yet Stalin instinctively understood that they did- they spoke to individuality, to the private experience beyond social engineering, to metaphor and metaphysics that lead to transgression of the mind, to take it wandering down country lanes and forgotten paths and not along the main motorway amidst the tanks and tractors. They speak to the delights of diversity.

The fascism of imagination, the totalitarian aspect, is essentially mono-, mono-theistic and mono-simplistic, mono-maniac. It stands against the celebration of diversity. There can be only one way and one ideology, one ultimate and sacrosanct means of seeing the world. This of course when allied with power- the gun- leads to a secure philosophical support of censorship. It argues that everything it strives to do is to prevent "*the contamination of the people's imagination*". It operates out of Goebbels Ministry of Propaganda, Mao's Cultural Revolution, Orwell's Ministry of Truth, the pyres of the Inquisition and the Witch-finder General, as well as Madison Avenue, Wall Street, the White House, or out of the mouths of babes and spin-doctors in our own fair land. But at its ultimate it works effortlessly without the need of these external guards to flaunt their muscle. It has, after endless repetition and underlining, become internalised, so fixed into our mode of perception that it remains an unchallenged "truth", so embedded is it that we can't even see how our imagination is controlled by it. And it flowers in every back alley and every street corner. It rages behind lace curtains and window boxes. It poisons life as well. And it will bring forth strange fruit.

Some years ago, my wife, the actress Tanya Myers and I as the artistic directors of Meeting Ground theatre decided to explore the most contaminated, most unimaginable love story-the journey of two young working-class, bright, good-looking, English lovers who would end up systematically killing one child after another. Myra Hindley and Ian Brady. The Moors Murderers. The play was called **DEMON LOVERS**. The **politics of the imagination** operates at all levels in our company's work, including the actual technique of acting itself. We are not content with simply "imagining" the characters, but work to literally "imagine what they imagine" - to see with their eyes, to live in and move around under what we call "*their ceiling of consciousness*". This is a painful route but its aim is to bring the nightmare into the light of day.

Some of you may recall, that the police discovered a tape of Christmas songs and sounds that they had constructed, and played in all apparent innocence, to their friends and relatives. It was in effect a kind of "radio play" intended to make fools of all the listeners, and thrilled the makers with its conceit and deceit as hidden within it was the terrible fact that it was a live recording of the murder of a young boy. They were making their own art for an audience of two. Themselves.

Some time later, the writer Colin Wilson contacted me. He was in communication with Brady and it transpired that at practically every performance of our show a

woman had been present who had secretly transcribed the piece and had sent it to Brady. She believed (“imagined”) that she was Brady’s illegitimate daughter, and he certainly fed her fantasy as he had fed and cultivated those of Myra herself. Brady wanted direct communication with me and we passed letters- discussing Raskolnikov- his favourite book was Crime and Punishment, and his favourite film not surprisingly- The Third Man- and my theory that he had been creating his own private theatre of terror, that they were killing in order to produce their nightmare shows, to shock the world with their carefully composed horror. The murders were made for the media. And the audience had a gun to their own head, they had no choice whether to watch or not. This has echoes daily in the news. He didn’t disagree. They were redeemed from their own personal sense of inferiority to a superior significance knowing they were the only ones who could read and understand the real *Ur-text* of their work as Peter Brook would say. They were empowered almost to the level of *Ipsissimus* by their knowledge. I won’t go on about this remarkable correspondence, but to draw some simple observations from it on the fascist imagination.

First, it’s as the above shows, selective of its audience. It defines quite simply those to whom it speaks, and those to whom it threatens. It is an imagination not of bridge-building but of division, of increasing dualities, attempting to repress what it defines as the “unacceptable” imagination, the imagination of the question, of uncertainty as opposed to the rigidity of static and statist art. And ultimately it descends at breakneck speed into the most terrifying of all dualities- **the duality of human v. non-human**, the dehumanisation and subsequent demonisation, of large sectors of the human race- The only true antidote to this is the constant reassertion and struggle to release **the humanistic imagination** from its confines. This is not an item some way down on the agenda. It is a question so central it permeates every other issue on the list. The world is made by our imaginings, and as paradoxical as it might seem, we must learn therefore learn to IMAGINE EVERYTHING including the UNIMAGINABLE. Every time we turn away from an image of horror, and put up the barriers across the bridge that have sprayed on them the words - FORBIDDEN, DO NOT ENTER, EVIL, INHUMAN, DO NOT RISK UNDERSTANDING, DESTROY- we ourselves are preparing the ground to become the same. It is imperative upon us not to censor but to face reaching from our humanity into the terrible inhumanity of others in order to see the stepping stones, the wrong turns, the bad signs along the way. It is important not to ban Das Kapital, everyone should read it, not to knock down Gaudi’s monstrosity, pile in your buses and go take your snaps, and have faith in our understanding and imaginative compassion not to forgive necessarily, but also not to forget. Art is not a retreat from the world, the world is art whether we like it or not. We create it. And destroy. **Compassion** and **empathy** are the key bridges to building peace, and they can only exist in the development of what I call **the humanistic imagination**. They are humanity’s highest attributes. And lead us ultimately to the revelation of “**the wonder of being human**”.

Even after seeing the recent exhibition of El Greco’s inquisitional nightmares I’m still touched by the wonder that a man can face such darkness and communicate the warnings. That he still has the need to communicate, to search for dialogue with himself, and beyond to people he cannot know, nor even be sure exist, or ever will exist seems to me a wondrous gesture. Such communication from even the darkest hell (as Primo Levi’s writing illustrates) paradoxically expresses an optimism in art and ultimately in humanity itself. It’s a profound belief that one true voice can change

the world. But how do we go in pursuit of this. How do we move towards a humanistic imagination against an apparent barrage of distortion?

It may seem that we don't have much to resist these images that are bombarded at us from all sides- we can't all do a Thoreau and head for the hills- but we can, following the old seventies strap line for social change the personal is political all work to understand how our imagination is affected, perhaps even poisoned, and we might then find clues on how to break free, to discover other kinds of images, narratives, visions that are not submissive or manipulated, but are personally transformative, for us as individuals and potentially for society as a whole. As Mahatma Gandhi said- You must first become yourself the world you desire.

This seems to me a fundamental, humanistic, and democratic question. And something that should be at the centre of all our lives. Some might say it already is. There's endless, lectures, papers, articles on creativity, the social/ political/economic arguments for art, the questions of culture, cultural diversity, and as Chair of ACE East Midlands I'm involved in some of these debates. In terms of "process" itself, there's a burgeoning of workshops in "creative writing/ creative painting/ creating crochet" many of them in delightful settings from the Yorkshire Dales to Greek islands, and some of those I've taught on. Post-grad courses in writing for television/ writing for film/ writing for the theatre/ radio/ the novel/ poetry/ and there's probably one on how to write haikus for e-mails. I'm not mocking any of those again because some I helped to set up. They are to various degrees empowering depending on how much they are working to stop the "tail wagging the dog"- the dog being the individual artist's search to find their own bark, the tail being the system's own need to satisfy its own financial and other imperatives.

But what seems however to be missing is a centre that tries to pull together both philosophically and practically all the differing insights of practitioners, artists, scientists, madmen and magicians, in a non partisan investigation of the imagination. In the sixties, when I was at university Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall set up the Centre for Contemporary Studies and it had, I believe, enormous impact. Certainly on me at least. Perhaps a Centre for the Contemporary Imagination is called for.

In its absence I'd like to share a few practical ways to see perhaps something of which I'm speaking, to explore the imagination, and catch sight of sight itself. There are endless books and courses on exercises to develop your imagination. What I'm concerned with are exercises that reveal the state of the imagination itself. I've drawn them for some unlikely sources. Few of the techniques are directly from accepted practitioners of the arts. The richest source has been the esoteric- hypnotherapy, magic, I worked as a controller for a deep trance medium for a few years, and others areas that now have now acquired a semi-respectable standing like- guided image workshops ( which is really just astral projection under a more fashionable name) .

I once attended a guided image event at Dartington Hall in Devon (and anyone who knows Dartington won't be surprised to hear that). A London professor was exploring alpha/beta waves and putting people through a simple astral guided image process. I can't do it now but basically you lie down, imagine floating through the air, through a "cloud of unknowing" and then you are guided verbally down to earth, and asked to look at your feet and most people are surprised as to what they see- they're wearing

medieval socks, or Wellington boots or Jesus sandals, and then gradually they're led to describe the world they see around them- castles, ruins, forests, whatever. This was a technique of Doctor Arthur Guirdham's, who saw this as proof of previous lives, the curious fact being as he wrote in his book *The Cathars and Reincarnation* that practically everybody seemed to have been an Albigensian heretic and burnt at the stake. One young woman in our group went up came down, and when The Prof. asked to look at her feet there was this silence then – *they're webbed*, and the extraordinary moment of realisation where she went – *I'm a duck*. He tried to carry on, clearly losing his grip, and *what do you see? Do you see any other ducks?* And she said- *I can't, don't want to speak I want to quack quack quack*. he brought her back really fast and I thought rather sadly because not only had he managed to prove reincarnation but also Pythagoras' transmigration of souls. Seriously, the actual interplay between the two imaginations of guide and explorer in such activities are worthy of an hour's lecture in themselves.

Another key area of study is to look at those obsessed by the threat of the imagination and the need to control it. Religion works are absolutely key. The heretics are of course fascinating, and, leaving aside Crowley and Yeats, the magical diary of the séances held by John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's 1st astrologer and his medium, Edward Kelly, are riveting, and if you want the shortened version of their journey you could visit my web-site and read my play about it **Alchemical Wedding** - [www.Stephenlowe](http://www.stephenlowe.com)- all one word.

Indeed, medieval Christianity is a wonderful mine of such writings, and probably the most illuminating manuscript is **Meditations** by the founder of the Jesuit school, Saint Ignatius Loyola. Seminal reading. His desperate desire to save his followers from sexual fantasies, and dreams of depravity in all its forms, produces one of the finest studies on how the imagination works, and what "imaginative techniques" can be employed to control it. Freud's writings, of course from a similar fear of the throbbing repressed imagination, are also useful. Of course you have to stand them on their head to make any real sense of them which leads me to what I call –

### DRACON WORKSHOPS.

Dracons, by their nature, are "INVERSION" workshops.

The word dragon derives from the Greek *dracon*. Imagine a dragon. Most of us in our culture see the dragon as the enemy, spitting fire, and some knight in shining armour or Harry Potter is slaying it. It sits on the pot of gold, or blocking the door to the castle where the damsel is imprisoned. In some way, it is hiding the truth, the grail, and only by its destruction can this be attained. Curiously the derivation of *dracon* implies exactly the opposite. It's from the Greek for – *to see, look at, show*- and in fact, in pre-Christian and oriental philosophy, the dragon is seen as the ally who will lead the searcher to a true realisation, to a higher consciousness. . (This has begun to seep through at last in western story tales for example in Ursula Le Guin's Farthest Shore trilogy) .

So *dracon* workshops take images that we are all familiar with and turn them over to see if there's perhaps another meaning hidden beneath. And along the way we discover how difficult this is to do. It is an attempt to *imagine the unimaginable*, to

see how we are really still controlled by images that we might well believe we are essentially free off. I'll give one simple example.

I was leading a Dracon workshop at Riverside Studios for about forty people, of all ages, races and backgrounds, some involved in the arts, and a large number not. In terms of religion very few of them acknowledged any strong feeling towards Christianity, and indeed there were a number who claimed it had no influence on their lives at all. But all lived in the Western World. A key rule of a Dracon workshop is no-one needs explain or communicate what they see during it. It's simply a meeting between you and your imagination. All you have to do is sit quietly for a few minutes, with your eyes closed for a few minutes. Nothing easier. I would simply offer them a verbal image to explore *if they wished to*.

The first image actually is the Dragon, turning it from foe to friend, but the second is-

**The Virgin Mary and Child.** It's perhaps the most iconic image of all time, running neck and neck probably with the crucifixion. For two thousand years artists had portrayed endless versions of this relationship It's practically impossible to live in the western world, and not have an image of the Virgin Mary with child.

I asked them to visual their own. Perhaps they did it as an act of creative memory recreating Raphael's Madonna Of The Pinks, or pieced a picture together from their recollections of the school nativity play. I don't ask at this point. Nor do I ask what feelings are evoked by this image.

But after five minutes most of them seemed well pleased. All had discovered that behind close eyes, guided in choice, and with references to call upon, they could do it. Within the confines of a certain cultural ethos their imagination could be triggered into play.

I asked them to do the same for another five minutes but this time I suggested for them to image something that we all and agreement occurred within this story. I simply wanted them I asked them to track back the image of Madonna and child from the braying donkey and smiling sheep to a few hours earlier. To imagine Mary in that simple, and essential, human act of giving birth. Easy.

Within minutes people were slamming doors on their way out, others groaning, as they twisted in contemplation. The remainder majority had struggled with massive resistance to imagine what...? Why was it so difficult? When asked if they believed in Mary as a Virgin Mother hardly any did. And clearly if Mary the mother of Jesus did exist then she gave birth the way all women do? And this act would have been normal, beautiful, life affirming. But apparently so guarded is the image of the Virgin Mary that this attempt produced in even non-believers symptoms of sinfulness, and of salacious sacrilege. It was, and they experienced the pain of it, a struggle towards a truly **iconoclastic** image. In order to arrive at it, other images had to be shattered, and the seer had to be prepared to walk on their broken shards to discover the next.

The shock of the New. Beyond this point, where having established the dualities, the inversions, the mirror images, the thesis and antithesis, that we are then led into

another dimension-into the discovery of the imaginative synthesis and you must have to sign up for a workshop if you want to know how to do that.

What I want to stress is that the starting point for **THE HUMANISTIC IMAGINATION** is exactly where you are , and how willing you are to uncover how your imagination is controlled, and to search out ways to break through to your own deeper imagination- one that's perhaps less contaminated, and more genuinely *animated*. Like my dream.

And here's a lightning exercise to map out the landscape of the humanistic imagination. This is something you can try at home. And you need a dragon for a friend- because this is the way to discover one's one, truly individual, hidden treasures. To become one to one with IMAGE. I, MAGE. I, the magician of my own being. Image is power. I mage- is self empowerment. We have all this unique capacity. We've simply forgotten not just the content of our dreams, but the significance of the act of dreaming itself. In order to understand that, you need to become a member of the **PINK ELEPHANT CLUB**. And I'm afraid that, whilst it's technically open to everyone, it's still necessary to pass a little exam, which can take you either fifteen minutes or a lifetime.

I'm not asking you to do this now, but here's the rules. Try it when you go home. Three stages-

**Stage 1.** Eyes closed, . Imagine a pink elephant for five minutes. There's no catch, not a dracon workshop, it won't necessarily suddenly jump all over you. It's for you to see how initially your imagination, under my "guidance" operates. Do you put it together in bits, big ears here, couple of ivory tusks, it is black and white to start with, do you have to paint it, is it a pink cartoon elephant out of Dumbo, does it make it a sound, does it smell? Five minutes, play and explore. Discover your palate.

You're in the world of the commercial artist. My elephant tail is wagging the mammoth. But you've accepted willingly, so there can still be play, although the parameters are strictly controlled.

**Stage 2.** Take a few moments. What's flowing through your head? Select an image for yourself –it's apparently of your own choice selected from that tumultuous stream of consciousness that's endlessly throwing up its own flotsam and jetsam inside you- just pick one, a personal favourite, and now refuse all the others. Beach the image, dry it out, bring it to life, animate it. Does it change? Does it surprise? Does it rise up and lead you somewhere else?

Ninety per cent of artists, ninety per cent of the time work on the edge of this river. How much it's really free choice is another question, and we would have to look at the nature of the specific image to tell that. But no matter how good you get here, membership of the Pink Elephant Club resides in the third and final stage.

**Stage 3.** This is something I've adapted from Tolstoy- he claimed that his club had a membership of only one who had ever succeeded in achieving the necessary qualification. Now it's my ambition and dream that you should all join. This is the final test.

I want you to imagine a circus ring. An empty space. You're waiting for the great act. You're a child, you don't know what is, but in the immortal words of Stephen Sondheim, *something's coming I don't know what it is, but it's going to be great, the air is humming...* Empty the space. Make no decisions. Don't control it. You are audience not creator. Do what Stanislavski says is the only thing the artist can actually decide to do simply- to clear the space. As images appear, say no, leave the ring, you're not the finale. And keep that space totally empty for ten minutes, and then you can ask for you Pink Elephant badge.

Oh, but there's one other condition- and this you must remember- Imagine **NOTHING And especially not the PINK ELEPHANT**.

Now I'm not going to tell you what happens, but it's an exercise with variations that I've done and encouraged other to do over the years, and it's results still take me by surprise. And if we, as the creators are not surprised by own creation, indeed if we, like Cocteau, are not *étonné* astonished by our own imaginings then how can we expect it bring others into the shock of the "wonder of life". But one thing I will tell you as encouragement, the pink elephant will keep trying to sneak back, a bum on the left hand side of the frame, its trunk creeping in like a snake, just say no, and suddenly, and most unexpectedly, there will be" animation" – your imagination will become alive and you will follow into life with the thrill of it.

**A final coda.** Few last words. I want to return to play. The little boy in the room. To offer the child a toy instead of a gun.

In 1938, The Dutch historian , J. R. Huizinga, a world authority on the medieval period, foresaw the imminent advance of Hitler's fascism into his homeland. In the face of it, he wrote an extraordinary work trying to define what was the most aspirational and wonderful aspect of humanity, which he believed to be the specific target not only of fascism and totalitarianism. His subject was "play"- the voluntary participation, into structured forms of the imagination from those of the playground to those of the playhouse, to the rituals of draughts and chess, to medieval tournaments and poetry. Play. Huizinga was searching desperately for the basic DNA code of what play might truly consist of as the darkness came nearer- what made the distinction between the art of life and that of the imposed Nuremberg fascism of the imagination. He was trying to celebrate before it might be swept totally away. His aim was to remind us of how this very quintessential act marks out our extraordinary human potential, that lies beyond the torment of the dualities that have been created to divide and oppress us. His book is called **Homo Ludens**. Man as player.

I agree with him, I believe we should move beyond seeing ourselves simply as homo sapiens to *imagining* ourselves as beings who possess not only the power of knowledge but the deep power of the heart- that we enter into a life of creative play. That we understand there's no play with a gun to your head. The battle between Heaven and Hell, War and Peace is no longer won on the playing fields of Eton, if indeed they ever were, but on the playing fields of the minds and hearts of each and everyone of us. Thank you.

The end.