

Obama's Downcast Eyes

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The French poet Baudelaire spoke of "the grandiloquent truth of gestures on life's great occasions."

Last night's first presidential debate marked a great occasion in American political life. But President Obama's gestures were not eloquent, and because of this theatrical failure he couldn't get a handle on political truth.

Presidential debates are plays within a play. Campaigns are dramas, not fact finding missions, and debates are theatrical episodes, not academic tests. Everybody knows the televised debates are artificial, scripted, rehearsed, and choreographed. Rhetorical, not deliberative, more professional wrestling than political argument.

Yet the fifty million Americans who tune into these feigned encounters willingly suspend their disbelief. They are looking for a different, less rational kind of truth. By drama's end they will find it -- a feeling truth that depends on identification, character, drama, and catharsis. Truth in an aesthetic sense, a matter of performance, not about who is right.

In last night's drama, the president reprised a role that, two years ago, nearly destroyed his Presidency. He played The Last Rational Man, the policy wonk, the distanced professor. He worried over proper explanations. He spoke about numbers not adding up, about math and arithmetic.

Romney's numbers did not add up. The born again conservative blithely slipped off Republican tax policy -- which would balloon the deficit and slash entitlements -- like an old suit that had become too tight: That's not my plan. I won't raise the deficit by 5 trillion dollars. I won't cut taxes for the rich. I won't reduce Medicare. I won't stop 26 year olds from being ensured or cut off people with pre-existing conditions.

Bold lies! The Last Rational Man seemed taken aback. He tried explaining and reasoning, so the American people could see the Republican's numbers just didn't add up. "For eighteen months he's been talking about his tax cutting plan, now, five weeks before the election, he says never mind." Soon, it was back to the numbers. "It's a matter of arithmetic." He kept asking Americans to do the math.

The president should have told stories, to illustrate with narratives not explain with facts. Romney did exactly that. When the exasperated president insisted on the size of Republican tax cuts and deficits, the Governor replied: "I've got five boys, I'm used to people saying what isn't true!" Figuratively, he became the father, and Obama the wishful, wistful, and wayward prodigal son.

Jeffrey Alexander, Huffington Post Blog

There was more to Obama's dramaturgical failure than bad lines and an out-of-date script. Political performances are also about eyes and energy, about looking and being looked at, about seeming eager and interested and caring.

Romney-character was animated, clearly relishing this fight. He was pink and cheerful and almost chirpy. Brimming with confidence, he could barely contain himself. His eyes were wide and open; he displayed a passionate mane.

Obama-character kept his eyes downcast. He seemed sad and passive, smiling wryly as if to admit he was weathering painful blows. When he looked up, his answers were often agonizingly slow. He searched for words and they didn't come easily.

When President Obama did find his voice, he spoke quietly of "balance" and "responsibility." Governor Romney, eyes wide open and energized by a fire within, spoke fervently of apocalypse and salvation. He concluded with soaring rhetoric about the "two different paths for our future as a nation." Obama ended by gesturing to the same old, same old, the dreary past, not a bright shining future.

The president kicked off the public debate with a private message to his "Sweetie" on the evening of their 20th anniversary. "There are a lot of points I want to make tonight, but the most important one is that 20 years ago I became the luckiest man on Earth." Ninety minutes later, it seemed painfully clear that the Barack Obama would have preferred to be out on a date. Mitt Romney was the happy warrior last night.