

Idiot Like Me

The Dialectic of Pie in the Face

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Clown school, summer 2007. I'm doing an improv exercise, still soaked from the spit takes and bucket sloshes we practiced in the last class. The teacher catches me struggling for a witty response and hollers "Stop!"

"You're thinking too hard." He looks straight into my eyes: this guy's been a clown for so long that he needs just a facial twitch to remind me of the only imperative. Play. A noun and a verb—just like "clown."

"Have the courage to be dumb." He melts into the character he played for years with a collective circus on the West Coast: joyful, idiotic curiosity and belief. Snapping back to adult eyes and spreading his open palms wide, he goes on: "There's too much gravitas in the world—it keeps us from being generous with each other."

There's a giddiness that overcomes me when I encounter the completely ridiculous. It happens when I am the target of a friendly prank, or a magic trick or punchline takes me by complete surprise, or someone gets on the bus wearing a mouse costume. First comes a halt in known reality, a moment of suspension in which I've gone off the cliff of common sense but my brain keeps churning like Wile E. Coyote's legs in midair. Then, as the impossibility of explanation hits me, I plunge: my mind freefalls in disorientation and delight. The sudden instability of consensual reality, the discovery of this world's slipperiness, tickles a spot in the back of my head, spreads through my body, and I am lost in the silly ecstasy of this hole punched into common sense.

I get just as big a thrill from inducing this feeling in other people. When I hear a surprised, happy laugh, from a friend, a stranger, or an audience, I feel a shared excitement: we've mutually acknowledged that reality is contestable, and that that is not necessarily a frightening thing (notice how much easier it is to laugh in company than alone: hence the canned laughter on television). We have together entered and delighted in the secret corner of everyone's brain where everything is open, and nothing is predictable.

This state of being, however temporary, is clown, and everyone has it in them somewhere, whether or not they willingly access it, and whether or not they are performers. As a human being, each one of us knows nothing for certain, except that we will die. Yet each one of us (if we are independent, functioning adults) must carry on living as if we knew something. If we can be comfortable with our own stupidity, we can face the world with total honesty and revel in the absurdity this paradox produces. A related paradox, however, soon appears: if we human fools were to consistently admit that we know nothing, we could no longer live as human beings. We would be unable to feel enough of a reality to participate in our communities, to be productive in our work, or even to survive. To live together as human beings, we must share some amount of certainty about our world. But then, why does it feel so good, perhaps so necessary, to let down that certainty and laugh together?

To leave behind learned social manners and fear of foolishness, and take that plunge into complete ridiculousness? And so we come to the role of the performing clown.

There are few, if any, societies without clowns in performance or stories. From the obscene, backwards-walking Heyoka of the North American Plains tribes to the obscene, masked zanies of Italian commedia dell'arte, from the Jewish tales of the "wise" fools of Chelm to the Muslim tales of the "wisdom" of foolish Nasereddin, from Chinese tricksters to West African tricksters, the entertaining fool seems to be universal. We cannot be clowns all of the



time—even those of us who play the clown—but whoever feels called to the state of the fool and can successfully communicate that energy, might help us admit and take pleasure in our ignorance.

The energy of the idiot, that being between knowing nothing and having to carry on acting in the world, manifests in play. English clown John Wright describes it in his recent *Why Is That So Funny?*: “Play occupies a liminal world between the actual and the imaginary where anything can become something else ... laughter gives us permission to carry on doing silly things when our more rational selves are inhibited and alarmed by our persistent stupidity.” The performing clown must develop the art of play in order to tap into that universal, joyful idiocy—so even if we are not performers, we can examine play through a look at the clown’s art.

Watching clowns, or trying to perform as one, you will notice one thing very quickly, another paradox: play must be real. Think about the kinds of clowns that make most of us wince. There is the scary clown—not necessarily John Wayne Gacy, but perhaps a crusty Shriner with a runny painted grin and a forced laugh. He may mean well, but few things are more unsettling than a rigid mask of fake joy. Then there is his cousin, the party clown with the cute nickname trying to amuse children with her “wacky” behavior.

Now watch some kids playing. Unlike those relentlessly happy clowns, they are dead serious. They are also hilarious: the scenes they pretend are beyond their understanding and capability; their costumes nicked from an adult closet are too big on them; they drive the cardboard box as if it were really a fire truck. And they wouldn’t be so funny if their momentary belief wasn’t so ferociously serious.

This is the realization a performing clown arrives at: the more you try to be funny, the less you will make anyone laugh. But the more serious you become about what you are doing, the more apparent the absurdity of your situation becomes and the more those watching will titter and howl. You, and the children playing, are aware that what you are doing is playing. But in the moment you are playing it, that cardboard box is really a fire truck. If you are onstage or in the circus ring, you may have done your routine a thousand times, but this time must be as spontaneous as though it were the first, or else your audience will smell false play, and they will not laugh. And that is the only test: if the audience members laugh, it’s funny. If they don’t, it’s not. And as for those who say that they were “going for something else,” something perhaps artistic or political—that’s nice, but is it clown? Is it play? In a true state of play, we are incapable of making a “statement.” We are mad, passionate, real—and though we may bluster uncontrollably, we know nothing. We are completely naive, completely open, and as clown Philippe Gaulier describes it, “in the grip of pleasure and freedom.” This innocence is childlike in its ignorance and thirst to play but is not necessarily cute or sweet. The bubbly party clown grates because she is not truly innocent, but rather precious, demanding that we love her cuteness. The clown who makes us laugh affects us with true vulnerability, an absence of the shell of civilized knowledge or competence, which renders her dangerously available.

Tiffany Riley, a circus and hospital clown, tells her students that you cannot be precious when working to make an ill child laugh: “The hospital clown is the anarchist in the room, getting into trouble and out of it, upsetting the regimented environment. Not hugging the kid and giving them stickers, but getting wrapped up in the curtain.” It is this idiocy which induces the laughter that produces chemicals which soothe and perhaps heal the child’s body.

Most of our laughter at a clown—and at kids playing—comes not from derision, but from empathy. Not pity, not “oh, poor sad clown,” but from a recognition of and pleasure in the absurd situation. We don’t laugh in mockery of a particular idiot, but are freed to enjoy all idiocy including our own, and perhaps to admit—dare we?—that our serious “adult” pursuits may be as flimsy and nonsensical as the cardboard fire truck. Who is not secretly as baffled by the world as the clown is publicly? Who is not as surprised at the things that pop up unexpectedly? It is a relief to watch a clown knowing nothing, being surprised by everything, and to laugh in a group, marveling at how silly we all are: and yet we, like the clown on the stage, must persist in muddling through the problems life throws at us. We must play our concertina despite the sandbags falling around us, or outwit a predatory Elmer Fudd, or find a way to dance in our oversized shoes.

I got into performance clowning through anti-authoritarian activism a few years ago. It’s a long, weird story, but basically involved a “medicine show” circus to advertise anarchist books and zines, and some clown bloc involvement at demonstrations. I quickly discovered that I find it hard to enjoy clowning (onstage or not) that tries to convey an explicit political “message.” It’s never fun to be hammered over the head with allegories and effigies. The sense of play in such performance seems dimmed, and the delightful bafflement and innocence is smothered in calculation. A clown’s “wisdom” is not knowledge, but liberation from knowledge, complete openness to the world

popping and exploding around her. I have to side with Jacques LeCoq in an argument he once had with Dario Fo: there's no way the clown can be political, because he is too absorbed in the shininess of a uniform's buttons to understand what it represents.

There is something political in laughter and play in themselves-but not "political" in the ideological sense. Rather, they carry a power that lies beyond ideology: whenever people come together in laughter-not derisive, intellectual laughter, but warm, ridiculous, communal, and raw, the kind a clown hopes to provoke, authority is potentially threatened. Often, people don't realize that they have that pure, savage, idiotic joy in them, until an environment or a performance draws it out. In mass-marketed society, in that moment, folks are less timid, less defeated: a real, raw, human energy comes bubbling out, threatening to burst the seams of the plastic world. Harpo has stumbled into the room with his giant scissors, and anyone in a uniform had better run.

This impossibility of ideology can, at times, pose a greater challenge than any articulated politics. Clown is "anarchy" in the literal sense, cutting any "ism" to shreds—including "anarchism"! But what better target for its reality-shredding scissors than capital, which relies on the illusion of inevitability for its very existence? The only inevitability that clown accepts is that all of us are human, none of us are very sure about anything, and all of us will die. When the world shines through the lens of the ridiculous, then the invisible hand of the market...well, does it want to thumb-wrestle? When we clown, we become fearless enough to take on any monster. Play's debunking is not rational hermeneutic suspicion, but the brave imbecile's absence of terror. When knowledge evaporates, reality and necessity in all their sobering fearsomeness vanish with it.

At this point, it might seem that we face a chasm much deeper than any the coyote ever hovered over: empty, bottomless relativism. If we abandon necessity to revel in absurdity, there is a danger that our concern for other human beings might go with it. But we haven't let go of all necessity. There's that one persistent reality even for a clown: that we are human fools. This is the one and only wall that the "what if" of play can hit. Clown is a shockingly unmediated state of interaction: consensual pretensions, like uniforms, degrees, or titles, mean nothing; dogma and hierarchy are rendered impossible—and there stands the human being, naked, foolish, and utterly mortal. The sight of him or her—whether the clown or the target of the clown's pranks—produces a strange, honest sort of empathy. It's no hugfest—when clowns get too sappy, you can be sure that a slap is close behind. But after a good clown show, after the eyepokes, honks, and explosions are over, the audience walks away feeling connected in vulnerability and delight—and in the ability to feel both of those at once.

So, am I proposing that all anti-authoritarian activists start practicing doubletakes and pratfalls? No, though I certainly wouldn't stop them. But examining clown performance helps us look at the essence of play, and its usefulness and limitations as a tactic of resistance. Playfulness as resistance—public pranks, unpermitted street festivals, clown brigades at protests—does not usually involve a clear performer/audience distinction. The spirit of giddy ridiculousness, of blissfully idiotic fearlessness, of pulling the rug from under consensual reality, is, however, the same. It is ferocious, destroying pretensions and unraveling hierarchy, and at the same time generous, inclusive of everyone willing to admit their foolishness. It keeps passionate, real energy percolating among us, and shits on mass-marketed pleasure environments. To acknowledge how frail and silly we all are is, paradoxically, a source of tremendous strength.

There is also, however, a caveat to be drawn from the performing clown. At the end of the show, the circus clown wipes off the makeup, and Harpo transforms into Arthur Marx. They don't transition into dour seriousness—many clowns are joyful, prankish people in their daily lives—but they do resume their other human dimensions in order to function. If pure play were to be achieved as a permanent state, not only would survival and moral responsibility become impossible, but play would cease to be fun, becoming a new "necessity" which would be annoying at best and frightening as the Shriner clown's rictus at worst. And hence, it would cease to be play.

There's a use for social manners and a need for rational hermeneutic suspicion. Play and clown make no sense unless they are temporary—for how else would there be a seriousness to poke at? They come and go, again and again, breaking idols of rigid thought and hierarchy. They serve as a reminder that all asserted "realities" are contestable, rearing their ridiculous heads where too much dogma and fear accumulate. (In this, they are close relatives of the periodic renewal of carnival, described so well in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. But that is a subject for another day.) In revealing reality as unstable, they reveal the possibility of transformation.

And transformation should always be possible. Even in antiauthoritarian circles and societies, dogma and domination will sediment—until the clown comes running with scissors.

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