

A Thesis Presented to  
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Clowning as an Act of Social Critique, Subversive and Cathartic Laughter, and Compassion in the  
Modern Age

by

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“Behind clowns, sources of empathy, masters of the absurd, of humor, they who draw me into an inexplicable space-time capsule, who make my tears flow for no reason. Behind clowns, I am surprised to sense over and over again humble people, insignificant we might even say, stubbornly incapable of explaining, outside the ring, the unique magic of their art.”

- Leandre Ribera

“The genius of clowning is transforming the little, everyday annoyances, not only overcoming, but actually transforming them into something strange and terrific. It is the power to extract mirth for millions out of nothing and less than nothing.”

- Grock

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The black and white fuzz billowed across the screen as my grandmother popped in a VHS tape: *Saltimbanco*, a long-running Cirque du Soleil show recorded in the mid-90's. I think she wanted to distract me for an hour while she worked on a pot of gumbo, rather than stimulate an interest in circus life. Regardless, I was well and truly engrossed in the program. Of course, the acrobatics, costumes, and music proved quite a captivating spectacle, but I really perked up when the clown came on. His upturned red hat, wide overall shorts, and pointy shoes made the character not only ridiculous, but delightfully relatable. Here was a character that stood apart from the rest of the performers because his clothes were almost *normal*. And he ran right out into the audience, as though he was more comfortable with the rest of us than the Wonderlandish characters on stage. Even better, it seemed his whole purpose was to be really, really funny. Ten-year-old Danny was sold.

This delightful, effeminate little man bounced around the stage, looking out into the audience as if to beg for their approval, while thoroughly in control of his stage. He expertly mimed slamming into an invisible door and spent minutes trying to find a way through his invented barrier. He moved his body in ways that jarred the brain more than feats pulled off by the contortionists, and paired every flamboyant action with a vocal sound effect, from whistles and pips to creaks and pounding fists. He was truly incredible. And even though his invisible door conundrum was ludicrous, I wanted so badly for him to open it. He found a way for me to empathize with him over this invented problem. He made me feel compassion. And that phenomenon is what I will be dissecting in this thesis: the capacity for a clown to stir up a positive emotional response in people, and how that silliness is so vitally important for our social dynamic.

While clowns are not necessarily a symbol of positivity in American culture and are in fact feared by many, there are a number of practitioners of the art form who try to change that image for the better. Clowns, fools, and comedians in general have always served as voices of dissent and contradiction, and while humor can be ugly, cruel, and even oppressive at times, it is most effective when applied as a force of liberation, relief, and perseverance in the face of tyranny and oppression. Clowns operate as practitioners of subversive laughter. They are

people who expose the silliness of human activity for the purpose of catharsis for those who need it, and whose talent for insubordination can potentially inspire critical thought and unity for those with their backs against the wall.

This thesis will elaborate on the function of clowns and their variety of iterations throughout history, primarily addressing the development of the clown from a Western lens. That being said, clowns exist in nearly every culture on the planet to some capacity, so I will examine a handful of examples from various cultures to give focus to how the clown exists as a significant – perhaps essential – facet of the human condition. I will then discuss how clowning can be used as a medium of social criticism and unity in the modern age beyond the tropes and clichés with which it is associated, and how comic relief can and should be taken seriously. Finally, the purpose of this thesis is to show that clowns are most effective when they are compassionate, and that they have the potential to be a force for positivity in the future.

## Defining Clown



Eli Simon points out in his book *The Art of Clowning* that “when most people think of clowns these days, they conjure images of crazy-looking guys in baggy pants, oversized shoes,

orange hair, and garish makeup.”<sup>1</sup> In a recent article addressing the resurgence of clowns in popular media, Jason Zinoman states “this performer was the beloved hero of comedy... but times have changed... morose clowns are almost as common as scary ones. How did red noses become such bad news?”<sup>2</sup> In order to elaborate on the function of a clown outside of the tropes with which it is associated, however steep that mountain may be, we must first ask what images are associated with the word ‘clown’. Is it the balloon-twisting performer at your cousin’s birthday party? The gravediggers in Hamlet? The mascot of that hamburger chain? The white faced ballerina-constable you saw that one time in Krakow? Donald Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign? All of these are valid, at least in part, but I think it is important to remove as much stigma from the word as we can and build from there. And so the question must be asked: what is a clown?

As is to be expected, a precise definition is tricky to nail down. The fact is, while they may be ubiquitous, clowns are incredibly varied and unsurprisingly have a variety of messy histories. The term clown can be used to describe a slew of “figures going back in time to the most primitive of tribal existence but equally at home in contemporary, technologically advanced societies,”<sup>3</sup> all of whom share similar traits and serve similar purposes. ‘Clown’ can refer to any number of eccentric performers or theatrical figures, those who typically straddle the lines between art, ritual, fact, and fiction. Other names associated with clowns include fools, comedians, comics, drolls, farceurs, humorists, Harlequins, jokers, mimes, mummers, pranksters, tricksters, wags and wits.<sup>4</sup> These names are so often interchangeable, with very little consensus as to precise definition and delineation between each word, so it might be easy to say that a clown is any comic performer who instigates laughter. Even this is not quite so axiomatic, as contemporary clowns are in some cases verging on poetic or reflective, arguably intended to stimulate critical thought and not always with humor.

The discussion about ‘clown’ is still swirling in the form of clown scholarship and pedagogy today. In his book *Clown Readings in Theatre Practice*, Jon Davison discusses his approach to the discourse: “whenever I see two people in agreement [about clowning], my instinct is to disagree with them. Maybe that’s what led me to be a clown. In any case, it’s a

useful research tool. A kind of naïve skepticism, no malice intended. When two people agree on what clowns are, my ears prick up even more, ready to provide the contrary view if called upon.”<sup>5</sup> This urge to proclaim that the emperor is not wearing any clothes is certainly a major component to the circumstance of the modern clown as a critic and dissenter. Furthermore, it shows that as with most conversations revolving around contemporary art, this one is far from over.

The physical attributes of a clown are something to be considered, as they are a code that clues in an audience to what they may expect, and are by no means uniform. As P. Nalle Laanela notes in his *Clown Manifesto*, “in Myanmar a comedian will wear a farmer’s hat” as opposed to the “bright colours, a red nose and big shoes” most often seen in Western society. He goes on to say “there’s a very strong American movement that believes as long as you use the Western clown attributes, you are a clown”<sup>6</sup>, but were it that simple, we would have to exclude characters like Mr. Bean, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton, all prime examples of clowns in normative dress. Charlie Chaplin wore a tattered morning suit –a jacket just too small and baggy pants that allowed for acrobatic flops– which served to represent the conflict between his eagerness to fit in and his readiness to challenge the limitations of class and etiquette.

Similarly, Mr. Bean adorns the same muted suit and dull red tie day in and day out, with pants worn unfashionably high on the waist. This consistency shows an earnest effort to blend in with the rest of us, while his unabashed, inquisitive behavior and malleable face easily sets him apart. On the other hand, the popular European circus *Archaos* features clowns who “wear costumes of corrugated aluminum to battle the cruelty of contemporary society,”<sup>7</sup> as opposed to the tight jacket and baggy pants that iconized and freed Charlie Chaplin. As Feste the Fool says in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, “*cucullus non facit monachum*” or “the cowl does not make the monk”, nor does the red nose make the clown. Rather, a clown’s function is predicated on behavior, with dress being an accentuation of that behavior. Laanela, also known by the self-attributed mononym Nalleslavski, firmly states that his “belief is that the essence of the clown performer is always about being playful and connecting to an audience”<sup>8</sup>, and while

some argue over the necessity of an audience, these two notions are both essential to keep in mind when considering the way a clown functions. Clowns are abstractions of a human, a sort of liberated idea of what a human can be outside the confines of social pressures, and therefore licensed to play without hesitation. A clown really only exists when an audience recognizes and responds to the action of the performer.



Charlie Chaplin in 1931 silent film *City Lights*

Then there is Avner “the Eccentric” Eisenberg, a clown teacher and performer who posits that “a clown is not a thing. Clowning is a series of techniques and attitudes that allow you to solve problems that in some sense don’t really exist. But we agree that they exist. So in the show, when I can’t pick up my hat, of *course* I can pick it up, but I say ‘oh dear...’ and we all accept that. It’s not about costumes, makeup, funny faces, funny voices; it’s the attitude to solve the problems that you find along the way to doing your job.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, clowning is about performing actions that an audience can understand, and finding problems to solve when really none should exist. This is a critical and relatable idea, because every person has run into

unexpected problems with a task, and we feel *insecure* about that. We feel confused, vulnerable, naïve, sometimes stupid when we are confronted with something that we cannot solve.

Once again referring to clown practitioner and professor Eli Simon, “many of [the] clown’s deepest attributes are tied to childhood experiences, summoning primal emotions, thoughts, and images,”<sup>10</sup> which are largely predicated on play and the process of learning the functions of the world. A clown represents an outsider, an ‘other’, who sees the flaws and possible solutions to social structure, and is willing to play with the functions of the world in order to make sense of it, just as a child does. The greatest trait in a clown is the ability to take the imperfections of mankind upon themselves and say ‘I am representing our collective confusion, vulnerability, naiveté, sometimes stupidity, for all of us.’ This sentiment takes the weight off the shoulders of an audience and allows them to see the performer as a surrogate for themselves and for their insecurities. The clown provides a lens through which humanity can observe itself and its absurdity.

It is important to note that this romantic notion of what a clown can and should be is not universally accepted, and perhaps for good reason. Clowns often exist and participate in the margins of society, removed from many social boundaries and presumably the threat of punishment. John Townsen writes that “unimpressed with sacred ceremonies or the power of rulers, [a clown] is liable to be openly blasphemous and defiant”.<sup>11</sup> Those who are blasphemous, defiant, and do not cooperate within established social structures are often not trusted. In popular media, perhaps inspired by the serial killer and part time birthday party clown John Wayne Gacy, clowns and clown aesthetics have been used as a vehicle for portraying violent sociopaths, such as Twisty from *American Horror Story* and the creature from Stephen King’s *IT*. A recent internet prank shows two men dressed as clowns, chasing people around a deserted parking lot with giant mallets.



Pennywise the Dancing Clown from the 1990 film *It*

In these cases, I would say that some of the qualities that make clowns so effective, namely their unpredictable nature and willingness to defy social norms (such as not murdering people in this case), have been exploited to great effect. The element of unpredictability is one that is most obviously applicable to serial killers and other members of society who have atypical moral compasses, so the exploitation of that mysterious nature is a logical step. A clown “transgresses all boundaries, refuses all dichotomies: often neither a male nor female... clever nor stupid, mad nor sane, entertainment nor threat. Ignoring... these oppressive binary oppositions s/he claims the position of the ‘other’ with pride as s/he plays with and against categorization.”<sup>12</sup> That being said, these contradictions can understandably cause anxiety from a lack of familiarity, a fear of the unknown.

Perhaps the most iconic image of the rogue killer clown in modern media is that of the Joker from the Batman universe. Seen in numerous films, comics, video games, and cartoons, this character dons a mask of white makeup and red lips, and behaves in a wildly unpredictable

manner with seemingly no purpose besides creating chaos. Despite his incredibly violent and traumatizing actions, he is a beloved character among fans of the Batman series, especially after Heath Ledger's hauntingly visceral portrayal of the character in the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*. Again, the image of the clown is used and arguably exploited, although not to same fear-inducing capacity as the previously mentioned murderous clowns; this flamboyantly dressed, grotesquely grease-painted, and incredibly unpredictable character is nearly brought to a sympathetic light.

Aziz Gual, a performer from Mexico, remembers one of his first experiences with clowns as a terrifying one. He describes a scenario when he was a boy during which two street performers hoisted him up by a rope and tore off his pants, revealing his genitals for the raucous laughter of the crowd, as well as a girl he happened to have a crush on at the time. In the book *Clowns: In Conversation With Modern Masters*, he explains that "to the clowns, it was a great triumph. But for me, it was an invasive experience. I felt profoundly vulnerable and intimidated. I didn't think that clowns could be that mean. I thought somehow they would be more careful."<sup>13</sup> He went on to become a clown himself and to be a force for compassion in an art form that can be so easily misinterpreted and abused. He says that he has always strived to be empathetic and "to understand the people. It doesn't matter whether they are old or kids... we are all vulnerable... this is very important, because if you don't understand what people feel, or why people cry, you can't be a clown."<sup>14</sup> Gual is one of many striving to alter the common perception of clowns, along with notable practitioners such as Patch Adams and Leandre Ribera.

On the other hand, contemporary media phenomenon and contender for the U.S. presidency Donald Trump has been labelled with many synonyms of 'clown', including but not limited to: clown, buffoon, fool, wazzock<sup>15</sup>, and the briefly popular #FuckFaceVonClownstick.<sup>16</sup> In response to statements made by various newscasters and politicians that Trump was 'the greatest show on earth', circus performer Adam Realman incredulously pointed out that "by calling him the greatest show on earth, you're kind of insulting a lot of the circus world."<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the sentiment does not ring true for everyone, but he does exemplify a number of traits

that I have previously described. He makes silly faces, cracks jokes, and projects the kind of charisma that one rarely sees beyond straight-to-TV movie villains. He has the attitude that allows him to solve problems that in some sense don't really exist, such as rapists illegally emigrating in droves from Mexico. He encourages behavior that defies social norms, such as inciting violence in response to peaceful protest. And people are listening. Trump relates to those who feel that they have been marginalized by the powers that be. He represents an outsider, an 'other', who sees the flaws and possible solutions to social structure, and is willing to play with the functions of the world in order to make sense of it, just as a child does, just as a clown does. The conversation on the internet rages as to whether he is clever or stupid, mad or sane, entertainment or threat. He also has really silly hair.

A clown can really be anyone, even if they are unaware of their status as 'clown', which is likely the case with Donald Trump. As I will discuss in Part II, it is likely that the clown has origins in tribal society, and is by extension an integral part of human social structure as a whole. Clowning is everywhere, even if it is just your friend making a silly face when telling a story, or when you do a goofy dance because you don't like the music and can't figure out how to move to it. Clowns are essentially people performing incongruous actions, or behaving in an abnormal manner for the purpose of inciting a reaction. This reaction is typically laughter, but can also be a manifestation of fear, pain, or even love and empathy. We see that time and time again the most effective clowns are those who use compassion as their primary tool to express the opposite of their cultures' expected norms. Compassionate clowns are those who use their liminal nature and talent for insubordination to incite doubt and unite people in the crossing of boundaries, they bring people along for the ride on a transfer from order to chaos to reorder.

## II

### Clowning as a Social Institution



Pussy Riot performing "A Punk Prayer", 2012<sup>18</sup>

In order to better understand what clowning means in a contemporary sense, it is important to address how it has existed and functioned as an element of the human cultural dynamic as a whole. As countless examples show, clowns have existed as a fundamental part of social structure, and clowning is perhaps one of the most crucial facets of the human experience. In his book *At the Edge of History*, William Irwin Thompson posits that the structure of human tribal society is comprised of four primary roles: *headman*, *hunter*, *shaman*, and *clown*. The *headman* takes a leadership role due to his administrative and organizational skills; the *hunter* uses his exceptional physical capabilities to provide food and presumably protection from other groups; the *shaman* maintains knowledge of sacred rituals and traditional history; and the *clown* keeps all three of the others in check by mocking them and making everyone laugh.<sup>19</sup> As it is a logical speculation about the predominately pre-historical societies of humankind, this theory cannot necessarily be proven; nevertheless, we see evidence of clowns being a pillar of humanity in an overwhelming number of human cultures, from every corner of the globe.

For many native North American groups, clowning as a function of the social order was a fairly common practice. Popular stereotypes portray Native Americans as stoic and humorless, and “for centuries, travel accounts, children’s literature, Western novels and Hollywood films have propagated these rigid stereotypes. They deny [Native Americans] a sense of wit and a love for humor,”<sup>20</sup> and are incredibly misleading. Some of the better known examples of these clowning traditions are those of the Hopi people in the Southwest, but similar traditions are practiced by the Inuit people in the Arctic, as well as Cheyenne Contraries, Sioux and Ponca *heyoka*, Arikara Foolish People, and the Arapaho Crazy Lodge.<sup>21</sup> The Contraries of the Cheyenne people were essential participants in certain religious ceremonies, and as the attributed name suggests, they performed actions contrary to ceremonial order and social convention. “Armed with their tiny bows and arrows they hunted the Animal Dancers of other societies... the men and women clowns danced irregularly and clumsily, kicking and quarreling among themselves, butting backwards into others, overly dramatizing their motions”, and all to the raucous laughter of the spectators.<sup>22</sup> These Contraries had their own formally organized

institution within the tribe, just like the military, medicine, and dance societies, and had their own unique duties to perform.

While their popularity has decreased with the decline of ritual activities, masked Koyong clowns have played important parts in ritual performance for the indigenous Mapuche people of southern Chile and Argentina. The clowns dress in ragged clothes stuffed with straw to signify their poverty, and many of their masks are clearly made to represent white people. The purpose for this is more complicated than a simple mimetic response to the white 'other'. Researcher Magnus Course posits that the mask play is a way for the clowns and their audiences to deal with the melding of 'other' and 'self'. He concludes that "through their lived embodiment of becoming white, clowns constitute a coming to terms with the process of transformation, which is not willed or desired but rather imposed" by the white majority in Chile.<sup>23</sup> Many Mapuche are moving to urban centers, and while they are now less common for that reason, the clowns perform a "creative response to the very absence of agency" that is felt by many of the Mapuche when trying to adapt to post-colonial Chile.

The two most prominent rituals they perform contrast each other, one exemplifying raucous misbehavior and the other conservative social gathering, but "both sets of behaviors are equally flawed and equally distant from the proper behavior of a 'true person.'" According to Course, the lesson taught by this contrast is to find "the careful balance of respecting others while still asserting personal autonomy."<sup>24</sup> The clowns act as moral instructors in this respect, but they also present a dichotomy of pain and joy. These clowns are predominately poor men and often suffer from alcoholism and depression, men who live on the margins of society and who locals sometimes refer to as a bit crazy. Besides their willingness to be paid in alcohol, Course suggests that there is a sense in Mapuche society "in which clowns must be this kind of person", that a clown must always be poor and suffer.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps those who suffer most have the best understanding of the cathartic necessity of laughter.



“Kollones.” Two Mapuche clowns in 1928. Photographer unknown. <sup>26</sup>

On the other side of the globe, the socio-religious performance traditions of Bali are perhaps one of the best examples of traditional clowning in a modern social structure. The history of this practice is difficult to trace, but it is ingrained in the Balinese social dynamic and used as a way to express opinion about very real issues affecting Bali, namely westernization. Before electoral politics, Balinese kings would use theatrical performances as a function of religious rituals in order to exert power in the form of moral instruction, spreading concepts of how humans should exist and act in accordance to the gods and nature. Remnants of that

tradition are alive in the dramatic structure of temple rituals, but it also has led to the widely accepted use of theater, especially clowning, as a form of communicating an idea to the public.

The temple festivals known as 'odalan' are microcosmic examples of Balinese society, and provide an outlet for people to reaffirm and sustain cultural heritage, but they also allow for criticism of the "contemporary forces like tourism and commercial development which are poised to destroy it".<sup>27</sup> Laughter is thought to encourage the gods to grace a performance with their presence; therefore laughter is a sacred thing in its own right, and this mentality carries over beyond the temple. During temple performances, clowns will go around pretending to take an obnoxious number of pictures of everyone they can get close to. This is intended to mock the intrusive tourists and garner a laugh, but also pushes the audience to observe a discrepancy between the beauty and sanctity of the ceremony and the grotesque nature of the intruders. As explained by prominent clown I Nyoman Catra, "When people look at the results of development through the eyes of the clowns they see it with a dose of skepticism."<sup>28</sup> These clowns provide a simple yet accessible criticism, and unite the Balinese observers with a shared laugh.

Even the name of the clowns, *penasar*, is representative of how essential they are to temple performances. *Penasar* means 'foundation' in Balinese, and the multilingual entertainers weave improvised modern references into the traditional stories, in order to alter the foundation of the social dynamic. At once fools, priests, entertainers, and historians, they behave as mediators and subversive shepherds for a culture in transition. The same clowns who were seen in the temples can also be seen entertaining crowds during political campaigns, invited to perform mock debates and political jokes at the intervals between a politician's speeches. This is not terribly dissimilar to the parodies of political debates performed on *Saturday Night Live* and other comedy shows. The fact that politicians invite them to participate validates the clowning in a secular fashion, as a sort of facsimile of the temple rituals.

In Russia there exists a very distinct social tradition called *Yurodtsvo*, or holy foolishness. According to Kerith M. Woodyard, holy foolishness is a “radical behavioral model canonized in the Russian Orthodox Church and replicated throughout Russia's literary and artistic traditions”,<sup>29</sup> and is characterized by subversive behavior in order to provide spiritual guidance. Practitioners of *Yurodstvo* live an ascetic lifestyle and behave in a manner that is foolish, “which is caused neither by mistake nor by feeble-mindedness, but is deliberate, irritating, even provocative”,<sup>30</sup> in order to educate and instruct others essentially how not to behave. In an odd contrast, this exaggerated self-humiliation can be seen as an expression of humility in the vein of Jesus Christ, and therefore a Holy Fool, or *yurodivy*, is often considered blessed. The Holy Fool is then ambivalently accepted by spectators as “sinner and saint, lunatic and prophet, hooligan and helper”,<sup>31</sup> and while the *yurodivy* can be performing rudely and even subversively, the purpose is to inspire socially acceptable behavior and faith, not more foolishness.

Thus, the institution of *Yurodtsvo* lives in a paradoxical space, where the clown is a brick in the foundation of the social order, yet the purpose is to act in a way which *conflicts* with the social order. While the Russian Orthodox Church does not always accept the practice as a form of devotion, numerous Holy Fools have been canonized as saints, most notably Basil the Fool, a sixteenth-century saint who spoke out against the tyranny of Ivan the Terrible. With this in mind, despite the supposed intention to keep people on the straight and narrow, these practices can indeed inspire radical discourse, as I will discuss further in Part III. Consequently, the church's hesitancy to validate *Yurodstvo* is understandable and unsurprising, as the church is a massive social institution predicated on conservative values and order.

The feminist punk band Pussy Riot referred to the concept of *Yurodtsvo* as a legal defense when they were arrested for performing an abridged version of their song “Mother of God, Put Putin Away” in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The performance was a protest of Putin's close ties with the Orthodox Church and the supposed corruption that came along with such a relationship. The women donned their iconic neon balaclavas and colorful dresses, in stark contrast to the muted red and gold tones of the church decorations. They jerked, flailed, and genuflected in mocking reference to religious rituals, and sang inflammatory

lyrics such as “The church’s praise of rotten dictators” and “Shit! Shit! The Lord’s shit”, to which the authorities responded with the fairly severe punishment of a two year prison sentence. In response to criticism, band member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova asserted: “We are jesters, jokers, holy fools and we bear no ill will towards anyone”.<sup>32</sup> The resulting music video brought international attention to the band, as well as to the issues they sought to uncover in Russia. Their commitment to being a voice for the voiceless and acting in such a contradictory fashion rehabilitates an old tradition of holy foolishness, which fits neatly with the modern, liminal spirit of punk culture.

Clowns and fools operate as pillars of contemporary American society as well. In a nation built on a concept of free speech and a general sense of “nobody tells *me* what to do”, comedic dissenters are incredibly popular. The privilege to mock authority and social code is absolutely not universal today, and heavy legal consequences do exist in many countries around the world. While satire and critical humor is by no means uniquely American, the privilege of being able to speak without the threat of judicial penalty and the celebration of that privilege is an advantage that allows American comedians to take on the role of modern day court jesters. Massively popular stand-up comics such as George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and Louis C.K. come into their fame by telling stories and jokes that highlight their own incompetence, make fun of the powers that be, and point out glaring flaws in the social order.

Beloved television satirists such as Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver take on the role of fictionalized newscasters or exaggerated selves in order to bring attention to and poke fun at very real issues that face the nation and the world. The near-sacred attention given to the freedom of speech in America has made these comedians into a sort of secular holy fool, touched with a gift for satire and given the license to say what they please, despite criticism. In response to being called a ‘comedian fool’ by Jack Warner (former vice president of FIFA and subject of some commentary on the show), John Oliver took the title and proudly proclaimed “Comedian fool? That’s not an insult, that’s literally my business card!” and then made light of his own appearance with the self-deprecating retort, “why not just say I look like the reflection of Harry Potter in a doorknob? Come on, I’m doing your job for you!”<sup>33</sup> His ability to be the

absurd looking funny man, to accept that role with a strange sense of dignity and purpose, and to then have people *listen* and *laugh* with him is exactly what an effective clown does. John Oliver is a unique case. Because of the subscription based business model of HBO, his show *Last Week Tonight* does not rely on money from advertisers, and he can therefore piss off pretty much anybody without fear of losing advertising revenue. His show is massively popular, and segments posted on the internet allow for millions more to access his material without the need to pay for an HBO subscription. This liberty to speak freely and criticize whomever he pleases harkens back to the court jester, but rather than relying on the patronage and mercy of a king, duke, or multinational corporation, he relies on the public to vote with their attention and maybe a few dollars.

American groups such as Teatro Campesino and Bread and Puppet Theater have used their respective brands of comedy and performance to disseminate political criticism to a wide variety of audiences. In the sixties, Teatro Campesino would perform their 'actos' on the backs of flatbed trucks to dramatize the plight of Latino farmworkers in America. Around the same time, Bread and Puppet staged pageants and marches with large, goofy puppets satirizing politicians and protesting the Vietnam War. They continue to be one of the only self-sufficient theater companies in the nation, utilizing the art of puppetry, unity, and playfulness to be a force of resistance and a voice of dissent. They promote the idea that art should be cheap and available to everyone, that it soothes pain, wakes up sleepers, and fights against war and stupidity.<sup>34</sup> Massively popular Italian playwright, director, and clown Dario Fo made a name for himself putting on comedic performances that satirized the church, war, and political corruption, and brought to light many social issues, including the absurdity of homelessness and hunger in the face of arrogance and wealth. He provided an obstinate dissenting voice via comedy to those who felt they could not be heard. These people are entertainers first and foremost, but their ability to influence the social dynamic is impressive and shows that clowning is still a major facet of the human condition.

### III

#### The Development of the Clown in Western Culture



*Starczyk*, Jan Melejko, 1862, oil on canvas, 47 in × 35 in, Warsaw National Museum

The rise of the court jester in Medieval and early Renaissance Europe is a logical starting point to span the gap between early clowns and the comic staples of modern Western culture. An early iteration of the modern clown, the jester was an entertainer who served the noble and royal courts. Evidence of the court-employed fool spans back to ancient imperial China<sup>35</sup>, but the iconic jester character as we know it developed out of feudal Europe and carries many of the important traits of the contemporary clown. These jesters wore colorful clothing and all sorts of eccentric accessories, setting them apart from the normative dress of the time. They would sing songs, tell jokes and stories, and occasionally perform acrobatics or juggle, but another primary function was to criticize their master or mistress. “Queen Elizabeth is said to have rebuked one of her fools for being insufficiently severe with her.”<sup>36</sup> One of the most famous critical jesters is Stańczyk, a Polish jester who served three different monarchs and had a taste for satire. While very little actual evidence of Stańczyk exists beyond literature and folklore, and he very well might be an amalgamation of a number of different people or no one at all, his significance as a figure of defiance and political criticism is one that has survived centuries. The painting of Stańczyk by Jan Matejko (above) is an iconic image illustrating the solemn contemplation of the critical jester after hearing news of war, which strongly contrasts with his silly outfit and the lively celebration in the background.

The writing of Shakespeare is perhaps one of the best lenses through which we can view the function of these jesters, or at least their idealized and heightened theatrical function. The fools that Shakespeare wrote into his plays were often either commoners or employed fools, and acted primarily as comic relief characters, making topical jokes and goofing around. But some of Shakespeare’s fools were profoundly more complex, provided important commentary on social structure, and were integral characters to the flow of the story. As Isaac Asimov asserts in his *Guide to Shakespeare*, “the great secret of the successful fool [is] that he is no fool at all”, and we see this very plainly, particularly in *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*. Both of the fools in these plays are referred to as fool, so from the beginning they are established as silly characters; but in both cases, and for different reasons, these two characters strike a chord that sets them apart from other performers.

In act one, scene five of *Twelfth Night*, we are introduced to Feste the fool. He is employed by Olivia as her court jester, and while his job is to entertain and poke fun at the aristocracy, Olivia is still in mourning over her deceased brother and wants nothing to do with Feste. The first thing she says to him is “Take the Fool away”, to which Feste responds “Do you not hear, fellows? Take away the Lady.” This begins a touchy back-and-forth whereby Feste accuses Olivia of being foolish for mourning so long after her brother’s death. She plays along tentatively, perhaps with a bit of exasperation at Feste’s insistence that she hear him out, but she listens nonetheless. He insists that “cucullus non facit monachum” or ‘the cowl does not make the monk’, and that while his job is to play the fool, he is no fool himself. He asks permission to give evidence of her foolishness, which she hesitantly allows. He continues to poke at her, until she finally lightens up a bit and defends Feste’s words against the prudish Malvolio, albeit in a chiding tone. Feste successfully begins to drag Olivia out of her doldrums, and thus sets up one of the major themes of the play: not taking oneself or one’s situation too seriously.

The cowl not making the monk indicates that the visual signifiers of any given profession, gender, class, and so on are not in any way determinate of the personality or worth of that individual. Again, a major theme in the play is woven into Feste’s language. This phrase begs Olivia to take her blinders off and give Feste and every other character a second thought beyond their appearance or demeanor, and it is from there that she starts to become an active participant in her surroundings. This scene sets up the function of Feste, primarily as the cheeky disturber of the peace and devil’s advocate that we see throughout the play. As the clown, Feste also has the job of being on the outside of the social circles, and can be seen as the bridge between the audience and the other characters on stage. As a theatrical device, the clown disrupts the fabric of a scene in a number of ways. He may address the audience directly with facial expressions or verbal communication, breaking what is called the ‘fourth wall’ and challenging the social conventions of a theatrical experience.

If he does not opt for this approach, the clown will rely on his essential ‘otherness’ to engage the audience and alter the theatrical space. In other words, the clown is by necessity

'grotesque' in one way or another. He may have ragged clothing, exaggerated makeup or facial features, or he may simply behave in a manner that distinctly sets him apart from the rest of the characters in the play, who are presumably normative. Regardless, the grotesqueness of a clown is what makes him distinctly and irrefutably the 'other', thus allowing him to transcend the mimetic structure of a performance and therefore link himself to the world of the audience. "The audience laughs at the 'otherness' of the clown both because he is not like them and because he is not like the normative characters in the fiction." Feste will actively participate in both plots and be sure to keep everyone in check, but by doing so he will set himself apart from each of the characters and their relationships. With "cucullus non facit monachum" he is also begging the audience to become active watchers and active minds, to be open-minded participants in the play and beyond. He is asking the audience to be compassionate, therefore establishing himself as a positive force to which the audience can attach themselves.

The fool in *King Lear*, simply and aptly named Fool, has been interpreted a number of ways, but he is one of the first of his kind to be entirely aware of his position as a fool. He comments on the way he is mistreated saying: *I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipped for speaking true; thou'lt have me whipped for lying; and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o'thing than a fool.* And yet, he is the first person in the play to criticize Lear for dividing the kingdom: *and yet I would not be thee, nuncle; thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides, and left nothing i' the middle.* He is not hindered by the threat of punishment, or the concept of a natural order of evil and goodness. Lear seems preposterous to the Fool, with his black-and-white view of the world and desire for rational order driving him mad, "but the Fool does not desert his ridiculous, degraded king, and accompanies him on his way to madness."<sup>37</sup> The relationship between the two has often been played as a tender friendship of codependency, and the Fool will occasionally be portrayed as Lear's puppet, so that he keeps himself in check.

Harold Bloom explains in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* that "the Fool... humanizes Lear, and makes the dread king accessible to us," he balances the enormity of Lear's claims to power and his inaccessible sense of grandeur, and he acts as a sort of voice of reason

that the audience can relate to. “You could remove the Fool... and not alter much in the way of plot structures,” says Bloom, “but you would remove our surrogates from these plays, for the Fool... [is the true voice] of our feelings.”<sup>38</sup> Above all, the Fool acts as a contrary to the very idea that the world is ruled by rational structure or that our lives are somehow fated. His mission is to show us that we are all fools.



Karel Dujardin, *Commedia dell'Arte show* (1657)

Around the same time Shakespeare was writing his fools, another predecessor to the modern clown was developing in Commedia dell'Arte. A form of half-masked improvisational comedy, Commedia dell'Arte came into popularity in Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and flourished for nearly two hundred years. Traveling troupes of performers would set up simple stages in public spaces and perform improvised shows based on a hierarchical structure of stock characters, with each character representing a different member of society. The characters were numerous, but the most common and popular characters were the wealthy Pantalone, the scheming servant Arlecchino (Harlequin), the boastful soldier Capitano, the know-it-all

doctor, and the young lovers (whose unattainable love typically drive the story). Each performer would typically play the same character over and over, honing their repertoire of jokes, stunts, and relationships with the other characters. While every character had comedic bits, or lazzi, to perform, the most significant influences on clowning were the Zanni, the bumbling servants.

The name Zanni is a diminutive form of the name Giovanni, and refers to the young peasant men looking for any sort of work in the city. According to John Rudlin, behind the earnest, hardworking, and foolish Zanni “stands the terrible reality of a population uprooted and crushed. For many, migration to the very cities which had caused the disaster was the only option.”<sup>39</sup> While these migrant workers were often disliked by Venetians, these were characters with which the poor populations could sympathize, whose willingness to help their master but inability to accomplish simple tasks or climb out of the lowest rung of society related to the frustrations of poverty and desperation. My experience with Zanni began with a workshop at the American College Theater Festival, where I and two other curious souls played with masks and walked around all silly under the guidance of John Bellomo, artistic director of the Ombelico Mask Ensemble. In a few short hours, we covered the basics of walking and behaving as Zanni. We capped off the session with a classic Lazzo scenario in which two Zanni must retrieve a chair for Pantalone. The Zanni figure the best solution to this task is to push the chair, and so each pushes the chair from opposite ends. Of course the chair does not budge, so they switch sides, again a fruitless effort. They attempt to lift the chair, one pulling while standing atop it, the other pushing from the bottom. Still, no luck. On and on this goes, the Zanni trying everything from sawing the chair in half with their hands to seducing the chair with their best love poem; until eventually Pantalone shouts “Zanni, bring me my chair *now!*” and the Zanni, startled by their master’s voice and the urgency of the task, pick up the chair and run off stage as if it were nothing, accompanied by hearty laughter.

Our instructor John explained that in the heightened reality of the Zanni, they must create their own logic to then be challenged. For example, he donned his mask and crossed the stage confidently, tripping over an invisible object halfway across. He addressed the audience

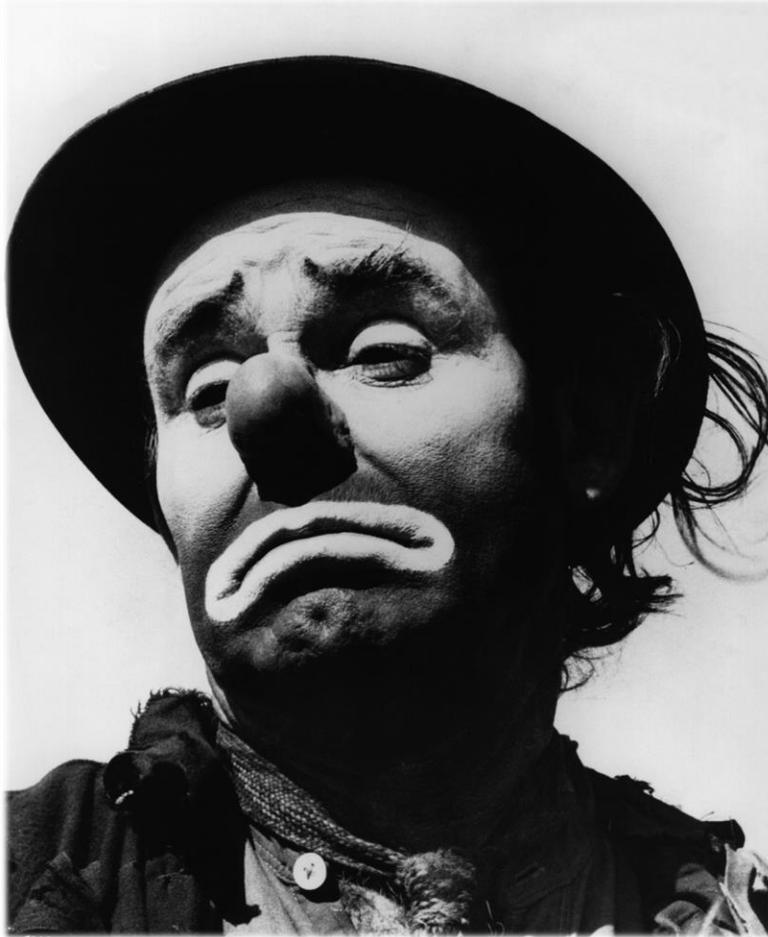
with a look, confirming with us that there was something odd in this reality, and continued on his way. When he walked back across the stage, he once again tripped over an unknown assailant. Now that he has established the logic that there is an obstacle in the middle of the stage, on his third try he takes great care to step over that particular spot, with chuckles of encouragement from the audience. Once he has crossed the boundary, he trips yet again a few steps later, reaffirming the ludicrous nature of the scenario. And for whatever reason this simple invented problem is really funny. These performers must use their wealth of experience with the characters to invent scenarios which will garner a reaction and develop an improvised relationship with an audience, just as Nalleslavski suggests clowns must do.

Commedia, which spread through Italy and France, had a huge influence over the development of English Pantomime, a musical comedy production that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century began to feature a set of stock characters based around the love interest of Harlequin (formerly Arlechinno) and Columbine. The harlequinade as it was known, followed a basic structure: the nimble, acrobatic Harlequin would try to elope with Columbine, but her father, Pantaloon (Pantalone), tries to keep them apart. Pantaloon's servants, Clown and Pierrot, would be playing tricks on him all the while. Over time, the harlequinade would become much more important, and Harlequin would become more and more romantic and less mischievous, while Clown would become an agent of chaos and fun. The biggest transformation to Clown was with performer Joseph Grimaldi, who changed the character from a ragged country bumpkin to a scheming villain in colorful tassels and garish makeup.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the word *clown* came into popular English usage, and defined a more witty and capable entertainer than the rustic, boorish peasant it used to describe.

The circus brought a new variety of clowns to the stage, and while the circus is typically a place where clowns provide simple comic entertainment more than social commentary, it began the development of clowning in North America. Circus clowns are generally separated into three categories: the white faced clown, the red-faced Auguste, and the character clown. White face clowns, who don a large ruffled collar and pointed hat, typically act as the straight men in a clown gag. Auguste clowns, who wear oversized shoes, floppy ties, and false noses,

are usually on the receiving end of a pie to the face. These clowns have developed into characters like Bozo and Krusty the Clown from *The Simpsons*, and are commonly seen at birthday parties. The character clown, as the name implies, perform as a clown character such as a police officer or a self-important musician, but the most iconic is the tramp or hobo character. Clowns such as Emmett Kelly and Red Skelton are prime examples of this hobo clown in more popular media, both of whom played ragged, insular characters with scraggly beards representative of the hundreds of men who rode the rails in search of work during the great depression. Kelly portrayed the tragically sad clown Weary Willie, who performed stunts and gags, but always with a demeanor that exaggerated the futility of his actions rather than the eagerness to succeed. In an iconic appearance on the *Carol Burnett Show*, he shared a gentle friendship with Carol's clown character, allowing Kelly to express a sincere want for comfort and companionship. This appealed to a sympathetic audience, and was a stepping stone towards the more poetic clowns developed in the later part of the century.

The modern reimagining of the clown began most notably with the actor and mime Jacques Lecoq, who established a French school for physical theater in 1956 called L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq. There he developed the beginnings of a theory of the inner clown, a sort of playful nature that everyone can cultivate via the removal of social masks, derived from the vulnerability of the individual and not invented by the actor. Poetic, morose, thoughtful, gentle, and empathetic clowns have all been brought to the forefront with this mentality. The concept of the inner clown is one of the most practiced and preached today, and has led to the development of the clown as a means of personal expression in performance art, but also as a means of building confidence and empathy in the professional world. Clowning has been taught in workshops all over the world in a theatrical context, but also in the context of personal development and well-being. It has been used to revitalize a sense of empathy in people, to break down a fear of failure and restructure a comfort with vulnerability.



Emmett Kelly as Weary Willie<sup>41</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, clown teachers and practitioners are pushing even further beyond the personal clown. Jon Davison, a clown philosopher and performer, writes that “Lecoq’s contemporary personal clown, born of the 60s, sustained itself for half a century on our obsession with self. Now, in the 21st century, our inner self is no more, we are all public knowledge in a globalised, viralised world where anyone or anything can be clown - man, woman, child, cat, dog... No need to look inside. All it takes is the right framing.”<sup>42</sup> In this sense, clowns are edging towards a reduction of personal expression, perhaps even in opposition to it, and more into the emphasis of laughter and silliness as a unifying factor in the human experience.

#### IV

#### Clowns in the New Millennium



Over the last twenty years, the social importance and relevance of the clown has become more and more pronounced, and for good reason. Clowns are becoming increasingly prominent practitioners of cathartic laughter, especially in the medical field and places like Greece, where refugees are flooding in from Syria and Iraq. Puddles Pity Party has brought clowning back into the limelight via the internet, and TV shows like *Baskets* have highlighted the struggle of a clown performer to adapt to a modern audience. Furthermore, clowns have been grouping together and organizing public protests, using their otherness and silliness to mock and unite against the established social order.

A career spanning four decades and counting as a physician, educator, activist, and clown has made Hunter “Patch” Adams a key advocate for compassion in the medical field, as well as for the social unity of laughter. “He’s not just a goofy guy in a clown nose tweaking the beard of hospital administrators who try to rein him in,” he is a man on a very serious mission to bring holistic medical treatment to as many people as he can reach, especially if that means being silly. “When you ask people what they like about life,” Adams says, “they talk about the fun they have, whether it’s racing cars, working in the garden, dancing or writing books. People crave laughter as if it were an essential amino acid. But humor is often denied in the adult world. In the business, religious, medical and academic worlds, the stress is on seriousness and significance, as though humor is inappropriate. Human beings connect through humor, and deep connection creates health.”<sup>43</sup> That may sound like hippie nonsense, and some of his suggestions seem ludicrous – he once recommended having a barf-along with a bulimic friend – but perhaps that is the point: to encourage the practice of radical tenderness and embracing instead of ignoring people in need.

His approach to laughter treatment is not unique. While humor is a difficult thing to analyze in its entirety, the relationship of laughter to physical and emotional wellbeing can be readily observed. According to the Cancer Treatment Centers of America, laughter can be used as a tool for stimulating oxygen intake and exercising the respiratory and circulatory systems, keeping the heart, lungs, and nervous system active and healthy. It also triggers the release of endorphins, which relieve pain and induce feelings of pleasure or euphoria.<sup>44</sup> Patch has inspired

numerous organizations to bring clowning to hospitals, and offer healing laughter and gentle fun to children and others at their lowest. These qualities have also been utilized by people such as Dr. Madan Kataria, who began an exercise routine called Laughter Yoga, the major tenet of which is that laughter stimulates circulatory and mental health, and does not need to rely on humor. This not-so-radical movement of laughter yogis practice movements such as 'lawnmower laughter', where the participants pretend to pull the starter cord on a lawnmower, forcing laughter to imitate the sound of the engine starting. Once the 'lawnmowers' are running, everyone walks around, bumping into each other and doing a very poor job of mowing their imaginary lawns. The laughs that were forced at the beginning become genuine yelps of pleasure as the group participates in a ridiculous game together, not only improving their personal health, but bonding as a group as well.

Patch Adams also leads numerous yearly clowning excursions to various places around the world. Ever since 1985, he has been taking groups of clowns to orphanages, hospitals, and refugee camps in countries such as Morocco, Russia, and Mexico. In the same vein as Patch, an organization called Clowns Without Borders (CWB) has made it their mission to bring the healing and compassionate power of laughter to those who need it most. They define themselves as a "non-profit organization which offers laughter to relieve the suffering of all persons, especially children, who live in areas of crisis including refugee camps, conflict zones and other situations of adversity."<sup>45</sup> This organization has conducted missions at refugee camps in Greece, youth prisons in South Sudan, and hundreds of communities around the world where people live in or have experienced conditions of severe poverty, hunger, and violence. While they do not provide food, money, security, medical care, or any immediate relief to their audiences, the emotional relief that they provide supports and potentially begins the rehabilitation process of those who have been severely wounded. "Colonialism, dictatorship, racism, religious dogmatism, rigid social conformity, and emotional alienation will never be overcome by humor alone, [but] laughter can play a role in subverting their impact."<sup>46</sup> And as Patch said in an interview, "we are not the answer; we are a stimulant to ask questions... I entered medicine to use it as a vehicle for social change"<sup>47</sup>. While his change may seem minor and incremental, it is a necessary source of hope for many.

As discussed earlier, clowns and the image of clown is not terribly popular in America. The red nose and other tropes are seen as overplayed or too clichéd to be meaningful, but a few people are reevaluating the clown costume and behavior in order to connect to a burnt-out audience of the internet age. Mike Geier, the man behind Puddles Pity Party, is a towering figure with a golden baritone voice, coming to fame in 2013 when he teamed up with the internet sensation Postmodern Jukebox to cover the pop hit “Royals”. He dons the frilly costume of a classic whiteface circus clown, but with a sullen demeanor not too unlike that of Emmett Kelly. He slowly saunters on stage, silently interacting with and invading the personal space of his audience. “At one point, he collects cellphones and redistributes them among the crowd, inspiring giggles that quickly become a very modern kind of panic,” says New York Times columnist and fan Jason Zinoman, “He confronts the crowd, slowly creating tension and suspense. What makes him transcend the trope [of the terrifying clown] is his vulnerability. When you first see him charging down the aisle, he’s an intimidating figure, but his body is actually not aggressive. It slumps, passively. When he asks for a hug, it looks as if he really needs it.”<sup>48</sup>



Puddles the Clown crooning<sup>49</sup>

Puddles perhaps connects to an audience that feels the weight of broken dreams and failure, or at least the constant fear of it. He projects a nervous energy that brings up memories of pre-adolescent stage fright. The anxiety that energizes the room is derived from the sheer excitement and terror of being picked as a volunteer, the possibility that one might be forced to make a fool of oneself on stage. In an age of cultivating an image and projecting a sense of self via social media outlets, Puddles activates that anxiety, but he also suggests that being a fool can pay off, considering his incredible talent and rousing renditions of popular and powerful songs. Puddles dusts off the classic clown costume and an attitude reminiscent of the self-reflective European clowns of the 60's, but with a revitalized idea of what a clown can be, a focus on vulnerability that everyone can relate to, and so far, the message is driving home.

Similarly, the 2016 show *Baskets* stars Zach Galifianakis as Chip Baskets, a pretentious clown school dropout who, dedicated to his art, takes an underpaying job as a rodeo clown in his home town. He even takes on a protégé, his coworker and Insane Clown Posse enthusiast, in order to perpetuate his genius. The show banks on dark humor and rather than being a sympathetic look at a depressed artist, it highlights the interactions Chip Baskets has with the cast of supporting characters, all of whom are better clowns than he is in their own respect. Self-obsessed and wrapped in his own ideas of grandeur, Chip shows very little compassion for his friends and family members, who tolerate his rudeness seemingly to no end. The monotone and timid Costco employee Martha drives Chip around and puts up with his verbal abuse and severe lack of gratitude with little comment. Chip's mother Christine, played by Louie Anderson, is a "character whose dottiness and endless chattering are defense mechanisms developed over a life of disappointment"<sup>50</sup>, and while she can be a silly caricature of a doting mother, Christine presents a character who is deeply and truly compassionate.

That is not to say Chip does not have his moments. When Chip's niece comes home from school upset about her dance routine, which her classmates laughed at, Chip encourages her to take that opportunity to laugh in the face of her misgivings. He says that if you are a bad dancer, dance badly on purpose "so no matter what terrible thing happens in your life, it doesn't matter, because you're in on the joke".<sup>51</sup> Beyond being a great lesson for his niece, it is

a moment of overwhelming self-realization for Chip, who discovers a newfound passion for parenting and a revitalized hope to sift through the swamp of failure, but it is quickly beaten down by the news that his wife has left to return to France. The show returns to its depressing cycle, with new failures to overcome, but it hints at the spirit of clowning that the show tries to convey: we are all fools, so it is best to laugh at our own shortcomings. While Chip fails at being a clown (failing at failing, a seemingly impossible feat), he shines when he lets himself show his vulnerability and respond to the vulnerability of others.



Zach Galifianakis in *Baskets*, 2016<sup>52</sup>

Clowning may be about the good fun that diverts and refreshes, as well as the fun that lets us be vulnerable with each other, but it is also about the bad fun, the beautiful trouble that disturbs comfortable assumptions about the world and violates taboo. Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a sporadic rise in the popularity of clown groups such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), who have used their unique brand of

silliness and humor in the practice of social and political activism. Just this year, a right-wing vigilante patrol group called the Soldiers of Odin has organized to protect their community of Tampere, Finland, against incoming asylum seekers. In response, a clown group called the Loldiers of Odin has been taunting the leather-clad nationalists “to the accompanying tunes of a decrepit accordion and with one clown portraying Odin as a bearded buffoon in a dressing gown and a plastic horned faux-Viking hat.”<sup>53</sup> In an attempt to scrutinize and parody the Soldiers, The Loldiers employ the art of clowning in order to criticize anti-immigration fervor and make the vigilante patrols seem ridiculous. This attitude of ridicule is, as Charlie Chaplin put it, “an attitude of defiance. We must laugh at our helplessness against the forces of nature or go insane.”<sup>54</sup> As opposed to simply mocking another group, however righteous that action may seem, the attitude of ridicule and pointing out the injustice of a situation can be a unifying factor as well. The Loldiers, who are still an active group of rabble-rousers in the street and the internet, are an example of how people can make fools of themselves as a group for the purpose of shining a light on folly, collectively undermining the authority of fear, rather than focusing on a personal expression of ‘inner clown’.

In an earlier effort to diffuse tension and employ ridicule for a positive outcome, the aforementioned group CIRCA interacted with Scottish police who were monitoring the G8 Alternatives protests in 2005. A line of officers and a line of clowns faced off and after an enthusiastic countdown, the police and clowns ran towards each other, the clowns’ hands outstretched. After a moment of confusion, the two groups ran into each other’s arms, Clowns hugging police officers and officers hugging clowns. “Everyone is a bit surprised, there is a roar of celebratory cheers from the clowns and slightly sheepish and embarrassed applause from the police... somehow, this group of clowns managed to persuade the police to play a game with them.”<sup>55</sup> They almost effortlessly broke down a barrier of authority with the most basic action of compassion: a simple hug. Rather than “merely confronting his/her oppressors, s/he acknowledges their physical presence and gives them respect as fellow human beings.”<sup>56</sup> This shows a departure from typical confrontations between demonstrators and figures of authority, instigated by the clown’s ability to subvert. A clown exists outside of typical power structures, and they can use that natural insubordination to unify.



The Loldiers of Odin<sup>57</sup>

While CIRCA has been fairly inactive over the last few years, an internet organization called Clownsec keeps the spirit of rebel clowning alive to some extent. Clownsec, as defined by their website, “is the natural evolution of activists, street artists, hackers, phreaks, geeks, pranksters, urban explorers, musicians and various other freedom fighters who show their appreciation for humor in an otherwise dreary world of protest and hactivism.”<sup>58</sup> While they encourage people to “Honk the Planet” and spread a message of lighthearted insubordination, their tone is notably more sinister, freely taking on the image of the terrifying, murderous clown, and encouraging people to participate in ‘direct action’ activism, solving problems yourself rather than petitioning authorities or relying on external institutions. They proselytize personal liberty, expression of self, and participation to whatever capacity in their Clown Army (‘Resistance if Fertile!’). Considering their strong internet presence and ability to spread information anonymously from their screens, Clownsec inhabit a space of vague insubordination which corresponds to the liminal nature of the clown. “This is a radical departure from the confrontation of demonstrators and authority and here are the beginnings

of disruption of power relations. As such the clown is utterly subversive: through him/her the boundaries that give authority its power disappear; by making him/herself impossible to categorise s/he inhabits a place outside these power relations. In a way s/he becomes untouchable." For better or worse, the internet allows for a new way to play with and against categorization, and these clowns naturally capitalize on that opportunity.

As the late, great Abbie Hoffman said, "One of the worst mistakes any revolution can make is to become boring. It leads to rituals as opposed to games, cults as opposed to communities and the denial of human rights as opposed to freedom."<sup>59</sup> While some might think it inappropriate to clown in times of strife and chaos, I would argue that is when we need clowns the most. While they may not provide the most basic of necessities, those who play the fool remind us to laugh at our shortcomings instead of hide them, to treat ourselves and others with the compassion we all need, and to never underestimate the power of comic *relief*. Clowns have been able to adapt to the information age with ease, and the capacity for clowns to teach us how to let go of our self-absorption and roll around on the floor, pretend to mow the lawn, or just hug a weary cop is something that has perhaps never been more necessary. Beyond Charlie Chaplin's attitude of defiance lies a greater function of humor, the capacity to unite an audience of individuals into a resilient community, freeing people from an isolation that is so common in modern life. At its basest, most visceral level, clowning and humor is directly linked to the instinct to survive. "As great clowns like Chaplin have proven, a universal thread has linked our common sense of humor to our common sense of humanity"<sup>60</sup>, and as Avner the Eccentric tells his clown students, "everyone inhales, but many of us need to be reminded to exhale"<sup>61</sup>. This has always been the job of the clown, and it will continue to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Conclusion

I am interested in the capacity for a clown to stir up a positive emotional response in people, just as the springy entertainer in *Saltimbanco* did for me so many years ago. I think anyone and everyone can clown, and that silliness is vitally important to our social dynamic. In order to encourage people to clown, I've tried my hand at leading clown workshops with the university drama club, in the style of a workshop I participated in at the American College Theater Festival. We played games that allowed us to be silly with our bodies and explore the boundaries of physical and emotional comfort. We contorted ourselves, showed off simple 'talents', and tried out laughter yoga, which was incredibly effective as a social lubricant and emotional leveler. We played games inspired by CIRCA to unify us in group foolishness, and worked on improvisational situations to develop a relationship with the audience and work out how to feel a room and follow the laughter of a crowd. Most of the participants were admittedly rather anxious about clowns before the workshop, but I think a few open minds jumped on the bandwagon by the end.

In order to bring the message to a wider audience, I used my BFA senior art show as an outlet for expressing my earnest desire to get people to appreciate the clown beyond the stereotypes and fears that word evokes. I presented a bowl of red foam noses for gallery visitors to try on in a mirror, as well as a 'Backpocket Handbook for Everyday Clowning', which gave tips for clowning in daily life. Other things included a poem, a few photos with subjects pertaining to laughter and everyday silliness, and a piñata shaped like a banana, which invited people to take a swing and let off some steam. The purpose of the work was to engage people in that sense of play and the willingness to be foolish in order to distract from or alter reality. The show brought levity to a space usually occupied by pondering faces and critical discussion, and the response was positive from professors, peers, and parents alike. From what I gather speaking to visitors and watching people goof around in front of the mirror, I think the noses helped activate something in people that I like to think was there all along: the need to digest the academic, intellectual atmosphere of a university art exhibition with a bit of lighthearted fun rather than seriousness and significance. Those presenting their artwork face the looming,

very real fear of failure and shame, and while that fear was tangible in the weeks leading up to the exhibition, I think my show and a number of others encouraged people to exhale a bit.

My message, through all of these outlets, is that clowning is not about floppy shoes or greasy makeup. It isn't about red noses. Clowning is about play. It's the act of allowing oneself to be ridiculous, behaving in an abnormal manner for the purpose of inciting a reaction, for you and the people watching. This reaction is hopefully laughter, but it can also be a manifestation of anxiety, fear, or pain. The most effective clowns are those who use compassion as their primary tool, who take the burdens of failure and shame upon their shoulders and make a joke out of it, to make an ass out of themselves on the off chance that it might make someone's day better. The best clowns revitalize a sense of empathy in people, break down the fear of failure, and help to restructure a comfort with vulnerability. To clown is to laugh in the face of adversity, to hunt for a universal thread that links our humor to our humanity.

Time and time again we see clowns as pillars of the social order, and clowning as an act of subversive defiance, unified catharsis, and poignant criticism. We might not see all of these traits in the birthday party entertainers or juggalos of the world, but the spirit of clowning is by no means a thing of the past, and is still a significant part of our humanity. The *penasar* in Bali and the Mapuche *koyong* clowns make a mockery of the white 'other' not only because making fun of white people is easy and fun, but also to collectively address the struggle of adapting to Western society and maintaining identity in an increasingly globalized world. Shakespeare's fools remind us that we are all quite foolish, and in order to be positive critical thinkers, we must first acknowledge our faults, laugh, and learn from them. The clown is something that has survived the past, adapted and somehow flourished through industrialization, colonization, modernization, and now the internet, accessing what simply reflects the greatest pleasures and pains of being human. Clowns will continue to turn the world over until it is well cooked, will struggle up shit creek with their hands because they gave their paddle to someone else, and they will have great fun doing it.

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