

Culture



Clown Performance in the European One-Ring Circus

Kenneth Little

Volume 1, Number 2, 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077831ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077831ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Little, K. (1981). Clown Performance in the European One-Ring Circus. *Culture*,
1(2), 67–72. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077831ar>

Article abstract

An attempt is made to interpret a clown act, a musical entree, as it was performed in various European one-ring circuses during the earlier part of this century. This interpretation relies on the fact that clowns, as circus actors, attempt to re-create the ordinary, everyday world in a ludic form by scrutinizing our expressions of what is ordinary and everyday. In effect, clowns “defamiliarize” many of our habits of perception. In this way clowns are saying something about our everyday world in a way in which their audience can reflect and thereby come to a better understanding of the world in which they live.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society /
Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1981

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit
(including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be
viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal,
Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to
promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Clown Performance in the European One-Ring Circus

Kenneth Little
University of Virginia

An attempt is made to interpret a clown act, a musical entree, as it was performed in various European one-ring circuses during the earlier part of this century. This interpretation relies on the fact that clowns, as circus actors, attempt to re-create the ordinary, everyday world in a ludic form by scrutinizing our expressions of what is ordinary and everyday. In effect, clowns "defamiliarize" many of our habits of perception. In this way clowns are saying something about our everyday world in a way in which their audience can reflect and thereby come to a better understanding of the world in which they live.

L'auteur tente d'interpréter un numéro de clown, une « entrée » musicale, tel qu'il a été joué sur plusieurs pistes de cirques européens au début du siècle. Cette interprétation est basée sur le fait que le rôle du clown au cirque est de recréer le monde quotidien sous une forme ludique, en soumettant notre notion de ce qui est ordinaire et courant à un examen minutieux. En réalité, le clown « défamiliarise » bon nombre de nos habitudes en ce qui concerne notre façon de percevoir les choses. Ainsi, le clown commente notre monde familier d'une façon qui permet au public d'y réfléchir et de parvenir à une meilleure compréhension du monde dans lequel il vit.

I

This paper addresses itself to the task of an interpretation of a clown performance. I take the position that the clown performance, as a collectively sustained symbolic structure, is an "acted document" or an "acted text" (Geertz, 1973: 3, 14; Ricoeur, 1973), and, as such, is an imaginative work constructed out of social materials (Geertz, 1973: 448-449).

My thoughts about clown performances have been stimulated by Heidegger's intriguing position that "at bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary, it is extraordinary or uncanny." The sense of the uncanny, as I understand it, involves a break with what Schutz (1953) calls the "taken-for-granted typifications and relevancies" of the social world. I will attempt to set out and explore some of the lineaments of a clown performance in hopes that such a task will bring us a bit closer to an understanding of the "play" or "ludic" world within which he works. It may then be possible to explore the clown's diverse expressions of the "ordinary".

I will not touch upon the structural and rule-oriented nature of the communication codes that are being used. This Paul Bouissac (1976: 151-175) has accomplished in an elegant semiotic deconstruction of the clown performance. My intention is to explore the meaning of the clown performance within the context

of a world which the clown is saying something about and which we (the audience) reflect upon, and in reflection, come to understand the everyday world, if only for a moment, in a different light. Stated in another way, as a text, Bouissac suggests that the clown performance is a communication process with discernable codes and messages, the object of a particular structuring, the logic of which can be described and explained. Germane to my analysis in particular, and in general to all considerations of the analysis of performance, is equally serious thinking centered on text and text reference. Clown texts as performative texts not only say something, but they say something about something, a world.

A clown, like all circus performers, has recourse to one of the circus's chief qualities, eccentricity. But whereas the exponents of the serious acts make use of eccentricity in order to create positive, heroic characters, clowns make use of it in order to create ludic, subversive characters. Popov the clown (1970: 81-82) argues this point and more. He suggests that this ludic quality "has become a brilliant and sharp-edged weapon in the hands of the clown. It is not just the weapon of laughter." A clown who is armed with this weapon can introduce conflicts into the ring as no other circus performer can. The eccentric nature of the circus frames the clown's performance in such a way that he can begin to reveal serious social conflicts or moods simultaneously by being funny. To be good, a clown must be funny and serious at the same time.

With these few introductory remarks in mind I will discuss one of the most famous and successful clown acts. It was a musical entree performed in many European one-ring circuses during the 1920's by the Fratellini brothers clown trio (Francois, Paul and Albert). They were each superb comic actors, skilled acrobats and musicians with a lifetime of experiences in these activities.

II

Musical clown entrees vary considerably but they all usually involve the whiteface clown playing a soothing tune on a musical instrument only to be disrupted by the discordant sounds of a less talented partner, the *auguste*. However, while musical entrees may display this particular performance structure, they by no means say the same things. Their power, meaning and significance are created by each clown.

The whiteface clown of the trio was Francois. He was elegant and condescending in the tradition of the authoritarian clown. His costume and makeup were neat and clean. He wore a full silk jumper and his whiteface was marked by delicate red eyebrows and red lips. Less elegant, despite his many efforts to be so, was Paul. He did not wear makeup and his

costume was that of an overdressed accountant; he always appeared in a tuxedo and top hat. His character has often been likened to that of a bureaucrat. "He represented the petty bourgeois forever convinced of his superiority yet always ready to commit some dirty trick when he thinks he can get away with it" (Towsen, 1976: 236). His indignant astonishment and outrage at the sight of the grotesque vagabond Albert would always result in Albert getting hit. Albert was the grotesque tramp. He was considered a naive character. In his penchant for violence, gadgetry and his affinity for the grotesque he was much in the tradition of the *harlequin*. It was Albert's appearance that was shocking. He described himself as a "hairy old ape", a character created by exaggerating certain characteristics often associated with the *auguste*, a large red nose, lips painted thick and black, the areas around his mouth and eyes painted white with a blend of flesh and carmine tones giving colour to the rest of his face. He wore a red wig, big shoes, elaborate head gear, and a ragged yet very colourful costume (Towsen, 1976: 238).

The two more respectable clowns, Francois and Paul, enter the ring, each carrying a guitar or mandolin. They set up two chairs in the center of the ring, but actually sitting on them becomes difficult because each is too polite to sit down before the other does so. They continually bob up and down, issuing a stream of apologies, until one of them finally throws the other down and holds him there until he himself is seated. As they strike the first notes, the spot light mysteriously moves away from them. When they discover its whereabouts, they relocate their chairs accordingly. But again it deserts them. This leads to a chase after the elusive light. They finally pounce on it and, with much effort, "carry" it back to the chairs. At long last, Francois and Paul begin their musical offering, and a pleasant concert it is. Just when the audience is beginning to enjoy these fine instrumentalists, a third part — the grotesque Albert — sneaks in with a large tuba and an enormous musical score, letting forth a large blast that shocks these two serious artists.

The two musicians, of course, are dismayed at Albert's interruption, yet they cannot determine the source of the disturbance. Again the tuba sounds, but this time they spot the intruder, pounce on him, and eject him from the ring. The same business is repeated, with variations, before terminating in a riotous scuffle in which clown gadgetry, including a water-shooting tuba, comes into play. The conclusion to the Fratellini entree is not the obvious chase off, but a rather pleasing concert by all three clowns. (Towsen, 1976: 249-251).

This version of the musical entree juxtaposes two categories of musical sound and social class. The two respectable clowns, Paul and Francois, play small refined stringed instruments. In stark contrast, the grotesque, Albert, plays the largest, clumsiest, and one of the most difficult of the wind instruments, the

tuba. Before they even begin to play, Paul and Francois engage in a prolonged endeavour at proper musical recital behaviour. They adopt the formal manners and style associated with the performances of classical musicians. Their attempt to be serious and serious-minded seems only feeble and ridiculous and ends in a short scuffle between them. Even the spotlight — presumably the same spotlight that would shine on serious musicians in the concert hall — is shocked by their behaviour and it tries to get away from them. However, it is finally caught and brought under their control. After these prolonged negotiations between the musicians and the spotlight, they finally begin to play their music. Soon after they have begun they are once again interrupted, this time by Albert with his large tuba and music score. He, his tuba and his music score appear to be out of place. The *allegria*, in this sense, gives way to the buffoon. The sound of his tuba “blast” radically contrasts with the sophisticated and controlled sounds of the stringed instruments and it shocks Paul and Francois. Albert has butted in uninvited. The other two finally eject Albert from the ring. The whole thing is repeated and in one of the ensuing scuffles, Albert’s instrument is turned into a “water-shooting” tuba. Albert’s behaviour is uncontrolled. Compared to the behaviour of Paul and Francois, he seems to be a man totally lacking in manners and severely deficient of “culture”. Albert’s animal-like, uncontrolled blast on the tuba is like “passing wind”, and uninhibited flatulence that embarrasses the two musicians. He does not prescribe to their standard of propriety. Instead, his wind scatters things and meanings, yet in the confusion reveals a glimpse of a counterpole to spirit: nature with the purpose and intelligence of instinct rather than reason, which cannot be accommodated to bourgeois rational understanding. However, after all of this they finally decide to sit and play a short concert together. The act is over.

The Fratellinis’ act draws on certain cultural themes — order, insensitivity, violence, rage — and orders them in such a way as to fashion a view of their essential nature and power in a capitalist society. Their act is constructed in such a way that those who are watching may see the Fratellinis not only as funny but in a deeper sense, meaningful. When Albert attempts to join these elegant musicians, a class war ensues.

Francois and Paul are social creations of the “comfortable” if not the “well to do” classes. They delight in formality and politeness and attempt to dominate, through acts of coercion and violence, every object (the spotlight) and person (Albert) that either disobeys them or gets in the way of their “artistic” pursuits. Albert is subjected to the violence (in the form of slaps and kicks) of the sophisticated

two. This seems to be an expression of hatred and repulsion of the “natural” Albert who expresses his “naturalness” by naively crossing the boundaries of bourgeois politeness, etiquette and propriety in his hope of being able to play in the concert too. It is not completely clear whether Albert is sincerely naive about the value systems of Paul and Francois and attempts to join them simply by participating, or whether he intentionally tries to disrupt their performance because he was not invited to join. Either way he exposes them for what they are, not artists, but authoritarian and violent keepers of a particular ideology and value of art.

Albert’s dirty, uncultured physical presence is an expression of the low social standing which is attributed to him. Both his manners and appearance testify to his closeness to nature. Similarly, his tuba is his weapon and because of the peculiar way in which he uses it (by squirting water on his two elegant offenders in retaliation for being mishandled) it serves to further identify him, and objects associated with him, with nature rather than with bourgeois culture.

However, by the end of the act the life of authority and domination (centered in bourgeois culture) over the lower classes and nature seems to have diminished. Albert’s presence, since they can not get rid of him, must be reluctantly accepted. They make do with him and his grotesque musical instrument and allow him to join in the music making.

This particular activity is an effective statement about life the way the “well to do” have and would prefer to keep it; i.e., always within their control. This is indicated in the amount of trouble the culturally unacceptable Albert had in trying to accomplish the task of playing his musical instrument in the company of culturally “acceptable” musicians. Albert’s acceptance into this little musical group appropriates much of the possible power of criticism of the bourgeoisie he, or others like him, may possess as members of another class. He has been, in a sense, co-opted.

The act as a whole questions bourgeois ideology and values and questions people’s desire for them. These matters bear serious consideration for the humanity of ideology of this bourgeois class, the Fratellini’s suggest in their act, is seriously lacking. They may value art, be artistic, and consider themselves the only true possessors of culture, but art, besides its aesthetic value, seems also to define and defend the boundaries of their bourgeois ideology. One purpose of the bourgeois notion of art that overrides much of its humanity and creativity is that it is an instrument of symbolic domination and violence; it is a use of art that serves to neglect the concerns of a major class of people within capitalist society.

This particular interpretation seems all the more

valid if we consider for a moment the Fratellinis' politics. They were the trusted companions of French intellectuals during the 1920's. The theatrical avant-garde saw the Fratellinis as proof of the possibility of using the theatre as a stage for political, social and cultural change. They taught their clowning methods and techniques in student theatre workshops. They supported and performed in various experimental theatres throughout France during the 1920's and 1930's. They believed that their art could be understood as more than just comic entertainment. This lesson was learned during the eleven years they spent in Russia, just prior to the Russian Revolution, before they achieved popularity in France (Mariel, 1923; Townsen, 1976: 251).

One important interpretation of why this act is so powerful is that it combines bourgeois social class and ideology with culture, culture with violence, violence with the destruction of those persons and things that are serious obstacles in the way of those who are in a position to dominate. Through the force of the Fratellinis' imaginations, a dimension of our everyday world not normally reflected upon is brought into light.

III

There is no systematic record of clown performances. My interpretation of this performance is therefore tentative primarily because it is based solely on the analysis of a written description. Such a description highlights only a few of the major sequences of events. However, even written descriptions of clown performances can be analysed here as more than metaphor, as well as metaphorically. Clowns are involved in the very definition of our world. They are essential to our world of everyday experience and to the understanding of it.

Within the everyday world of experience we rely upon things being what they appear to be. They must be what they are for that is the only determinant logical way in which the world can be put together, or at least this is what we place reliance on. However, within a clown's performance, appearances can never be trusted, things cannot be relied on for what they appear to be, which means there is always the possibility that during his performance we may be mistaken by what we see. The clown's created world is composed of familiar objects and events and yet the categories we have developed for them no longer apply. We are drawn into a world that appears familiar. But the everyday world, and with it our biases for emotional, psychological and social security, are "played" with in an apparently arbitrary and yet uncanny shifting of optics. And here is where a clown's performance makes an extraordinary statement.

If within our experience of the mundane world we are mistaken by appearances and things can be other than what they appear to be, we cannot be aware that this is the case for such mistakes would be invisible to us. All that we would see would be our intrusion into the world of misguided or violent actions, poor judgment, funny predicaments, etc. Now all of these are the constant companions of human life. This is one of the reasons why we laugh at clowns during their performances. The clown mirrors all of these things.

We as audience laugh at a clown because everything seems to go wrong for him. He seems to lack the knowledge and the ability to do even the simplest things "right" and in this sense he is funny. When, for example, the Fratellini brothers, Francois and Paul attack Albert, in what the former two consider to be blatant interference with their musical performance, it is clear that their actions are funny and can be interpreted as a statement about their relationship with their clown partner, Albert.

However, a clown's performance simultaneously raises the spectre that the apparent determinism in the everyday world just might be coming apart, its meaning for us unravelling into personal or social snares of delusion, dilemmas and conflicts that we often fail to recognize.

It might be the Fratellini brothers we see in the circus ring but we also see an indignant bourgeoisie who feel a privileged right to dominate and, if necessary, impose their authority on those who inadvertently or innocently trespass into a domain of culture that the former consider their own. Paul and Francois are temporarily transformed into mock exemplars of the bourgeoisie whose rightful members their behaviour is modelled on. Albert "becomes" a member of the lowest class in capitalist society, a tramp.

What has happened, is that the Fratellini brothers have created an imaginary world in which their behaviour is framed in accordance with a set of cultural or social premises that belong rightfully to another world on which the imaginary one is patterned. This is the essence of their art. It is an imaginary creation or what Bateson (1972) calls a "play frame".

Huzinga (1955) defines "play" as a completely voluntary activity marked off from "ordinary life" by its own course, order and meaning. Accordingly a clown performance, if it is to be considered play, must break down the determinism of the ordinary world and reassemble a model of it from a clown's eyes. Turner (1977a: 35) has pointed out in commenting on the ideas presented in Goffman's book *Frame Analysis*, that:

To look at itself a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection. To do this it must set up a frame within

which images and symbols can be remodelled and rearranged.

Indeed, this is what is accomplished by the clown.

Imaginative though they are, the clown act obviously is not entirely a product of the clown's imagination. The acts he stages and the characters he creates and animates are patterned on themes from the everyday world. In Basso's (1979: 41) terms these themes are:

... slices of unjoking activity that he employs in the capacity of a model or what I propose to call a *primary text*. Drawn from various sectors of community life, the strips of "serious" behavior furnish the raw materials from which joking performances are fashioned. Consequently any actual performance may be said to consist in the construction and presentation of a *secondary text* that is intended to be understood as a facsimile or transcribed copy of the primary text on which it is patterned.

A clown performance, as a secondary text, conveys a message that could not possibly be as effectively conveyed if the theme it is patterned after were performed in a serious manner. In the event that a clown act were taken seriously or literally it would instantly stop being funny and would stand open to interpretation as an instance of a primary text upon which it was intended to be modeled. The only way a clown can be successfully serious is if he is successfully funny. Hence the line between being funny and dangerous is a thin one. It is the difference, for example, between impressing an audience with a fact and propaganda.

A successful clown act must be simultaneously funny and serious. But there always remains the risk for a clown that his act will resemble too closely the primary texts upon which they are modeled and be interpreted as too serious. When a clown shatters the play frame the consequences are disaster. Making use of his years dedicated to developing a range of stylized body movements, facial expressions and gestures into the form of a ludic personality, a clown "plays" with our commonplace world of habit and reframes it to take on meanings that are otherwise hidden from us by just those habits of thought and action. His play frame bears his stamp of aesthetic identification. He invents the new occurrences of meaning and metaphor and adapts them for his own expressive purposes, requirements and the particular occasion of their use.

IV

A clown's performance is a leisure time activity usually set apart from the ordinary course of life. If therefore has most always found its place outside of the realm of everyday, practical affairs but usually

stands in a live reflexive relationship to those affairs. In other words, a clown has always been most successful when considered by his audience to be funny, popular, comparatively innovent, and no real offense to them or the society at large. But, while he is meant to be funny, there always remains the fact that underlying his jokes and gags there is a deeper message about the state of things within society. It is either a message about fashion, fad, politics, economics, cultural values, specific popular personalities, life-style, etc. Any one or a combination of these themes can be the focus of a clown's comments. A closer reflection on this message allows us (the audience), through a clown's performance, to take a closer look at society and our individual places within it.

Accordingly, a clown's message is, in Geertz's (1973: 441) estimation, a "metasocial commentary." It is a story that a clown tells members of the society about themselves. His performance works, "by disarranging semantic contexts in such a way that properties conventionally ascribed to certain things are unconventionally ascribed to others, which are seen then actually to possess them" (Geertz, 1973: 447). What a clown's performance does, is question both our ordinary world as we (the audience) perceive it, and our habits of perception. Scklovsky (1965: 12) argues that:

Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war... and art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *story*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.

A clown's performance, as an artistic endeavour, accomplishes such a "defamiliarization". The implication of this statement is that we, the audience, as actors in society, are often so numbed by habit that we see without really perceiving. It requires a certain squint of discordance, something the clown performance accomplishes, to make us reflect and become, even if only for a moment, clear-sighted observers of ourselves in the world.

If entertainment, as Turner (1977b: 73) explains, "literally means 'holding between', that is, 'liminalizing', then a clown's performance is truly entertainment. A clown holds up for us an imaginary model of our everyday world of experience from within which he scrutinizes and criticizes his audience's society and cultural values. In doing so, he also stretches our perceptions and holds them taut for one moment longer so that we may see the world from his eyes. And though we may laugh at what we appear to see, is the

joke he performs, if we do not watch carefully, not on us?

REFERENCES

BASSO, Keith H.

1979 *Portraits of The Whiteman: Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols Among the Western Apache*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

BATESON, Gregory

1972 *A Theory of Play and Fantasy*. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York, Ballantine Books: 177-193.

BOUISSAC, Paul

1976 *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

GEERTZ, Clifford

1973 *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*. In *Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books: 412-453.

GOFFMAN, Erving

1974 *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York, Harper and Row.

HUZINGA, Johan

1955 *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Boston, Beacon Press.

MARIEL, Pierre

1923 *Les Fratellini : Histoire de Trois Clowns*, Paris, Société Anonyme d'Éditions.

POPOV, Oleg

1970 *Russian Clown*, Macdonald Press.

RICOEUR, Paul

1973 *The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text*, *New Literary History*, 5: 91-120.

SCHUTZ, Alfred

1953 *Common Sense and Scientific Interpretation in Human Action*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 14: 1-37.

SHKLOVSKY, Victor

1965 *Art as Technique*. In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, L.T. Lemon and M.J. Reis (eds.), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press: 3-24.

TOWSEN, John H.

1976 *Clowns*, New York, Hawthorn Books.

TURNER, Victor

1977a *Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*. In *Performance and Postmodern Culture*, M. Benamou and C. Caramello (eds.), Madison, University of Wisconsin Press: 33-55.

1977b *Process, System and Symbol: A New Anthropological Synthesis*, *Daedalus*, 106 (3): 61-80.