

On performance, carnival, and the sacred clown

Three arts-led approaches to disrupting cultural hegemony through the transgressing and renegotiating of boundaries

Performance

Source: *Performance* by Diana Taylor

*“For me, performance art is a conceptual ‘territory’ with fluctuating weather and borders; a **place where contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox are not only tolerated, but also encouraged.** The borders of our ‘performance country’ are open to nomads, migrants, hybrids, and outcasts.”*

–Guillermo Gómez-Peña, performance artist, writer, activist, and educator

Performance is not always about art. It’s a wide-ranging and difficult practice to define and holds many, at times conflicting, meanings and possibilities. (6) Not simply an act or action, but an existential condition: an ontology. (3)

Performance can be understood as process—as **enactment, exertion, intervention, and expenditure.** (8) Rather than a single, vanishing act, we can also think of performance as an ongoing repertoire of **gestures and behaviors that get reenacted or reactivated** again and again, often without us being aware of them. (10)

Doing is fundamental for human beings who learn through imitation, repetition, and internalizing the actions of others. Though essential to socialization, there is a conservative potential to mimetic repetition. Performance artist Maris Bustamante writes: “We human beings are born clinging to each other and fundamentally programmed to reproduce what we are taught. Submitted to this programming, in this sense, we are victims of what others have made us. Or to put it another way, **we are not ourselves, we are... them.**” (13)

Performance, however, is not limited to mimetic repetition. It also includes **the possibility of change, critique, and creativity within frameworks of repetition.** (15)

From forms such as performance art, dance, and theater, to sociopolitical and cultural practices such as sports, ritual, political protest, military parades, and funerals, all have reiterative elements that are actualized in every new instantiation. **These practices usually have their own structures, conventions, and styles that clearly bracket and separate them**

from other social practices of daily life. In short, performance implies **a set of meanings and conventions.** (16)

Carnival

Source: *A Paradise Built in Hell* by Rebecca Solnit

*“Carnival celebrated **temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order**; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed... People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced.”*

–Mikhail Bakhtin, philosopher, literary critic and scholar

Disaster and revolution both create in some sense a carnival – **an upheaval and a meeting ground.** Carnival makes sense as revolution too: an overthrow of the established order under which we are alienated from each other, too shy to act, divided along familiar lines. Those lines vanish and we merge exuberantly. (165)

Like disasters, carnival often features **grotesque images, motifs of death, role inversion and transformation, and much chaos**, as well as the basic ingredient of people living together in a shared space and going beyond their usual bounds. Carnival is in some sense a formalized disaster, a ritual to reap disaster’s benefits with a minimum of disaster’s tragic consequences. Pioneering disaster researcher Charles E. Fritz writes: “Disasters provide a temporary liberation from the worries, inhibitions, and anxieties associated with the past and future because **they force people to concentrate their full attention on immediate moment-to-moment, day-to-day needs** within the context of the present realities.” He could have also been describing what carnival provides in the more safe and structured break from ordinary time. (166)

A sense of being outside ordinary time, of disorder and inversion, governs saturnalias and carnivals. They are liminal in an almost literal sense, since that word means crossing lintels or thresholds. Some ancient calendars had three hundred and sixty days; the five at the end of the year were categorically outside time, so that the ordinary rules did not apply. (166)

The Roman Saturnalia was a year-end winter **festival of freedom**: gambling was permitted in public, everyone wore the wool caps of freedmen, slaves were relieved of their duties and masters sometimes waited on slaves, a lord of misrule was chosen. The festival lasted a few days, but long after it was over it must have left a lingering sense that **the everyday order of things was not the inevitable one**; it must have, like disaster and revolution, opened up the possibilities.

One way to regard uprisings and maybe even disasters is as unseasonal outbreaks of carnival, assertions of civil society, community, and **the breakdown of categories and boundaries**. Many traditional carnivals feature **subversive and mocking elements**: parodies of the church and religion, status reversals, reenactments of historical moments—such as the conquest of Latin America—in ways that reclaim power and voice. (168)

The sacred clown

Source: “The Clown: An Archetypal Self-Journey” by Michael Bala. *Jung Journal*, 4:1, 50-71.

*“The chorus of clowns rips apart polite society and in that act exposes our true feelings. In his joyful disorder, we remember primal emotions: we lust, we become envious and jealous, we are starved for affection and fame, and we long for an illusive trouble-free happiness. We would rather sleep than work; we are clever and undeniably foolish at times. We are complicated, conflicted and no single character can carry the weight of so many inconsistencies. We need a chorus of clowns to speak for us. Despite their secular natures, clowns are mythic . . . **Humor is an old response to fear of the unknown and contempt for the familiar.**”*

–Midori Synder, author and scholar on myth and folklore

What is a clown? Though circus clowns are usually first to mind, this is too narrow in focus when we reflect on the Clown from a psychological perspective. The Clown can also be considered an expression of the Trickster who provides **form for disruptive and integrative archetypal energies for the individual and the collective**.

Organized ‘clown societies’ have served socio-religious functions for their communities, from early Greek mimes to the Pueblo Indian clown societies. These clown societies were stable institutions fulfilling a cultural psychological need. Navaho, Pueblo, Hopi, and Zuni peoples all had ritual clowns who served an **essential role in social and sacred ceremonies** through both **crossing and maintaining boundaries**. (50)

Emanating from the Clown’s realms are **humor and play, order and disorder, the sacred and the profane**. Garbed in his “motley” (meaning “diversified in colour; variegated; particoloured; checkered,” “a fool’s dress,” “composed of elements of diverse or varied character,” “varying in character or mood; changeable in form,” and “an incongruous mixture”), the clown signals that **something out of the ordinary is at hand**. (51)

The Clown, by evoking laughter, can serve as a bridge **uniting neglected, enshadowed, and unconscious elements with prevailing conscious attitudes** through the vehicle of his antics, his dress, and his personality. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung highlights the importance of humor when he considers the effect of its absence, writing, “. . . [when] people lack the necessary humour, or else it fails them . . . they are seized by a sort of pathos, everything seems

pregnant with meaning and all effective self-criticism is checked.” (52) Drama scholar Lucile Hoerr Charles describes laughter as being “one of the purest and most spontaneous expressions of the sudden happiness of release, of rebirth into consciousness and **acceptance of an element needed for personal balance and progress.**” (53)

Humor acts as a vehicle for the transcendent function seeking to **hold conflict and tension long enough to allow the emergence of an unexpected resolution** – usually accompanied by a **release of locked up energies.** (53) It can be counted among the “holding arts” – arts that encourage **ambivalence and polyvalence.** (54) Conscious humor, as in conscious clowning, serves the individual’s and the culture’s need to face, survive, and to throw off what can feel like the deadening cloak of our existential feelings of humiliation because of our many human imperfections. (53)

Two of the clown’s ancestors are the Fool and the Jester. In tarot, the Fool card is unnumbered and as such holds an ambiguous place as either the lowest or the highest aspect. (55) The Fool can be the one who, being an outsider and having little power, **presents the unseen possibility or expresses the unthinkable thoughts;** the Fool “speaks” of profound truth sometimes clearly and plainly, sometimes in mythic or poetic fashion, and sometimes in language that at first seems to be nonsense. The Fool represents “the every person” who is on a journey of self-discovery, and is said to always represent **the questioner’s core emergent self, open in a very embodied or lived way.** (56) The role of the Fool is crucial as a countervailing force against power or convention in almost any form.

The Trickster, a special form of the Fool, is the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries. His function is to add disorder to what is order and so make a whole; to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, **an experience of what is not permitted.**” (57)