CLOWNS IN ANTHROPOLOGY
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Introduction

Clowns are exhilarating and disturbing, funny and frightening. They are ambiguous and confusing, yet capable of skilled disarranging and rearranging of our meaningful contexts. They can be found in rituals and courts as well as theaters and the circus. The clown is related to the trickster, who exists in stories and myths. The two figures share a contradictory, paradoxical nature and an affinity with play and humor. However, of the two the clown has received less attention. While there is a sustained scholarly discussion of the trickster, the clown has been written about rather sporadically, and there is little engagement between the texts beyond the fairly common statement that clowning is universal; interpretations usually conflict. Some authors write about clowning in a specific context based on their own fieldwork, but many others, mostly using the same ethnographic sources, attempt to provide a general view of 'clowns'. The texts arrive at very different conclusions. In descriptive terms there are common features to clowning. These are inverted or contrary behavior, obscenity and taboo breaking, imitation and mockery of strangers, and exaggerated or otherwise inappropriate behavior. However, exactly what the clowns do is often described only vaguely. "Detailed descriptions of the clown's place in public events are scarce" (Handelman 1990: 236).

Tricksters have been studied all over the world but almost all the material on clowns is Native American. This may be because of the large number of ritual clowns in the Americas but also because on first encounters they shocked European observers who felt that clowns and religion do not go together. So far, anthropologists have written very little about clowns elsewhere. Exceptions are provided by James Peacock's (1978) article on clowns in Javanese theater and an edited volume *Clowning as Critical Practice: Performance Humor in the South Pacific* (Mitchell [ed.] 1992). Some of the ethnographic sources referred to in this review include a description of Pueblo ritual by Vera Laski (1959), biographies such as *Sun Chief* (Simmons 1948) and *Black Elk Speaks* (Niehardt 1932) and descriptions of clowning scattered through many ethnographies, such as the texts on the Yaquis (Painter 1986; Spicer 1980). *The Delight Makers* (1971 [1890]), a novel by the archaeologist Adolf Bandelier, gives his impression of what ritual clown performances would have been like among "prehistoric pueblo Indians" based on his own observations and ethnological reports. An encyclopedia of clowns and tricksters (Christen 1998) has close to two hundred entries, which provide short descriptions of various figures and some of the associated themes.

It has been suggested by some that the category of clown or trickster is an artifact of the analyst and subsumes figures really too different to be compared (see Beidelman 1980). Many authors nevertheless see enough common ground in the combination of contradictory elements and use of humor to proceed with analysis. Louis Hieb says: "The 'ritual clown' does not exist as a viable category in comparative discussion but there are many 'religious' specialists who make creative use of humor" (Hieb 1977: 185; see also Babcock 1984; Handelman 1990).

In this brief review of the literature I consider studies of clowns as specific kinds of performers or figures. There are some very detailed descriptions and analyses of verbal humor and the comic in ritual or performance (e.g. Basso 1979 on the Apache; Bricker 1973 on the Maya; Kapferer 1983 on exorcism rituals in Sri Lanka), but this focus comprises a rather different field of scholarship to the study of clowns as figures that bring with them a certain relation to the ritual context, a frame of interpretation discussed in the following texts. Most of the literature discussed here is by anthropologists, but I have included some authors from other fields who nevertheless engage in the discussion of the clown as a universal figure and make use of anthropological texts. Unless otherwise noted, I use the term to refer to all clowns, including Western ones.

The texts are organized in chronological order within three themes. The first writers to consider clowns were mostly concerned with giving general explanations and descriptions of clowns and clowning, as well as looking for historical connections between clowns from different groups. A second theme is the clown as a specific type or kind of figure, contrasted with other cultural or universal types of figures. These writers are perhaps the most willing to compare clowns cross-culturally. The third theme—which arose after the first two—shifts the focus to the performances of the clowns. Most of the referenced works are articles which have been published in various journals and edited volumes.

General explanations for the existence of clowns

The earliest scholarly work on clowns subsumes a quest for the fundamental reason clowns exist. Why do we have them? In many of the theoretical texts written on clowns (and tricksters) this is seen in terms of a psychological or cultural need that the clowns are thought to fulfil. For a long time a functional explanation, which saw the clowns as a vicarious outlet for repressed sentiments, was pretty much the accepted raison d'être for clowns, following on from Freudian ideas of humor as a release of pent-up energy caused by hostility or repression. Some of the authors considered below restrict their theories to specific clowns in a specific culture, while others support the idea of a universal theory.

Although Native American ritual clowns had been mentioned in many ethnographical texts, the first anthropological work with clowns as its major focus is a doctoral dissertation, *The Clown in Native North America* (1929), by Julian Steward, who later became known for his cultural ecology studies. His dissertation aims to map out the wide-spread phenomenon of ritual clowning in all of North America and then link it to humor as a universally human and therefore innate psychological trait with different cultural manifestations. He begins by discussing differences between areas and possible historical connections then goes on to consider the clowns in terms of contemporary theories of humor, suggesting that cross-cultural studies of clowning would provide data that reveals what would be culturally specific on the one hand and "common to all men" on the other.

Steward compares forms of clowning in America and divides them into areas: phallicism in the South West, militarism in the plains and ceremonial madness on the North West coast. The most important and widely shared trait of Native American clowns is reversal, which may take very concrete forms such as walking backwards, saying yes instead of no, or more abstract forms of inappropriate behavior. He divides the object of humor into four themes: 1) burlesque of the sacred which includes breaking of taboos; 2) sex and

obscenity; 3) misfortune, manifest as sickness, sorrow, need, or through gluttony; 4) the caricature and burlesque of strangers. Steward considers how each of these themes is manifest in the different areas. Death, he says, is usually not ridiculed. Steward's work remains the most extensive text in terms of ethnographic description on Native American clowns.

Following on from Steward, the article "The Sacred Clowns of the Pueblo and Mayo-Yaqui Indians" was written by Elsie Clews Parsons and Ralph L. Beals in 1934 as an attempt to consider a few groups in greater detail, based on the authors' own field work. Neither the Yaquis nor the Mayos had appeared in the text by Steward, as they were brought into anthropological knowledge by Beals at a later date. Here the Yaquis and the Mayos are examined together, but in other ethnographic texts they are considered to be two distinct groups. Parsons, who had studied the Pueblo clowns, describes being shocked by how similar the performances of the Mayo and Yaqui clowns in Sonora were to the Pueblos, even though otherwise the peoples had little in common. Besides giving a description of dress and behavior, the authors discuss the possibility of a historical connection between the Pueblo and Sonoran clowns to explain the similarity. The two authors have differing views: Parsons thinks that the clowns must be the result of Spanish influence as "Mexican clowns are more or less alike" (1934: 512), while Beals posits an earlier pan-Mesoamerican culture, from which the clown would have come first to the Sonoran groups and then to the Pueblos. The two authors do not have evidence to prove either theory; they present their respective cases and agree to disagree.

Both Beals and Parsons provide a functionalist explanation for clowns, describing them as a safety-valve for repressed sentiments. A similar approach is taken by Lucile Hoerr Charles in her paper "The Function of the Clown" (1945) which includes all clowns in its scope. She considers the clown's role to lie in bringing neglected and suppressed psychological elements into consciousness. Clowning celebrates life and offers a release from whatever the repressed elements are in a given culture.

In his search for the answer to why ritual clowns exist, N. Ross Crumrine discusses the specific case of the Mayo *capakobem*. He has done extensive fieldwork with the Mayos and published several ethnographic texts as a result of his research. Crumrine's article "Capakoba, the Mayo Easter Ceremonial Impersonator: Explanations of Ritual Clowning" (1969) begins by listing some of the ways the clowns have been interpreted previously: as a diffused trait and comic relief by Parsons and Beals as seen above; as a mistake in cognition in an entry called "Monsters" in the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (J.A. McCulloch 1913); and as ritualized rebellion following the theories of Max Gluckman. Interpretations of clowning as supernatural sanction and psychological regression by Jacob Levine, and as release of tension suggested by John Honigmann and mentioned by Crumrine are similar to other psychological-functional interpretations. Crumrine is not specific in his critique of the earlier interpretations, he only says that "more intensive analysis makes these interpretations appear incomplete" (1969: 1).

In his own analysis, Crumrine says the *capakobam* protect customs by carrying on tradition, work for ceremony by performing necessary acts such as cleaning or gathering wood as part of their ritual labor and ritually enact important but somewhat taboo subjects such as marriage and curing in sketch-like performances. He considers historical, psychological-affective, sociological and cultural cognitive explanations and finds the one of "ritual learning" to be the best. The "conflicting portrayal of opposing themes creates

cognitive dissonance which intensifies the final solution (…) numerous oppositions within the structure of Mayo culture and society have been ritually mediated, ritual learning has taken place, and Mayos more deeply understand and identify with their culture and society" (1969: 21).

In her article "Ritual Clowns and Symbolical Behavior" (1970) French scholar Laura Makarius produces a critique of previous ethnography in which she makes no detailed reference to scholars who have considered clowns, but rather a general statement which claims they got it all wrong in their "so-called explanations (…) of the ritual clown in terms of their function" (1970: 45). Makarius argues that functional explanations neglect many aspects of ritual clowns, and that to understand clowns, we must look at their ceremonial and mythical context. For Makarius, the most important function for tricksters—and clowns as their "earthly counterparts" (1970: 46) who evoke the same mythical role in ritual—is as transgressors, and specifically as breakers of the blood taboo. The clown as transgressor is a common theme, but Makarius is more specific than anyone with her focus on the blood taboo. She describes the use of blood or representations of blood by ritual clowns. According to her, they re-enact the role of magician who breaks the blood taboo for the benefit of the group. At the same time, the clown is associated with non-violence. Nevertheless, although Makarius takes a wider view, she follows along similar lines as the previous authors when she concludes that clowns "owe their existence solely to the need of evoking something which at the same time must be suppressed" (1970: 70).

Louis A. Hieb also aims to give a general explanation for ritual clowning, but in his view, the motive is more semiotic and social than psychological. In his writings about Zuñi and Hopi clowns based on his own fieldwork (1972, 1977), he takes a structuralist approach and analyzes how the clown performance, through oppositions and reversal, symbolically represents some of the most important concepts of Zuñi culture. In his article "The Ritual Clown: Humor and Ethics" (1977) Hieb considers humor as both a symbol and a strategy. The Hopi clown performance makes an ethical statement through representing *kahopi* (not-hopi, unethical) behavior.

Clowns compared to shamans, heroes and other types

While the functionalists looked for the psychological functions served by the clown, another popular way of placing the clown in the larger context has been to contrast him—and it usually is a 'he'—with other figures and performers. Chronologically, these studies overlap somewhat with those considered in the previous section. The trickster has also been studied in this vein, both as a figure in a gallery of types, but also as a step in a developmental progress from one type to another. In some early views the trickster had been seen as an originally high and noble figure degraded into buffoonery. Franz Boas, on the other hand, viewed the trickster as the earlier figure which would with progress give way to the culture hero (Ricketts 1966: 328–9). The key work on the subject *The Trickster* by Paul Radin (1956) includes an essay by Carl Jung on the trickster as an archetype.

Writing around the same time as Radin, Wolfgang Zucker (1954, 1967) considers the clown as a universal archetype as well. The clown is grotesque, inappropriate, funny even before he speaks. He is contradictory and marginal. Zucker takes into consideration the affinity of the clown to the devil, and describes the clown as a counter figure to the hero

and as "the lord of disorder" (Zucker 1954: 314, also the title of Zucker 1967). The clown is set against the cosmic order, yet ultimately affirms it. In his later paper, Zucker criticizes previous works for reducing a complex phenomenon to "some function or another of the human society or of the human mind which are taken as simply assumed" and advocates accepting the clown as he is, ambiguous and self-contradictory, and focusing on the "self understanding of the audience that interacts with the clown" instead (Zucker 1967: 307). The clown is "an expression of the absurdity and paradox of the human existence (1967: 308)".

Barbara Tedlock's (1975) article "The Clown's Way" stands out from the other texts on clowns. She considers Native American ritual clowns as a wide-spread and recurring phenomenon. Her article is based on previous ethnography, but she has done extensive fieldwork with the Mayas and the Zuñis, among others, in collaboration with her husband Dennis Tedlock who is known for his studies in the ethnography of speaking. Barbara Tedlock's article on clowns includes considerable native commentary and ties the practice to the ethnographic context much more than the other texts considered here. Hers is the only text that considers in any depth the different meanings laughter has on different occasions. Discussing the clowns' power to heal and affect social relations, Tedlock asserts that the clown is "close to the heart of American Indian religions" (1975: 105). As a healer the clown is opposed to the shaman, parodying the shaman in performance but with many of the same powers, such as providing a translation of the knowledge of another reality. The contrary action that inverts everyday behavior "opens" people to immediate experience by laughter or shock so that it is "easier for the power to come to them" (195: 106). In Tedlock's analysis clowns revitalize society by revealing higher truths and offering a self-reflexive semiotic commentary. The clowns' seeming disrespect or lack of propriety brings about a freedom from accepted norms and ways of behavior which is also freedom from conventional ways of thinking, fears and tensions. This release is healing. "Mystical liberation from ultimate cosmic fears brings with it a liberation from conventional notions of what is dangerous or sacred" (195: 108). Tedlock speaks of release in a different way from the other authors who oppose the idea of release to universal suppressed psychological tendencies which eat away at humans until the temporary release provided by humor which is then followed by a return to the psychological tension. Conversely, Tedlock ties 'relief' and 'release' to emic perceptions of the efficacy of the ritual performance of the clowns: release from idle thought and worry promotes health and balance in an individual as well as the society. There is no necessary return to the state of anxiety: the Jicarilla Apache clown led the people out of sacred dark underground into light with his non-human laugh scaring away the sickness that was above. Scaring the disease away is a curing technique. Another example Tedlock gives of the various meanings clowning and laughter may have for social relations comes from the north: among the Inuit, hosts try to make their visitors laugh by means of a clowning performance. Visitors resist as long as they can, as when they finally do laugh, they are at the mercy of the host.

Arden R. King's article (1977) opens the context further to look at clowns and creativity among North American Indians in the situation where many Native American cultures are faced with the threat of destruction. He is the only author to include the wider political context of the U.S. To King the clown has potential to both destroy and affirm or create structure. He separates the different aspects of the clown's role into humorous and non-

humorous which alternate. According to King, humorousness is not discussed much because anyone can be humorous, but the clown alone has "potential for the elicitation of nonorder—the creation of another way of human *being*" (1977: 147). The humor, the "retreat into buffoonery" (1977: 144), which insures the clown against the consequences of his own behavior, happens when "the limits are secure and the structure is neither in need nor danger of replacement" (1977: 147). King sees the creativity of the ritual clowns evinced in two forms: "that in which clowns have been deeply involved in cultural survival [through symbolic representation], and that in which clownly roles have been utilized as models for leaders of revitalistic and other nativistic movements" (1977: 148).

Of the writers considered here, only Makarius (see above) and Barbara Babcock have written about both tricksters and clowns. The main difference for both writers is that the trickster is a mythological character and the clown is a performer, but the meanings they embody and the operations they perform in a culture are the same. In her article "Arrange Me into Disorder: fragments and reflections on ritual clowning" (1984), Babcock experiments with a new style of writing, to get closer to the subject. She divides her pages into two columns: 'texts' on one side and 'paratexts' on the other. Her own comments span the width of the page. Babcock says that scholarship has to also consider the aesthetics and metaphysics of clowning. If King says that there is no need to discuss the humorous aspect of the clowns, Babcock disagrees. She points out that the bias against comedy has impinged on its analysis and notes that there is a dichotomy between the analysis and the comic subject. Clowning has not been taken seriously, as a structure of truth and reality; it offers "realities of decreation" (1984: 103) and poses hypothetical and subjunctive modes of culture. Babcock insists on the importance of the comic frame, which many other authors such as King brush aside as beside the point. Some of the themes she considers are criticism as comedy (and vice-versa), comedy as self-knowledge and the liminality of the clown. She also explores themes of "paradoxical metacommentary" (1984: 114), where clowning makes contradictory statements on its context, and examines how the detachment and double entendre of clown performance can bring insight into meanings. Clowning reflects reality in a way that rational thought cannot, it reveals the arbitrary, constructed nature of the world. Through the use of opposites and reversals, for Babcock clowns are mediators par excellence who organize the world through their performance.

The clowning performance considered

A third theme shifts the focus onto the performance. This approach takes into account how clown performances are created through shifts and changes, unlike many non-humorous rituals or performances in which the emphasis is on repeating actions as exactly as possible. These texts ask, how is the clowns' efficacy created? What kinds of performances include clown figures? What is the clown's part in the process of the performance, as they always appear with non-humorous figures? And how is clowning situated in relation to non-humorous performance?

Paul Bouissac, a semiotician, has studied circus clowns. His criticism of anthropologists is for their referring to (circus) clowns with generalizations and allusions, rather than applying the same methods as to their own field-studies (Bouissac 1976). There is no reason to consider Western clowns as fundamentally different from any other clowns. Although the

context of appearance is profane, Bouissac sees the circus clown performance as ultimately referencing the sacred. He takes the performance of the clown to be a mode of communication, a cultural text obviously understood by the public, but of which there has been very little scientific study. To Bouissac, the performances of circus clowns are metacultural texts, which must be varied more to suit different contexts than other circus acts. "Clown tradition is not a set of ready-made tricks but a set of rules that operates on the constitutive rules of the contextual culture" (Bouissac 1976: 169). In his article "Profanation of the sacred" (1990), Bouissac analyses how circus clown performances take culturally sacred concepts and profane them through inversions and substitutions such as putting a pig in the place of a baby. Surprisingly few researchers seem to have considered the clown's ability to provoke emotion; of those whose work has been presented here, only Bouissac and Tedlock see this as an important part of the efficacy of clowning.

Don Handelman is another writer who writes about clowns using previously published ethnography. He has studied performance, emergent and institutional, in various contexts. In a text first published as an article and then as a chapter in his book on performance, Handelman considers clowns as symbolic types in their performance context and in contrast to different kinds of performances: "public events have logics of design that encourage particular operations to be done through them and inhibit others" (1990: 236). Clowns are part of specific kinds of occasions. Handelman defines clowns as "figures that combine contradictory features in their composition, more particularly the playful and the serious" (1990: 236). It is the playfulness that separates the clowns from other self-contradictory characters. At the same time, the clown type is not wholly comic and therein lies its special power. This is a very different approach to that of King, who also separates the humorous and non-humorous aspects of the clown and sees the non-humorous as efficacious, and the humor—the retreat into buffoonery—as offering protection for the clown from the consequences his non-humorous actions. It is interesting to note that in the first publication of this article Handelman draws on the Mayo *chapakobem*, described above by Parsons and Beals and Crumrine, but leaves them out of the second version. He says this is because the *chapakobem* "are indeed contradictory in their composition, but (…) there is little play, humor, or amusement in their constitution (…) the application of this term to them is misleading" (1990: 297). It seems clear, however, from the texts and a documentary of the Mayo Easter (Serrano 1980), the *chapakobem* are intended to be, and taken by their audience to be, very funny indeed. This shows that it is difficult to describe the clowns and to get an idea of their performance from texts and possibly also points to how the comic side is down-played in descriptions.

The contradictory and paradoxical nature of clowns is noted in other texts as well, though in most of them this is linked to the ability to offer alternatives through double entendre as a sort of intellectual exercise while Handelman sees it as a kind of source of performative power and an integral part of the effectiveness of the ritual in which the clown appears. Clown types are affined with process, boundary, and transition, and opposed to deity figures and essentialist versions of structure. Handelman criticizes previous studies for focusing on the significance of the clown to the mundane order while ignoring how the clowns actually "make the occasions of their presence work" (1990: 237). He insists that the clown must be examined in the total context of the event, in the clown's relation both to other figures and also to the phases of the event. Meanwhile he argues that clowns only

appear in certain kinds of events—which he calls "modelling"—which leave room for proposing new interpretations of reality. Furthermore, the clown appears in very specific phases of events, usually signifying a shift or change in the process of the event. This is because the clown is a self-reflexive figure, able to index the phases in the process of the event. The clown has a different relation to, and therefore a different effect on, context than certain other types, such as those Handelman calls "Prophet" or "Saviour" types (1990: 245). The clown is, to a degree, autonomous of its context. While other figures have a more straightforward relation to their context, and pose only one reality at a time so to say, the clown moves between alternative realities without solving the paradoxes of transition and without evoking a metamessage like 'this is play'. This way the clown dissolves the absolutism of the rigid boundaries. In addition to his general dismissal of other texts on clowns, Handelman specifically disagrees with Makarius; he argues that the clown does not break the taboo, but erases the boundary between sacred and mundane and alters their relationship. Instead of taking responsibility for collective sins in a kind of unconscious representation, the clown performs a semiotic manipulation of the structure.

The texts considered so far, with the exception of Bouissac, are mostly products of ethnographic fieldwork, done by the authors themselves or others before them, among indigenous North Americans. Providing a perspective on clowns in another part of the world is a volume titled *Clowning as Critical Practice: Performance Humor in the South Pacific* (1992). In many ways this book provides a contrast to the other anthropological texts on clowns. The volume consists of articles by different authors, based on their own field work. Some of the articles consider impromptu clowning and others institutionalized clown figures. There is similarity in the techniques of creating humor, but it is put to different uses. Important themes are the role of women as clowns, which is rare in North America, and the focus on clowning as criticism. A recurring theme in the articles is that the cultures in this area are so hierarchical that there is normally no opportunity to voice criticisms. Clowning, through the license granted to the clown, makes criticism possible. The idea that clowning can be a criticism is not absent from the North American material, but it is not necessarily linked to hierarchy in the society. Something that stands out as a contrast to the material in North America is the close ties clowning in the Pacific has to kinship. This is especially clear in the articles that look at clowning in weddings and funerals, as the performers who take on the role of the clown, as well as those towards whom the performance is directed, have specific kin relations. While the Native American clowns often mediate relations between gods and humans, the South Pacific clowns mediate relations between humans, albeit in a ritual context.

Conclusion

In terms of techniques, clown performances resemble each other in different times and places. However, the ambiguity of the clown allows a myriad of different interpretations. If the trickster is "everything to everyman" as Radin (1955: 169) says, so is the clown. "Whatever predicate we use to describe him, the opposite can also be said, and with equal right" (Zucker 1967: 307). The texts reflect this.

It seems the comic side of clowning has been the more difficult one to analyse. Although everyone agrees that playfulness and humor are definitive traits of the clown, even those

authors who say the comic is important struggle with it—and many see it as something quite insignificant or irrelevant to the true, *serious* meaning altogether. Babcock is right when she says there is a dichotomy between analysis and the comic subject. Tedlock's approach of looking at the comic in the cultural context of social relations and not as something abstract seems to work the best.

The focus has shifted with the times, from historical beginnings and psychological function to semiotics and performance. The most promising direction seems to be one that is firmly rooted in ethnography and the specifics of a given situation, and engages with the more general discussion from that position. Tedlock illustrates how important the cultural context is for clowning to make sense as meaningful action. I think Handelman makes an extremely important point when he says clowns must be investigated in the total context of their appearance. This marks a change from trying to interpret the clown (as a symbol), to asking how a clown performance (as the use of symbols) works within the dynamics of a certain kind of performance.

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