

# Nothing is sacred

## Gregory Paschalidis

Paul Bouissac, *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning. Rituals of Transgression and the Theory of Laughter*. London: Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics, 2015, 232 pp, \$ 128.00 (Hardcover), ISBN: 9781472521736, \$43.95 (Paperback), ISBN: 9781472532787, \$32.99 (EPUB/PDF eBook), ISBN: 9781472525086/9781472531117.

As a child, the circus was the source of rather ambivalent feelings. I was mesmerized by the feats of the acrobats, revolted at the sight of once wild tigers or elephants turned into trained pets, and saddened rather than merry with the absurd antics of the clowns. Childhood memories of clowns seem to make the elegiac trope almost the rule in modern treatments of clowns, set as early as Charles Dickens' comprehensive rewriting, during the post-Regency decline of the pantomime shows, of the memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837), the father of modern-day clowns. More recently, the feeling of a long-gone golden era of clowns suffuses Federico Fellini's mockumentary *The Clowns* (1970), inspired by his early memories of circus and clowns. Featuring famous clowns and clown acts, the film's final part is appropriately devoted to a lengthy and extravagant restaging of the celebrated Fratellini brothers' 'funeral of a clown' act. Half way through the film, the French circus historian Tristan Rémy (1897-1977), the first to chronicle the life, work and techniques of the great clowns (*Les Clowns*, 1945) and record in detail many of their most memorable acts and gags (*Entrées clownesques*, 1962), tells Fellini he shouldn't bother with a now defunct art, for 'the circus has no longer meaning in the modern world'. No such elegiac mood is to be found in the work of Paul Bouissac, however, for whom the world of the circus and its clowns forms a vital part of his scientific autobiography, since it has been the principal preoccupation of his ethnographic research for the past forty years, in the circus rings and stages of Europe, Asia and the Americas. His *Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning* is generously interlaced with fieldnotes, detailed descriptions of clown acts, interviews and photographs taken during his globetrotting fieldwork. Most importantly, it represents the latest installment of a series of publications which, starting with *Circus and Culture: A semiotic approach* (Indiana UP, 1976), includes also *Semiotics of the Circus* (De Gruyter, 2010) and *Circus as Multimodal Discourse* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012). Taken as a whole, this tetralogy establishes Bouissac as the leading scholar of circus studies, all the while offering

the most forceful demonstration of the analytical and interpretative potential of interweaving ethnography and semiotics.

The book focuses on the European clown tradition from Joseph Grimaldi to contemporary performers. The first four chapters cover the elements that, according to Bouissac, comprise the 'lexicon of the multimodal language of clowning', i.e. makeup, costumes, props and gags. The detailed recording and analysis of the appearance of clowns reveals that the variations in makeup and costume that different performers adopt as their signatures, follow two highly codified generic patterns broadly known in the circus jargon as the *whiteface* clowns and the *augustes*. More specifically, the whiteface and the *auguste* 'form a semiotic couple in which the signs that define one are inverted in the other' (Bouissac 2015: 39). The former's makeup expresses arrogance and anger, while his costume is distinguished by its elaborate decoration and bright colours. The *auguste's* makeup, on the other hand, suggests 'innocence, positive feelings, playfulness, and submission' (Bouissac 2015: 36), while his attire consists in an ill-fitting mishmash of shabby and ragged clothes. With the whiteface's haughtiness, splendor and deftness expressing social dominance and cultural authority, played out in his systematic bullying and victimisation of an inept, naïve and awkward *auguste*, the whiteface/*auguste* couple represents 'a stereotypical icon of social differences' (Bouissac 2015: 55).

If the whiteface/*auguste* dyad is a caricatured depiction of status and class differences, the world of clown props and gags is our world 'turned upside down'. The objects and artifacts used in clown acts are typically unmoored from their normal function, defamiliarizing the everyday world of habit and utility. Their use-value is twisted and corrupted by the surprising and, sometimes, even shocking meaning they assume in the ring, in a manner similar to the images of surrealist poetry and art (Bouissac 2015: 62-63). An analogous principle of radical incongruity marks the rhetorical structure of clown gags, which are generated by the same basic semiotic logic of 'connecting two strongly disconnected cultural objects (artifacts, behaviors, concepts, or ontological categories) that nevertheless are part of a formal or material continuum' (Bouissac 2015: 94).

The next four chapters outline the grammar of clowning, the cultural rules and codes at play in the production of clown acts. At the core of this purposely anti-grammatical grammar is the playful breaking of socio-cultural norms and rules, the 'ritualistic flouting of the social order' (Bouissac 2015: 114). Uniquely qualified for unveiling the arbitrariness of authority and institutional violence is the *auguste*, the non-normalised outsider. Not accidentally, the solo clown performers, who emerged since the 1960s and subsequently led the novel type of immersive performances whereby members of the audience are selectively invited to take part in the comic process, are exclusively *augustes*. In this case, though, Bouissac points out, the clown combines elements of the whiteface and the *auguste* by playing tricks of his own, this time at the expense of the audience. Far from representing a latterday synthesis, moreover, it is this yet undivided into the whiteface/*auguste* dyad type of clown which is genealogically linked to the archetypal type of the trickster.

Widening his initial geocultural focus on the European clown tradition, Bouissac proceeds to trace the trickster's diverse avatars in widely different historical eras and cultural regions of the world. Mustering a wide range of mythological and ethnographic evidence, he suggests that the European clown tradition is generated by a more fundamental dynamic structure that can be traced back at the heart of all cultures. All the clown acts that have been performed in European circuses over the last two centuries are but fragments of a grand narrative, 'mere episodes of a much larger story in which the clown tricks humans into coming face to face with the arbitrariness of their culture and the fragility of their identity' (Bouissac 2015: 136). Combining the meticulous attention to the contingent, context-bound character of clown acts and performances, their endless variations, transformations and innovations, with the steadfast search for underlying fundamental rules and similarities, Bouissac's work is clearly part of another grand, this time scientific narrative, inaugurated by Claude Levi-Strauss in *La Pensee Sauvage* and *Mythologiques*. His *Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning* suggests that next to the universality of reason we should also admit the universality of anti-reason, while the trickster, by virtue of being the ambiguous, unpredictable and equivocal character that mediates polar opposites – such as life and death, inside and outside, order and disorder (Levi-Strauss 1963) – has the inherently metacultural function of reminding us that 'nothing is sacred'.

Recently, we have seen once again announcements of the imminent end of the clown (see e.g. Walker 2014). The closure, after 146 years, of the Ringling Brothers, Burnum & Bailey Circus, the oldest and most famous circus in the United States, has certainly provoked a nostalgia-infused spate of articles on the dying art of the circus (see e.g. Zinoman 2017). As on previous occasions, the announcements seem rather exaggerated. Next to a wave of important recent studies on the circus and the clowns (e.g. Albrecht 2006; Carlyon 2016; Peacock 2009; Weber et al. 2012), often induced by the rise of performance studies, we are witnessing a profusion of circus and clown culture. In his rather sceptical survey of the latter, Bouissac notes that the clown has become a stock character in children parties, parades, charity events, marketing campaigns and even an acclaimed part of therapeutic entertainment programmes in hospitals. Some of these practices inevitably raise the issue of the rampant banalization of clowning. Perhaps the most telling example is the ubiquitous Ronald McDonald clown figure, officially styled as the Chief Happiness Officer of the McDonald fast-food corporation. Still others, like the development of the rebel clown in contemporary cultural activism, seem to tap directly into the iconoclastic tradition of the trickster. At the same time, the last quarter of the twentieth century has seen the worldwide burgeoning of clown festivals and organizations, as well as of clown and circus schools and colleges (Sugarman 2001). The latter developments have unwittingly fostered the globalisation of western clown culture. The auguste type, in particular, has become part of an international lingua franca adopted in areas as varied as Japan, China and Africa, leading inevitably to the marginalization of the indigeneous clowning traditions.

Bouissac concludes with an excursus on the most controversial question of all, the nature

and the causes of humor and laughter. In what is admittedly the most tentative part of his book, the hypotheses he puts forward, inspired as they are by neuroscience, inevitably raise the thorny mind/body issue. His masterful ethno-semiotic analysis of the 'laughing culture' of clowning certainly has no need of the obscure riddle of the *homo ridens*.

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