

Book review

Bouissac, Paul (2015). *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning: Rituals of Transgression and the Theory of Laughter*. Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics. London: Bloomsbury, 218 pp.

If academic communities around the world were for several years reluctant to accept the seriousness of humour research (see among others Wycoff 1999), it is not particularly hard (at least for humour researchers) to imagine what academic communities would have to say about investigating clowning and its semiotics. Scholarly research on clowns and their semiotics is indeed scarce – with perhaps the recent exceptions of hospital clowns and their contribution to patients’ psychological well-being (see Tan Jr et al. 2014 and references therein) as well as clowns as prominent figures in activist stunts (see Sørensen 2013; Ramsden 2015 and references therein). Non-academics also exhibit controversial attitudes towards clowns: *coulrophobia*, that is, the irrational fear of clowns, is not uncommon among people in contemporary societies, who seem to be repelled by clown performances and figures. As a result, clowns can be perceived not only as funny but also as discomfiting and intimidating.

Bouissac sets out to convince us that the semiotics of clowning is worth investigating and, what is more, that it could shed some light on people’s ambivalent perceptions of clowns and their performances. To this end, he draws on material collected “in several decades of ethnographic fieldwork in circuses and other theatres in Europe, Asia, and the Americas” (p. 2) to provide a detailed account of clowns’ appearance, face makeup, costumes, and props (chapters 1–3) and their acts and narratives (chapters 4–5). He also explores the (European) origins of clown figures (chapter 6) and extensively refers to specific recurrent topics in clown performances such as sex and death (chapters 7–8). Bouissac conceptualizes clowns as “ritual transgressors of the rules and norms of civil society” (p. 15) (chapter 9) and examines their diverse roles in modern societies in the contexts of medical care and political movements (chapter 10). Finally, the semiotics of clowning is viewed in relation to scholarly approaches to laughter (chapter 11). In what follows, I will try to concentrate on some of the main issues/aspects of the book that seem to be most relevant to humour research and could therefore attract the attention of humour scholars.

First of all, the semiotics of clowning and humour research share a common interest in treating clowning and humour respectively as originating in transgressions of social norms and conventions. Everything in clown performances, from clown makeup to their narratives, constitutes violations of what is widely perceived as socially accepted appearance and behaviour: “playing with codes of any kind is indeed the hallmark of clowning” (p. 47). In parallel with any humorous genre or performance, such playing does not seriously challenge or threaten the status quo: “[t]he ambiguity of the clowns’ toying with the fundamentals of culture mirrors the incessant effort of the tricksters to undermine the consistency of the rules as a way of transcending the norms and, at the same time, *reasserting their binding power*” (p. 157; my emphasis). The laughter elicited by clown performances functions as “the guardian of commonsensical norms that

maintains social harmony and controls deviance” (p. 203), thus reminding us of Bergson’s (1990/1900) theory of laughter and humour as social correctives (see also Billig 2005).

Clowns seem to be part of a remarkably long tradition in Europe and elsewhere. Bouissac refers to the existence of such traditions outside Europe (e.g. in Japan and Java; pp. 182–195), but focuses on the presence and practices of clowns within Europe. An interesting hypothesis put forward by the author is that clowns originate in the central figure in comical tales from pre-Christian times in northern Europe (Germany and Scandinavia) called Loki. Loki was a “trickster inasmuch as he transcends the divine order and freely breaks the rules, both bringing chaos and solving problems through cunning and mischievous behaviour” (p. 140), much like Ancient Greek god Hermes (p. 136). Such a hypothesis seems most appealing but equally hard to investigate as sources on both European pre-Christian traditions and circus performances before the 18th century are both scarce and not particularly reliable. Furthermore, even though Bouissac appears to be familiar with some literature on Loki, he takes such knowledge for granted (even though readers may not be familiar with it at all) and does not provide any of Loki’s stories which could be examined in comparison to the narratives performed by clowns. Such a contrastive analysis could better illustrate the author’s point and could offer some initial empirical support to his hypothesis.

Bouissac also identifies intertextual relations between the narratives diverse clown performances are based on. Intertextual connections between gags and narratives are not hard to explain as clowns may adjust their gags and narratives so as to fulfil audience expectations and to create a surprise effect at the same time. So, even though clowns often modify their performances from one circus/audience to another, some similarities persist along with the differences. The author takes this line of thought a step further by suggesting that “all the circus clown acts that have been performed in European circuses over approximately the past 200 years belong to a *single* grand narrative” (p. 12; my emphasis). This “grand narrative”, Bouissac suggests, involves two protagonists (at least one of which is a clown), “always starts with a disruption of the expected order” (p. 173), and “hinges on a transformation of situation or status such as the breaking of an object or a rule, the loss of a game, a punishment, a reversal of fortune, or a surprising development” (p. 174). At the end, “the virtual chaos [...] is quickly brought under control [...] thus restoring the harmony that [the protagonists] disrupted at the inception of their act” (p. 174). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the structure of clown narratives bears striking resemblance to other kinds of narratives (e.g. oral, literary ones) which also evolve around one or more unexpected events that cause disruption and unsettle the equilibrium to be restored at the end of the narrative (see Labov 1972; Archakis & Tsakona 2012 and references therein).

Bouissac offers extensive and attractive accounts of clowns gags and (on- and off-stage) narratives as viewed and framed from an ethnographer’s perspective, which is one of the most appealing aspects of the study. Sometimes, however, the narratives of the performances lack a detailed analysis that would cover the whole narrative (and not just a small part of it) and would help the reader understand why such accounts are important for the theoretical point(s) the author wishes to make. Thus, theorizing is sometimes implicitly assigned to the implied reader.

Organising the content of his book, Bouissac opts for a bottom-up approach. He begins with the exhaustive description of clowns’ appearances, costumes, and props, then he moves to their gags and narratives and to the topics of these narratives, so as to eventually discuss intertextual connections and make cross-cultural comparisons. Thus, he leaves purely theoretical issues for the final chapter: chapter 11 is dedicated to diverse approaches to laughter which are deemed pertinent to the semiotics of clowning. Such a bottom-up approach – albeit uncommon among humour researchers – is welcome as it highlights the details of clowning performances and

introduces the readers to the activities, the profession, and the culture of clowns. One of the major contributions of the book is that, after reading it, watching clown performances can never be the same: the author guides us through the semiotics of clowning in such detail that every move and feature of clown acts will be overloaded with meaning(s) for the readers of the book. This is significant not only for those who are already familiar with clowns but mostly for those who have not so far been clown fans or for those who may be irrationally scared of clowns (see *coulrophobia* above). And, of course, it is significant for those who so far thought that clown performances are impromptu and meaningless sketches without any sociocultural and political connotations and performed merely to amuse the audience (on the political connotations of clown performances, see pp. 42, 55–56, and chapter 7). The author indeed succeeds in showing that clown performances “are more complex and sophisticated than is usually thought” (p. 204).

However, in the final, theoretically oriented chapter of the book, when the author attempts to connect his data and analyses with theoretical approaches and literature on laughter, the result seems not adequately convincing for the reader. Bouissac is undoubtedly familiar with studies and findings covering a wide range of disciplines and methodologies, but does not seem to manage to form a coherent and solid theoretical proposal that would allow him to offer a well-defined and to-the-point account of clown laughter. He critically discusses various viewpoints on the uses and functions of laughter in general, but does not clearly tell us which functions and aspects of laughter emerge as relevant to clown acts.

Furthermore, even though the author clearly states that clown gags are based on surprise (pp. 76–77), that clown performances consist of narratives based on unexpected events (pp. 173–180), and that in general clowns display “transgressive behaviour verging on cultural subversion when [they] ignore the tacit rules of social games” (p. 11), any mention of the incongruity theory of laughter and humour is notably absent from the theoretical discussion of the final chapter (on the incongruity theory, see among others Attardo 1994: 47–49 and references therein). In other words, although Bouissac dedicates most (if not all) of his book to explaining how and why clown figures and performances are inextricably linked to flouting social conventions and to violating expectations, he refrains from exploiting incongruity theory to account for such flouting and violations.

Nevertheless, Bouissac’s study remains a reader-friendly book and an invaluable ethnographic approach to an area of study that has been most neglected by (humour and other) scholars. It is particularly interesting for humour researchers, especially those who investigate clown performances in or, mostly nowadays, outside circuses (e.g. in hospitals, political activist stunts, street performances). The book could definitely incite potential readers to engage not only in various forms of amateur or professional clowning but, most importantly, to continue this promising and fascinating line of research.

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