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Abstract

During the last decade, radical clowning has become an increasingly popular tactic among participants in the global justice movement in the western world. In order to discuss how radical clowns differ from conventional clowns and what they have in common, radical clowning can be interpreted through the lenses of clown theory and the four concepts of play, otherness, incompetence, and ridicule. Ethnographic data from the Swedish anti-militarist network Ofog reveals how play and otherness contribute to radical clowns' attempts to communicate nonviolent values, negotiate space, and recognize the human in the other. The findings demonstrate one way that humor can be rebellious and challenge established relations of power.

Keywords

radical, play, clowning, otherness, challenging, militarism

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Radical Clowning: Challenging Militarism through Play and Otherness

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Keywords: political humor, absurdity, play, otherness, tactical carnival, CIRCA, Ofog, clowning, ridicule, resistance, subversiveness

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1 Introduction

The “clown army” is a concept that the Swedish anti-militarist network Ofog has used frequently during nonviolent direct actions, inspired by the British group Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) that initiated radical clowning as part of civil disobedience actions in 2003 (Bogad 2010). The origin was specifically linked to the war in Iraq, but as time has passed several groups have experimented with clowning outside of an anti-war context (Routledge 2012). The clowns in these very special armies dress in a mixture of military and clown clothing and use attributes from the clowning sphere. Their absurd performances become a different way of challenging militarism and authorities.

CIRCA's radical clowning developed within a tradition of nonviolent direct action emphasizing independent organizing, community and solidarity (Klepto

2004; Routledge 2012). It can be placed within a larger trend of joyful protest that has been termed “carnavalesque” (Bruner 2005), the “ethical spectacle” (Duncombe 2007), and “tactical carnival” (Bogad 2006). Tactical carnival is both a way to confront some of the dogmas within the traditional left and “create a joyous counterculture that can sustain long-term participation in a movement” (Bogad 2006: 52). The goals are to occupy space, present a friendly face to outsiders, provide an alternative to the existing world order, help overcome fear and create a culture of active defiance (Bogad 2010: 542–43). The academic writing on CIRCA has focused on its role in activists’ personal liberation and emotional well-being and the benefits of training to “stay in clown” and not just act like one (Bogad 2010; Routledge 2012). Recent scholarship has also included a discussion about its relationship with citizenship (Fletcher 2009), the Bakhtian carnival and the masks’ possibilities for concealing identities and countering our society’s focus on individualism (Bogad 2010). Radical clowning is an example of what I have previously termed an absurd humorous political stunt in my classification of five types of stunts (Sørensen 2013). Radical clowning challenges all claims to rationality and logic put forward by the police and military with an absolute refusal to accept this perception of the world. Through the use of absurdity, clowning has the potential to open up possibilities for interaction with representatives of dominant discourses that are not available in the same form to “ordinary” protesters who carry out non-humorous stereotypical types of activism such as demonstrations, blockades and leafletting.

The present study has confirmed other findings that clowning is effective for getting media attention (Bogad 2010: 553) and facilitating a culture of resistance.¹ However, I intend to take the investigation into radical clowning one step further and analyze radical clowning in relation to theory of clowning and conventional circus clowning practice. After a short introduction to the Swedish context and my study, I address Peacock’s clown theory. The concepts of play, otherness, incompetence and ridicule are then applied to the data in order to investigate what the rebel clowns can achieve when it comes to the relations of power they aim to undermine. Play and otherness contribute to radical clowns’ attempts at communicating nonviolent values, negotiating space, and recognizing the human in the other. However, the technique of

¹ With the concept “cultures of resistance” I refer to groups’ ability to create and sustain internal community and strengthen the individual’s capacity for participating in resistance. Routledge writes about CIRCA that: “The purpose was to develop a methodology that helped to transform and sustain the inner emotional life of the activists involved as well as being an effective technique for taking direct action” (Poul Routledge 2009: 87). See also (Bogad 2010: 550 and (Sørensen 2008).

incompetence is almost absent from radical clowning, something which might limit the effects the clowning can have. Rebel clowns are also found to rely on ridicule, something that risks contradicting the intended messages. Applying a multifaceted understanding of power that likewise sees resistance as diverse shows that rebel clowning can be used to undermine dominant discourses. The findings show one way in which humor can be subversive and have political impacts.

2 The Swedish anti-militarist network Ofog

“Ofog”, which means “mischief”, is a Swedish network of anti-militarists originating in 2002. It consists of local groups in four cities, affinity groups and individuals. As the name suggests, many people in the network have a preference for playful types of activism and Ofog fits well within the tradition of “tactical carnival.” Ofog works for a world free of militarism with a particular focus on Sweden’s role in the current world order. Two issues have been of particular importance: Swedish arms production and the use of a military test area in the north of Sweden.

When people in Ofog use the terms “militarism” and “anti-militarism,” they do not necessarily mean the same things. I use “militarism” to refer to the dominant and deeply entrenched assumptions that military might give most power and that an army is the best way to protect a country. Armed forces and arms producers rely on the discourse of militarism in order to justify their existence. Upholders of the discourse also include governments, a number of government agencies as well as a large proportion of the general public. “Anti-militarists,” on the other hand, contribute to a counter-discourse of anti-militarism that rejects or at least questions the assumptions inherent in militarism.

Arms exports from Sweden are forbidden in principle (ISP 2012); nevertheless, Sweden was the world’s largest arms exporter in proportion to the size of the population in 2010, and Swedish companies exported everything from red-dot sights to fighter planes to countries all over the world. In reality, both countries at war and various dictatorships were able to buy Swedish produced arms (SPAS 2011). Sweden is a close ally of NATO and the Swedish Defence Materiel Administration (FMV) operates Europe’s largest overland test site in the north of Sweden. The area formerly known as the North European Aerospace Test range is now called Vidsel Test Range. It has an air space almost the size of Belgium (FMV 2013), and is routinely rented out to other countries’ military forces to train and test new weapon systems.

Ofog spends much time working with legal means to raise awareness about these issues, but also organizes civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action. Radical clowning has been used in three different contexts: In legal demonstrations, clowning has been a way to deescalate tensions and reach out to police officers. In civil disobedience actions, clowning has served the additional purpose of physically challenging access to restricted space. In counter-recruitment where Ofog has attempted to disrupt military recruitment of young people, clowning has been a way to demonstrate the absurdity of militarism.

3 Methodology

The guiding questions for this research have been:

- What role do the radical clowns play in Ofog's nonviolent direct actions?
- What are the similarities and differences between Ofog's rebel clowning and other examples of rebel clowning?
- What are the similarities and differences between rebel clowning and traditional circus clowns seen through the lenses of clown theory?
- What implications do the findings about rebel clowning have for the debate within humor studies about humor's subversiveness?

The present study of clowning is part of a larger project about humorous political stunts (Sørensen 2014). One part has been carried out together with Ofog between 2011 and 2013 inspired by action research methodologies (McIntyre 2008; Somekh 2006; Stringer 2007). In this text, I rely on data from participant observation in civil disobedience actions involving clowning as well as semi-structured interviews with other Ofog activists.

Participant observation has a long tradition and is a well-established method within anthropology and ethnography (Emerson 2001). Participant observation is usually used to observe various forms of everyday life, but is also suggested as a method to gain insights into a little known subject (Jorgensen 1989: 12). The present study is an example of the latter. Between May 2011 and October 2013 I have participated in a number of the meetings in the local group in Gothenburg and in most of the activities at the national level such as camps, the celebration of Ofog's ten-year anniversary and annual national meetings that decided on organizational matters and made some plans for the future. I also participated in some humorous actions, including as a rebel clown. However, because I was not interested in studying Ofog as a group but in

working together to study the phenomena of humor, this is not a traditional ethnographic study.

Semi-structured interviewing is another well-established method used to get a number of different types of information (Patton 2002). I interviewed thirteen Ofog activists about their experiences with humor. Most of these were audio-recorded interviews about many aspects of humor and political activism. In this article I draw on interviews where episodes about rebel clowning were mentioned. The interviews provided facts about events that I have not observed myself and gave an impression of what the humor means to those who tell about it.

4 Clown theory

Several books provide instructions and practical exercises for people who want to practice clowning or other physical comedy (Simon 2012; Wright 2006), but academics have made surprisingly few attempts to theorize clowning. An exception is Louise Peacock's book *Serious Play*, which has a few pages on CIRCA. However, more interesting is her attempt to define the unique features of all clowning, including ceremonial clowning, the traditional circus clown, clowns in theatre and the recent invention of clowns in hospitals.

Peacock identifies three central aspects of clowning that I will use as a point of departure for the analysis of rebel clowning:

The clown is distinguished from the actor by his or her ability to play with the audience and to create a sense of *complicité* with them by using play to connect with them. There is always something of the 'other' about clowns. This may be expressed in the way that they look different from ordinary everyday people (through make-up, costume, the use of a red nose), but the most striking feature of the clowns' 'otherness' is their attitude to life as expressed through their performance. Whilst the clown often fails to achieve what they set out to achieve, their failure is framed by their optimism and by the simplicity of their approach to life. (Peacock 2009: 14, italics in the original).

I emphasize here the three concepts I consider central in Peacock's definition: *play*, *otherness* and *failure*. Below, I treat them as techniques that can be more or less operationalized in a performance and apply them to the data from Ofog. Later in her book, Peacock uses the word 'incompetence' interchangeably with 'failure'; I find incompetence to be a more appropriate label and will use it subsequently. In addition, I present the fourth concept of ridicule, which Peacock mentions but does not find so prominent in traditional clowning that it is included in her definition.

5 Play, otherness, incompetence and ridicule in rebel clowning

Play is probably the most crucial element in clowning, also for rebel clowns. I observed how play can work during an international summer camp called War Starts Here, organized by Ofog near the Vidsel Test Range in July 2011. During the day of direct action, 200 people held a pink carnival just outside the restricted test area.² I was part of an affinity group with eight clowns that had two goals: first, to challenge police perceptions of their own role by trying to reach to the human beings behind the police uniform, and, second, to distract the police to make other affinity groups achieve what they wanted, such as climbing the fence in order to get to the military runway. I will return to the problematic aspects of trying to do this simultaneously since they contradict each other. The clowns were dressed in a mixture of clowning and military clothing and brought items such as jump ropes, soap bubbles, feather dusters, and balloons with them to play with. When all of the 200 activists arrived outside of the restricted area, the clowns immediately spotted the police blocking the road, and decided to help. As members of the clown army, the idea was to show a community with others in uniform, although much of what the police do perplexes the clowns. Forming their own line across the road just in front of the police, the clowns assisted in stopping the rest of the activists from proceeding and helped direct the traffic that was allowed to pass where the protesters could not go.

Most of the police seemed quite relaxed around both the clowns and the other activists, although they declined to try the soap bubbles and most of them politely declined raisins and chocolate. Emma, who was part of our group, reported that when she started to clean the shoe of one policeman with her feather duster, to her surprise he just put forward his other foot as well.³ However, one particular policewoman had been very hesitant in her interaction with the clowns. When they moved towards her, she moved away and she definitely did not want chocolate or raisins. A breakthrough came when the clown Sara claimed that her shoes were bigger than the policewoman's shoes and without words indicated that she wanted to measure. When Sara sat down on the ground, the policewoman followed her lead and put her boot against the clown's boot, revealing that Sara did in fact have the biggest shoes. A little while

² The following is based on participatory observation during Ofog's action July 26, 2011 Field notes July 2011

³ Interview September 2011. All the informants have been given pseudonyms.

later, Sara pretended to get stuck halfway through the fence into the runway, where a number of activists were sitting under arrest and waiting to be escorted out. This performance was of such high quality that I thought Sara actually was stuck.

A group of around fifty people, including some of the clowns, decided to participate in a civil disobedience action by entering the restricted area. This involved a five kilometer walk where the fifty people were escorted by only two police officers. Some of the clowns walked in the heels of one policeman, sometimes one, and sometimes three in a line, imitating his every move. If he walked fast, the clowns walked fast; if he talked in his radio, the clowns talked in their imaginary radios. If he turned around to see what was going on, the clowns turned around as well. From the clown perspective, this was a game of “follow John,” but the officer did his best to ignore the clowns (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Ofog action Luleå July 26, 2011 clowns and police. Notice that the policeman looks amused. Photo by Ofog

John Wright (2006) in his book *Why Is That So Funny? A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy* devotes much space to clowning. In addition to providing many practical exercises for performers to help them find their “inner clown”, Wright also reflects on the meaning of clowning. To him it is important that clowns are not acting, they just are. Clowns exist in the here and now without pretence (Wright 2006: 193). All clowning takes its point of departure in *simple clown* which he characterizes as “fun-loving, childlike, amoral, irresponsible, mercurial, bizarre, destructive, chaotic and anarchic” (Wright 2006: 203–204). Central

to the simple clown are stupidity, naivety, and constant bafflement about what life has to offer. This idea of the simple clown goes well together with Peacock's emphasis on play and with attempts by rebel clowns to get the police to engage in play with them, including jumping in jump rope and blowing soap bubbles.

The second keyword from Peacock's definition of clowning, otherness, also resonates well with radical clowning. By wearing parts of military uniforms, the clown army is partly like others in uniform, but the clowning attributes and especially the red noses obviously make them part of the community of clowns. Ofog and CIRCA clowns belong everywhere – and nowhere. The otherness is also expressed in part of CIRCA's statement "about the army": "We are *circa* because we are approximate and ambivalent, neither here nor there, but in the most powerful of all places, the place in-between order and chaos" (CIRCA 2006).

According to Peacock, "failure or 'incompetence' is a staple ingredient of clown performance", and the third central aspect of clowning she identifies (Peacock 2009: 24). Weitz also describes how the western clown is inspired by the "country bumpkin" and draws on "physical, intellectual and social incompetence" (Weitz 2012: 79). However, failure and incompetence are almost absent from the data about rebel clowns. Although CIRCA's recruitment video includes a sentence about "learning how to be stupid" (Anonymous not dated-a) and the self-description has a reference to failure when discussing why they are clowns (CIRCA 2006), the incompetence is not mentioned in the academic literature on CIRCA. Sara getting stuck in the fence surrounding Vidsel Test Range/NEAT is the only example of incompetence I have observed or heard about. Since this is rather striking, I also looked for episodes of incompetence in ten YouTube videos documenting rebel clown actions.⁴ In none of them did I find anything resembling incompetence.

There are most likely several reasons why there is so little incompetence in rebel clowning. Activists who have little knowledge of the clown tradition are unlikely to have thought much about what ought to be "staple ingredients" in their clowning. However, it might also be because it takes more practice and skills to be funny by appearing incompetent than most amateur rebel clowns have. It also requires a type of action/situation where there is enough time to

⁴ See (Anonymous 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Anonymous 2007, 2012, 2013; Anonymous not dated-a, b, c, d). I randomly picked these videos from different clown actions in different cities, taking place between 2005 and 2013. The videos are a small selection of what has been filmed and posted on YouTube and are probably not representative of all rebel clowning. "Selection bias" occurs at the level of the filmmaker and cannot be controlled by a researcher. The videos show the variety of ways that the idea of rebel clowning has been picked up and adapted to local circumstances in Europe and North America.

establish contact with the audiences. Finally, amateur clowns who are used to being “ordinary” protesters might find it easy to ridicule others, but a challenge to humiliate themselves by appearing incompetent. However, it would require more research to obtain information to help explain why incompetence is almost absent from rebel clowning.

Nevertheless, if incompetence is missing, rebel clowning instead includes a fourth feature, which does not take such a prominent place in Peacock’s theory, namely ridicule. Clowns standing next to police and military personnel and imitating their every move are a “staple ingredient” in actions I have observed and heard about. The clowns at the Vidsel Test Range/NEAT that followed in the heels of one policeman are an example of such ridicule. Examples of ridicule are also included in descriptions about CIRCA actions (Klepto 2004).

Looking at radical clowning from the perspective of Peacock’s clown theory shows that radical clowning uses two of the three core features of clowning she identified; play and otherness. However, the third core feature, incompetence, is almost absent in radical clowning, something I will return to later. Instead I identified ridicule as a fourth core feature. The next section shows how expressions of play and otherness are central for rebel clowns’ attempts to communicate nonviolent values, a mutual recognition of the human in the other and negotiate space.

6 Communicating nonviolent values and negotiating space through play and otherness

Many nonviolent activists find it important to communicate their nonviolent values and intentions to everyone they encounter during an action (Sharp 1973; WRI 2009). One way to do this can be to reach out to the “human in the other”, for instance by appealing to the person behind the police role. Non-clowning activists can do this in many ways, but play and otherness are central in rebel clowns’ expressions of their commitment to nonviolent values. It is not possible during the heat of the moment to communicate sophisticated understandings of nonviolent action, but as a minimum almost all rebel clowns aim to communicate a non-threatening attitude.

Vera is a clown from Ofog who prefers to take the role of the curious clown who wants to include everyone in what is going on. She likes the clown figure because it does not make her “a hard and angry activist”⁵, a notion she used to

⁵ Interview September 2011.

describe the stereotype of political activists. Police are frequently the target of clown play and some clowns can be extremely persistent in their ridicule, Vera is the kind of clown who leaves police officers alone if they don't want to play. As she expresses it: "you know, it is not as fun to play with someone who thinks you are very annoying."⁶

Vera's experience is that it is easier to communicate her commitment to nonviolent values when she is in the role as a clown than when she is a "civilian". A telling example was when her clown character pretended to fall in love with one of the police officers. She looked at him and flirted by hugging herself, and felt it was a break through that made him relax: "For me the symbolism became: You are here, but you are not my enemy. I rather think you should be with us instead."⁷

A comparable example is described in an article about CIRCA. The clown Trixie confronted a line of very serious police in riot gear during the G8 summit in Edinburgh in 2005. During a rather tense situation, Trixie went along the line of police and kissed the plastic shields of all the policemen in the line, just after the shields had been used to shove people away in order to restore police control of a street. A photo of this episode went around the world the next day as part of many news reports. (Bogad 2010: 539).

Both of these episodes can be understood as an expression of the clowns' otherness. Even if kissing and flirting in public usually do not break social conventions in Sweden and Scotland, when done by a rebel clown, it usually diverges considerably from social conventions about relations between protesters and police.

The play and otherness make it difficult for police to find adequate ways of responding. Peter is another Ofog clown, and his experience has been that police and military do not really know how to respond to clowns. Clowning creates insecurity because police cannot react as they do with conventional protestors:

I have noticed that police and soldiers do not really know how to meet clowns; they can't really behave as they usually do when they meet demonstrators. Instead they become a bit more cautious, and you can get away with more things than you usually would.⁸

Peter has also had the experience that the police attempted to make the clowns serious, and ask them to stop being foolish. He has noticed that "the police are uncomfortable, you can feel that. And then you have reached through in some

⁶ Interview September 2011.

⁷ Interview September 2011.

⁸ Interview September 2011.

way, because then they are not so certain in their role.”⁹ However, Peter thought it was difficult to know to what degree he and other clowns had connected with the persons behind the police role.

Clowning changes the dynamic of the interaction with the police who are not sure how to react, and it is an attempt to reach to the human being behind the uniform. Also studies of CIRCA have showed how radical clowning can diffuse tense situations, when the clowns neither behave as “ordinary” protesters nor turn to fear or anger (Bogad 2010; Routledge 2009: 88).

When it comes to authorities’ reactions to clowns, many factors are involved. There is the big picture about what type of action the clowns are involved in, time available for the encounter, the activists’ plans and the instructions the police have received from their superiors. In addition, there are the interactions at the individual level. Behind every clown and police officer is a person who responds to micro signals from another individual – signals that can be intended or not. Vera thought it was ok to pretend to flirt and fall in love with one particular police officer, but she did not do it with others. A police-woman in Luleå had been hesitant towards all clowns, but finally gave in to a clown who was particularly skilful when she sat down to measure shoes. Through the techniques of play and otherness, the absurd clown figure has a potential for communicating that all people have much in common no matter what their role in society, but the clowns have only very limited control over how others interpret their performances.

In addition to the possibility of communicating nonviolent values and intentions, the play and otherness of clowning can also have a more direct effect during actions. Vera, Lisa, and Lena told about an episode in 2008 when Ofog was protesting outside of the company Bofors’ headquarters in the town Karlskoga. Bofors is one of Sweden’s biggest arms manufacturers, and Ofog had held a demonstration against the company the whole day. The police had closed off the area in front of the building with red and white tape. A small delegation from the activists had just tried to deliver a letter to the CEO, but was driven out of the enclosed area. Everybody was a bit tired, it rained a little, and the activists were discussing whether they should go home. Suddenly, three rebel clowns from the clown army arrived. All three did their best to hide together behind a small tree branch on this huge open parking lot. Pretending that they were invisible to the police, the three clowns snuck into the enclosed area, hid behind a flowerpot and started playing clown games. Then the clowns became bolder and tried to engage the police in their games and imitate the way the police officers stood and moved. Some of the police officers started to move

9 Interview September 2011.

differently in order to get the clowns to imitate them, and one policeman even blew soap bubbles that a clown offered.

Vera reflected about this episode:

And then we appear, a group of clowns and kind of hide behind little twigs and roll around and fool around and we can stay there, and we reflected on that. But they just removed someone, and I don't think it was because the police got tired, they understood that it would probably be easier to let us stay in there.¹⁰

As Vera interpreted the situation, the police thought it would be easier to let the clowns stay inside the enclosed area and let them play since they did not do any harm. That the police apparently accepted the clowns as harmless meant that they had been successful in communicating their nonviolent intentions. Lena, another Ofog activist who participated in the same clown group, commented on how the situation was perceived by the “ordinary” Ofog activists who were holding the demonstration outside of the enclosed area (Figures 2 and 3):

We kind of sneaked in, you know we were very visible because it was a totally open parking lot, but we pretended to sneak in and came all the way to the house and really played theatre. It was like a show for the others in the manifestation because it rained a little and was kind of “should we go home or what” atmosphere.¹¹

Figure 2: The clown army succeed through camouflage and silliness to get inside the enclosure. Outside arms producer Bofors' headquarters in Karlskoga June 17 2008. Photo by Ofog
Note: Original photo text on Ofog's webpage.

¹⁰ Interview September 2011

¹¹ Interview June 2011

Figure 3: A police blows soap bobbles outside Bofors headquarters. Photo by Ofog
 Note: Original photo text from Ofog's webpage.

Lisa, an activist who observed this episode, viewed it as a little victory regarding space because the clowns managed to get a little further than what was allowed. The year before someone had been arrested and convicted just for being a few meters inside the enclosed area.¹² The challenge was mainly symbolic since the clowns did not have any plans about what to do in the forbidden area. It was the crossing itself that was seen as victorious because it challenged the authority of the police. This might be considered childish mischief, but in this context where the police were present to protect a big arms producer from nonviolent protest, the challenging of space became a transcendence of the rationality that the police were trying to uphold. By physically crossing the line of authority, using a combination of play and otherness, the clowns showed that the line was artificial and negotiable, since some people could cross it and others not.

However, clowning will not always have this effect. In 2012 a group of Ofog clowns participated in an action called “NATO game over” in Belgium. The action was announced beforehand as a “humanitarian intervention”, and was a civil disobedience action where 500 people attempted to climb the fence into the headquarters of the military alliance NATO. However, in this context everything happened so fast that there was no possibility for the clowns to establish a relationship and involve figures of authority in clown games.¹³

¹² Interview September 2011.

¹³ Field notes April 2, 2012.

7 The limitations and contradictions of radical clowning

Radical clowning also includes behavior that can be seen as contradicting both nonviolent values and the mutual recognition. Radical clowns might reach out to individual police officers, and be received in an atmosphere of mutual recognition of friendliness. However, when the clowns at the same time aim to distract police officers in an attempt to divert their attention away from the job, they jeopardize the trust they have just built. The police are most likely aware of the clowns' contradictory intentions and never fully let their guard down, but it creates a tension when the play is not just innocent fun, but in addition an excuse for other purposes.

In addition, mocking and ridiculing of authoritative body language and commands is problematical in light of nonviolent values and an appeal for mutual recognition. Some police officers might have enough critical self-distance to laugh or smile at the ridicule, but they can also be genuinely offended. Ridicule is one of humor's potentially harmful sides but it is often downplayed in writings focusing on the positive aspects of humor (Billig 2005).

Within the tradition of "carnival against capital" (Bogad 2010: 543–544), CIRCA developed a carnivalesque form of protest focusing on "do it yourself" direct action and protesting in ways not permitted by the state. Although most of what happens is nonviolent, this type of activism sometimes ends in vandalism and rioting (Bogad 2010: 543). An article that discusses a network of cycling rebel clowns in New York includes an episode where a biking clown intentionally hit a man who had parked his car on the bike lane (Shepard et al. 2008). The authors do not reflect on this, but such episodes are potentially damaging for radical clowning. It is one thing if the performance is confusing or meaningless, but if clowning becomes associated with violence, there is a considerable risk of losing sympathy from otherwise friendly audiences. Clowns who engage in or are associated with violence undermine the innocence of the clown figure and are counterproductive to the intentions.

There is no reason to think that such violent episodes are common, but a comparable expression of aggression can be found in a YouTube video that places itself in the tradition of CIRCA. It shows a man with clowning face paint arguing with a policeman (Anonymous 2013). The person who is identified as an "anarchist clown" seems to have left all playfulness behind. Instead of playing tricks with the policeman or teasing him, he is engaging in a relatively aggressive conversation that has nothing to do with humour. The person who is "clowning" is obviously upset about an episode where a protester was hit by a

policeman¹⁴, but he has not found a way of dealing with this frustration within the limits of the clown role. Other clowns might have been able to use their clown roles to express their grief and horror about what had happened. Absurdity is part of the logic of rebel clowning, and if one wants to engage in rational conversation one has to bring along non-clowning friends or stop clowning.

Another limitation of rebel clowning is related to who they meet when they take actions. Although it is an explicit goal for rebel clowns to criticise systems and attack those on top of the hierarchies,¹⁵ in the clowning episodes I have watched or been told about the clowns end up mocking and ridiculing those with the least power within police and military. Thus there is a contradiction between what the clowns intend to achieve and what they are actually able to do. Although the clowning is directed at the role that police and military perform, it is the individual police officer or soldier who knows how the experience feels for them.¹⁶

Peacock (2009: 122) claims that the effect of CIRCA was limited and Bogad (2010: 555) reflects that in themselves, performances like these can only hint at a better world. I agree that it is important to be cautious when judging the effects of radical clowning. Creating friendly relations with the police might be considered an important aspect of a good nonviolent action, but it should hardly be the goal in itself. A few clowns here and there cannot be expected to dismantle the discourse of militarism, but Ofog's clowns did not even get to meet representatives of NATO or Bofors and communicate the absurdity of the situation directly to them. Such "meetings" only happened indirectly through media. The most generous interpretation possible is that these clowns contributed to creating a little more attention to the issues of NATO and Swedish arms production and export. Additionally, clowning was a positive experience for most of the activist clowns and contributed to creating a culture of resistance. However, one should not dismiss the effect of hinting at a better world. An important aspect of a nonviolent action is to be an utopian enactment of a different society (Vinhagen 2005), something clowning can contribute to.

14 The text published together with the video says: "Gen'ral Malaise of the Salish CIRCA (Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army) dismisses Sgt. Ryan Long of the Seattle Police Department during a march against Monsanto rally at Westlake Park, May 25th, 2013. At the El Comite Immigration Reform Rally on May 1st 2013, Ofcr. Jack Persons hit and ran a protester on a bicycle, which is what clownie is referencing in this video."

15 For instance this was emphasised by the Ofog clown Lena, interview July 2011.

16 As part of the research project I contacted the police in the north of Sweden and asked for an interview with the police officers who had been present during the War Starts Here action. However, the police never responded to the request.

8 Radical clowning and the tradition of clowning

The people who initiated CIRCA had a well thought through idea about the purpose of radical clowning and the self-description is well articulated (CIRCA 2006). However, the concept of radical clowning has spread without the knowledge about the clown figure following. CIRCA wanted to set the clown free from the circus (CIRCA 2006), but in places where the radical clowns operate, clowns are closely associated with the circus. In addition to imitating other rebel clowns, childhood memories of the circus are with all likelihood where most radical clowns draw their inspiration from.

Peacock herself does not engage in a systematic discussion about the similarities and differences between what she describes as central clowning concepts and her analysis of CIRCA. Thus, she mentions how CIRCA clowns are playing and how they parody the military, but does not comment on the fact that the technique of incompetence appears to be missing in CIRCA clown behavior. A question then arises: would more use of this technique make the rebel clown army concept more convincing, for instance in negotiating space or by emphasizing nonviolent values or mutual recognition? Accounts of rebel clowns' experiences reveal that they have felt successful, but that does not mean that the performance cannot be improved. Clowns parodying police and military in uniform by imitating their posture usually come across as funny without much explanation. However, other clown army actions can be difficult to grasp. More use of incompetence in the performance would hardly make clowning more self-explanatory. However, performances and play that involve incompetence would probably contribute considerably to the mutual recognition that rebel clowns strive towards. We are all humans who can fail, activists and representatives of authorities alike, and it would make it more difficult to interpret the clown activists as self-righteous. Where the non-humorous activists usually find it hard to deal with incompetence, this would be easier for clowns. Since clowns are constantly bewildered by the state of the world and their lack of success, they could serve as an embodiment of all activists' common failure to change the world.

Peacock also mentions two aspects of traditional clown performances not discussed yet in relation to her theory: sexual antics and violence. When discussing what rebel clowns attempt to achieve, it is worth noting that they usually refrain from engaging with these two aspects of traditional clowning.

Peacock writes that "clown actions can also involve sexual antics which involve a level of obscenity that would not be acceptable in everyday society" (Peacock 2009: 26). None of the rebel clowns in CIRCA or Ofog have picked up

this aspect of clowning, something that would also with all likelihood divert attention away from the message they are interested in communicating. The kissing and flirting that can be included in rebel clowning is not part of the clowning tradition that Peacock describes, probably because kissing and flirting rarely diverge from established social norms in the societies where rebel clowning is practiced.

In traditional clown performances, aggression and violence can be part of the clown performance (Peacock 2009: 26). The initiators of the original British CIRCA did not include this in their concept, but indicated with the slogan “*amuse, bemuse, but never bruise*” (Bogad 2010: 553) that nonviolence was central. As discussed earlier, violence is an obvious contradiction to the non-violent values that the activists want to communicate and signs of aggression are a potential source for huge misunderstandings.

9 Implications for theory of humor

For decades it has been debated whether humor is subversive and can contribute to resistance. A number of authors are skeptical about humor’s ability to contribute to change (Benton 1988; Billig 2005; Davies 2007; Hong 2010; Tsakona and Popa 2011), while other studies have documented that under some circumstances humor can be seen to contribute to change (Barker 2001; Branagan 2007; Downe 1999; Rodrigues and Collinson 1995; Stokker 1997, 2001; Sørensen 2008; Taylor and Bain 2003; Westwood 2013).

Nowhere has this debate been more passionate than when it comes to the “carnavalesque”, after the publication of the English translation of Bakhtin’s (1984 [1965]) *Rabelais and His World*. When Bakhtin developed his ideas about the carnivalesque and praised carnival for its subversiveness, he apparently did not have accurate information about what happened around the medieval European carnival (Dentith 1995: 74). The most obvious reason for hesitation towards the subversive potential was that carnival was licensed by the church. However, as Stallybrass and White (1986) have demonstrated convincingly, the carnivalesque can be understood as a much broader transgression when it is set free from the connection to *carnival* as a certain set of practices at a particular time in history.

Also when it comes to clowning, its potential subversiveness has been debated. In its self-description CIRCA emphasized clowning’s historical affiliation with subversion and disobedience (CIRCA 2006; Klepto 2004). In an article about conventional clowning, Weitz found that the clown is a way of enforcing

social control that teaches children the “correct” response to failure – to be ashamed and disappointed. However, he adds that “it is also possible to read the clown’s buoyant attitude toward setback as somehow liberating, shrugging off social expectation to shoulder the world playfully.” (Weitz 2012: 80). Nevertheless he concludes his analysis by doubting clowning’s ability to contribute to change. According to Weitz, even if the clown can get away with much “the status quo reasserts its primacy in the end, with the reins still firmly in the hands of the dominant discourse – yes, we have had a good laugh, but what has changed?” (Weitz 2012: 87). Wright writes that “clowning is subversive, but it’s too mindless an activity in itself to be political with anything like a capital ‘P’” (Wright 2006: 203).

One of the problems with the debate about humor’s conservative/subversive potential is that some of the sceptics write about “humor” as if it is one thing and jump from findings about their studies of jokes to all humor. To take a recently published example, Tsakona and Popa (2011) call it a popular myth that humor is subversive and can be a rebellion against political oppressions and injustice. They claim that even when humor conveys criticism, it “recycles and reinforces dominant values and views on politics” (Tsakona and Popa 2011: 2). This might be a reasonable conclusion based on the data they have studied, but it should not be generalized to all political humor. It is especially problematic when they are partly basing the generalizations on a literature review that neglects findings that point in a different direction. So while Hong’s findings (which are based on the diaries of just two individuals) are referred to at length, they do not include in their review the studies mentioned above which have found circumstances where humor can contribute to change. However, even more problematic is the skeptics’ apparently dichotomous understanding of power, resistance and change. They do not take into account studies that have found power, change and resistance to be multifaceted and not a question of either-or (Bayat 2010; Foucault 1976, 1982; Scott 1985, 1990).

With a point of departure in this understanding of power and resistance it seems more reasonable to assume that resistance to dominant discourses requires multiple strategies, and ask under what circumstances humor can contribute to undermining the hegemony of dominant discourses. Although humor is unlikely to bring about change on its own, it can be a way for dissent to be expressed. The rebel clowns whose experiences I have described here did not bring down militarism, close an arms factory or stop a military exercise, and it would have been rather naïve to expect them to accomplish anything that far-reaching. Evaluating their experiences from this perspective is unfair. What the clowns can contribute is to raise critique, generate media attention, and be a personal liberation that can make activism more sustainable, fun and enjoyable

thus facilitating a culture of resistance. Within these civil disobedience actions, clowns present a friendly and non-threatening face. The episode outside Bofors showed that the police line was artificial and negotiable. Of course this clowning event did not stop Bofors from producing weapons, but for the activists, this was a successful resistance to the dominant discourse of militarism. It was a transgression that exposed the absurdity of a huge arms producer's need for police protection against nonviolent protest.

10 Conclusion

Ofog's clowns are an application of the rebel clown army concept developed by CIRCA. It is part of a tradition of tactical carnival and playful protest which seems to be increasing in the so-called western world within the global justice movement. However, there is no data that indicate that the phenomenon has been used in other cultural contexts, and it is easy to imagine many contexts where rebel clowning would be considered inappropriate, or simply become meaningless if the clown figure is not an established part of the cultural heritage and mythology.

Comparing Ofog's radical clowning with traditional clowning shows that rebel clowning does indeed draw on its historic roots. Two out of three of Peacock's key features of clowning, play and otherness, were present in the data about clowning from Ofog and CIRCA. By using play and otherness in their performances, radical clowns can under some circumstances communicate non-violent values, contribute to activists' and police officers' recognition of the human in the other as well as negotiate physical space. Everyone involved is aware that the clown army is a performance and the red nose is not real, but play and otherness sometimes succeed in transcending the established relations of power.

The place where traditional clowning and rebel clowning depart from each other is in Peacock's third key feature: incompetence. It is a staple ingredient in traditional clowning, but is almost absent from radical clowning. The reason may be that incompetence requires performance skills that most activists have not acquired. Nevertheless, rebel clowning would probably benefit from more expressions of incompetence since it would increase the possibility for mutual recognition of the human in the other.

In addition to the three clowning aspects emphasized by Peacock, I discovered that ridicule has a prominent place in rebel clowning, especially in the form of parodies of the body language of authority figures. Through parody and

imitation, the police and military are denied the dignity of being adults performing their job and their power temporarily broken. Since clowns are “others”, who have adopted a role quite distinct from conventional protesters, law enforcement personnel cannot just react as they normally do, at least not in these Swedish examples. Although representatives of the police are unlikely to be fundamentally scattered in their view of the world, they are placed in a position where no response appears quite right. However, ridicule sends ambiguous signals that risks complicating communication. It is not enough to put on a red nose and imitate the police – the relations are still fragile, and if the performance is not experienced as sincere the possibility will collapse. That is why even a single violent clown should be a concern for the whole community of rebel clowns.

Maybe clowns are trying to do so many different things at the same time that their performances become incomprehensible to others. However, to confuse someone who is usually sure of themselves and what they do is in the clowning perspective an achievement in itself. Clowning has its limitations, but it is nevertheless a technique that provides a unique way to confront established relations of power head on.

No single action or method is likely to significantly undermine such a dominant discourse as militarism in the short term. The experiments that CIRCA, Ofog and similar groups have done so far have been small scale. Of course it is impossible to dismantle the military institutions with 8 clowns here and 150 clowns there. However, the very existence of rebel clowns shows how the traditional circus clowns can be an inspiration for powerful resistance. Weitz found the circus clown to mainly be a way to enforce social control and teach children conforming behavior. However, some of the children have grown up and remembered the subversive potential clowning showed them and bring this experience with them into their activism in adult life. When the practical result of the childhood experiences is that the clown figure has been modified and interpreted in the context of protest, it is of less relevance that academics have found clowning to mean something different.

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