

The political exploitation of the clown figure in traditional and popular theater in Asia

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Abstract

In humor the mechanisms may be universal, but this is not to imply that humor is understood cross-culturally. Its exclusive nature lies in playing with the self-evident being determined by the specific cultural context. In many societies joking is a clown's breadwinning, either in solo performances or as part of any type of theatrical art. In view of their relative freedom in openly criticizing society, clowns have been recruited, particularly in Asia, as mouthpieces for government propaganda, for example on birth control. Their jesting was meant to motivate the population for modernization. It turned out that this seriously hampered the freedom of the clown. It was evident to the audience that the clown could no longer play his subtle games in selling his jokes and gags. He turned to earnestness and superficiality. In practicing the apparently universal mechanisms of comedy, the clown lost sight of the societal context of his audience.

Humor and fools: playing with the self-evident

Humor means playing with the self-evident, and unsettling it, which sheds a surprising light on things. The general mechanism of a joke is to make a creative comparison out of two non-coherent elements. This is really the principle underlying all metaphor, as the comparison between a camel and a ship as in the saying, the camel is the ship of the desert. Although this example concerns an obvious schoolbook explanation of a rather complex and difficult feature of metaphor,¹ it also explains this matter in a nutshell. In fact camels and ships have nothing in common, but in the condensation of speech the image is evident.