

Homer Sapiens

Newrock Budget

If we were to go interactive here, which would be against the club rules if the club rules had caught up with the Power Point century, which they haven't, of course – the rule on visual aids, for example, seems to be concerned with preventing members from bringing attractive magician's assistants in fishnet tights or performing seals – we really do need to update – anyway, if I could ask for a show of hands of how many members watch television there would be a about fifty hands in the air. Sheepish hands, since television is sort of a guilty shame and something you'd want to keep private, but what the hell. Everybody watches something right? But then if I were to ask how many of you are regular watchers of the Simpsons, or even irregular watchers of the Simpsons, what I would see is maybe three hands up, which is a shame. My guess is that most of you, if pressed, would say that the Simpsons is a children's show either because it's a cartoon or because you have vague memories of bratty kids walking around in Bart Simpson tee shirts, as though watching the show might lead you yourself to walk around in Bart Simpson tee shirts. And that would be too bad. Because the Simpsons, for many reasons, is your friend. The Simpsons has been in there in the cultural fray every week for the past twenty one years, doing battle against political correctness, mimes, Broadway musicals, religious bullies, crappy education, PBS, flawed logic, intelligent design, fashion extremes, SUVs, and clowns, to name just a few in a long long list of targets. The weapons are fast gags, and they are lethal. Except that they're not. No matter how many fake Broadway musicals get sent up, for example, we still have ghastly Broadway musicals getting produced. There are still megachurches. There are still SUVs. And there are still clowns.

Clowns. You gotta hate'em. They're possibly the least funny things in the universe. The clown on the Simpsons is Krusty, the star of a long running television show much loved by ten-year-old Bart Simpson, who likes all the stuff that parents fear most, especially violent stuff, especially violent stuff on television. Krusty the Klown wears full clown drag – whiteface, ruff collar, big floppy shoes, clown suit, gloves. He's manic. He's a chain smoker except when the camera's running, he curses in Yiddish, and he essentially hates kids. I'm pretty sure he was modeled after the Bozo of Bozo's circus, one of the longest running shows in television history. Which is, of course, not actually history. It's TV. But it ran forever, the anchor of Chicago's independent television station WGN's midday lineup. Anybody here know what WGN stands for? Don't raise your hands. It's against the rules. WGN stands for World's Greatest Newspaper. Everybody know what paper claimed that distinction? Right. The Chicago Tribune, the station's owner. The claim to be the World's Greatest Newspaper was made by Col. Robert McCormick who owned the paper for most of its life. Col. McCormick was an isolationist and anti-semitic, but not clownishly so. Clownish management didn't become a feature of the Tribune's corporate structure until new owner Sam Zell installed a buffoon with Cincinnati connections to run the paper like a business. What Mr. Zell's management clown actually did was run the paper like a sleazy radio station, which was not surprising since he had made his bones in sleazy radio stations. It is interesting to think what the unfunny management clown would have done had Bozo's Circus still been airing when he took over the Trib. It is quite possible that he would have made the TV clown the paper's managing editor.

Why did Bozo and Bozo's circus, last for decades? The show was awful, like our own beloved but deeply unfunny Uncle Al in its use of frenetic action to fill time. In addition to nothing funny actually happening, there was none of the educational piety to which we are now accustomed. It seems especially unfunny that Bozo himself was nothing more than a corporate logo brought to life. Bozo's first existence was as the face of Capital Records' childrens division. You can't be funny and be a corporate logo at the same time. You just can't. Bozo laughed a lot, as though he were funny, but it was that scary laugh that children's entertainers do to let the kids know that whatever just happened was supposed to be funny.

Except that kids don't laugh at clowns. The children who are still young enough to be thrown in front of clowns don't understand the concept of coming up with polite laughter to save the feelings of someone who's trying to be funny but isn't. But not laughing at unfunny schtick wasn't actually a program on Bozo's circus anymore than it was on Uncle Al. All that was needed was an offstage assistant to cue the kids to shriek, which was actually what children's programming in the mid twentieth century was all about. Kids shrieking. Kids are happy shrieking when there's nothing interesting going on. So why did the program run so long if it wasn't funny? I think it was because Americans believe in their trusting hearts that clowns are a good thing even though every fiber of their primitive nervous system warns them that clowns are not only not funny but possibly dangerous.

When, for example, was the last time you had a good laugh over something Ronald McDonald said or did? I will answer for you because of the no-interactivity-in-the-club rule. You have never laughed at Ronald McDonald. Ever. He's not even supposed to be funny. Ronald McDonald is the corporate symbol not because he makes you laugh but because his first name rhymes with his last name and because the suits at McDonalds are cynical enough to know that ninety nine out of a hundred Americans believe they're supposed to love clowns. And it works. Enough people believe that they love clowns so much that McDonalds named their corporate charity, the eminently worthy hostels for families of ailing children, after their own corporate logo. It's very helpful, by the way, to have the public think your corporation is lovable when the herds of cattle who give their lives to become happy meals fart enough methane to speed up global warming as significantly as the millions of SUVs idling in the McDonalds drive-thru lanes fart out carbon dioxide.

Bozo and Ronald are far from being the only unfunny clowns. They're just the most recent. Let's take a walk through cultural history to see what other unpleasant actors in stylized bum costumes have failed to make us laugh. Or failed to make us laugh sincerely. Was there ever, for example, anyone less funny than the late Red Skelton in his pantomime clown mode? A few of you were fortunately born too late ever to have seen Mr. Skelton on his eponymous television hour, but for many years millions of Americans endured his classic clown act almost as if it were a religious rite. The otherwise amusing and obviously intelligent Carol Burnett appeared far too often as a clown cleaning woman, pantomiming, if I remember correctly, to make us laugh. What she got was not laughs but those sickly sentimental smiles we save for things we think should be funny but are, in fact, not. Lucille Ball, whose carefully built comic character was funny enough for three people, was another actor unable to resist the urge to put on clown clothes and become utterly unfunny. And then there is the patron saint of celluloid clowns, the statutory rapist Charlie Chaplin. Show his picture to an audience at the Oscars and there will be a

collective sigh of adoration. If I were (illegally) to project his costumed image on the wall in this very club, there would be, I guarantee you, a chorus of hearty chuckles. Yet who in this room has ordered up Charlie Chaplin reels for their Netflix queues?. I believe I am correct in saying not a one of you. And you haven't ordered up those unfunny reels because your Netflix queue is the real you. It represents the stuff that you, or she who controls the queue, sincerely believe will give you some pleasure.

Still don't believe me? How many Jerry Lewis movies are in your Netflix queue. I thought so. He's still alive, by the way. Still popping up on the airwaves for his telethon. And isn't it a wonderful thing, by the way, that the networks have been blown to smithereens by cable? No longer can someone like that unamusing clown control one third of the nation's broadcast time for an entire weekend. Jerry Lewis is famous for being beloved by the French, who are famous for their own clowns such as the late Jacques Tati and the famous mime Marcel Marceau who achieved international renown for being stunningly unfunny in whatever country he appeared in since language in his schtick was no barrier.

Clowns are not limited to the media or the circus. There was until his death a few years ago a clown named Raymond Thunder Sky who spent a great deal of his time riding in Queen City Metro motor coaches right here in our own beloved home town. Mr Thunder Sky, a Mohawk, to his credit, while wearing a full clown suit topped off by a construction hard hat, never pretended to be amusing or even likable, but there was constant confusion given the sentimental expectations of most Cincinnatians. Far more worrisome is the growing crossover from politics into clowning and/or vice versa. Without going into the specifics of his politics, as an example, it is fair to say that there is more than a slight element of clownishness in the newly declared politician Donald Trump. It was not that long ago – the 1980s actually – that most literate Americans understood Mr Trump to be almost a classical clown. His Homeric epithet at that time, bestowed on him by the lamented Spy magazine, was Short-Armed Vulgarian. His unusually shiny suits were as close as one could come to clown regalia as one would see in a boardroom and the hairdo that seemed to have been inspired by the grille on the 1960 Oldsmobile was, counter to clown expectations, hilarious. Today since the suits are shinier and the hairdo is swoopier and more metallic than ever, it is impossible to think anything other than that Mr Trumps clown ambitions have grown. How do those clown aspirations jibe with the political aspirations? There is perhaps one man alone in greater Cincinnati who can comment first hand from the hairdo perspective, and that would be Ohio's first district congressman whose coiffure has given the city more mirthful moments than ten visits by Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey. He is, however, difficult to reach, sleeping as he does under his congressional desk.

Has this been an unfair or too harsh attack on what some of you may still believe to be a jolly art form? I think not. You would not, I think, be complimenting your daughter's boyfriend or your ex-wife's lawyer a clown, would you? QED

[Albert Pyle 04/25/2011]