

Peter Buse

Clowning and Power: Lacan, Nietzsche, Foucault

This talk considers the function of clowning and buffoonery in contemporary politics. It starts from two basic points of orientation. The first is the frequency with which, these days, participants in formal politics, particularly on the right, are characterized as clowns or buffoons, the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, being only the most obvious and immediate example, Silvio Berlusconi being another. The paper will note that being thus characterized does not seem to disqualify the buffoon from holding office; in fact, perhaps quite the contrary: the buffoonery would appear to be integral to the political success and efficacy of these clown-politicians. The second point of orientation opens this question onto the horizon of critical and cultural theory: the fact that like Boris Johnson, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was more than once described as 'clownish', even by those who admired him, and that he also used the term to describe himself. The label applied especially to the way he conducted himself during his fortnightly seminars over almost three decades, the record of which continues to trickle through to us in the shape of texts edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. For some the term is a way of discrediting Lacan, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that Lacan's clowning was one important dimension of *his* efficacy as a psychoanalyst.

In the case of the politicians, and indeed, of Lacan, is this just a cunning mask, a populist trick to conjure votes, and deflect criticism? Or is it in fact a perfect crystallization in a single grotesque image, of the general degradation into insignificance of formal politics, when the real business and actual power is happening elsewhere? This paper will try to answer these questions, going by way of Nietzsche's characterization of Socrates as a buffoon (*Hanswurst*) who managed to get himself seriously, and concluding with Michel Foucault's reflections on modern power as Ubu-esque in his lecture series at the College de France in 1975. Foucault claims the 'Ubu-esque' is a potentially 'precise category of historico-political analysis' which describes 'the maximization of effects of power on the basis of the disqualification of the one who produces them', going on to note that power can thrive in 'a place that is manifestly, explicitly, and readily discredited as odious, despicable, or ridiculous'. This observation surely has applications to the current global situation of power beyond formal electoral politics.