The Death-Clowns of Activism: how educational struggles for the 'good and beautiful' can go wrong.

By Stefan Alexa

Some recognise that activism has been a central feature of educational endeavours in society. The link between activism and learning seems to be a thing of the past; perhaps, there is even a romantic idealisation of a past when activism had an active role in attaining what was considered 'good and beautiful'.

My contention is that activism is still alive within contemporary educational enterprises, however, neither education, nor activism is necessarily only linked to a journey and struggle for the 'good and the beautiful'. I am using concepts such as the 'clown' (Manea, 1993; Jürgens, 2014) and the 'pilgrimage' (Formenti and West, 2018) to explore darker educational realities surrounding terms such as 'terrorist learning' (Kettle and Mumford, 2016).

Unlike Kettle and Mumford (2016), I conceptualise 'terrorist learning' as a pilgrimage towards death, an activism of a different nature; different masks are worn, from a distance a clown can be seen smiling, but on a close-up, a sad and evil clown appears, perhaps a Whiteface Clown (Manea, 1993).

Terrorism is not an 'extra-ordinary' activity, but rather -together with fundamentalism- an ordinary one (West, 2016). A pilgrimage towards death starts like any other journey only to end badly, in the very 'river of death', and just before the promised 'Celestial City' (Bunyan, 1996). In the end 'one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist'; the agencies of 'death and the ugly' do reveal themselves uncannily within what some regard (and always seen) as 'good and beautiful'.

Some authors have described the “uncanny” as being connected to the making of uncertainty as “it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity, that they may challenge all rationality and logic” (Bennett and Royle, 2004, p. 36). In his essay on the “uncanny” (1919), Freud defines this term with the help of a dichotomy between two German terms, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.

*Heimlich* refers, on the one hand, to something that is homey, or home-like, something familiar, intimate, comfortable and domestic as well as, on the other hand, something that is
secret, hidden, concealed and out of sight. On the opposite side, the term *unheimlich* refers to something un-homey and unfamiliar, something eerie and strange, as well as, on the other hand, unhidden and revealed. The “uncanny” is *unheimlich* inasmuch it refers to some frightening matters that could lead one to desire to go back to what one knows, is familiar with; in this sense, for Freud the “uncanny” is the return of the repressed.

The Freudian conceptual breakthrough through the notion of ‘death drive’ has made possible to explain “why a subject unconsciously and repeatedly places him or herself in painful, extreme or traumatic situations that revive previously lived experiences” (Roudinesco, 2004, p. 103); these experiences are either in the open and conscious to all, or are buried deep away from the facile grasp of reason and common-sense.

The 'play' itself, as a "universal activity", has been conceived to be towards life, towards a healthy mother-child relationship as suggested by the famous British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, David Winnicott (Winnicott, 2012). However, within this realm of connected psychic phenomena, there seem to be firm links between reality and horror, hence the need to consider play as part of sickness and not merely restricted to healthy conditions:

> The least we can say about external reality is that there is too much horror in it: wars, delinquency, natural catastrophes, epidemics, unemployment, terrorism. [...] During these last few years we have witnessed many examples of perverted playing, of dirty playing. Such play is not based on interchange, but on the will to dominate; it is a way of imposing one’s will, and the will to submit. It is a kind of play that is impregnated with destructiveness (Green, 2018, p. 12).

I consider that playfulness is necessarily involved in the pilgrimage towards life as representing one’s “Homeland” by creatively accepting the “Exile” as a necessary rupture and ‘disjuncture’; on the other hand, there is a perverted creativity, yet no less creative –“impregnated with destructiveness”, the uncanny and the Unheimlich- which stands as engine for a pilgrimage towards death, in effect being itself characterised by a “perverted playfulness”, yet still a powerful kind of playfulness. It is indeed of importance to realise a connective note towards Norman Manea’s reflections on the terror-filled events of the twentieth century and say that playfulness’ necessity exists in both, the destructive and dictatorial actions of a White Clown, and in the artistic and poetic endeavours of an Augustus the Fool (Manea, 1993); as a continuation note:

> Malice, deformation and above all violence – these are the characteristics of those circus clowns who become detached from their original context and begin to haunt different media and art forms. They are a far cry from their colleagues in the circus,
who are generally picaresque, blithe and droll. [...] A proto- or archetype of the circus that represents productive anarchy, the clown is an anthropological constant that exists in all cultures, a ‘world figure’ whose archaic mythical origins issue from Indian cultures, antique gods and the Commedia dell’Arte, among others. Owing to his multiple identities and a multifarious group of fellow tricksters from different times, cultures and media (jesters, picaros, harlequins, pierrots, pagliacci, etc.), it is very difficult to define the clown’s essential nature; however, what his various forms all do have in common is their ambivalence. One of the most ambivalent clown manifestations is the violent clown type (Jürgens, 2014, p. 441).

Literary violent clowns have mask-like faces; "in fact, the very word ‘mask’ is derived from the Arabic, *maskharat*, meaning ‘clown’. Masks have the power to attract or repel, submerging the actor’s authentic identity and investing the wearer with special power and privilege" (Robb, 2007, p. 29). Ronald L. Grimes (1975) has conceptualised the difference between a ritual and a biographical mask, as the latter would have a very different performative outlook than the ritual mask across different phases of a mask’s ‘life’: from making to wearing, from encountering to removing, from exchanging to displaying and finally destroying it. In agreement with Grime’s multi-faceted usage of the masks, I also acknowledge that a mask has more than a ritual value and that one needs to engage with its biographical potentialities, more specifically those that relate to the making a ‘second face’ through four moments in the life of a mask.

Exploring these matters requires "narrative imagination" (Andrews, 2014), to approach and interlink biographies, even across generations, not least my own as a researcher; auto/biographical articulations of terrorism-impacted biographical stories are seen as the duty of another kind of 'clown' who is on a pilgrimage towards life. Until the very last moment when the trigger is pulled and death occurs, this clown - an activist on the pilgrimage towards life- has the duty to optimistically start the dialogue -one time after another-, and attempt to change the otherwise very 'ordinary' unfolding of events. The clown that succeeds this is an artist and is a teacher; they have less authority as other clowns have taken over in a world dominated by abuse of power, isolation, excessive consumption, reckless and hateful behaviours against the Other.

Would activism through the arts and the practice of (autonomous) teaching (and learning) be enough to find the 'good and the beautiful' once again?

**Questions:**

What does it mean to be an activist and whose values we represent?

Are academics just avoiding taking an activist stance?
**Keywords:** Good and beauty and their opposites, dark play, uncanny, clown, pilgrimage, lifelong learning.

**Bibliography:**


