

Biting on Nonsense. “Does [it] taste funny to you?”

“In 1993 Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst [...] produced a short video titled *A Couple of Cannibals Eating a Clown (I Should Coco)*. The title alludes to the first part of the joke, which concludes: ‘One says to the other: “Does this taste funny to you?”’ The sick character of the joke sets the tone for the video, which shows the two artists sitting in a bar, obviously drunk, wearing clown regalia, and swapping horrifically gruesome stories about traffic accidents and crimes. They manage to remain disconcertingly deadpan throughout, but eventually crack up laughing.”¹

Why is all this nonsense funny? It would be banal to try to explain because as soon as humour becomes didactic, it does not seem funny anymore. Hard to grasp and even harder to maintain, humour is a vulnerable trade because what one finds funny might seem nonsense to another. But this is probably humour’s best characteristic.

Humour can find its own logic within the illogical structure of Nonsense, a genre that finds its roots in early English literature and riddles², and became popular during the Victorian era with classic texts like Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Because the humour of Nonsense derives from a different source than the humour of a punch-line joke, it often relates more strongly to absurdism. Nonsense’s illogical logics are funny only because they do not make sense, as opposed to most humour, which is funny because it does.

There is a tendency to take the term ‘nonsense’ too literally, interpreting it as ‘meaninglessness’. The confusion is between the epistemological and the literary-historical use of the term: a ‘text’ does not have to be void of sense if it takes advantage of nonsensical devices.³ The nonsensical mode is largely literary, and lies mostly in word twisting, breaking the conventional language system by disrupting syntactic and grammatical structures. However, its essence, leaving all text-based gibberish aside, embodies a certain wit and ingenuity. In relation to the Freudian concept of the ‘uncanny’, Nonsense is something that often seems familiar but foreign, resulting in a funny feeling of pleasurable uncomfortableness.⁴

Cunning juxtapositions from both reality and fantasy can be understood as Nonsense characteristics. With the rejection of logic, Nonsense creates its own conventions within its little universe, which “[have] little or nothing to do with the purely logical categories of truth and falsity.”⁵ Even though it aims to break rules and (linguistic) boundaries, because of the playfulness of its approach, it cannot be understood as being nihilistic or destructive in spirit.

“Fiction is a description without a place.”⁶ As in Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in*

¹ Hopkins, D. & Fruitmarket Gallery (2006) *Dada’s Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art*. Edinburgh, Fruitmarket Gallery, p. 57.

² Malcolm, N. (1997) *The Origins of English Nonsense*. London, Fontana Press.

³ Tigges, W. (1988) *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. Costerus. Amsterdam, Rodopi, p. 229.

⁴ Freud used the term ‘uncanny’ (Das Unheimliche) to explain the phenomena that occurs when ideas and feelings from childhood, repressed in childhood, re-awake and the familiar becomes unsettling. See: Freud, S., McLintock, D. & Haughton, H. (2003) *The Uncanny*. Penguin Classics. London, Penguin.

⁵ Rieke, A. (1992) *The Senses of Nonsense*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, p. 7.

⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

Wonderland, place only exists in the imagination of the reader/writer. There, strange things start to take shape, where cause and effect do not go by logic, but by twisting logic. Because the impossible becomes possible in the realm of Nonsense, we can see different subjects from new perspectives, gaining a greater depth of understanding. Because of this topsy-turvyness, we are struck by enigmatic feelings about familiar things. We encounter elements that draw out our curiosities and fears, and feelings of both sadness and joy. It is not the laughing-out-loud sort of humour but the kind where you surprise yourself by the sound of your own laughter.

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