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Dark Ecological Comedy

Julian Langer

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A not funny joke -

Q: why did the chicken cross the road?

A: because civilisation deforested and colonised the landscape, and constructed roads to transport domesticated life. The chicken crossing the road is not participating in being transported along the road. This chicken is refusing to conform to the narrative of road systems. This chicken is a rebel and is crossing the road in defiance of civilisation!

At about the same point in my life that I became fascinated with politics, philosophy, rebellion and so on, I became fascinated with comedy. I found stand up comedy, in particular dark, political, surreal and shock comedy, intensely attractive. I watched Bill Hicks, Doug Stanhope, Dylan Moran, Stewart Lee, Brendon Burns, George Carlin, Jack Dee and many others, with an interest in the art-form that equalled the enjoyment I got from the comedy. During this period of my life, I regularly attended a local young person's stand up comedy group, which was mostly me and two other youngsters and an ageing bohemian clever-clogs leftist - who is a friend I deeply appreciate the presence of in my life still - in a local

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arts centre, going through newspapers and producing some of the least funny jokes imaginable.

What has brought me to writing this now is an interest in certain topics within the spectacle and a desire for a rebel-comedy aesthetic.

Cancellation, Cancellers and The-Cancelled

One of the motivations for writing this piece is that of how I've encountered one of the dominant spectacularised political theatres. This "clash of titans" is that of the left-liberal politically correct "cancellers" vs the "cancelled" free-speech advocating right-wing. From my view point, this largely seems like newer clothing for the same left-politics vs right-politics ideological-dancing that is performative entirely, with nothing of meaningful techno-machinic difference when it comes to the assault, abuse and annihilation of individual living being and environments. But I want to comment here on aspects of this performance that I find revolting.

From the get-go with my interest in comedy, I was drawn to the freedom of speech, expression and creativity that I noticed in the politics of stand up comedy, as I came to learn of how comedians like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin had rebelled against repression from conservatives. I came to find censorship and political correctness attractive political narratives to rebel against, through the enjoyment of dark, political and shock comedy. When I came to encounter political correctness as being pushed by the other side of the political "divide" I was initially surprised, but this passed as I became increasingly anti-politics and stopped identifying with the left. The online push by the liberal-left to "cancel", through online means of not-seeing and deplatforming individuals offline (again, a mode of not-seeing), struck and continues to strike me as an effort in the bad faith of self-deception. Those that were being "cancelled" weren't really cancelled or gone, but slightly moved away from view.

With regards to the other side of "divide", I've continually found the idea that the conservative and alt-right are, were

or have ever been anything of being silenced or repressed by the “woke” somewhat ridiculous. The sheer immensity of the media machinery around those political ideologies, supporting their causes, renders the claims nonsense to me; with more and more of the world being assimilated into their totalities and spectacularised - Chappelle’s posturing as an individual seeking to challenge oppression, whilst using and supporting the machinery of media platforms to set feminists, transgender advocates and black liberationists against each other, is utterly inauthentic to my eyes. Stewart Lee beautifully articulated this effort in bad faith when commenting on how much of Netflix stand up comedy is comedians saying “you can’t say this; if you say this you will get cancelled; the woke won’t let me say the words that I am saying right now” (I have paraphrased slightly), on one of the largest media platforms in the world - likewise conservative and alt-right speakers posturing as having been “cancelled” from media machines with huge influence stinks of shit and bad faith to me.

Joke as Resistance, Humour as Rebellion and Mockery as Praxis

Q: what animal has 6 legs and a dick on its back.

A: a horse on a fox hunt.

I find inspiring and beautiful, historical accounts of Jewish individuals sharing in jokes about Hitler, the SS and everything else that the Nazi regime involved, whilst experiencing abuse from that politics. In a setting where life involved so much danger, threat and hostility, it strikes me as heroic finding a means of surviving and resisting. This seems most striking with holocaust humour - jokes made by individuals living in concentration camps about living in concentration camps.

Another example of humour as rebellion comes from one of my greatest heroes - Pemulwuy. Pemulwuy was an indigenous rebel, who fought against the colonisation of Australia by the British Empire. Fighting as an individual, his rebellion is documented to have

involved humiliating and mocking the British, as means of perceptual attack. While Pemulwuy was ultimately murdered by Empire, I find it beautiful that his praxis was spontaneous indigenous resistance to colonialism and was not tainted by the narratives of ideology. There are differences, but Pemulwuy's rebellion reminds me of the story of Diogenes the cynic, when he met Alexander the Great and mocked him to his face.

As a tribal response and individual rebellion, comedy seems, from the aforementioned examples, to be a means of survival and challenge that comes without need for political programming, organisation, ideology or even hope. Without any need for mediators or any narratives of a future to reach, a joke can be an immediatist means of disintegrating the ontics of the theatre of social performance. A student mocks the teacher who bullies their classmates, rendering the teacher psychically disempowered in the minds of all who witness the mockery. Individuals at work enjoy a period of slaking off by making jokes about their arsehole manager, who revels in their posturing of "authority". There seems to me to be a quality of desirability that is instinctively and intuitively obvious in this form of praxis.

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During a talk on the concept of subsistence, Timothy Morton tells a not yet funny joke. This joke is that, in order to avoid the impacts of global warming, Neolithic farmers created much much worse global warming 10,000 years later. I feel that I am living amidst the punchline of this joke and I'm not yet able to laugh comfortably. The joke has that definite feeling of "oh that's too close".

A not funny joke - every individual seeking to care for Earth is seeking to care for the life of a living presence that will in all likelihood die when the sun explodes. It's not a pleasant joke and it speaks to the darkest aspects of the experience of eco-absurdism. My attention is brought, through this joke, to an aspect of Morton's dark-ecology, where he focuses on the "ridiculous". In ridiculous-

ness there is something of ridicule. Who is being ridiculed here? Earth? Those wanting to care for Earth? Both? Maybe the joke speaks to a gestalt of figures called "the ridiculous" and a ground called "the ridiculous" - a ridiculous holism of ridiculousness. As the abusers of Earth actively engage in annihilation - real "cancel culture" - being-in the ridiculous might be a place for laughing at ourselves(?).

When considering the spectacle of green-washed politics, environmentally friendly krapitalism and the rest of the show, I am struck by a feeling of ridiculousness. Another not yet funny joke - paper straws. Not laughing? How is this one for you - to save wildlife, conservationists are culling/killing wildlife? Here I find myself amidst a psycho-geographic terrain of the ridiculous, witnessing ridiculousness and I am ridiculing, whilst also being ridiculous. Are you laughing? Do you think I am?

Is dark ecological comedy too harsh, too shocking, insensitive or politically incorrect? I don't know. Can dark ecological comedy be softer, gentler or more sensitive? Maybe someone could train a pigeon to shit on Elon Musk every day? Would that be better? I don't know! If dark ecological comedy gets cancelled, will Earth be cancelled? I don't know!

One last not funny joke. This is a joke about (real) cancel culture. The project that is cancelling forests, 200 species a day, mountains, breathable air, plastic free water and the rest of the life that is Earth, is cancelling the future that this project is seeking to progress towards and make sustainable.

There is a coldness to these jokes that I notice, but one of the wonderful qualities of the cold is finding warmth for oneself or with others. This thought reminds me of an old folk saying - make a friend a fire and they will be warm for a day, but set the friend on fire and they'll be warm for the rest of their life. In laughter there might be a fire that an individual or individuals being with one another, can be warmed by and find a little light, amidst the darkness and the cold.