

Ass Bowl Comedy: Nonsense & Experimental Film

In Joyce Wieland's short film *Sailboat* (1967), the eponymous object appears, disappears, and reappears, each time moving steadfastly across the screen. Nothing much happens, yet inevitable questions about what it all means do not go completely unrewarded. The word 'sailboat' appears prominently on-screen for the film's duration, dutifully accompanying the object which it names. This is sturdy, referential meaning, the bedrock of semantics. In this sense, the film is clear, and abnormally free of ambiguity. But naming objects has its aesthetic limits. Is the sailboat then a metaphor? Metaphors need staging of some sort, and *Sailboat* offers nothing which might set metaphorical speculation in motion. Maybe there is symptomatic meaning. The ocean, with an opaque surface concealing the teeming content below, is a well known symbol of the unconscious. But without context, the ocean, like the sailboat, remains stubbornly and untransformatively itself. This modest film does a good job of staging meaning, but doesn't itself seem to provide much.

Sympathetic viewers, wanting to explore their curiosity in the film, could decide, for example, to investigate the artist's (or their own) past history with sailboats and oceans. But there's no need to do all that supplementary work. *Sailboat* is a nonsense film, and to insist that the sailboat mean something is like wanting an explanation for why the grin was separated from the cat. As with all nonsense, part of the pleasure of the film lies in its implicit message that customary forms of interpretative activity have been waived. The following description of the literary nonsense of the French writer Raymond Roussel could well have been a tagline for *Sailboat*:

"Empty enigmas, arrested time, signs which refuse to signify, giant enlargement of the tiny detail, narratives which come full circle: We are in a flat and discontinuous universe where each thing refers only to itself. A universe of fixity, of repetition, of absolute obviousness, which enchants and discourages the explorer..."

The exploration of nonsense in *Sailboat* is hardly unique. So why is there not a recognizable category for "nonsense art?" There appear to be several good reasons. Despite the number of strollers in museums these days, contemporary art rarely has much to offer children. But such generational lines are very unclearly drawn; grown-ups have shown equal enthusiasm for nonsense literature. Perhaps it is the dubious commitment that nonsense has to "seriousness" which continues to cause doubt. But the considerable attention that nonsense literature has received from literary theorists and philosophers, its influence on high modernists like James Joyce, as well as the attraction postmodernists have shown to the peripheral or the abject, should allay anyone's fears about the ability of nonsense to contribute to sober cultural discourse. The obstacle must then be language, to which, according to Elizabeth Sewell, the field of nonsense is "limited." While they may contain lots of language, the visual arts are, after all, considerably visual, and a category mistake threatens those who suspect the machinery of nonsense.

But why only language? In this resolutely visual era, the unwillingness to extend nonsense beyond language seems an unnecessary concession to the artificial boundaries of a genre. Neither of the two most far-reaching examinations of nonsense, Elizabeth Sewell's seminal "The Field of Nonsense" (1952) and Jean-Jacques Lecercle's "The Philosophy of Nonsense," (1992), contemplate its extension beyond language.

This is not merely a result of their respective resolve not to stray far from the classical Victorian era and that ur-text of nonsense literature "Alice in Wonderland." It's based on the understanding that language is our preeminent tool for grasping the world of things. Nonsense texts go to work not on the world of things, but on the tool we use to grasp it with; hence their highly self-reflexive, artificial nature. The world of things (including images of things, and images as things) is, in this view, beyond the proper domain of nonsense.

With nonsense "it is important to keep the distinction between words and things," writes Elizabeth Sewell. A dragonfly becomes a snapdragon fly; this is a transformation in language, not of objects. As she points out, the one instance in the Alice books when one distinct thing magically transforms into another thing occurs when the duchesses' baby turns into a pig, and it stands out as an anomaly. Alice herself is disapproving. The concise, quantum disorder of nonsense, focused as it is on words and rules, stands apart from the fluid, synthesizing disorder of both dream and magic. Nonsense makes endless distinctions, separating cats from their grins, treating the world as constituted of irreducibly dissimilar units. "The aim of nonsense is very precise indeed," writes Sewell. "It is by means of language to set before the mind a possible universe in which everything goes along serially, by one and one...it must not be upset by indistinctness of the units or by fusion of the whole." The centripetal forces of dream and magic also disorder the world, but in the opposite direction to nonsense, synthesizing and making wholes out of disparate parts. Logic, one of Carroll's several vocations, is a close ally of nonsense, while being utterly foreign to dream and magic. The world according to nonsense and logic is a world of particulars, and however differently they may both analyze them, they nonetheless insist, unlike magic, that they are analyzable.

For those who restrict the field of nonsense to language, images are a threat. Sewell has shown how images can undermine nonsense by introducing dream, or poetry. But is the real threat to nonsense the presence of images, or the social and cognitive forces which insist on the essential links between images and words? Whether or not one wishes to call such forces "realism," the most damning complaint is that they ruin the fun, delivering language over to the managerial demands of duty and representation. Keeping words in isolation from each other, and images in isolation from words ñ de-linking them all from each other and their representational duties ñ is the action which transforms them into playthings, cheerfully demolishing the stable and predictable infrastructure central to ideals of 'noiseless' communication.

In the history of modernism, these basic themes are akin to household knowledge; challenging the existence of an essential link between images or objects and language has been common in 20thC thought and art making. A succinct and celebrated example is Rene Magritte's "The Treachery of Images" from 1926. Magritte's painting employs paradox, a cherished tool of nonsense, in order to prevent image and word, in Sewell's terms, from collapsing into a "unity," or "fusion of the whole." But this is a nonsense work for which the presence of the image is key. It wouldn't do to say, in the absence of that image, "a pipe is not a pipe", nor "an image of a pipe is not a pipe." It is essential to the success of the paradox that it point to a manifest object-image: "this is not a pipe". Images are "treacherous" not due to any inherent qualities they may or may not have, but due to the fickle relationship they have with language. This latter fact should be enough to let images into the game, and let them play.

Committed to the seriality of "one and one and one," nonsense rejects metaphor, the goal of which is to "fuse" unlike concepts in the mind. Nonsense is centrifugal, prising concepts apart;

metaphor is centripetal, fusing them together. "The wind was as strong as soup," is the kind of comparison one finds in nonsense, making such mental fusions most unlikely.

The history of poetry is unthinkable without metaphor. But in a striking formulation, Sewell states that "nonsense is too precise to be akin to poetry. It seems much nearer logic than dream." Precision is not something commonly associated with nonsense, but when asked to cut a deck of cards and Harpo pulls out a hatchet, is his response to the language of the request not meticulous? Harpo cuts through metaphor, demonstrating as he does a recognizably belligerent pose in nonsense, a kind of haughty impatience with the tediously ubiquitous forces of common sense. Nonsense prefers the "semantic void" of interrupted communication, arbitrary associations, and humorously irrelevant detail because the interpretation instinct, which the "semantic creativity" of metaphor and poetry is designed to energize, is instead constantly thwarted. Poetry is too friendly with the dream state, too eager to promote the production of imagery from words, and too enamored of the proliferation of meaning to have much to do with nonsense.

In *The Way Things Go* (1987), Fischli and Weiss mobilize an impressive array of forces and agents (gravity, fire, corrosive liquids, electro-chemical forces, steam, etc) and things (tires, step-ladders, glue, balloons, old shoes, etc) to engineer a rather boyish 30-minute cause and effect sequence. Unaccompanied by commentary, and with no direct reference to human presence, the objects, agencies and actions are all the film offers. No assistance is offered those who would reinforce it with metaphorical packaging. In place of metaphor there is pure, blunt description. A metal bar rolls down an incline, its motion slowed to an excruciatingly slow crawl by a thick coating of wet glue. The sound of its descent is (to some) inexplicably hilarious, a result, one can only speculate, of the complete absence of anything which might explain it. A contemporary consciousness would suspect irony. But as in certain kinds of humour, theory seems incapable of encapsulating the effects of nonsense on the nervous system. The pointlessness of the film's work, reinforced by its compelling sloppiness and carefree waste, makes it mysteriously straightforward. There is no trace of moral seriousness, and no procedure through which to give it some by way of metaphor that wouldn't be intolerably strained. The metal bar and the glue are "free" to pursue their distinctive relationship unhindered by external semantic, moral or political values.

Nonsense works may be studiously flimsy in meaning, but they are very coherent, and *The Way Things Go* is extremely orderly and predictable. Its only concern is with the rules and procedures that it so rigorously obeys. The "syntax" of the cause and effect process is rigid and set, the laws of physics obediently respected. In this, *The Way Things Go* reflects the concern for syntactic correctness in Alice in Wonderland. Lecerle calls this obedience to order, operating alongside a disdain of semantics, the "conservative-revolutionary" character of nonsense. "Nonsense," Sewell says, "wants to defeat disorder with disorder's own weapons."

Once in the field of nonsense, one has permission to ignore the customary pressures to interpret. Only the most stubborn exegete persists in attempting to articulate what it means to separate a grin from a cat. Verses like: "Do you carrot for me?/My heart beats for you / If we cantaloupe/Lettuce marry/Weed make a swell pear" are enough to sweep away any hermeneutic exuberances. Freud linked what he called "the pleasure of nonsense" to the experience of the child who, in the process of acquiring language, turns words into playthings, freed from the obligations of meaning. The child, says Freud, "wants to withdraw from the pressure of critical

reason" (a desire, as we know, by no means forsaken by adults.)

One begins to see why this non-poetic, non-metaphorical genre is not an aesthetic tool favored by those artists who like to express emotions. Sewell says that "the total construction [of nonsense] must be no more than a detached product of the conscious mind which must never identify itself with its production in any way." "Nonsense," she says, "is supremely concerned with the rational mind." In this formulation, an entire tradition of art production is thereby excused from consideration.

But another tradition looks more promising. Consider Marcel Duchamp's "Bottlerack." In addition to its famously irreverent decontextualization, it manifests several nonsense-like traits, like its fondness for banal, singular objects. In Carroll's lampoon of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," he replaced the lofty, and harmonious, comparison between stars and diamonds with the very unlofty, and incongruous, comparison between bats and tea-trays. And in the finest tradition of nonsense, he has dispensed, as has "Bottlerack," with any but the most lampooning references to Beauty.

Sewell and Lecerle, with their singular attentiveness to the conditions of literary genre, wouldn't countenance "Bottlerack." But not Susan Stewart, author of "Nonsense" from 1978. Her approach to the field of nonsense compels her to face up to that which constantly pressures Sewell's and Lecerle's literary formulations: the everyday. Stewart is interested in "any activity that produces "'not sense'." Her measuring stick is our set of shared ideas of what is and is not "common sense." What gets counted as nonsense then is highly contextual, both socially and historically, subject to the contingencies of shifting convention, visually and linguistically. Nonsense can be studied through the various formal operations disagreeable to sense: reversals, circularity, simultaneity, decontextualization, discontinuity, repetition, and so on. The terms of inclusion are generous, easily accommodating Gertrude Stein, skipping rhymes, jokes (good or bad) and offhand remarks. Metaphor is back in, or at least the type of metaphor not 'rescued' from nonsense by careful, meaning-producing contextualization. Nor are there any of the fussy restrictions regarding dream or magic, or images and things. The door to art is accordingly wide open. And this too, is the dilemma of Stewart's inclusiveness. The category's precision begins to decline when so much diverse material from so many different discursive environments crowds in.

Yet Stewart's study underwrites a sensible intuition occasioned by Sewell's and Lecerle's selective rendering: why not Duchamp? Joyce Wieland? Skipping rhymes? Nonsense being such an elemental cultural practice and aesthetic pleasure, why hold it in reserve? If the motivation is to distinguish the critical, or more finely honed versions from the commodified clutter or the everyday cliches, a good typology or a minor effort at a poetics would do the job. The ubiquity and breadth of nonsense as a social agent, operating across diverse high and low cultural terrain, makes any critical distinctions welcome. Sewell and Lecerle's distinctions (once the restriction on images is repealed) are seminal, for they succeed in articulating broad, diverging tendencies in the last hundred-odd years of art-making.

Which brings us to Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970), whose reputation for difficulty and seriousness seems to make it an unlikely candidate for nonsense analysis. Certainly the awesomely tight formal structure looks the very visualization of thought itself. The chain of scholarly references in the film has inspired enterprising interpretive efforts on the part of commentators eager to provide it with the internal coherence or sense it seems to demand. This

critical task is underscored by the well-known learnedness of the filmmaker, and ironically sustained by Frampton's decision to provide not a single scrap of information in the film regarding the source texts he used, little known texts which he could be sure almost no one would recognize. It is no exaggeration to say that most film and art students are intimidated by this film.

With such a uniquely exquisite and rigorous surface structure one would expect a parallel meaning apparatus, but something very different unfolds. The title signals what's to come. Here's the definition of the lemma named for one of its discoverers, Max Zorn: "Every partially ordered set in which every chain (i.e. totally ordered subset) has an upper bound contains at least one maximal element." Yikes. It's easy, of course, to find "sets" and "subsets" in the film, as easy, in fact, as finding them in the room in which you're sitting. One may then identify maximally and minimally-ordered sets. Maybe it's me, but after considerable effort, I failed to find any application of the actual lemma which wasn't utterly forced or too abstract by half. But is that the labour asked of us? The title seems to both invite and mock pedantry. In an article devoted to the film, Scott MacDonald says "Zorn's Lemma doesn't exactly demonstrate Zorn's lemma...", after which the title isn't mentioned again. Allen Weiss makes the only effort that I'm familiar with to penetrate the mathematical substance, but jettisons the bulk of what is specific about Zorn's lemma in order to make some generalizing comments about "partially ordered sets" and "maximally ordered sets." Armed with such abstract tools, one could make partially relevant comments about pretty much any film ever made.

There is much stronger evidence that the title is a ruse, luring the viewer in by half measures. The central organizing principle of *Zorn's Lemma* is the alphabet. Using the alphabet is a method of ordering deprives the resulting order of all meaning, and any sets or subsets which emerge within its framework are arbitrary and random. "There is nothing so nonsensical as the dictionary, the telephone book, or the encyclopedia," says Susan Stewart, "all of them texts that arrange the world within the hermetic surface of an arbitrary convention". Thus when the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* says, "I've heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary," she captures the paradox of the sense of alphabetized order, and the nonsense of the random and arbitrary associations its ordering produces. Under the auspices of the alphabet, maximally or minimally ordered sets or subsets are no less arbitrary or random. One may, of course, take the role of Alice and insist on sticking with the lemma, worrying over the application of the mathematical details. But Frampton left an escape sign within the title itself. Noticing that this most formidable of titles begins with a "z" and ends with an "a" in a film centrally concerned with the alphabet is like the relief one feels when unexpectedly hearing the recess bell ring.

Such uncertain relevance dominates the film. While the image-letter substitutions are arbitrary, the first four images of the middle section form a kind of pre-Socratic metaphysical master set, representing earth, fire, water, and air. These were once thought to be the constituent elements of all things (like the things represented in the other 20 image substitutions) in a way analogous to the letters of the alphabet, which are the constituent elements of all words. It's true that words are fashioned from letters, while it's false that matter is fashioned from earth, fire, water and air. No matter; the concern is with formal elements, and their playful arrangements and re-arrangements, not their truth content. There may be semantic potential, but as in the case of *Zorn's Lemma*, it is not allowed to interfere with formal play. "Limp member" pops out from the sequence of commercial signs, as does "ass bowl comedy." They are, at best, isolated one-liners, or dead ends. Frampton wanted to bring the number of letters in the alphabet in line with

the number of frames per second in film, so he employed a 24-letter Roman alphabet. But why a Roman alphabet? Well, in order to bring the number of frames per second in a film in line with the letters of the alphabet. These are instances of form without meaning, intellectual nonsense, or perhaps nonsense for intellectuals.

As Frampton said, "there are not complex ideas, only series of simple ideas," a kindred formulation to the "one and one and one" of nonsense. Frampton imposes this logic of serial disconnection in ways, to my knowledge, previously unseen in nonsense. In the second section of 2,700 one-second cuts, sequences of continuous action are ruthlessly fragmented and separated. In the third section, the reading of the text by the Medieval bishop Robert Grosseteste is, as Frampton calls it, "pocketed;" that is, it is read metronomically, at a rate of one word per second, by six alternating female voices. Stripped of the synthesizing rhythms of human speech, each word is stranded in its own disconnected pocket. To follow this mystical text with its archaic syntax might already have its own difficulties; Frampton makes the task yet more difficult, burying the content in an encasement of additional "order." The words are serialized, like the numbers, lists and alphabets so beloved of nonsense artists, producing more irrelevant details and arbitrary associations.

The other common critical response to *Zorns Lemma* is allegorical, encompassing "big" themes. As Lecercle says, "...the more tenuous the meaning offered by the author of the text, the greater the reader's need and desire for full meaning." But the job of nonsense texts is to be about meaning, not provide it, and this is what *Zorns Lemma* does with the big themes. Starting as it does with a dark screen and ending in a white screen, it has been likened to the history of film itself. Another interpretation has it mapping the grand trajectory of the cognitive development of a human, from child to adult. This latter tendency, in all its extravagant ambition, has perhaps more evidence to support it: the endless cycling of the alphabet, the citations from the school grammar book from the first section of the film, the process of learning how to link words to physical items and actions in the world, and so on. But its concerns are not with the mental operations of cognitive development, but the institutional ones. This is what Lecercle calls the "pedagogy of nonsense," part of the rhizome (as he calls it, following Deleuze) of school and anti-school. The difficulty of finding the relevance of the film's various meaning fragments reflects the question so frequently asked by students: why should I learn this stuff? Why is it relevant? What does it have to do with my life? The inability to adequately answer such questions is one reason school can, like this great film, seem such a grinding bore.

But I would like to suggest that, in the tradition of good nonsense, *Zorns Lemma* is extremely funny, and that the main factor masking this humour is the almost majestic indifference the filmmaker shows to comic timing. The film's ostensible "lessons" drift by and little is learned. Frampton didn't bother revealing the sources for the texts he used because, like all authors of nonsense, he throws his lot in with the school child, not the teacher. The experience of paying close attention to the a-coherent lessons of the film is an ironic mirror-image of the experience of not paying close attention to a coherent classroom lecture. There are, accordingly, no keys to reading this film, unless, in the spirit of the work, it is the image of Frampton himself changing a flat tire under the sign of the letter "t". Beneath the look of solemnity and rigour, one finds a schoolboy's lark, the rebellion of the clever school child.

And that's how it is with nonsense: the form comes first, rigorous but playful; the concern with meaning is considerable, but formal. *Zorns Lemma* shares with literary nonsense a deep concern with order. Literary nonsense carefully obeys the laws of syntax. Solecisms, or syntactic transgressions, are very rare, a point well made in the poem *Jabberwocky*, which is both

phonetically and syntactically coherent, and very much a product of the English language, even if what we parse out as words, along with any semantic prospects they might have had, are mostly unrecognizable. Such obedient syntax compensates for a refusal to obey the rules of semantics. Similarly, *Zorns Lemma* employs a surface structure almost algorithmic in its uniformity, compensating for the refusal to provide thematic definition. Yet, in keeping with one of the charming ironies of nonsense, both are ardently pedagogical: Alice about language; *Zorns Lemma* about film and language. This latter point makes efforts to extract the sense from the nonsense reasonable, provided that the horizon of nonsense is kept within view. Marjorie Perloff, rather heroically, attempted a sensical reading of "Tender Buttons" by Gertrude Stein, one of Frampton's favorite writers. The result was, not surprisingly, uneven. Caught in the penumbra of its extravagant source, her sensical response is itself threatened with nonsense. Interpretive forays are however, sometimes necessary in order to keep the game in play, for the proximity of sense is necessary to ensure the success of nonsense, and vice versa. Abandoning oneself to nonsense is no less inappropriate a response than insisting that what nonsense really wants to do is produce some kind of secretly-codified sense.

The argument for accepting *Zorns Lemma* as nonsense is, admittedly, not going to come without resistance. The evidence in Frampton's own writings and interviews is uneven, to say the least, and one must often contradict Frampton himself to make the case. So much for authorial intention. But more importantly, Frampton does something that is never found in the generic tradition: nowhere in the film does he unambiguously send the signal that his film is nonsense. In his analyses of play and fantasy, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson shows that we must have ways of signaling that what we are doing is not really what it seems. In play-fighting, for example, to fail to convey that the fighting is "not really fighting" can have unfortunate consequences. In addition to the undeniable presence of nonsense effects and structures, *Zorns Lemma* also has the 'feel' of deep meaning, inducing many to stray off the sunny paths of nonsense, and into the jungles of profundity.

At this point, however, one can more fully understand the image of Frampton changing his flat tire. It's only a small stretch to claim that abandoning meaning-as-intention from the interpretive process contributes to the argument that *Zorns Lemma* is nonsense. The usual questions regarding the author, or the one who speaks (does he mean what he says? does he say what he means?) are significantly magnified in nonsense. Saying and meaning chase each other around indeterminately. Lecercle calls this radical non-sense, where the nonsense text takes its place in a "potentially endless chain of saying and meaning."

Frampton, of course, sets several texts in motion, none of whose originary intentions can be deployed to explain the film: a mathematical formula (is it surprising that a complex mathematical formula cannot be mapped onto a film?); a 250-year old grammar textbook (with moral lessons like "In Adam's fall; We sinneth all" as a pedagogical bonus); a 750 year old mystical text (it's the job of the mystic to attempt the expression of the inexpressible, or to mean what is not sayable); and a 2500 year old philosophical theory (its wrongness, or nonsense, thoroughly compensated for by its beauty and its inventiveness).

Nonsense is a complex response to two common themes of contemporary art: authority and pedagogy. Lecercle points out that nonsense transgresses rules and reinforces them at the same time, ridicules pedagogy and is pedagogical at the same time. To this we might add that it can be both cynical and politically relevant at the same time. This ambivalence can make it difficult to

assign nonsense a role in critical practice. Antonin Artaud's exuberant contempt for what he called the "cowardice" of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" (an instance of "pure" nonsense) was a response to this ambivalence. Elizabeth Sewall, on the other hand, ejected *The Hunting of the Snark* from the nonsense canon due to its tone of moral seriousness. The Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* relinquishes a claim to purity by subversively targeting not just language, but social, legal and political institutions - and women. It is perhaps here, in the impure form of tendentious nonsense, that one finds the most vibrant style of nonsense.

The appeal for the recognition of nonsense forms should not be seen as another "against-interpretation" argument. Nonsense may mock the more dogged forms of interpretation, but does so quite pedagogically, a self-consciously contradictory form resembling artworks whose message is, in part, the forestalling of the interpretation of messages. Nor does nonsense underwrite gibberish, or radical non-meaning. Instead it casts a critical light on an error common enough in art criticism, that art is somehow always primarily about communication. Artists make things, or they do things; what they make or do may have little or nothing to do with communication. The filmmaker Alexander Kluge said that one cannot understand a Hölderlin poem. "If you try," he said, "you are an idiot." Perhaps the problem lies in the schoolishness of critiques which, misperceiving the form of the work, just can't stop ringing that school bell.