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Performing Failure: Critical Theories on Perfection and the Sublime

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BOUNCING TOWARDS GRACE: RISKING FAILURE IN SEARCH OF THE SUBLIME - Falling into the Abyss with Clowns and Circus

“Failure must be but a challenge to others.”

- Amelia Earhart

[Amelia Earhart](#) (1897-1939) was the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic ocean. Her goal was to be the first person to fly around the world. She succeeded in accomplishing most of this journey and then she failed. She fell into the abyss and was never seen again. [Ruby Rowat](#), an Australian aerialist, is renowned in the circus world for her daring swinging-trapeze work. She developed an act inspired by Amelia Earhart's last flight entitled [Aviatrix](#) and performed it to critical acclaim until, in 2008, she failed to catch her foot on the trapeze bar and she also fell into the abyss, slamming into the floor of the circus ring. She was unable to walk for ten days and couldn't perform for over a year. And then she bounced back, climbed the rope and once again swung across the abyss. Success is such an impermanent state, precarious in its high-flying exhilaration, so why do we dream of it as the ultimate destination offering eternal security? And why do we fear failure as a permanent fixed point of no return when it is equally transitory and there is always the potential after a fall to get back up and “fail again, fail better” as Samuel Beckett said in *Westward Ho* (7). Success may not be guaranteed but another shot at failure is always possible - if we want to take the risk.

But the terror of this risk often grinds us to a halt, throwing a spanner in the works causing system failure within the individual. Success is the result of risking failure, and usually the result of performing many failures, so without the risk factor, the success formula malfunctions resulting in the very failure to perform that terrified us into safe immobility. Is this fear-based response the “dominance of reason over imagination” that Gillian Pierce speaks about as “provid[ing] solace for the postmodern subject in the face of the inestimably large”? (10). Instead of seeking solace in the face of possible failure, can we galvanize the “terror-exhilaration” (Mann, 7) that characterizes the sublime experience of engaging with the vast unknown? Can we take up the gauntlet thrown down by Amelia Earhart and see failure as a challenge, not only to others but to ourselves, learning to fall into, and bounce back from, the sublime experience of the abyss?

Falling is terrifying. It is uncontrolled, disordered, noisy, and disturbing. Judith Halberstam identifies failure as a disturbance of expectations (98). [In this video](#) we see a slow motion example of this disturbance of expectation in a physical fall. When aerialist Ruby Rowat fell from her trapeze she said that it resulted in a “molecular shake-up” of her entire system. In a society whose dominant ideology is based on the success of predictable outcomes it is no wonder we are terrified of opening ourselves up to the unpredictable ‘shake-up’ of falling. In “The Power of the Automaton” Minsoo Kang states that Ernst Jentsch refers to a “psychic insecurity” which is caused by the uncanny feeling “that is aroused when one encounters an entity or finds oneself in a

situation that is unfamiliar or unexpected, making it difficult to make sense of it through one's established worldview." (Kang, 22) This translates, he says, into emotions ranging from anxiety to terror. These are the same feelings which occur when falling and experiencing a 'molecular shake-up'. The anxiety and terror induced by facing the incomprehensible as our body is thrown out of balance are also associated with the fear of death, as described on the ['Anxiety and Fear of Death' web page](#). Consequently, by chain reaction, our fear of the uncontrolled unknown, our fear of entering the abyss and risking uncertain outcomes in a society that is focused on success, limits our ability to risk failure as we equate failure with falling and falling with death. Perhaps our fear of falling is in our DNA, passed down from Adam and Eve and their fall from grace, informing us of the dangers of falling out of favour due to failing to obey the rules. In a society that continually reinforces a dominant binary structured around good and bad, success and failure, it is a rebellious act to inhabit the ambiguous space of precarious possibilities.

Clowns live in this precarious space, risking failure, defying rules and expectations and "refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline", which Halberstam defines as a condition of failure (88). Clowns have their own logic and our pleasure is observing them negotiate the challenges of a confounding universe and witnessing the ludicrous human folly as their extraordinary ideas collide with the ordinary world. A Sisyphean Failure in action, providing us with a "pause for thought, the space of thinking" as we view the world from an altered perspective. (Cocker, 159). Theirs is

survival through imagination. Julie Salverson in her article “Taking Liberties: a theatre class of foolish witnesses” states that clowns are characterized by “a willingness to engage in the face of failure” (246) and it is the courage and resiliency of this willingness that defines a clown. Falling into “the flop” of failure and staying present and engaged in this moment is the most essential aspect of good clowning. This is what master teacher [Philippe Gaulier](#) says makes a clown “the beautiful idiot” because she keeps rising after the fall, never giving up, re-entering the unknown again and again with open heart and a new plan. Today she might fail, but tomorrow - tomorrow could be a beautiful dream come true!

Clowns live failure repeatedly. Which is only possible because they bounce. They never end in the fall, they always bounce back. This resiliency must be developed to survive as a clown. At [Ecole Internationale de Theatre Jacques Lecoq](#) students physically explore falling by testing their own limits of how long they can stay in the fall, playing with the terror and anxiety of leaning over the edge of the abyss, before they save themselves by stepping forward. This visceral experience familiarizes them with their physical response to the fear of falling and they explore how to allow themselves to go farther into the unknown than they initially permitted. This precarious teetering provides the space for something unexpected to happen and also risks the arrival of the fall. If this happens, they learn to survive the fall by physically bouncing back from the ground like a ball. This ability to bounce back is essential in order to ‘save the show’ otherwise there is no continuing story as the clown ‘dies’ on stage and the audience asks for their

money back. There is much we can learn from the survival skills of a clown when facing the fear of falling into the abyss of potential failure.

We go to the circus in search of the sublime in a world of the seemingly impossible, to enter a space we do not allow ourselves to experience in our everyday lives and witness the uncanny. Bonnie Mann says that the sublime experience occurs when there is a “dissolution of boundaries” between realities (7), and the circus provides this dissolution as we enter the extraordinary reality of a world populated by the bizarre and experience the incomprehensible in death-defying physical acts. Circus is traditionally populated by those who are marginalized by society: the undesirable, the abnormal, the bizarre, the freaks. People who are “resistant to the dominant order” (Halberstam, 88), and therefore circus provides a world that defies the rules of society and disrupts expectations, offering something exhilaratingly dangerous. People teeter on the edge of the abyss and as we watch, we physically experience the terror and the exuberance of approaching this abyss. We experience, through the visceral connection with the body of the performer “a molecular shake-up” that occurs when we engage with the seemingly impossible physical acts. As Moholy-Nagy of the Bauhaus school said “the effect of this bodily mechanics essentially lies in the spectator being astonished or startled by the possibilities of his own organism as demonstrated to him by others.” (Koss, 735) Performance that risks failure by “elevating [the human body] to [its] greatest potential”, existing on the brink of falling by presenting the incomprehensible, has an effect which is “one of uncontrollable exuberance, not rationalized efficiency”.

(Koss, 734) Bauhaus performances, similar to circus, were specifically seeking to create an event that “doesn’t let the masses watch silently, that does not simply excite them inwardly, but that instead lets them take hold of, participate in, and - at the highest level of a redemptive ecstasy - merge with the action on stage.” (Koss, 740) Circus offers a similar doorway into the sublime through this ecstatic state of uncontrollable exuberance induced by experiencing performers disrupting expectations by defying gravity and physical limitations.

Yet life is dangerous and the potential for falling is everywhere, not just for clowns or at the circus. Even when we are striving to rise to a state of grace, a state of perfection; striving to be number one, which has become as Laurie Anderson said in her performance Home of the Brave “a national obsession”, the danger of falling is everywhere. We all fall. This is a physiological truth that we learned as toddlers attempting to walk. Walking is the act of continually falling, and most importantly, saving oneself. This can be seen in the photos of [Eadweard Muybridge](#). We must fall in order to move forward and we already know how to survive the fall as witnessed in our daily walking. If we acknowledged this, and dared the fall purposefully, trusting we would bounce back, what might we achieve?

Life at its best is a brilliant clown performance: terrifying, exhilarating, incomprehensible, ridiculous and unknowable, offering us infinite possibilities to be “lifted across the abyss” (Koss, 741) if we have the resiliency to stay engaged and keep bouncing. The danger of

falling and failing is everywhere, so perhaps the objective is not to *not* fail, not to *not* fail, but rather to become resilient enough to survive the fall by bouncing back, so that we can explore the uncharted territories of the imagination, engage with the precarious possibilities of the abyss, and experience the incomprehensible in the sublime. We must learn, like the clown, to bounce, so that the fall is not the final resting place but rather a place of resistance to push against in order to gain the momentum to catapult back up and “fail again, fail better”. Perhaps it is only in accepting the challenge of our failures, as Ms Earhart proposes, and experiencing the fall and bounce, again and again, like the clown defying dominant logics of power and the circus artist daring new limits, that we can acquire the ferocious exhilaration that leads to the highest level of redemptive ecstasy and experience the uncontrollable exuberance of the sublime. Perhaps, as well, the possibility of grace awaits us as we fall, bounce, and suspend hanging in the space of the unknown, waiting to see what we will encounter next. A fall not *from* grace, but rather a bounce towards it.

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