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## **THE DADAISTIC ROOTS OF THERAPEUTIC HUMOR**

**By Michael Titze, Ph.D.**

About fifty years ago, sociologist Erving Goffman compared the social world to a large stage performance where the dramatic development is based on thoroughly rehearsed roles. Every actor on this stage is supposed to give a most favorable impression. He or she is expected to take into account certain pre-established and strict rules. These rules guide the individual's rhetoric as well as his or her non-verbal actions. Invisible stage directing as well as the backstage mechanics ensure the precise functioning and narrative continuity of the play. This in turn guarantees that the actor does not step out of line.

Goffman's metaphor is no longer apt for today's post-modern social conditions. Society, once described by Emile Durkheim as the unique entirety to which everything is related," presents itself to postmodern man as a kind of patchwork quilt upon which "Everyone crochets at his own patch", as observed by German sociologist Gerhard Schulze (1997).

### **POSTMODERN REALITY IS PARALOGICAL**

French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) coined the term "postmodern" in the late seventies. According to Lyotard, the universal stage direction, which is the original "meta narration" that sets the game rules and typecasts the roles we play has been gradually invalidated. Instead of the unisonous prescriptives of the past (defined by the king, the pope, or traditional customs) there are nowadays many opinion-forming prompters. Their statements and opinions can, of course, be contradictory. Therefore, an undisturbed conformity to one fixed role or game rule would be futile. To put it in Jacques Derrida's words, in the postmodern world there are no valid points of orientation. And there is no grand script, we could complement to enable standardized actions."

Social action in postmodern society is not a stable system in which the output is regulated by the input. Rather, there is a disordered and paradoxical connection between input and output, creating what Michel Foucault terms a "radical discontinuity". In this sense, rational or logical action strategies are not suitable. Instead, "paralogical" approaches seem more promising. **Postmodern individuals must desist from codified rules. Instead, they need to engage in creative impromptu acting, be their own authority, and be responsible for their successes or failures.** Since the basic method for achieving success and avoiding failure is perfectionistic

performance, everyone strives to project the most favorable figure on the world stage in order to avoid severe negative consequences to one's self-esteem!

## **MORE OF THE SAME PERFORMANCE!**

In a society that favors above-average appearance, increasing numbers of individuals are striving for perfect beauty because even an average appearance may be an indication of failure. This is one of the underlying reasons for the growing statistic of eating disorders in our postmodern society!

Another problem in postmodern society stems from the demands placed upon individuals by the world of employment: In today's world, knowledge is increasing at a breathtaking pace. According to sociologist Richard Sennett (1998), an educated and qualified first-time employee currently needs to renew his or her professional knowledge base at least three times within a timeframe of forty working years, whereas previous generations of employees were simply expected to continue using what they had already learned throughout their professional careers. As indicated in a survey by Oliver James (1998), all of the above demands exact their toll on postmodern individuals who may feel caught in the "more-of-the-same" trap, wherein life appears as a cheerless burden. Subsequently, postmodern individuals are up to ten times more prone to experience depression than, their peers did fifty years ago. The violence rate has increased as well, together with increasing incidences of anxiety, compulsion, alcohol/drug abuse, eating disorders and gambling addictions. This is simultaneous with a decreasing joie de vivre. **According to a 1984 survey published in the German magazine "PM", the average individual laughed approximately eighteen minutes a day in the 1940s, which was a war and post-war era! However, in the 1980s, an era of economic prosperity and significant leaps in the standard of living, the average individual laughed only six minutes a day.**

Does this mean that postmodern individuals have to surrender to endless drudgery and increasing levels of depression? That scenario would only apply if the "more-of-the-same" principle had exclusive validity. However, there is a compensatory tendency at work, as evidenced by the growing interest in using paralogical and paradoxical solutions to address present-day problems. In a time-of dislocated orienting or directive social patterns, alternative interests like the New Age movement are in fashion. The same is true for pseudoscientific speculations. According to a survey in Newsweek" magazine, every second American citizen believes in UFOs and extraterrestrials. This indicates that postmodern individuals are becoming less interested in rationally suggested solutions to the big issues in life. There seems to be a growing readiness to integrate incongruity, absurdity and nonsense into everyday life. William F. Fry (1992) has stipulated that this interest in paradoxical issues is feeding a sphere of "chaotic creativity", which in turn constitutes a breeding ground for humor!

## **LESS IS BETTER - DADA IS THE BEST!**

In 1974, Paul Watzlawick described the "less-of-the-same" principle, which makes use of an apparently irrational communication to trigger action. He recommended two modes of action for accessing this sphere of communication: to be mad or bad! Initially, this would mean less adherence to the traditional norms that represent reason and good manners. In the case of psychotherapy, this includes an unconditional acceptance of the patient's presenting symptoms. Traditional psychotherapy originally tried to "repair" symptoms because they were understood as defects. Psychotherapy in postmodern times looks upon such symptoms within a less negative

framework. They are approached as positive clues to underlying creative resources. These resources are frequently associated with what Freudians call "primary processes", or the private logic of one's "inner child".

The road to this perspective was charted by an important art movement of the postmodern era. This movement was founded in Zurich during the disastrous years of the first World War and soon spread to Berlin And Paris. It was called "Dada", a French word meaning toy horse. The early Dadaists openly expressed their interest in the pre-logical thinking of primitive, irrational beings like children and so-called "lunatics". One of the most important protagonists of Dada was the German psychiatrist Richard Huelsenbeck (1892 -1972). He summed up his point of view in his 1916 poem "The End Of The World":

***This is what things have come to in this world  
The cows sit on telegraph poles and play chess  
The cockatoo under the skirts of the Spanish dancer  
Sings as sadly as a headquarters bugler and the cannons lament all day  
That is the lavender landscape Herr Mayer was talking about  
When he lost his eye  
Only the fire department can drive the nightmare from the drawing-room  
But all the horses are broken  
Ah yes Sonya, they all take the celluloid doll for a changeling and shout:  
God save the king  
The whole Monist club is gathered on the steamship Meyerbeer  
But only the pilot has any conception of high C  
I pull the anatomical Atlas out of my toe  
A serious study begins  
Have you seen the fish standing in front of the opera in cutaways  
For the last two days and nights .... ?  
Ah, ah, ye great devils - ah, ah ye keepers of bees and commandments  
With a bow wow wow and a bow woe woe who today does not know  
What our Father Homer wrote  
I hold peace and war in my toga but I'll take a cherry flip  
Today nobody knows whether he was tomorrow  
They beat time with a coffin lid  
If somebody had the nerve to rip the tail feathers  
Off the trolley car it's a great age  
The zoology professors gather in the meadow  
With the palms of their hands they turn back the rainbows  
The great magician sat the tomatoes on his forehead  
Again thou hauntest castle and grounds  
The roebuck whistles the stallion bounds  
(And this is how the world is, this is all that's ahead of us.)***

## **HUMORIZING PUBLIC LIFE**

René Schweizer is a contemporary Dadaist based in Basel, Switzerland. His life's work has been dedicated to "The transformation of reality by systematic deception" (1979). As a Dadaist, Schweizer is constantly playing with the grotesque, with nonsense and absurdity. For example, he swamped Switzerland's administrative system with "naughty inquiries." A state property office received a letter from Schweizer inquiring as to whether his mind, which he had lost the other day, had been handed in by anybody! He also sent the following inquiry to the head office for

kindergartens in the City of Basel: "Up to this point, I have not done one thing right in my life. Therefore, I want to start all over again. Is it possible for me to enter one of your kindergartens?"

In the first phase of Schweizer's nonsensical actions, many of the institutions he corresponded with responded quite seriously, thus involuntarily producing a funny effect. Schweizer published all of this correspondence in books with high print runs. This resulted in a tremendous public resonance and triggered a significant attitude change! At this point, most recent replies to Schweizer's letters from administrative bodies have been unequivocally humorous!

Schweizer's homepage ([www.rene-schweizer.ch](http://www.rene-schweizer.ch)) includes some of his unpublished poems. One of these poems is entitled "The Grand Being":

*"Blinkee blankee blonkee blank  
Feedee fahdee foe  
Shlinkee shlankee shionkee shiank  
Didee dahee do  
I came here on a mood  
I had nothing to jest  
The silence was no longer food  
I could no longer rest  
I sought the tight to see the truth  
And knew I was a fool  
Was this how I got the blues?  
A noise-polluted pool?  
Blinkee blankee blonkee blank  
Feedee fahdee foe."*

In his book "The Gagaistic Manifest", Schweizer (1979, p. 9) writes: **"Everyone talks about the serious side of life. When you open the newspaper or listen to the radio, you are confronted with it. But where does it say that the world has to obey the principle of seriousness and earnestness? Why should you disfigure your forehead with furrows of pensiveness? Why should you take everything in an enormously serious manner? [ ... ] Creation has established a counterpart of seriousness: humor. But in the official world, in everyday thinking, humor is neglected. Therefore, humor - in all its manifestations and nuances - has to be strategically brought into play. Thus the supremacy of seriousness may be thwarted."**

In 1996, a conference was initiated in Basel, Switzerland for professionals who had integrated humor into their work. This conference was attended by experts in the therapeutic field and was continued in subsequent years as the "International Congress of Humor in Therapy." Thousands of participants from Central Europe participated in this event which had remarkable positive consequences in many areas of public life.

## **DADA AND MODERN PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Huelsenbeck's original intent was to create a "lark regarding the outlook on life" (Hoellen, 1993, p.5). He wanted to offset the contradiction between the subjective world of dreams and delusions and the objective reality of reason. His main concern, however, was to repudiate the rationalism of Western civilization by concentrating on the creative power of the unconscious. This interest, of course, established an affinity with psychoanalysis.

In 1936, Huelsenbeck emigrated to New York, changed his name to Charles T. Hulbeck, and decided to undergo a formal training analysis with the famous neo-analyst Karen Horney. In 1946, Huelsenbeck became a training analyst himself and was contacted by Albert Ellis, who was in turn formally trained by Huelsenbeck until 1953. In 1955, Ellis founded his own "heretical underground approach" (Wolfe, 1977, p.14), Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET), which turned out to be one of the most influential therapeutic systems of our time: While rationality plays a central role in RET, it is quite obvious that Ellis uses important Dadaistic elements in his therapeutic approach. One example is his "shame attacking exercises" that have proven to be successful in the treatment of social phobia. During the course of these exercises, clients are encouraged to be foolish and engage in "shameful" acts, such as:

- **Say something stupid**
- **Confess an embarrassing weakness like: "I can't spell"**
- **Act funny, such as singing aloud when one has an awful voice or using a black umbrella on a bright day**
- **Say something lecherous**
- **Ask a shoemaker for a wristwatch**
- **Call out the stops in a loud voice while riding a bus or trolley**
- **Ask other passengers what day it is.**

In an article entitled "Fun as Psychotherapy" Ellis states: "One of the main tenets of rational-emotive therapy consists of unconditionally accepting people with their mistakes and idiocies [ ... ] When one of my clients told me that he could not defecate in a public toilet because someone in the next stall might hear him make improper sounds and might think badly of him, I asked, What do you expect when you sit on your john and make the right noises - that the guy in the next stall will play the Star-Spangled Banner?" (1977, pp.264-266).

## **HUMOR IN PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Many psychotherapists have been progressively using paralogical methods in their professional work during the past several decades. For instance, Frank Farrelly, founder of Provocative Therapy, turned traditional therapeutic guidelines upside down. In his interventions, Farrelly works with the most absurd exaggerations and ironic insinuations, thus establishing a clear connection between the way he handles clients' neurotic problems and humor. His approach echoes the paralogical or irrational world of fools and clowns. Salameh (2006) describes this world as the source of a special or non-conforming wisdom, which is displayed by medieval court jesters, American-Indian "tricksters," Zen Masters, or dervishes like Mulla Nasruddin. When the therapist participates in this "wisdom of the fools," he or she can then immediately enter the sphere of creative unconsciousness. Frank Farrelly (1991, p.23) illustrated this viewpoint in an introductory lecture he gave at a 1991 conference:

***"I am firmly on the side of the angels. I was thinking how I might begin to talk to you this morning. And I thought, I could say I used to know what provocative therapy was. And I think in some ways I know less and less what it is. Now, perhaps that's not because it's so complex, perhaps it's because I am becoming more and more a Dummkopf (idiot)."***

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## Biography

Dr. Michael Titze is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Tuttlingen, Germany. He is a past president of HumorCare Germany, an established European therapeutic humor organization ([www.humorcare.com](http://www.humorcare.com)), and a recognized pioneer of therapeutic humor in Europe. Dr. Titze has authored numerous articles, book chapters, and books on the subject of therapeutic humor. His published books in German include **"The Healing Power of Humor"** (1985), **"The Therapeutic Power of Laughter"** (1995), **"Therapeutic Humor"** (1998, with C. Eschenröder), and **"The Humor Strategy"** (2004)

## EDITOR'S CORNER

In a health club steam room, a man with a towel wrapped around his waist is diligently trying to read the daily newspaper. The steam has filled up the room, the door and walls are curly with sweat, and the room is suffused with thick clouds of steam reminiscent of the London fog. Waves of steam are coming through the paper as it gets slowly shredded to pieces by the ambient humidity. Yet the man keeps on reading, trying to decipher the newspaper articles. This is a classic Dada scenario, a scenario that happens to be simultaneously absurd and comical. What makes this scenario even more comical is that this story actually happened! Marcel Duchamp, the famous Dada artist, had a taste for good food but did not want to pay for his expensive culinary tastes. So he took up the habit of signing the tablecloth at whatever restaurant table -he happened to be seated at in lieu of payment. After Duchamp left, the restaurant owner would immediately seize the signed tablecloth off the table and declare it to be "a work of art," while Duchamp kept getting his free meals! Along the same lines, a famous Sufi master once admonished his disciples to spill their favorite wine on their prayer rugs! All the above are clear expressions of the Dada spirit as it relates to human behavior. The basic premise of Dada is humorous rebellion because humor mocks all "accepted" reality. Through their art, the renowned Dada artists like Salvador Dali, Auguste Breton, and others created an impressive new perspective in art based on the twisting of reality to make it humorous. Without proclaiming themselves to be comedians or humorists, the Dadaists expressed themselves humorously in their art. In films like "The Secret Charm of the Bourgeoisie" directed by Louis Bunuel, the Dada humoristic spirit clearly comes through in a stinging ironic critique of the bourgeois way of life. On the other hand, Salvador Dali boldly mocked time by painting melting clocks in a mesmerizing Dada/surrealistic painting. While the audacious image of a melting clock is superbly creative, it is also quite hilarious in terms of

busting the boundaries of time and space. Through these and other iconoclastic contributions, the Dada movement redefined what was considered to be the "legal limit" of creativity in art, writing, painting, and cinema. Many of the new currents in postmodern literature and art find their roots in the Dada creative/humorous experience. In this stimulating article, Dr. Michael Titze, a well-known German psychologist, writer, and Dadaist, extensively examines the relationship between Dada art, psychotherapy, and humor and illustrates his viewpoint with fresh and stimulating examples. The insights he shares here are illuminating and always to the point. Interestingly, the first words uttered by my youngest daughter Nina when she started speaking were "Dada, Dada, Dada!"