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IMAGE REMOVED FOR SRO PURPOSES

Image is available online here:

<http://www.joandelamalla.com>

Joan de la Malla (Spain), "The Sad Clown", exhibited at the Natural History Museum, London, 2018

The impacts, affects and meanings of a photograph are always produced via a dynamic interaction of disparate elements in both content and form. In this brief analysis of Joan de la Malla's photograph 'The Sad Clown', winner of the photojournalism prize at the 2018 Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, I focus on how the image sets off a series of movements towards and away from the common trope of anthropomorphism, exploring how it works to expose, confound and then re-install this familiar device.

The photograph, taken in Surabaya, Java, is of a long-tailed macaque, Timbul, who has been dressed by his owner in the guise of a clown, with a tall hat bearing the word Badut ('clown'), and a mask approximating white pan stick makeup, a red nose and smiling lips. His short height and slight build brings to mind a child in costume. This attempted illusion clearly precedes (and will succeed) the moment at which de la Malla took the picture. Tibmul is positioned in the foreground to the right of the image, while his owner stands further back and to the left. He is out of focus and has been decapitated by the edge of the frame, but holds a chain which loops towards the back of the macaque's neck. As many theorists of representations of animals have noted, anthropomorphism constitutes an act of human domination over an animal, a symbolic "capture and appropriation", as Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon put it.¹ But in addition to this symbolic violence, the macaque is also a victim of physical violence at the hands of its owner (restraint, coercion, discipline), figured here in the chain and the mask.

In the photograph, the macaque has raised its left hand to its masked face, in what seems to be a gesture of distress or fatigue. Crucially, the simian nature of this dark, hairy arm explodes the attempted disguise: as soon as the 'wrongness' of the arm is registered, Timbul is re-read as a monkey, not a child or clown. The viewer is thus invited to both notice the attempted anthropomorphism as an illusion, and to see past it to feel sympathy with the creature behind the mask. In this way the cliché of the sad clown is reanimated as a powerful indictment of inter-species cruelty.

But at this very moment, our sympathy for the abused macaque still retains an element of anthropomorphism. Even while noting that the animal has been uprooted from its natural habitat and put to work in an urban environment (it is pictured alongside railway tracks), we can only imagine how it must feel as a fellow human, not as a monkey, since we cannot really know how they might feel. Thus, no matter how we try, the 'interval' between animal and human cannot be eradicated, and the

macaque's alterity remains. All these layers of complexity are registered in de la Malla's photograph.

There is, however, a further kind of symbolic violence at work here, one inherent in all photography, which captures a trace of an event that then circulates separately from the event's context. John Berger writes:

The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supersession of further appearances. [...] The contemporary public photograph [...] offers information, but information severed from all lived experience. [...] The violence [of that separation] is expressed in [the image's] strangeness.ⁱⁱ

It is the symbolic rupture created by this decontextualisation which de la Malla attempts to mitigate in the comments appended to *The Sad Clown* when the image was exhibited at the Natural History Museum in London: "Joan spent a long time gaining the trust of the monkey's owners. 'They are not bad people,' he says, 'and by doing street shows, they can afford to send their children to school. They just need other opportunities to make a living.'"ⁱⁱⁱ This statement tries to limit the extractive charge of the image by returning it, and the moment that it fixes, to the particular social and economic situation of urban poverty in Surabaya, the second-largest city in Indonesia. However, the risk remains that, alongside a sympathetic response to the plight of Timbul and other animals like him, the photograph cannot but propose a judgmental gaze, which laments the brutality of a distant and 'primitive' culture.

ⁱ Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon, *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, London: BFI, 2015, p. 2.

ⁱⁱ John Berger, 'Uses of Photography' 1978, rpt in *Understanding a Photograph*, ed Geoff Dyer, Penguin, 2013, pp. 52-53.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Wildlife Photographer of the Year, 54*, exhibition catalogue, 2018, p.26.