

THE COMIC HIATUS

In the classic cartoon scene, Bugs Bunny runs over the edge of the precipice. He walks through the air for a few moments, with no ground beneath his feet. Only when he looks down and takes stock of his situation – ‘uh, oh’ – does he start to fall. In my humble opinion, all mankind is to be found in this comic hiatus. Our existence is confined to the realm between *stupidity that is by definition unrecognized and the disastrous comprehension of our stupidity*.

No one is intelligent enough to comprehend his own stupidity. And that is all to the good. Cognition has a disastrous effect not only on stupidity, but also on the intelligence based on it.

Anyone who behaves stupidly fails to see that he is stupid, and will persist in his folly. In a sense, he is still intelligent, that is, he continues to think while he pursues the false trail he has taken.

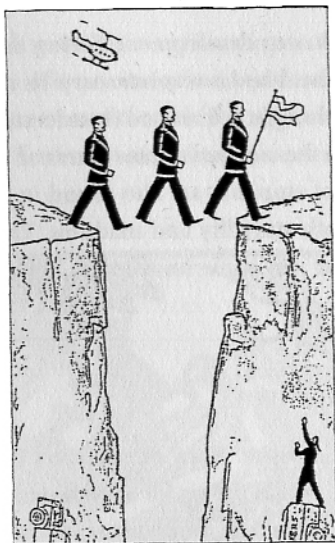
Awareness of one's stupidity not only means putting an end to that stupidity but also to the knowledge based on it. Insight coincides with idiocy.

THE SEVENTH HEAVEN

This realm between the two types of stupidity, between stupidity and the idiocy springing from comprehension, is the domain of the comic effect. In the animated cartoon, heroes explode, are smashed to a pulp or skinned alive, only to get up again as if nothing has happened. And even the Irish in Irish jokes go on coming to grief without Ireland going under.

Man does not differ from the cardboard figures in animated

From Margit Willems
and P. Hermanides,
Speciale effecten
(Amsterdam, 1991)



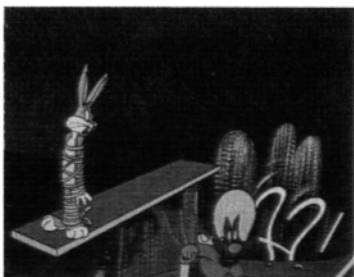
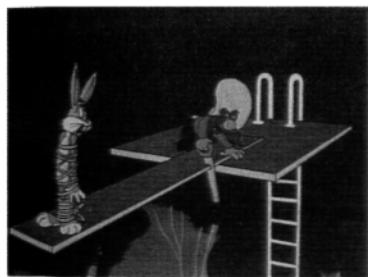
cartoons. We too keep falling flat on our faces and standing up again merrily, as if some intelligence guarantees not only that we survive all foolish acts, but also that we learn from our mistakes. Gullibly we dwell in a paradisiacal state, in which intelligence thinks for us. Our blind faith in reason lends all our actions a comical, unreal, indestructible aspect, in short, something typically Irish.

THE SECRET OF SUSPENDED LIFE

Our life is in a state of suspension. Every man goes on thinking and talking in the void, stumbling about in the illusory coordinates of his knowledge, trusting blindly in the rational basis of his existence, much as trapeze artists trust in their safety net. Like the rabbit that walks on air.

Why doesn't the rabbit fall down? Because it is in an animated cartoon. But let us adopt the logic of the cartoon for a moment: the rabbit continues to remain suspended in the air because the force of gravity has been temporarily switched off, because nature has forgotten its own laws. Things are much the same in fairy-tales: even the most fearsome giants would end up with crippled backs the moment gravity is brought into play. (This leads one to suspect that fairy stories about giants are written by people with sore backs.)

The secret of the joke is revealed in Friz Freleng's animated cartoon *High Diving Hare* (1949). Cowboy Yosemite Sam goes to a circus that advertises a death-defying leap: a dive from the top of the circus tent into a tub of water. It turns out that the artiste is indisposed, so Sam forces the ringmaster, Bugs Bunny, to stand in for him. Trussed up with rope, Bugs is poised on the diving board that is attached to a platform on top of a ladder. Sam, perched on the platform, saws the board off: immediately stupid Sam goes crashing down, platform and ladder and all, while clever Bugs Bunny remains suspended in the air on the sawn-off diving board and tells the audience: 'I know dis defies de law of gravity, but, uh, you see, I never studied law!' As if gravity only works if we are familiar with its effects. The joke is that the rabbit knows perfectly well that there is something he does not know. And as long as he does not know it he is safe.



Bugs Bunny in *High Diving Hare*.
From Joe Adamson, *Bugs Bunny*, (London, 1991)

THE STUPIDITY OF INTELLIGENCE

Everybody knows that our knowledge is unfounded, that science is a self-defined system of rules and laws. And as long as we all act dumb and pretend that our wisdom is soundly based, everything goes without a hitch. Imagination keeps the world going round. Disclosure of the obvious, however, would prove fatal.

But whom are we fooling? If everyone knows at the back of his mind that our knowledge is baseless, who can there be who does not know this? Who persists in flying in the face of all the evidence and continues to believe in the solid basis of our knowledge? The paradoxical answer is: our intelligence does not and cannot know it. Thinking