

HRJS FIELD ESSAYS

FIELD ESSAY 001 | SHADOW LITERACY & HUMAN CONTINUITY

IT'S GOT ELECTROLYTES

When Everybody Is Representin', Who Is Watching the Garden?

An HRJS Essay on Proxy Failure, Tribal Legibility,
Institutional Shadow & Human Continuity

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EDITORIAL FRAME

The satire is the doorway. The audit is the work.

What follows treats *Idiocracy* not as a prediction and not as an excuse to call everybody stupid, but as a useful cultural mirror. The question running through the essay is deliberately simple: when labels, proxies, tribes and institutions tell us something is working, are we still willing to look at what the system is actually producing?

Idiocracy is a 2006 satirical comedy directed by Mike Judge. Its premise is deliberately absurd: an entirely average man, Joe Bauers, participates in a military hibernation experiment, is forgotten, and wakes up roughly 500 years in the future. He discovers a United States that is technologically recognizable but culturally, intellectually, commercially, and institutionally degraded. Entertainment has collapsed into spectacle. Advertising has invaded nearly everything. Public institutions still exist, but many of the people operating them seem barely capable of understanding what those institutions were designed to accomplish.

It is an intentionally ridiculous movie. That is precisely why it works.

Most discussions of *Idiocracy* reduce its warning to something like, "People are getting stupid." I think that interpretation misses something considerably more useful.

I am less interested in asking whether people are becoming less intelligent than I am in asking whether we are becoming **less capable of distinguishing socially recognized signals of value from value itself**.

That distinction matters to my work with Human Rights Justice Systems™ because HRJS is fundamentally concerned with systems, human continuity, institutional legibility, authority, consequence, shadow, and the distance that can develop between what institutions say they are doing and what actually happens to the human beings passing through them.

When I watch *Idiocracy* through that lens, I don't just see stupid people.

I see **proxy failure**.

I see **tribal legibility**.

I see **institutional shadow**.

I see people defending the symbols of functioning systems after those systems have stopped producing the outcomes the symbols were supposed to represent.

And I see a society becoming increasingly incapable of looking at the fucking garden.

IT'S GOT ELECTROLYTES

One of the movie's most famous running jokes involves Brawndo, a sports drink that has effectively replaced water.

The crops are being irrigated with it.

The crops are dying.

Joe eventually asks the obvious question: why not give the plants water?

The response is essentially circular. Brawndo has electrolytes. Electrolytes are what plants crave. Why do plants crave electrolytes? Because Brawndo has electrolytes.

The language has become detached from observation.

The important question should be:

Are the crops growing?

Instead, the socially accepted question has become:

Does it have electrolytes?

That distinction reaches far beyond a fictional sports drink.

A job can become electrolytes.

A degree can become electrolytes.

A title can become electrolytes.

A marriage can become electrolytes.

A house can become electrolytes.

A professional vocabulary can become electrolytes.

A résumé can become electrolytes.

An institutional affiliation can become electrolytes.

A political identity can become electrolytes.

A diagnosis can become electrolytes.

A completed procedure can become electrolytes.

A certification can become electrolytes.

None of these things is inherently meaningless.

That is important.

Employment can tell us something about stability, productivity and income. Credentials can provide meaningful evidence of training. Professional titles can communicate responsibility. Procedures can protect people. Institutions can establish standards. Categories allow complicated societies to process enormous amounts of information without investigating every human being from birth onward.

Even electrolytes are real.

The problem begins when **the proxy replaces the outcome it was supposed to approximate.**

Imagine two people.

One has the conventional markers of social legibility: stable employment, recognizable employer, vehicle, respectable title, familiar presentation, clean résumé and a life that fits easily into categories other people already understand.

The second person is rebuilding after disruption. That person may temporarily lack one or several conventional markers while working every day, caring for other people, developing independent projects, documenting problems, creating systems, pursuing income, navigating institutions and steadily reconstructing stability.

Understanding the second person requires something the first person does not necessarily require:

continuity.

Someone has to reconstruct the road that produced the present snapshot.

But humans and institutions love shortcuts.

So instead:

"Does he have a job?"

It's got electrolytes.

"Does she have the right degree?"

It's got electrolytes.

"Does this person belong to a recognizable institution?"

It's got electrolytes.

"Does this person fit the category I associate with stability?"

It's got electrolytes.

Meanwhile, there is another question sitting quietly underneath all of them:

Is the fucking garden growing?

INSTITUTIONAL LEGIBILITY IS NOT HUMAN VALUE

This is where Human Continuity becomes important.

A category is a compressed representation of a human being.

It is not the human being.

"Unemployed" communicates something.

It does not reconstruct the road.

"Manager" communicates something.

It does not establish character.

"Homeless" communicates something.

It does not measure intelligence, discipline, capability or future potential.

"Executive," "felon," "veteran," "mother," "father," "disabled," "wealthy," "poor," "educated," "uneducated," "conservative," "progressive," "religious," "atheist."

Every category contains information.

Every category also destroys information.

Compression does that.

Human Continuity asks us to recover what compression removed:

See the person who is here. Reconstruct the road that produced them.

That does not require abandoning categories. It requires remembering what categories are.

They are maps.

They are not the territory.

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTIN'

Then *Idiocracy* gives us another beautiful piece of satire: its degraded version of the legislature, the **House of Representin'**.

Again, the easy interpretation is simply, "Look how stupid Congress became."

I think there is a deeper institutional metaphor available.

Brawndo represents **proxy failure**.

The House of Representin' represents **representational failure**.

There is a difference between representing people's interests and **performing recognizable membership in their tribe**.

Human beings form tribes because tribes solve real problems. They provide belonging, protection, identity, shared language and social coordination.

Tribes also require signals.

Clothing.

Vocabulary.

Religion.

Occupation.

Education.

Political affiliation.

Masculinity.

Femininity.

Neighborhood.

Class.

Race and culture.

Professional language.

Social-media behavior.

Music.

Institutions.

Even humor.

These signals help us answer an ancient human question very quickly:

Is this person one of us?

That isn't automatically irrational. Human beings cannot conduct a six-month anthropological investigation before deciding whether every stranger is trustworthy.

But something dangerous happens when representation becomes performance.

Instead of asking:

Does this person actually advance the things we value?

we begin asking:

Does this person look and sound like somebody who represents us?

Now *representin'* becomes another electrolyte.

A person can materially harm the interests of the people who identify with them while continuing to receive loyalty because they perform the tribe magnificently.

Someone outside the tribe can produce a beneficial outcome and still be rejected because the person lacks the correct symbolic markers.

The garden can be dying.

But our guy has electrolytes.

REALITY -> PROXY -> TRIBE

I think this can be understood as a simple progression.

Reality is complicated.

Reality is expensive to evaluate. Human beings are complicated. Institutions are complicated. Outcomes take time to observe.

So we create a **proxy**.

The proxy helps us estimate reality without investigating everything from scratch.

Then people organize socially around recognizing the proxy.

Eventually the **tribe begins protecting the proxy even when reality contradicts it**.

The original question:

"Is the garden growing?"

becomes:

"Are you one of the people who believes in electrolytes?"

At that moment, disagreement about evidence becomes disagreement about belonging.

Now changing one's mind carries a social cost.

Evidence is no longer merely information.

Evidence can become betrayal.

That is where Shadow Literacy becomes indispensable.

SHADOW LITERACY AND THE DEAD GARDEN

Shadow Literacy is not simply the practice of identifying bad things other people refuse to acknowledge.

That would be convenient as hell.

It would also defeat the entire purpose.

At the individual, organizational and cultural levels, shadow includes the consequences our preferred stories make difficult for us to see.

A compassionate institution can harm people.

A meritocratic institution can reward conformity.

A safety system can produce danger.

An accountability system can distribute responsibility so widely that nobody remains accountable.

A movement fighting dehumanization can dehumanize its opponents.

A community built around inclusion can create outsiders.

A person who prides himself on seeing through everyone else's tribal categories can become trapped inside his own.

And HRJS can do it too.

That last part matters.

If Human Rights Justice Systems ever reaches a point where somebody can say:

"That is the HRJS position, therefore it must be humane,"

without examining consequences, then congratulations.

We made Brawndo.

There can be no serious Shadow Literacy that only examines **them**.

The audit has to turn around.

THE GARDEN TEST

That suggests a practical Shadow Literacy exercise I call **The Garden Test**.

When evaluating a person, institution, program, policy, ideology or organizational practice, ask:

1. **What outcome are we actually trying to produce?**

2. **What proxy are we using to represent that outcome?**
3. **Why do we believe that proxy still predicts the outcome?**
4. **What is actually happening to the garden?**
5. **Who benefits from continuing to call the proxy successful?**
6. **Who absorbs the consequences when it fails?**
7. **What evidence would cause us to change course?**
8. **Are we actually examining that evidence, or merely repeating that our system has electrolytes?**

That is where satire becomes institutional analysis.

FOLLOW THE AUTHORITY

Once the garden begins dying, another HRJS question becomes necessary:

Who controls the irrigation system?

Who can stop it?

Who noticed the damage first?

Who documented it?

Who has authority to change the process?

Who profits from continuing it?

Who can appeal?

Who bears the loss?

Who possesses only one fragment of the information?

Who can see across organizational boundaries?

Who gets blamed when failure finally becomes impossible to ignore?

That is where Authority Mapping intersects with Shadow Literacy.

Many institutional failures do not require a room full of malicious people.

Sometimes everybody performs their assigned role correctly while the combined system produces an unacceptable result.

Each person sees one piece.

Nobody sees the garden.

That is **distributed institutional shadow**.

BAD SYSTEMS CAN BECOME DEPENDENT ON THEIR OWN FAILURE

There is another layer to the Brawndo story that deserves attention.

When Joe finally convinces people to stop using Brawndo on the crops, fixing the underlying agricultural problem does not immediately make society happy.

Brawndo is economically important.

Its disruption creates unemployment and anger before the crops have visibly recovered.

So the attempted solution initially appears to have made everything worse.

That dynamic exists outside satire.

Institutions can become economically, professionally, politically or psychologically dependent on systems that are failing.

Once enough livelihoods, identities, procedures and power structures depend upon the existing arrangement, correcting the underlying failure creates immediate costs.

Those costs can then be presented as evidence that reform itself was the problem.

The electrolyte isn't merely in the bottle anymore.

It is embedded in the architecture.

That is considerably harder to remove.

EVERY TRIBE HAS ELECTROLYTES

This phenomenon does not belong to one political ideology, social class or institution.

Progressives have electrolytes.

Conservatives have electrolytes.

Academics have electrolytes.

Religious communities have electrolytes.

Corporations have electrolytes.

Activists have electrolytes.

Working-class cultures have electrolytes.

Professional-managerial cultures have electrolytes.

Countercultures have electrolytes.

People who pride themselves on being independent thinkers have electrolytes.

Even the people loudly announcing that they belong to absolutely no tribe eventually seem to locate one another and form the **Tribe of People Too Independent to Belong to Tribes**.

Human beings are remarkably efficient at rebuilding the cage immediately after escaping it.

The specific words change.

"Evidence-based."

"Common sense."

"Traditional."

"Progressive."

"Patriot."

"Independent thinker."

"Spiritual."

"Professional."

"Trauma-informed."

"Expert."

"Real American."

"Educated."

None of these terms is inherently empty.

But every useful concept can eventually become a phrase that allows somebody to **stop examining what is actually happening**.

TRANSLATION WITHOUT MANIPULATION

There is also an uncomfortable practical reality here.

Sometimes the garden actually is growing, but nobody recognizes the plant because they are looking for the electrolyte bottle.

That creates a communication problem.

Institutions have languages.

Professions have languages.

Classes have languages.

Families have languages.

Subcultures have languages.

Trauma has a language.

Authority has a language.

A person can communicate something completely truthful and still fail to be understood because the receiving system does not recognize the form in which the information arrives.

This is where I increasingly see a role for **adaptive translation**.

Not manipulation.

Not impersonation.

Not deception.

Translation.

The underlying truth remains constant.

The interface changes.

A person might say:

"I'm trying to hold my fucking life together."

An institution may need to hear:

"I am experiencing a temporary interruption of income and actively pursuing stabilization."

Same person.

Same reality.

Different interface.

A warehouse worker may describe a problem differently from an attorney.

An attorney differently from a therapist.

A therapist differently from an executive.

An executive differently from a teenager.

Human Rights Justice Systems can potentially operate between those worlds.

Hear what the person is actually trying to communicate.

Understand what the receiving system requires in order to process it.

Translate between them without falsifying either side.

That is not merely communication.

It is **human-interface work**.

WHEN EVERYBODY IS REPRESENTIN', WHO IS WATCHING THE GARDEN?

Maybe the most dangerous reading of *Idiocracy* is the comforting one.

Maybe saying "**people are becoming stupid**" is itself an electrolyte.

It allows me to place the problem somewhere else.

With stupid people.

With another generation.

With another political tribe.

With another social class.

With people who watch the wrong television shows, vote incorrectly, use the wrong vocabulary, worship differently, live differently or lack whatever credentials my tribe considers evidence of intelligence.

That explanation feels wonderful because it leaves the observer untouched.

Shadow Literacy requires the harder question.

Can intelligent people become so attached to the signals confirming their worldview that they stop examining outcomes?

Can educated people?

Can compassionate people?

Can powerful people?

Can marginalized people?

Can institutions?

Can movements?

Can families?

Can I?

Absolutely.

The danger is not merely becoming too stupid to recognize that the garden is dying.

There may be something considerably more dangerous:

becoming intelligent enough to construct an elaborate explanation for why the dead garden proves the electrolytes are working.

That is where Human Rights Justice Systems becomes relevant to this satire.

I am not interested in building another tribe whose members memorize the correct vocabulary and then congratulate one another for having electrolytes.

I am interested in building tools that repeatedly force the examination back toward consequence.

What happened?

Who had authority?

Who could see?

Who could not?

Who benefited?

Who absorbed the cost?

What did the category conceal?

What does the record actually show?

Did the intervention work?

And ultimately:

Is the fucking garden growing?

Because representation should remain accountable to what it represents.

Institutions should remain accountable to the humans they affect.

Categories should remain subordinate to the people they describe.

Proxies should remain subordinate to outcomes.

And every system, including one I build myself, should remain vulnerable to the possibility that its favorite explanation is wrong.

Look before blame. Trace before name.

See who pays. Change the ways. Build better days.

And when everybody gets busy representin', defending the label, protecting the tribe and explaining why the bottle must be right:

Look at the fucking garden.

HRJS DOCTRINE

**LOOK BEFORE BLAME.
TRACE BEFORE NAME.**

**SEE WHO PAYS.
CHANGE THE WAYS.
BUILD BETTER DAYS.**

LOOK AT THE FUCKING GARDEN.

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