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The Fears of the Clown

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“The clown may be the source of mirth, but - who shall make the clown laugh?”

Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*

Many of us read Stephen King's *IT* before we were *re*-terrorised by Tim Curry's portrayal of Pennywise the Clown and his psychotic mania in the 1990 mini-series. It is said that “Stephen King's movie *IT* ... did for clowns what *Psycho* did for showers and what *Jaws* did for swimming in the ocean.”¹ But, many of us had already had our psyches attuned to the danger of clowns when we saw the scene in Steven Spielberg's 1982 film *Poltergeist* when we looked at the maniacal grinning face of the Robbie's clown sitting on the chair during a thunderstorm. The viewers all *knew* that clown would come to life – changing from the friendly-faced doll, to the demonic entity that drags Robbie under the bed ...



For many of us, these two depictions of clowns may be the root of Coulrophobia – a “persistent, abnormal, and irrational fear of clowns”. Clowns hover on the peripheries of our fears. They are uncanny. Like dolls, the masks they wear hide their true emotions, their true intent. A smile may appear to be smiling all the time, and such a fixed smile can only be fake or untrustworthy. On a more specific level, it may be the over-exaggerated features of the clowns' makeup, the big hair and arched eyebrows, big shoes and, of course, the oversized red nose. These are all theatrical tropes to communicate their countenance to an audience in a large arena. But in their performance, a clown can be both the source of terror and the victim of attacks, or the ambiguity that the clown can be simultaneously laughing and

¹ Michael Goldman, "Clowns are no laughing matter." *The Toronto Star* July 8 2000

crying. A clown is a duplicitous personality hiding its true purpose behind the extravagant painted faces. “Children find clown motifs ‘frightening and unknowable’.”² Their actions are unpredictable; as noted by Peter Kinderman, a professor of clinical psychology at Liverpool University: “The thing about clowns is that they look a bit like human beings, but they also look peculiar, and they do peculiar things. And everybody around them is doing peculiar things — they throw buckets of water and everybody laughs. Kids can find that quite unsettling.”³

While the clown does not conform to any of the uncanny motifs as highlighted by Freud, it is possible that the extreme white make-up may evoke the semblance of death; the facial features are recognisable *as* human, but the extreme and painted emotion is divorced from the expected and because the facial features are painted on, they can give a semblance of inhumanity, so they are enough to warrant the anxiety of a “second glance” for the brain to confirm what it has actually seen.

Or as Johnny Depp puts it: ““There always seemed to be a darkness lurking just under the surface, a potential for real evil,” he said. “I guess I am afraid of them because it's impossible — thanks to their painted-on smiles — to distinguish if they are happy or if they're about to bite your face off.”⁴

One of the most recognisable modern clowns is, of course, the Chief Happiness Officer of McDonald’s restaurants: Ronald McDonald. However, the fun-loving, clown has gone through a number of changes. Would the marketing of McDonalds be so successful if they had maintained this clown character from the 1960s who had a food tray for a hat and a paper cup for his nose? (This earlier characterisation seems more like Andy Pandy on the morning after a VERY good party!)



² <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/07/why-clowns-are-dying-out>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/joepublic/2010/feb/11/coulrophobia-clowns-scared>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/joepublic/2010/feb/11/coulrophobia-clowns-scared>

Historically, however, the clown has been the voice of reason. If we think of Feste (aka “Clown”) in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* or the fool in *King Lear*. The clown is in a position to observe where the ruler is making a mistake and to speak their mind – a luxury that other courtiers do not have. He is also able to communicate with both the noble characters as well as the commoners. In addition, they may be seen as protectors of the vulnerable – of Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, and of Lear when Cordelia is absent.

At the same time, the fool can hide the truth behind mockery and derision, but can equally obscure what is going on – for both the characters and the audience. Andrew McConnell Stott, a specialist in clowning culture, notes that clowns “push logic up to its breaking point ... They push our understanding to the limits of reason and they do this through joking but also through ridicule.”⁵



On the other hand, it is hardly surprising that clowns can be the source of some anxiety when we think of them as tricksters or the Lord of Misrule. In this we may think of the Norse god Loki or Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but *actual* historical clowns include or Harlequin, whose character may be linked to the *Erlkönig*, the king of the faeries, or even *Hellequin* who appears as a devil-like character in Adam de la Halle’s *Le Jeu de la feuillée* (The Play of the Greensward), as well as *Alichino* one of the devils in Dante’s *Inferno* (cantos 21-23). Harlequin appeared in the *Commedia dell’arte*, a masked, semi-improvised theatre which appeared in Italy in the sixteenth century. The *Commedia dell’arte* developed into a comic theatrical genre known as a *Harlequinade*, which was notable for its slapstick antics. Harlequin appeared as the agile, sometimes acrobatic, comic servant. One of Harlequin’s masters is often *Pantalone* an elderly, unscrupulous merchant of Venice. He is the father of Columbine, who is becomes the focus of the love interest between Harlequin and the romantic Pierrot. (It’s worth mentioning here that the other characters wear masks in the early



⁵ http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/halloween/11194653/Why-are-we-so-scared-of-clowns.html#disqus_thread

commedia, but, significantly Columbine does not). Pantelone keeps his daughter as far away from Harlequin as possible, but invariably is fooled by Harlequin's devious tricks, as well as being foiled by the tricks of another servant, known as Clown. Ultimately, Columbina leaves Pierrot in favour of Harlequin, breaking his heart, and hence his melancholy countenance.

While Harlequin was sly and cunning, and Pierrot was the sentimental dreamer, Clown represented the comical nature of clowning as well as anarchic fun and practical jokes on anyone he encountered. As the stories developed, Andrew Stott notes that Harlequin became "romantic and mercurial, instead of mischievous";



this was particularly noted in the opera *Harlequin Amulet; or, The Magick of Mona*. This left Clown (in this case played by Joseph Grimaldi) as the "undisputed agent" of chaos.⁶ Known as Joey the clown, Grimaldi introduced the whiteface makeup design. But, as Andrew Stott notes, while Grimaldi is a "kind of spiritual father of today's clowns ... he would have likened himself more to Chaplin or Keaton – somebody like that."⁷

He also personifies the tears of a clown: his life was affected by series of tragedies including the death of his wife in childbirth, and also the death of his alcoholic son aged 30. The archetypical melancholic comedian, Grimaldi said "I make you laugh at night but I am grim-all-day".⁸ It is the desolate and tormented Grimaldi we see in the opening chapters of Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, described thus:

He was dressed for the pantomimes in all the absurdity of a clown's costume. The spectral figures in the Dance of Death, the most frightful shapes that the ablest painter ever portrayed on canvas, never presented an appearance half so ghastly. His bloated body and shrunken legs—their deformity enhanced a hundredfold by the fantastic dress—the glassy eyes, contrasting fearfully with the thick white paint with which the face was besmeared; the grotesquely-ornamented head, trembling with paralysis, and the long skinny hands, rubbed with white chalk—all gave him a hideous and unnatural appearance, of which no description could convey an

⁶ Andrew McConnell Stott, *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi*. (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 2009), p. 109.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/07/why-clowns-are-dying-out>

⁸ James Williams, "Lear and the Fool" in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. James Williams and Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 16-50, p. 48.

adequate idea, and which, to this day, I shudder to think of. His voice was hollow and tremulous as he took me aside, and in broken words recounted a long catalogue of sickness and privations, terminating as usual with an urgent request for the loan of a trifling sum of money. I put a few shillings in his hand, and as I turned away I heard the roar of laughter which followed his first tumble on the stage.

Harlequin is very close in character to another “favourite” clown, the violent Pulcinella, or Punchinello, or sometimes just Mr Punch: hunchbacked and hook-nosed, he speaks in a distinctive squeaky voice. (the nose incidentally is representative of sexual potency, and the hunchback, against all political correctness, was considered to be amusing).⁹ Other characters including his wife, Judy, a policeman, a crocodile and even the baby, are found to be on the receiving end of Punchinello’s slapsticks. His lawlessness and disregard for authority continues until, in some versions, he faces Jack Ketch, the hangman, and ultimately, the devil himself, although, of course, Punchinello gets the better of both of them. But, while Punchinello is a puppet, he shares certain characteristics with the image of a clown, most particularly, as Rosalind Crone argues “since the puppets are carved from wood, their facial expressions cannot change, but are stuck in the same exaggerated pose”. She continues that this exaggeration – just as we see with the overemphasized features of the clown “helps to deter any sense of realism and to distance the audience”.¹⁰ It is these characteristics that Hollywood has capitalised on, leading to Killer Clowns, and of course, the delightful toy sitting on the chair in the thunderstorm in *Poltergeist*.



When considering the Clown Killer, King himself said that he created Pennywise as he felt that clowns scared children "more than anything else in the world". Some of his motifs were drawn from the real-life serial killer, John Wayne Gacy, known as the clown killer. However, this epithet is a misnomer. While it is true that Gacy was an active member of the community who dressed up as Pogo the clown for children at parties and entertaining them at local hospitals, and Gacy reportedly told police officers when

⁹ <http://www.punchandjudy.com/who.htm>

¹⁰ Rosalind Crone, “Mr and Mrs Punch in Nineteenth-Century England” in *The Historical Journal*, 49.4 (2006) pp. 1055–1082, p. 1065.

he was interviewed “A clown can get away with murder”. Charles Nemo, who visited Gacy four times on Death Row at Menard Correctional Center in Chester, Illinois, observes: “Real evil usually is not flamboyant; it does its very best to hide under a cover of respectability”.¹¹ (Critics do like to point out that Pogo the Clown’s make-up has sharp corners in comparison with the more rounded corners of traditional clown makeup).



I want to move on to a slightly different approach to clowns but one that is in keeping with our theme of the dark fantastic, and that is the 2013 global Internet sensation known as the Northampton Clown. The clown first appeared on Friday, 13 September. It was initially reported the two clowns knocked on a woman’s door asking if they could paint her windowsill despite having no painting equipment with them. These men were reported to the police but it is the only sighting to have involved two clowns.

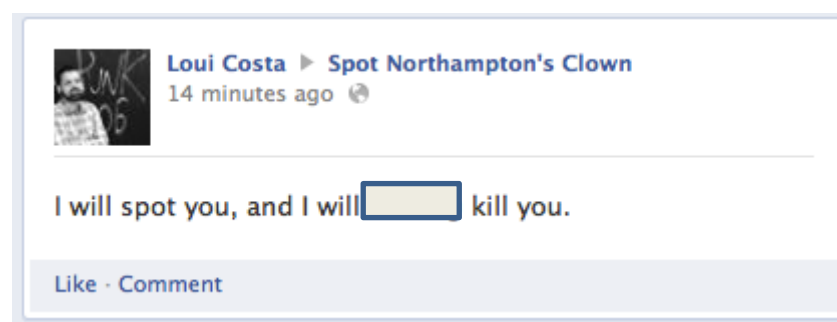
Otherwise, the clown has been spotted standing motionless and staring at disconcerted passers-by or clutching balloons and waving. He had his own Facebook page, “Spot Northampton’s Clown” and stories about the Northampton Clown went viral and were broadcast in the US, Australia, India, Canada and Japan. The clown’s page is reported to have had some 40,000 to 180,000 likes. Through

¹¹ Charles Nemo, "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye! : Four Visits to Serial Killer John Wayne Gacy." Originally at <http://user.aol.com/Karol666/page4/gacy.htm>, now on <http://murderpedia.org/male/G/g1/gacy-john-wayne.htm>.

this medium, the clown explained that he wasn't trying to terrorise people, he just wanted to be noticed, and also allayed any fears that he was carrying a weapon. That said, the cover photo was a picture of Pennywise from Stephen King's *It*, and the clown ended some of his messages with Pennywise's catchphrase: "Beep beep".

On the clown's website, *Northampton Clown Memoirs*, there are many photos of the clown with members of the public, all of them smiling.¹² In an "exclusive" with the *Northampton Chronicle* the clown explained: "I wasn't trying to frighten people ... I just wanted to amuse people... Most people enjoy being a bit freaked out and then they can laugh about it afterwards. It's like watching a horror movie, then people get scared they usually start laughing."¹³ The Northants Herald and Post ran an editor's letter observing that the clown "doesn't juggle. He doesn't twist balloons into animal shapes. He just stares."¹⁴ News Reporter Gillian Pensavalle from the Youtube news channel *Buzz 60* summarised the clown's actions: "So there's at least one clown roaming the streets, mostly at night, waving to people. What is so scary about that? Ok, everything! Everything is scary about that!"

However, bearing in mind that the Northampton clown was not only capitalising on a general apprehension concerning clowns but also, initially the superstitions surrounding Friday the thirteenth, not everyone appreciated his presence, and it transpired that the Northampton clown Facebook page had received some thousand death threats.



On his website, the clown expresses his distress at the death threats, noting "*It makes a down clown downer and a dark clown darker.*"¹⁵ He explains "I'm just a clown. All I want to do is make people laugh and lift a certain heaviness that lies in all of

¹² <http://northamptonclown.com/>

¹³ <http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/world-exclusive-northampton-clown-talks-to-the-chron-about-his-appearances-1-5504392>

¹⁴ <http://www.northampton-news-hp.co.uk/editors-letter-hate-northampton-clown/story-21675095-detail/story.html#LPFHWu4BIcmWeLq3.99>

¹⁵ <http://northamptonclown.com/northampton-clown-grand-theft-auto-5/>

our hearts”. All he’s doing he says is standing around harmlessly holding for colourful balloons that came from a dishevelled, damp basement. He then observes that there are others sending death threats on Facebook, and concludes “who is the evil being now?”¹⁶

It is ironic that the police were initially investigating the clown’s activities, and then had to protect him.

Just one month after the sightings started, the Northampton clown was unmasked by the Sunday People newspaper, and it transpired that he was – at the time – a media student at the University of Northampton named Alex Powell. He said he wanted to keep it as mysterious as possible and claimed he just wanted to entertain people, although he did also mention that he went to meet a little girl who only had six months to live. “Her mum messaged me saying she really wants to meet you before she dies. I took a picture with her and gave her a clown teddy and stuff.”¹⁷ The Northampton clown was last seen on New Year’s Day 2014, although the eagle eyed will see that he has a cameo in Grand Theft Auto V.¹⁸



¹⁶ <http://northhamptonclown.com/northampton-clown-grand-theft-auto-5/>

¹⁷ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/1061709/unmasked/>

¹⁸ <http://northhamptonclown.com/northampton-clown-grand-theft-auto-5/>

It is too much to say that the clown has had a number of copycats, but there have been reports of similar instances across the world, at the time of writing the most



recent headline was concerned that clowns were “politely terrorising” a town in South Carolina, although in this instance police were concerned about allegations of people dressed in clown outfits trying to lure children into the woods.¹⁹ There is NOTHING, mysterious or entertaining about that. And, of course, it reflects badly on those clowns who make a living on being family friendly entertainers and performers. Sir Toony van Dikes, who runs the website “Just for Clowns” pointed out asked “how the reporting on the story would go if instead of clowns, people were ... wearing hospital scrubs, lab coats and a stethoscope around their neck. Would the news report that doctors were hiding in the woods trying to lure kids with candy?”²⁰ Real clowning takes years of training,

they are acrobatic actors with comic timing, precision skills like juggling, balance, mime, voice work and abundant energy. And beyond that, they may be involved with clown-o-therapy, using drama to overcome stress and trauma.

The Northampton Clown follows a tradition of “phantom” encounters – ghosts, angels, even spring-heeled Jack. But then, Spring-heeled Jack did not have a Facebook page and access to social media, so, while the story of the clown in the “quaint English town of Northampton” reached California and Australia, those who felt threatened by the Northampton clown could respond in whatever way they wanted, including with threats of violence. But then, in Victorian times, a group of vigilantes responded to the “pranks” of Springheeled Jack – they just didn’t have the Internet to organise themselves.

As we have seen, there are some terrifying responses to clowns, and much of this is based on Hollywood capitalising on their unsettling countenance and actions, but can we just consider the evidence that has been presented here:

“It” is not a clown, not really. Pennywise the Dancing Clown is simply a form taken by It to lure children with the promise of balloons (think lo-tech Pokemon).

¹⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/04/clowns-politely-terrorising-south-carolina-town-will-be-arrested/>

²⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/us/creepy-clowns.html?_r=1.

We never see It's true form, but it takes the form of the phobias of the townsfolk of Derry on whom It preys, like the boggart in the Harry Potter series. It is a prehistoric entity that arrived from a dimension called the Deadlights on an asteroid, and which hibernates for 27 years before waking and engaging on a two-year feeding frenzy. The final manifestation is in the form of a pregnant spider at the end (another inherent phobia – spider's, that is, not necessarily pregnant spiders, although being pregnant means that there will soon be more spiders – lots more spiders). So he's not really a



clown. Not really. And in the case of John Wayne Gacy, it wasn't the clown costume (anonymity and access to children) or that he lured children, but instead it was his position of authority as a contractor and an employer that he used to lure young men. And Mr Punch is a representation of the Lord of Misrule, appointed to preside over the carnivalesque Feast of Fools and saturnalia. The clown in *Poltegeist* is actually a doll – the etymology of this word is Idol! And this IS something that Freud spends some considerable considering, most particularly in his discussion of Hoffman's "The Sandman". Here', the doll – Olympia – is lifeless, but is given human attributes. Freud's principal concern, then, is whether an apparently (in)animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate (Uncanny 226)

Oh, and the word Coulrophobia has only been in use since the 1980s, in fact since King's novel was published. The term is not listed in the World Health Organisation's ICD-10 nor in the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5 categorisation of disorders. Furthermore, coulrophobia, doesn't actually mean a fear of clowns: the *Online Etymology Dictionary* observes that the word has "some supposed sense of "stilt-walker"", and while the author observes that the "phenomenon is real enough ... The whole creation looks suspiciously like the sort of thing idle pseudo-intellectuals invent on the Internet and which every smarty-pants takes up thereafter".²¹

So actually, all those clowns that have scared you – they're not actually clowns!

²¹ <http://www.etymonline.com/?term=coulrophobia>



Pennywise 2017

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