

Clowning Around: Monstrous Politics and the "Creepy Clown" Phenomenon of 2016

Clowns have a complicated history in the United States; simultaneously the facilitators of laughter and the harbingers of fear. Though Bozo the Clown (a children's TV show character) and Pogo the Clown (the alter ego of a serial killer-rapist) seem disparate, they also share particular similarities that provoke subconscious mechanisms designed to warn the individual about possible danger. Clowns wear disguises and masks, they don't follow the normal rules of acceptable behavior, and they are out of place in society. Even within the space of a circus, a place of fantastical feats and wonders, the clown doesn't follow the rules of safety and behavior. It is the unpredictable catalyst that provokes, startles, and confuses.

These traits may explain why in the autumn of 2016, a presidential election year, individuals across the United States dressed like clowns and terrorized communities. Some pranks were harmless. The first incident began with a clown in Green Bay, WI who merely stood in public places holding four black balloons. Dubbed "Gags", the first sighting was recorded on August 1st at 2 a.m. but no action was taken by local authorities because "This person is not breaking the law...He can walk in a clown costume anywhere he wants" (May, "Creepy clown"). However, more nefarious copycats soon began to appear and the level of potential violence escalated. The next reports came from South Carolina, where a woman reported a clown staring at her in a local laundry mat (May, "Serious"). In Georgia, La Grange police posted a warning on their Facebook after reports came in about a clown attempting to lure children into the woods (LaGrange Police, "Tonight").

Then clowns became armed with more than balloons. Police Chief Kenneth Hampton sighted a masked clown with a blade in Tchula, MI (Gator, "Police chief"). After it fled, Chief

Hampton issued the warning: “if I roll up on you and you wave that damn sword at me. IT’S GAME OVER SON!!!” (Tchula Police Department, “To whom”). Some clown attacks were violent and life threatening. A woman was grabbed by her throat from behind by a clown making threats against a local school in Reading, OH. The police were unable to find any suspects and schools in the area were closed out of fear (Milam, “Clown threats”).

It’s interesting that these perpetrators became clowns instead of merely donning ski masks or dressing in random costumes. The clown face is an exaggeration of the sensory organs, and follows the ubiquitous cultural tradition of supernatural or demonic costumes that enlarge the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Dr. John Emigh of Brown University argues we are neurologically constructed to pay most attention to these facial features. The somatosensory cortex of the human brain associated with observing motion is especially sensitive to these parts, and coordinates with other areas of the brain associated with memories and emotional cues (Emigh 128-131). Therefore, when constructing costumes, it’s understandable that in order to elicit stronger emotions these features would be exaggerated. According to this theory then, a demon mask with a gaping mouth and bulging eyes would be more terrifying than one with smaller features. However, this explanation only partially explains why agitators chose to terrorize communities dressed as clowns. They could have dressed as witches with long noses or aliens with large eyes.

What the clown possesses is the power of parody; to make things ridiculous and render situations utterly surreal. In the European tradition, the court jester managed the realm of the absurd. Not only were they free to break the rules of court in order to entertain, they were also given the power to criticize as well. The jester is a lost position in modern American society, and clowns represent the last vestiges of the license to criticize and break taboos through outrageous

behavior (Otto 45). Clowns can take an ordinary object and use it out of context; such as a loaf of bread used as a hammer. Similarly, they assault observers with their antics by re-appropriating space to their own purposes and either breaking or twisting accepted norms. Clowns traverse the stage barrier and frequently engage the audience, incorporating them into the scene whether the viewer is willing or not. Furthermore, there is no predictability for clown behavior and the audience's expectations are constantly broken. Perhaps you were expecting a handshake and instead received an electrical shock. Clowns therefore serve the purpose of a "broken mirror" which reflects a grotesque image back on its audience; reversing reality and projecting a topsy-turvy world that is put into question (Otto 99). A classic entrée (a 10-15 minute routine) involves one clown accidentally breaking the mirror of another clown, and then pretending to be the mirror image to forestall any consequences. The unaware clown is confused and embarrassed about his unseemly new appearance, while the guilty clown tries to keep up the farce by mimicking his cohort as best as he can. Inevitably, all is revealed and the guilty clown is chased out of the ring (Little 118). Like the unknowing clown whose mirror was broken, the audience is treated to bizarre visuals (such as outrageous clothing), inappropriate behavior, (such as pushing an old man down the stairs), and a fragmented reality where anything can happen and reason is rendered ineffective.

Significantly, these "creepy clown" attacks occurred in the months prior to the 2016 American presidential election and stopped afterwards; seeming to imply a chaotic deterioration of social order correlating with the political candidates and their campaigns. Political discourse during this period was rife with clown analogies. Trump's campaign was referred to as a "runaway clown car", his presidential ticket a "gag", and his often terrifying behavior as "shenanigans" (Rich, "The Importance"). Hillary Clinton was berated over social media for her

“creepy clown smile” and a google search will yield altered photos of her with clown makeup (“Hillary Clinton”). Additionally, her political comportment was viewed as that of a “yarn-spinning ringmaster”; a circus showman whose peddling mask hides her true intentions (Cavna, “Donald Trump”). The whole presidential race acquired the characteristic of a circus — a comical and unreal space that defies definition and explanation. For example, cartoonist Gary Varvel elided the “creepy clowns” and the presidential candidates in a cartoon that depicts an old woman dialing 911 because dangerous creepy clowns are outside her front door; Trump and Clinton are drawn standing outside her house (Varvel “Cartoonist”). Other media sources have correlated the candidates with the “creepy clown” phenomenon such as the British political magazine *The New Statesman* which wrote “The only clown we should be scared of is Donald Trump” (Margolis, “The only”). The *Chicago Tribune* characterized the campaign as an “Evil Queen vs. Evil Clown” (Kass, “Presidential”). Lizzie Widdicombe, a journalist for *The New Yorker*, wrote: “it makes sense that 2016, the year that an orange-hued man ran for office, is when clowns stopped being funny” (“The Creepy”).

When the circumstance escalated beyond a society’s ability to process, in which politicians became clowns and the political arena a circus, the “creepy clowns” appeared as an expression of sociological frustration. A kind of meta-clown, the “creepy clowns” reflected a terrifying political situation which should be serious because the stakes are high (for candidates, constituents, the country itself, and its allies) but is treated comically. Since absurdity was already in use by the politicians, the “creepy clowns” used terror as a means to express their socio-political frustration. They became the “broken mirror” for a political system that was already distorted, and elucidated the monstrosity of a society with comical politics that can’t afford to “have a laugh”. Specifically, as politics became an intolerable joke young males

expressed their frustration with an unpredictable system in which they were previously confident of their power. As sociologist William Gamson states in his book on social protest *Pluralism and the Strategy of Social Protest*, hostility and violence used by challenging social groups “grows from an impatience born of confidence and rising efficacy” (81). Such impatience manifested as a male violence reasserting its perceived entitlement to social power in a politically diverse environment. Additionally, though attacks occurred in various communities across the United States, some were particularly aimed at African-American communities.

Clowns, though always characterized as tricksters, did not become sinister until the twentieth century after the trend of the sad and degenerating clown began in the mid nineteenth-century. Professor Andrew Stott at the University of Buffalo SUNY traces postmodern coulrophobia (the fear of clowns) to the decline of Britain’s most famous Georgian pantomime Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837) from whom the modern clown derives their dress style. The clown became an image of personal tragedy and degeneracy “making them seem all the more pathetic, beseeching, and sad” following Grimaldi’s popularity and misfortune (Stott 7). An early episode of Grimaldi’s success concomitant with tragedy occurred when he was six. His father severely beat him before a performance and failed to notice his son’s smeared clown make-up until he heard the audience laugh upon seeing a small, grotesquely sad child appear on stage. The father then proceeded to beat his son to the applause of the audience. Another example of Grimaldi’s penchant for tragedy is when a heavy platform with ten men fell on top of him the moment he proposed to his first wife. (Stott 17-18). Grimaldi, notorious for his depression is said to have remarked, “I am grim all day, but I make you laugh at night” (Stott 9).

During the British theater reforms in the nineteenth-century, pantomimes (who occupied lower positions of the performance hierarchy) were increasingly associated with vagrancy and

moral degeneracy. Sometimes seen drinking outside theaters between shows and viewed as proprietors of low slap-stick entertainment, they represented the corruption of popular culture and became vulgar objects of social obscenity. Thus, the “sad clown” trope of performers imbued with tragedy who could evoke laughter from the audience evolved into the “threatening clown” trope as clowns became socially dangerous — a menace that was exacerbated through fiction in the latter half of the twentieth-century that popularized the “evil clown” recognizable in figures like Pennywise, the child-eating clown from Stephen King’s novel *It* (1986). In the autumn months, haunted houses across the United States take advantage of this fear; such as in the case of Georgetown Morgue Haunted House in Seattle, WA where one patron stated: “I lost my shit at the clowns...I hate clowns” (P., “Georgetown”). Rather than instigate laughter, clowns have become proprietors of horror. Similar to the clowns of the Lakota tribe that satirize to produce humility and undermine individual arrogance, the modern “evil clown” produces terror and sabotages the assumed normality of American society (Jackson 100). Occupying the liminal and disorienting space of absurdity, they have the power to be comical or to frighten. Sometimes they use this power to remind us that some things shouldn’t be laughed at. The clown, a type of fool, often links absurdity with wisdom (Hynes 206). Additionally, these pranksters are often used as “tension-releasing valves” in performances to ease the anxiety of the audience (Christen ix). However, the manner of wisdom offered by the “creepy clowns” was not done in jest or to alleviate tension through comic relief. Rather, they sought to agitate an already absurd social-political situation through terror. By making public spaces chaotic, unsafe, and horrific, they drew attention to the fact that American politicians and politics had already done so.

Analyzing the trickster figure, Carl Jung notes that the s(he) often falls victim to her or his own antics (136). Any society must repress the most extreme of its parts in order to function

and American society, though more heterogeneous than most, is no exception. Schools banned clown Halloween costumes and some stores stopped selling them. Chicago schools banned clown costumes for Halloween celebrations and other school districts around the country followed suit (Healy, “Clown costumes”). The retail store Target pulled its masks from the shelves and Crypt Keepers Halloween Emporium removed its less expensive clown costumes (Wang, “Target”). Crypt Keepers owner stated “I wouldn’t let my kids go out as a clown this year” implying that even if they innocently donned the garb, there was a chance of assault from strangers (Thibodeau, “Clown”). Law enforcement agencies became more vigilant and communities literally began fighting back. Parents in Florida armed themselves and one stated “I’m terrified of clowns already and if one messes with me or my kids it’ll be to the hospital or morgue they go” (Galvin, “Florida Parents”). After the first phase of “creepy clown” videos were uploaded to various social media, a second phase occurred. These “Killer Clown Beat Down” videos depicted intended victims violently assaulting the prank clowns in response. Though such incidents are difficult to verify because of the “hit and run” nature of the incidents, the urge to retaliate against the “creepy clowns” was nonetheless significant. Trenton Harris uploaded a video to YouTube featuring a group of “creepy clowns” ambushing a group of young men in a parking garage; only to have the intended victims assault the clowns until the pranksters were on the ground shielding their heads from kicks and punches (“KILLER”). There is even a video featuring a "creepy clown" receiving a gunshot to the face while trying to ambush a fisherman (HandleBandle, “Psycho”).

Another form of retaliation occurred via professional clowns who spoke out against “lipstick clowns” (non-professionals who don clown garb) that were agitating anti-clown sentiments (Rose, “Creepy sightings?”). The clown community in Tucson, Arizona organized a

“Clown Lives Matter” march and invited participants to dress in full makeup as a “peaceful way to show clowns are not psycho killers” (“Performers organize”). Randy Christensen, president of the World Clown Association, criticized the perpetrators who were “trying to use a good, clean, wholesome art form and then distort[ing] it” (Christensen, “WCA”). Furthermore, he stated:

that anyone who does that is not a clown. If somebody dresses like a doctor, and is in a doctor’s smock, and is wearing a stethoscope, and is in a haunted house, and comes at you with a chainsaw, he is not really a doctor. It’s a person impersonating a doctor for this horror venue (Christensen, “WCA”).

The term "creepy clown", a.k.a. “lipstick clown”, is therefore somewhat of a misnomer. Christensen’s argument about the distinction between real, professional clowns and someone who dresses in face paint is valid. However, such a distinction belies the power of parody the act of clowning can have despite a lack of professional accreditation. For example, though dressed as clowns the American rap duo Insane Clown Posse wouldn’t readily be categorized as such because they seem to lack the qualities of clowning: trickery and comedy. Many of their videos and performances involve acts of violence while dressed as clowns with lyrics such as “I come with a hat full of tricks, trunk full of Faygo, car full of fat chicks, hahaha, fuck you, wicked clowns, we like to say what we’re up to” (Insane Clown Posse, “Hokus Pokus”). However, though overlooked by the music industry (ICP is categorized as an “indie” group without air time), they have earned two platinum and five gold albums which suggests a large fan base to whom rap-clowning is appealing. The Detroit rappers grew up in abusive and impoverished

situations which precipitated the creation of the “Dark Carnival”, a world in which through musical acts of revenge and violence wrong doers could be punished. Speaking of this, Violent J states:

In our music, we express a lot of anger. A lot of the anger we express is still very real. It’s just easier to say it on your record, and it’s amplified on our records. If we talk about killing a pedophile, that comes from somewhere. That’s real anger. We wish we could kill a pedophile, so we do it on the albums (Sunderland, “Tears”).

Thousands of fans, called “Juggalos”, find validation and catharsis in ICP’s music. What makes the group so popular is the obscenely macabre way they unify outcasts who are:

too fat, too ugly, and too poor to even hang with the punks or the comic-book nerds. Juggalo culture [gives] them an identity, while also transforming the stigmas of their scrub-life into something to be proud of (Sunderland, “Tears”).

The outcasts the other outcasts didn’t even want find power via the clowning antics of ICP and the violent mockery offered in their music. Thus, herein lies the problem with Randy Christensen’s statement. That even though “clown” can be a profession, the qualities of a clown are not limited to the professionals in the same way medicine is to a doctor. The power of the clown to disarray is a trait that follows the makeup, garb, and persona; not necessarily the person. It is the act of clowning that disorders and threatens by ridiculing. In a modern American

context, this power of parody possessed by the clown has become elided with terror, and has become a source of power individuals use to reassert their self-worth.

This power derives from the clown's liminal status as monstrous human who can embarrass and provoke discomfort. These not-quite-people mock and reverse normal order, often using deception and illusion to trick the audience (Christen xiii). They are paradoxical and unsettling, and may use terror or force to create disorder; such as in the case of the West African clown *Hauka* that intimidates audience members through physical violence with the aim of mocking authority (Christen 71). In a similar manner, the "creepy clowns" menaced communities to subvert the complacency of American society; a society in which "abnormality" has become normal through diversity and greater tolerance for heterogeneity. Trump's campaign slogan of "Make America Great Again!" alludes to a nostalgic past that, while still chaotic with clashes between various groups, was secure in the standard of Anglo-Christian patriarchy ("Make America Great Again!"). The implication is that counter-culture groups who were not in power during this unspecified "great" era (such as minorities and women), i.e. the "abnormal", were not the standard. Consequently, their gain in political power is negatively stigmatized because the stability of the founding group is threatened. Therefore, a retrogression back to this "great time" would signal a loss of influence for those newly empowered groups. The "creepy clowns" as an expression of political frustration reflect the tension between such politic groups.

One newly empowered political group is women, and it's significant that all the "creepy clowns" dressed as males; regardless of their gender. Thus, the "creepy clowns" harassed communities in keeping with a long tradition of associating maleness with terror. Most monsters in general have traits associated with an exaggerated caricature of masculinity: large size, aggressiveness, and potentially violent sexuality. From Grendel to Frankenstein's creature,

maleness is elided with monstrosity. The clown is no different. Stephen King's Pennywise had a male body and he was voiced by the male actor Tim Curry. The film *Clown* (2015) depicted a father who donned a clown costume only to discover it was the skin of a clown-demon, and he subsequently began to eat children. The short film *The Smiling Man* (2015) is explicit in its title about the maleness of the evil clown whose red makeup is blood. A young girl is intrigued by the balloons and laughter of this strange character who appears in her home; until she discovers the body of her dead mother. Even animation doesn't escape this trend. The evil clown in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) has a male voice and physique along with razor sharp teeth; belying the seemingly comical way he rides his unicycle and toots his old fashion brass horn. Harley Quinn, an antagonist to Batman in the DC comic universe, is a notable exception to this trend. However, she is portrayed less as clown and more as a mad woman in an abusive relationship with the Joker (Batman's nemesis — a violent and psychotic supervillain dressed as a clown), often being the butt of his jokes. Thus, the terror provoked by the "creepy clowns" elides with a threatening and violent masculinity that has a particular history in the United States. The sociologist Michael Kimmel notes that in the United States:

Men constitute 99 percent of all persons arrested for rape; 88 percent of those arrested for murder; 92 percent of those arrested for robbery; 87 percent for aggravated assault; 85 percent of other assaults; 83 percent of all family violence; 82 percent of disorderly conduct. Men are overwhelmingly more violent than women (265).

From post-Civil War southern boys knocking wood chips off each other's shoulders to precipitate a fight to modern urbanites daring each other to "disrespect", American masculinity "is still often equated with the capacity for violence" and male socialization "is a socialization to the legitimacy of violence" (276-277). It is no wonder then that monstrous violence demonstrated by the "creepy clowns" was embodied as male. Therefore, one way to view the "creepy clown" threat is as a *masculine* threat. The "creepy clowns" sought to reassert the lost esteem of their maleness in a political climate that threatened it; via the first viable female presidential candidate with a "creepy clown smile" who represented the gains of women as a political group. The dynamics of esteem and its loss are discussed by sociologist Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*:

Those members of the community who fall short of somewhat indefinite, normal degree of prowess or of property suffer in the esteem of their fellow-men; and consequently they also suffer in their own esteem, since the usual basis of self-respect is the respect accorded by one's neighbors (Ch. 2).

When faced with the loss of their political prestige and self-esteem, young males expressed their frustration. As a group, "young American men are the most violent group of people in the industrialized world" (Kimmel 269). However, in an unstable environment where un-politically correct statements and behavior are less tolerated than before, and in which the principle male candidate (Trump) is already viewed as potential threatening to women (through misogynist statements and policies aimed at reducing women's healthcare), the "creepy clowns" opted to

express their masculinity and regain lost esteem by terrorizing others safely and anonymously behind the clown's masked power of parody.

Another newly empowered group alluded to in the "creepy clown" videos, and whose position has become precarious in the recent political environment, is African-Americans. A sub-genre of "clown beat down" videos are dubbed "Hood" in which the prank gone wrong takes place within an African-American community or features African-Americans assaulting a clown. One such video features a clown approaching a young African-American male only to have the intended victim pull out a gun and say "Here, I got something for you. Don't run bitch" (HoodClips, "Clown Prank"). The intended victim then hits the clown over the head with the gun and points it at the prankster threatening to shoot. The racial context of these videos is stark. A white clown, a male in a white face mask or using white face paint, threatens urban African-Americans in a lower class setting only to have the victims rally and physically assault the joker. Dubbed "The Racist Clown" by independent news outlets such as *Salon* and *Raw Story*, Donald Trump likewise had his intended victims fight back. The New Jersey Casino Control Commission fined the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino \$200,000 for discriminating against African-American card dealers, and the Justice Department sued Trump Management Corporation twice for refusing to rent to that same minority group (O'Connor, "Here"). Portrayed on a micro level, the interactions between the white clown and the intended minority victim in the "hood" videos mirror the confrontation of those groups at the macro level between Trump ("the racist clown") and African-American opponents.

After the initial and "beat down" phases, the last phase of the "creepy clown" videos depicted, ironically, comedy. These videos satirized the threat of the "creepy clowns" and the public's reaction. For example, "Clown Attack Self-Defen[s]e Course" recommends carrying

around long balloons so that if you're chased by a clown you can drop them, thereby forcing the clown to stop, blown up the balloon, and make animal shapes while you flee to safety (Chris, "CLOWN ATTACK"). Lacking the usual element of humor attributed to clowns, and amidst a serious political struggle turned absurd, social media users added their own comical quality to the situation. *YouTube* users "erfanau" went further with their mischief and revealed the ridiculous role the media played in perpetuating the situation; stating:

...we know the media will publish any bullshit. The news is full of rubbish that really isn't news. The news should be kept for news, entertainment like this should be kept for entertainment. What Kim Kardashian had for breakfast isn't news ("HOW").

The users then filmed a fake clown beating and sent it to various news outlets, only one of which (ABC media) determined the video to be fake. The humiliation of the traditional media implicates the lack of seriousness and responsibility taken in investigative journalism. Certainly, the actors (politicians and "creepy clowns") are responsible for the mischief they make, but so is the media that reports those antics and portrays them in a particular manner to viewers across the country. Campaign reports, interviews, table talks, debates, and press conferences amalgamate into a hideous monster dubbed "media circus" that disseminates misinformation or perpetuates focus on irrelevant topics. Sometimes the "facts" are inconsequential such as when CBS News reported on Donald Trump's new hairstyle (Earl, "Donald"). Other times the "facts" can actually be misinforming, ruining, or just wrong. Hillary Clinton was the subject of a conspiracy theory in which a pizza shop frequented by democrats ran a pedophilic sex-ring. Though traditional

media was quick to spot the misinformation, they nonetheless contributed to its spread as often happens when the media continually nourishes a story. *NBC Washington* reported the restaurant owner was receiving death threats as the result of the conspiracy theory in November (“DC Pizzeria”). On December 4th, a gunman entered the pizzeria trying to save supposedly imprisoned children being exploited. Even after his arrest and having seen evidence to the contrary, the attacker refused to accept that the “Pizzagate” conspiracy was false and “rejected the term ‘fake news’ believing that it diminishes stories shared outside the mainstream media” (“Pizzagate”).

One of the top issues during the 2016 presidential campaign was the sheer amount of misinformation, and how readily it was disseminated. According to *PolitiFact*, Trump has the worst record of accuracy as a politician with 70% of his statements ranging from mostly inaccurate to false (Holan, “2016 Lie”). Likewise, Clinton denied sending classified information through her personal email — a statement that was false. Though politics is no stranger to information manipulation, the 2016 presidential campaign took such manipulation to the extreme. This political environment saturated with falsehoods, lies, and the manipulation of facts gave “fake news” (false information constructed to appear as legitimate news with the intention of proliferating through social media) the optimal conditions to flourish. Social media played a significant role in spreading “fake news”, and the “creepy clowns” mirrored this process. False tips, anonymous calls, and fabricated encounters were called into police stations all across the United States. For example, Spring ISD added extra security to its high school after a “creepy clown” Facebook page threatened violence; a threat that turned out to be a hoax (“Houston”). Alexandra Conley of Cincinnati phoned in a false clown attack because she didn’t want to lose her job for running late (Knight, “Reading”). Two people were arrested in Georgia for a false

report about a clown trying to lure children into the woods (May, “Police”). Like the clown who fabricates an alternate reality and “*is held accountable for nothing*”, misinformation and “fake news” helped create an alternate political reality in which facts were either difficult to verify or disregarded entirely with impunity (Otto 43, emphasis original). Factual reality became inured with a socio-political reality comprised of deception; a surreal space of deceit and obfuscation. Such a space could potentially have disastrous consequences for a country leading the world as a military, economic, and political power.

The circus is a phantasmagoria set apart from the mundane reality that allows a society to function. Inside the tent walls, skepticism is put aside to allow illusion and fantasy to construct a topsy-turvy world in which anything can happen. To facilitate this process, the clown acts as an agent of inversion; breaking down barriers, shattering assumptions, and ignoring the rules. The autumn of 2016 saw the veil between these two spaces disappear and "creepy clowns" walked the streets inciting terror as the presidential election approached. It became increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction both in regard to politics and the danger of "creepy clowns". These pranksters somberly illuminated the absurdity of a situation in which American society has become a circus and politicians the clowns. A reality that has lost its comical quality when serious issues such as healthcare, the federal budget, and immigration are decided by those same clowns. In fact, such a reality can be quite terrifying.

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