

**Deadly Funny: The Subversion of Clowning in the  
Killer Clown Genre**

by

**Liezel Spratley**



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Department of Drama

Faculty of Arts

Supervisor: Professor Edwin Hees

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## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

This dissertation investigates the potential for horror in the comic repertoires and performance styles of clowns, in an attempt to address the popular questions of why clowns inspire fear as well as laughter, and what makes them effective monsters in the horror genre. Notwithstanding short articles which offer a general and broad account, the question of why circus clowns are often viewed as frightening figures remains largely unexplored. For this reason I intend to undertake an in-depth exploration of the wide-ranging history of clowning – which includes anthropology, theatre, film, and literature.

This study focuses on finding the primary causes of clowns' horrific potential, rather than being satisfied with secondary causes such as the effect of their depictions in horror narratives on audiences<sup>1</sup>, or instances of practising clowns turning to crime, or simply accepting the view that they play tricks on their audiences, or that their make-up acts as a mask and therefore makes their faces and motives 'unreadable'. Although these explanations are legitimate, they do not adequately explain why certain clown types prove to be such effective monsters in horror narratives.

Clowns typically, albeit to varying degrees, flout taboos on deformity, scatology, violence and insanity, and carry with them the latent stigma attached to these phenomena, which are also recognised as the common themes of the horror genre. The focus of this study is not on clowns as figures of comic relief in horror, but as legitimate monsters in their own right, and an attempt is made to discover how audiences' anticipation of comic relief and the 'laws' of comedy are used deceptively in the construction of clowns as figures of fear.

During my investigation of specific killer clown films, graphic novels and prose novels, and by drawing on works such as Noël Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror* (1990), Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais' World* (1984), and various other studies of the genres of horror and

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<sup>1</sup> 'Audience' in the context of this study includes the film viewer or literature reader, and the clowns' victim(s) in the fictional narratives.

comedy, as well as anthropological studies of clowns, I argue that, when clowns are shifted from comedy to horror, the comical features and actions that flout the taboos on deformity, scatology, violence and insanity are reinstated as elements of horror and fear. I propose that clowns have the potential to be appropriated as monsters in the horror genre because they exhibit a paradoxical duality of fear and humour, and they have the ability to transgress and violate comedy elements to horrific effect.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Clowns appear in various manifestations and play a variety of roles in most cultures. In Europe, and the Americas, they feature prominently during childhood because of children's introduction to clowns at circuses, carnivals and parties. A British pantomime actor, known only as Whimsical Walker (1922:225), who started his clowning career on the pantomime stage in 1891, presents the nature of the clown's relationship to children as follows:

Pantomimes were originally intended almost solely for the entertaining of the younger generation, and the first part was always described as the "opening". It was, and still is, the harlequinade that follows which the youngsters looked forward to with delighted longing; their merry laughter and shrill cries of excited joy, as the fun proceeded, in surprise after surprise, were a pleasure to the older members of the audience, who felt that they were duly rewarded for having brought the children to revel in the frolics of "Joey," their bosom favourite and cherished idol.

Walker's description illustrates the generally accepted view, still held today, of the relationship between clowns and their audiences. In January 2008, Sheffield University cast a different light on the perception of clowns after publishing a study in the *Nursing Standard Magazine* on 250 children's responses to clown themes in hospital wards. During this study, the researcher Dr Penny Curtis found that "clowns are universally disliked by children" and that the majority of these children "found them quite frightening and unknowable" (Anon 2008a). Despite the generally accepted view that children enjoy the antics of clowns, this study showed that not all experiences with clowns are perceived to be pleasant ones. What is more is that a dislike or fear of clowns can carry over into adulthood and this relationship finds expression in the portrayal of clowns as monsters or criminals in popular culture.

Although I have found a small number of internet articles that give a brief overview on the topic, only a limited number of in-depth studies have thus far been made of the fear of clowns. For example, Joseph Durwin published a short essay entitled *Coulrophobia and the Trickster* (ca. 2004), that examines the fear of clowns and the exploitation of this fear in ‘killer clown’ films. His essay includes a discussion of the implication of clowns in paedophilia and the mass hysteria surrounding child sex abuse, and touches on themes of psychopathy, crime, demonology and tribal rituals. These dark themes stand in stark opposition to the image of the clown as comic entertainer, especially to younger audiences.

Durwin’s investigations reveal that the word ‘clown’ does not simply evoke traditional images of comic antics, balloons, bright costumes and exaggerated, painted faces in the circus ring or at carnivals: it also inspires distrust, fear and revulsion. The popularity and scope of the fear of clowns can be seen on *Yahoo! Answers* where there are numerous questions relating to the perceived terrifying and evil nature of clowns.<sup>2</sup> The answers range from a dislike of clowns to a fully-fledged phobia of clowns recognised as *coulrophobia*.<sup>3</sup>

Coulrophobia is “a recent coining in response to a surprisingly large amount of interest in the condition, particularly on websites...specifically devoted to the issue” (Maxwell 2002:1). Rodney Blackwell’s *www.ihateclowns.com* stands out as the most elaborate website dedicated to the fear and dislike of clowns. As well as offering merchandise, trivia and the opportunity to share your clown-related experiences, the site also features interactive games which allow visitors to the site to virtually slap or punch a clown (Blackwell 2005).

As the cause of their fear, coulrophobia sufferers principally cite advertising mascot Ronald McDonald, the clown associated with the fast food chain McDonald’s; the

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<sup>2</sup> *Yahoo! Answers* is a global interactive website on which members are able to ask and answer questions on various topics.

<sup>3</sup> The phobia of clowns is also called *harlequinophobia* and *clownophobia*



stereotype of the 'paedophile party-clown'; serial killer John Wayne Gacy; and the evil and/or monstrous clowns in horror films.

In response to the publication of Sheffield University's study, Finlo Rohrer (2008) attempted to address the factors involved in how these "smiley circus entertainers" became "a horror staple" in an online article submitted in the *BBC News Magazine*. Rohrer argues that "popular culture is to blame" for perpetuating a fear of clowns.

This fear was officially recognised as a phobia soon after the release of the director Tommy Lee Wallace's 1990 television film adaptation of Stephen King's 1986 novel *IT*, which features a murderous shape-shifting monster who targets children in Derry and feeds on their fear. The monster, known only as It, appears mainly as "Pennywise the Dancing Clown" (King 1986: 21). In a *Yahoo! Answers* poll entitled *Who believes that clowns are evil and scary, and why do you find them so?* (2007a), a great majority of the respondents cited the film adaptation of *IT* as the reason for their fear of clowns. Pennywise, played by Tim Curry in the film, was embedded in the minds of children who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s as one of the most effective horror monsters and perhaps the most iconic killer clown to this date, and played a major role in the rise and consolidation of coulrophobia in popular culture.

Another key factor in establishing coulrophobia was the notorious case of John Wayne Gacy, an American serial killer who spent 14 years on death row (1980-1994) after being convicted of murdering 33 young men in Chicago between 1972 and 1978. Although Gacy was a building contractor by trade, he performed as Pogo the clown at local charity events. Gacy never committed the crimes dressed as a clown but the media exploited his clown persona for its marketing value and therefore fuelled Gacy's notoriety as the Killer Clown. This is illustrated by the title of Terry Sullivan and Peter Maiken's book, *Killer Clown: The John Wayne Gacy Murders* (1983), which details the events leading up to Gacy's arrest, and Clive Saunders's slasher film *Gacy* (2003) which features the lead actor, Mark Holton, in clown make-up on the cover of the DVD.

These events were essential in introducing the clown as a ‘bogyman’ in society and inspiring the development of what Rohrer (2008) termed “a slew of schlocky movies over the past 20 years, known as the killer clown or evil clown genre”. The killer clown genre – a wide-ranging, multi-media genre which was established after the publication of *IT* – includes not only films, but also novels, comics and graphic novels and theatre performances.

However, studies on the history of clowning reveal that the threatening potential of clowns is not a recent development in the history of clowning. Circus and stage clowns had long recognized the fearful aspect of their image. Contemporary British horror writer Ramsey Campbell held that “the recurring theme in popular culture of the scary clown goes back at least as far as silent movie star Lon Chaney Sr” (Rohrer 2008).

Acknowledging the darker side of clowning, Chaney Sr, an American actor who started his career on the vaudeville stage in 1902, once famously asked: “[a] clown is funny in the circus ring, but what would be the normal reaction to opening a door at midnight and finding the same clown standing there in the moonlight?” (Barker 1997a:88). Whimsical Walker (1922:202), who also recognised clowns’ potential to elicit fear, described an incident in his autobiography where, during a pantomime at Drury Lane, the appearance of his clown character inspired fear in one of the audience members:

It occurred to me to present a cracker to the little Princess Mary, who was in one of the boxes with other members of the royal family. Getting a ladder, I planted it against the box and mounted it, cracker in hand. My clown’s white and red face in a queer headdress suddenly popping up over the edge rather alarmed the small lady, I’m afraid. The clown is all very well at the distance, but near to must seem an awful figure, especially to a child’s imaginative mind. I presented the cracker. I could see she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

There is widespread historical evidence of the combination of fear and humour relating to the clown figures, such as ritual clowns in tribal and historical communities, reaching as far back as the Saturnalian festivals. Although humour is an integral part of their

performances, it does not mean that all ritual clowns are regarded as their community's resident 'merrymakers'.

There are ritual clowns who deliberately use elements of comedy and terror to retain their position as asocial and liminal figures, and who do not function as integrated members of their communities. While acknowledging the entertainment aspect of their performances, the anthropologist Laura Makarius insists that even if some clown types engage in humorous acts, it is only one part of their ritual function, and they retain their status as powerful and frightening figures. There is, for example, an ambiguous clown clan amongst the Zuni tribe in New Mexico called the Koyemshi, who

wear horrible studded masks and black kilts and scarves. They may ridicule people and indulge in all kinds of jokes, including the most obscene. They are public fun-makers. And yet they constitute the most important and the most constant element in the Shalako ceremony. On the last day of the ceremony, rather than fool about, they act like priests fulfilling their sacred duties. (Makarius 1970:51-52)

According to Makarius (1970:56), their power of manipulation and magic is "acquired by virtue of a violation of taboo, and it manifests itself in the traditional form it assumes: ability to heal the sick, to grant success in hunting and in war, luck in gambling and in love, happiness and prosperity". However, Makarius (1970:56) makes it clear that this magical ability "has an ambivalent character" by explaining that if the clowns of the Canadian Assineboine tribe approach too close

the smiles of the women and children quickly change to expressions of surprise, tempered with fear...The Assineboine clowns provoke the laughter of their audience; but also frighten them....This intermingling of hilarity and fear is, ethnologically speaking, a stereotype sufficient to betray the presence of a clown.

Although circus and pantomime clowns retain this duality, they lack the social and ritual functions ascribed to their tribal counterparts. They are traditionally associated with the

comedy genre and are therefore expected simply to evoke laughter and amusement from audiences.

Concurring with Chaney and Walker's observation that the once comic features and behaviour are reinterpreted as elements of horror and fear when a clown steps out of his or her designated milieu and no longer operates within the framework of comedy, I propose to show how the killer clown genre utilises and subverts the anticipation of comedy while reinstating clowns' ability to inspire fear in their audiences.

It is important to note that there are other factors that contribute to the perpetuation of coulrophobia, but because of the extensive and complex history of clowns, and the far-reaching impact of clowning on various cultures, this study does not account for their historical links with demonology, or clowns' position as community scapegoat in the role of paedophile.<sup>4</sup> This study also excludes those horror narratives that feed on the popularity of the killer clown image simply by using the clown mask and costume as a means for the killer to conceal his or her identity. Examples of where the killer wears a rubber clown mask include Martyn Burke's film *Clown Murders* (1976) and Bradley Sykes's *Camp Blood Trilogy* (2004) films.<sup>5</sup> Although these films are promoted as 'killer clown' films, there is no allusion to clowning beyond the choice of mask which could easily be substituted by a Santa Claus or President Nixon mask without significantly altering the plot or characterization.

Instead, the focus will be on how killer clowns retain the physical attributes and actions that are interpreted as comical features within the parameters of physical comedy, without serving as figures of comic relief in horror. This allows me to investigate the reinterpretation of the comedy attributes and behavioural habits of clowns, to discover

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<sup>4</sup> Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker (1995:33) argue that the identification of a community's "scapegoat is explainable via the anthropological concept of *demonology*: the narrative, specific to every culture, that identifies the ultimate evil threatening the group". William Willeford (1980:123) draws a parallel between clowns and the medieval Vice and Devil in *The Fool and His Scepter*. The clown's role as scapegoat is also discussed in Cline's (1983:5, 44) book *Fools, Clowns and Jesters*.

<sup>5</sup> See also Dale Resteghini's film *Urban Massacre* (2002) and Robert Willems's film *S.I.C.K: Serial Insane Clown Killer* (2003).

how the ‘laws’ of comedy are used deceptively and the expectation of comic relief subverted, in the construction of the clown as a figure of fear, and legitimate monster, in the horror genre.

This approach is influenced by Donald Cameron McManus’s (2003:13) observation that the “key feature uniting all clowns...is their ability, through skill or stupidity, to break the rules governing the fictional world”. The method clowns use to subvert or defy accepted reason and conventions, is what McManus (2003:17) calls “clown logic”. I also propose to show that despite the trend of harmless clowning found in contemporary circuses and at children’s parties, an interpretation of clowns as figures of both fear and comic entertainment, is brought about by an inherent subversive and transgressive potential – evident in their ritual counterparts – which allows them to violate audiences’ interpretation and expectation of comedy elements, in a horror context.

I have identified four central aspects, or themes of clowns’ comedy routines and physical appearance, namely deformity (referred to as the grotesque), scatology, violence and insanity and each chapter of this dissertation focuses on one aspect of clowns’ physical, behavioural, and mental aberration.

In the first chapter, I will identify and explore a selection of horror narratives that rely on the physical deformity and grotesque attributes of the contre-Auguste, a clown whose characteristics are detailed in the chapter, to appropriate clowns as monsters in the horror genre. Using the contre-Auguste as the main example, I will draw a comparison between Mikhail Bakhtin’s exposition of the medieval grotesque body in *Rabelais’ World* (1984), and Noël Carroll’s methods for constructing the monster biology in his study on the aesthetics of horror in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990). By drawing this comparison I hope to illustrate how the contre-Auguste’s physical and symbolic deformity allows it to be appropriated as a ‘monster’ body in the following narratives: Will Elliott’s novel, *The Pilo Family Circus* (2007), the Chiodo brothers’ film *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* (1988), and the novel and film adaptation of Stephen King’s *IT*.

In order for a monster to qualify as a creature of horror, Carroll (1990:27) argues that it is imperative that the monster exhibit “the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening”, as well as “the property of being impure”. His view is that the creatures of horror are “salient in respect to these attributes” and that there are “certain recurring strategies for designing monsters [which] appear with striking regularity across the arts and media” (Carroll 1990:42-43). These strategies, which Carroll (1990:52) identifies as “[f]usion, fission, magnification, massification and horrific metonymy”, pertain largely to the impurity of horror creatures. The threatening aspect of horror monsters will be given greater prominence in the third and fourth chapters.

In this chapter, I will identify and discuss four of the five methods found in the chosen narratives in order to confirm the clown’s legitimacy as monster body specifically in terms of impurity. ‘Fusion’ includes the real/surreal, as well as the human/animal and living/dead duality inherent in the contre-Auguste clowns’ costumes and performances. ‘Fission’ concerns the split of a single character into two opposites of which the ‘clown half’ represents the monster. The exaggeration of the features of the clown body, especially the mouth and other facial features, accounts for the ‘magnification’ of the horror body, whereas the section on ‘massification’ considers the reasons behind the clown archetype’s potential for multiplicity, and investigates the horrifying potential of the presentation of killer clowns in groups of three or more.

‘Horrific metonymy’, Carroll’s fifth method of creating a monster, does not specifically apply to the biology of horror monsters, but it is one of the most common strategies used in the creation of horror monsters as impure beings. Carroll (1990:51) explains that a horrific creature can also be “*surrounded* by objects that we antecedently take to be objects of disgust and/or phobia”. In the second chapter, I will expand on the concept of ‘metonymy’ and include not only impure objects, but also the monster’s environment, and the behavioural and physical metonymy associated with disgust and revulsion in horror narratives. The creators of killer clowns forge a metonymic relationship between the symbols associated with clowns, circuses and carnivals – such as balloons, popcorn and candyfloss – and the attributes of threat and impurity: decay, scatology and the

body's excretions and secretions. The narratives relevant to this chapter are *IT*, *The Pilo Family Circus*, and *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, with mention of the character Clown/Violator in Mark Dippé's 1997 film called *Spawn* – which is based on the eponymous 90s comic series created by Todd McFarlane.

To recapitulate Carroll's statement, it is important to ensure that a monster qualifies as both impure *and* threatening. The dangerous and threatening aspect of a monster "can be satisfied simply by making the monster lethal" and the fact "[t]hat it kills and maims is enough" (Carroll 1990:43). Comedic characters' subversion of violence and horror to comic effect is one of the defining and long-standing characteristics of the comedy genre. Based on this part of Carroll's specification, the third chapter investigates two other aspects of the clown body, namely the comic body's resistance to the effects of violence and the clown's traditional ability to commit extreme violence without real and fatal consequences. When appropriated in the horror genre, these aspects heighten killer clowns' horrifying potential as dangerous and invulnerable monsters.

Killer clowns abuse the signals of comedy conventions to lure their audiences into a false sense of security. An audience's reaction to violence is dictated by what John Wright (2006:7) refers to as the "OK signal" in his book on practical clowning techniques, *Why is that so funny?*. Wright identifies four different types of laughter that guide audience expectation, and proceeds to show how these types relate to the OK signal. I will use extracts from *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, the novel and film adaptation of *IT*, and a discussion of the 'rope trick' murders of John Wayne Gacy, to illustrate how comedy conventions are subverted to betray an audience's perceptions of the OK signal, thereby recasting the clown as a potential threat.

According to Carroll (1990:43), it is also possible for a monster to be "psychologically, morally, or socially" threatening; it "may destroy one's identity, seek to destroy the moral order, or advance an alternative society". In view of this, the fourth chapter investigates the horrific and threatening potential of comic madness, when coupled with the use of Grand Guignol violence, and elements of the Romantic grotesque. The clowns relevant to

this chapter are the adaptations of the Joker in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1990), and the clown troupe in *The Pilo Family Circus* (2007). This chapter focuses specifically on how the reinterpretation of comic insanity as psychopathy allows these clowns' mental aberrations to threaten the conventions of rationality.



## Chapter 2

### The Clown Body – From Medieval Grotesque to Romantic Grotesque

#### The Contre-Auguste – Embodying the Grotesque

This chapter investigates the subversion, in the killer clown genre, of the contre-Auguste clown's dress and physical characteristics as a parody of deformity and grotesque behaviour in the following narratives: *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, *The Pilo Family Circus*, and the novel and film adaptation of Stephen King's *IT*.

Firstly, I will briefly delineate the different characteristics of the contre-Auguste clown's comical features and summarise how these characteristics developed, before drawing a comparison between the comic body – represented as a *grotesque body* in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Grotesque Realism – and the monster body. 'Clown' is often used as a general term for merrymakers and all types of comic actors, but there is one prevalent type that is informally recognised and implicated – at least physically, if not behaviourally – in the 'killer clown' or 'evil clown' phenomenon. This clown type consists of a variable combination of the following:

- a) a striped or dotted baggy pair of trousers and puffed shirt, or one-piece suit;
- b) a coloured ruff around the neck;
- c) physical exaggeration, such as oversized shoes, a large paunch and/or buttocks and a high forehead;
- d) brightly coloured hair in various styles;
- e) a white face with a red nose and a bright red grin painted over the mouth and cheeks;
- f) arching eyebrows with or without colour over the eyelids.

These physical characteristics closely resemble those of the contre-Auguste – which will be discussed presently – and originate with an early nineteenth-century British

pantomime clown called Joseph Grimaldi. Grimaldi's pantomime character, called Clown, inspired the term 'Joey', which is used as a generic name for contemporary circus clowns of a certain decorative style. According to Swortzell (1978:108), Grimaldi first introduced his clown character at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane as early as 1800, "although not until the unprecedented success" of his portrayal of Clown in *"Harlequin and the Mother Goose"* in 1806 when he was twenty-eight, did he win a truly national reputation".

In comparison with the costume traits of the killer clown type described above, images of Grimaldi show a white face, brightly coloured hair in a 'cock's comb' style or three separate tufts, a red painted mouth, red triangles on his cheeks and thick, exaggerated eyebrows. His costume consisted of a shirt with puffed sleeves and puffy bloomers with polka dots or stripes. The "single cock's comb", sometimes worn in place of the "three-tufted wig", was "a style that can be found as far back as the jesters of the Middle Ages" (Speaight 1980:63). It is imperative to keep in mind that Grimaldi's Joey was an amalgamation of various clown types, or at least of a variety of their qualities, to create a new style of clown.

According to Swortzell (1978:212), "[c]ircus historians have discovered over fifty varieties of clown in the modern circus", whereas "[t]he clowns themselves speak of three basic types...the Whiteface, the Auguste, and the Grotesque". It is important to differentiate between these clown types, not only to identify the costume styles from which the contre-Auguste adopted various physical attributes, but also to facilitate references made in the third chapter to the performance styles of the different clown types.

The contre-Auguste appropriated the white face and coloured one-piece suit and ruff of the Whiteface who, similar to the modern Pierrot, usually sports a painted mouth and nose on a white make-up base, but accentuates rather than exaggerates any facial features. The Auguste clown, on the other hand, represents the traditionally rustic, clumsy and slow-witted butt and provides the model for the contre-Auguste's bodily exaggeration.

*August* is “a slang term in Berlin dialect for stupid booby” (Speaight 1980:66). This term was reportedly first used to designate a clown type in 1864. Hoh (2006) provides a typical description of the Auguste clown who

usually wears oversize shoes, a bulbous red nose, wigs of bright colors, and mismatched, oversized clothing. He may leave most of his natural skin color showing or use a pink or red makeup base instead of white. Facial features are painted on in black and red. The lower lip and eyes may be outlined in white to exaggerate facial expressions. The auguste clown stumbles, performs pratfalls, slaps and is slapped, and often is the butt of jokes.

The Auguste has inspired two clown variations: the Hobo clown – a clown type with a homeless and unshaven look that is not to be mistaken for British comedic actor Charlie Chaplin’s (1889-1977) itinerant Tramp clown – and the Grotesque, also known as the contre-Auguste. Albert Fratellini, the youngest of the three Fratellini brothers – an Italian circus family of the early twentieth century who performed mainly in France – provides a typical example of the contre-Auguste variation. According to McManus (2003:26), it was Albert who

brought a new character to the clown dichotomy in the contre-Auguste. The contre-Auguste is a character so grotesque that even the Auguste is shocked by his lack of cultural refinement. Once Paul was established as the Auguste and Francois as the White Clown, Albert’s entrance provided a butt for both of them. Born in Russia, his character owed much to the Russian tradition of clowning. He was an extremely grotesque Auguste with oversized shoes, a red nose, and a series of frightful wigs.

With many contemporary clowns’ departure from excessive costuming to more recognisable and human forms, even traditional Auguste clowns with a few basic exaggerated character traits such as oversized shoes, can be regarded as grotesque clowns in comparison with their more naturalistic counterparts. The Joey, and more specifically

the contre-Auguste which sports grossly exaggerated and stylized features, most closely resembles Grimaldi's composite style, and is the type of clown most often used for marketing purposes and, most importantly, the clown type on which coulrophobia and clown horror is centred.

Andrew Stott (2005:8) argues that comedy is essentially a corporeal genre and quotes Henri Bergson as saying that "the comic does not exist outside the pale of that which is strictly *human*". Stott (2005:83) adds that, by extension, the comic body is

the medium through which humanity's fascination with its instincts and animal nature is explored. The comic body is exaggeratedly physical, a distorted, disproportionate, profane, ill-disciplined, insatiate, and perverse organism...Comic heroes are often disproportionate caricatures themselves, excessively fat or ludicrously thin...

Similarly, the horror genre frequently exaggerates the corporeal elements of humanity. The difference is that the grotesque body and all its aspects are celebrated in comedy, whereas the grotesque body is portrayed as impure and threatening in the horror genre.

In *Rabelais' World* Bakhtin introduces the grotesque body as the predominant image born from carnivalesque logic. He states that the "peculiarity of comic imagery...is inherent to medieval folk culture", and later adds that in "the literary sphere the entire medieval parody is based on the concept of the grotesque body" (Bakhtin 1984:18, 27). He recognises clowns as seminal figures in medieval folk culture by stating that the "comic performers of the marketplace were an important source of the grotesque image of the body" (Bakhtin 1984:352,353). Bakhtin further explains that term 'grotesque' dates back to the Roman ornaments, or *grotesca*, which were unearthed with Titus' baths at the end of the fifteenth century. In the decoration of these ornaments,

[t]here was no longer the movement of finished forms, vegetable or animal, in a finished and stable world; instead the inner movement of being itself was

expressed in the passing of one form into another, in the ever incompleting character of being...in reality this form was but a fragment of the immense world of grotesque imagery which existed throughout all the stages of antiquity and continued to exist in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. (Bakhtin 1984:31-32)

The fundamental differences in the way that comedy and horror approach the divergent representation of the world, and the ideas and representations of the grotesque body as its representative, can be explained by looking at the periods out of which these genres developed, namely the Middle Ages and the Romantic era and their respective interpretations of the grotesque.

Comedy played an integral role in pre-Lenten festivals and carnivals for centuries with the grotesque body featuring as a mascot and the legendary Hellequin, and the Vice character in the medieval mystery plays, are often identified as the forebears of contemporary circus clowns. Horror originated as a purely literary genre during the Romantic era, in the form of the “English Gothic novel, the German *Schauer-roman*, and French *roman noir*” in the eighteenth century, and later expanded to include film and theatre (Carroll 1990:4).

From these two eras developed two divergent perspectives on the grotesque body, namely the medieval and Romantic Grotesque, translated in the context of this study as the comedy and horror grotesque. According to Bakhtin (1984:38), the fundamental differences between the medieval and Romantic grotesque “appear most distinctly in relation to terror”, and he explains that medieval folk culture

was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic. Folk culture brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily form, and established a link through the body and bodily life.

Bakhtin (1984:39) contrasts the above with “the abstract and spiritual mastery sought by Romanticism, out of which the horror genre developed. With the Romantic view of the grotesque,

[a]ll that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile...Images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation, almost entirely lost their regenerating power and were turned to ‘vulgarity’. The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their reader with this fear. (Bakhtin 1984:39)

The monsters of the horror genre exhibit the vulgar images of the Romantic grotesque. Carroll sets out to define ‘horror’ in terms of the emotions these monsters inspire in their audiences. To this end, Carroll (1990:8) attempts to show how the “characteristic structures, imagery and figures are arranged to cause the emotion” that he calls “*art-horror*”. Paul Wells (2000:8) insists that “[c]entral to the horror genre’s identity is the configuration of the ‘monster’”. Carroll (1990:27) explains that audiences are “art-horrified” by a monster if the emotion is caused by

a) the thought that [the monster] is a possible being; and by the evaluative thought that b) said [monster] has the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening in the ways portrayed in the fiction and that c) said [monster] has the property of being impure...

Carroll introduces a paradigm against which the characteristics of horror figures can be measured to establish whether or not they qualify as monsters. The paradigm consists of five common strategies that are used in horror films and horror literature to ensure that a monster presents an image of impurity and threat. These strategies are “[f]usion, fission, magnification, massification and horrific metonymy” (Carroll 1990:52). I will investigate the use of the five strategies in the process of reinterpretation of the grotesque clown body into one of impurity and threat in the chosen horror narratives for this chapter. I

have grouped fusion with fission, and magnification with massification in this chapter. Horrific metonymy will be discussed in the second chapter.

### Fusion and Fission in Will Elliott's *The Pilo Family Circus*

Drawing on a decade of clown horror films and centuries of clown-related iconography, Will Elliott's novel *The Pilo Family Circus* follows Jamie's accidental foray into the world of clowning when he makes the mistake of picking up a bag of crystals belonging to a clown troupe who work for the titular supernatural circus owned by Kurt and George Pilo – a demonic werewolf and his midget brother. Gonko, the troupe's psychopathic leader, the Auguste clowns Doopy and his brother Goshy, and the prankster Rufshod, plan to kill Jamie and reclaim the crystals but they end up recruiting Jamie against his will after he comically throws a rolling pin at one of the clowns' stomach which "rebounded and flew straight back at Jamie" hitting him on the head and knocking him out (Elliott 2007:25).

Elliott uses three of the five strategies, namely fusion, fission and horrific metonymy, to appropriate the clowns in *The Pilo Family Circus* as bodies of horror. The first two methods in this section are the most common ways of constructing the monster body as a categorically interstitial, i.e. existing between categories, and contradictory object.

To begin with, Carroll (1990:43) defines 'fusion' as the "construction of creatures that transgress categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on". Carroll (1990:32) argues that "an *object* or *being* is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete or formless", and therefore difficult to classify. The example of fusion identified in *The Pilo Family Circus* is the human/animal duality of the clown called Goshy.

Jamie (also known as JJ in clown form) first encounters Goshy when he nearly runs him over at the start of the novel. The clown is described as "an apparition dressed in a puffy shirt with a garish flower pattern splashed violently across it...It wore oversized red

shoes, striped pants and white face paint...It stared at him...with ungodly boggling eyes” (Elliott 2006:3-4). By introducing him as both an apparition and a bewildered animal, the narrator invokes Goshy’s human/surreal and human/animal duality.

Throughout the novel, Goshy’s behaviour and physical attributes are likened to those of a bird, a reptile and a marsupial, but instead of drawing laughs, his human/animal duality only inspires fear and disgust. The avian comparisons begin with Jamie’s observation that “[i]t was as though it had just hatched out of a giant egg and wandered straight onto the road” (Elliott 2006:3). To cite further examples, while the clown troupe crowded around a crystal ball to watch Jamie’s audition, Goshy “gave a small toot, best signified as ‘Oo’” when he spotted him, and at another point Jamie heard him “Whistling like a budgerigar” (Elliott 2006:46, 141). Whereas the other clowns are recognisably human, however warped, Goshy has lost all touch with human reality. He makes “fluttering whistles like a lorikeet chirping”, and the narrator explains that the “sounds meant nothing especially, just an indication that some of his circuits were still on and running, that in his own way Goshy was still ticking” (Elliott 2006: 8, 49).

The antics of animals have long been imitated as a form of entertainment at fairs, carnivals and circuses. Like many other clowns, one of the earliest recorded clowns called Parmenon imitated animals to humorous effect. According to Swortzell (1978:15), “Parmenon was a clown of the first century of our era who became famous for his extraordinarily lifelike imitation of a pig”. He continues:

Long before Plutarch...clowns of ancient comedy realized that exaggeration and incongruity played a large part in humor. They consequently made it their business to create larger-than-life characters rather than merely lifelike ones – for example the ludicrous (frequently libellous) caricatures of Aristophanes, the vivid character types of Menander, and of course, the quintessential, proverbial pigginess of Parmenon’s pig. (Swortzell 1978:16)

The “combination of human and animal traits”, attributed to some clown types and manifest in the archetypal trickster, is regarded as “one of the most ancient grotesque



forms” (Bakhtin 1984:316). Barbara Babcock-Abrahams (1975:159-160) argues that in most instances “tricksters...often have a two-fold physical nature” and they “exhibit a human/animal dualism”. Clowns also exhibit a human/animal duality which partly derives from the ritual clowns who act as physical constituents of the archetypal trickster. She explains further that

myth and other expressive media are preoccupied with those areas *between* categories, between what is animal and what is human, what is natural and what is cultural...Trickster and his tales exemplify this preoccupation, for at the center of his antinomian existence is the power to escape the structures of society and the order of cultural things. (Babcock-Abrahams 1975:147-148)

The majority of clowns create their costume in order to set themselves apart from other people and to allow them a mode of behaviour and freedom of speech normally discouraged and condemned, but like the ritual fool, the grotesque clowns also strip themselves of being identified as fully human. To illustrate how this affects audiences’ perception of clowns, I will use an example provided by Frank “Slivers” Oakley (1871-1916), an American clown of the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Oakley recalls an incident that took place shortly before a show in Chicago, during which a young boy threw a tin can at his head, splitting open Oakley’s eyebrow, and then boasted about it to his father with no recognition of the clown as an actual human being. In A.E. Hotchner’s, *The Greatest Club on Earth*, Oakley remarks:

The clown isn’t really thought of as a human being. He’s an indestructible form of life somewhere between a grasshopper and an orang-utan. (Cline 1983:44)

Audiences marvel at the antics of clowns in much the same way that they marvel at performing dogs and monkeys – recognising in them the ‘otherness’ of animalistic

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Oakley “joined the Ringling Bros. Circus in 1897” and later “performed with the Barnum & Bailey Circus followed by three seasons, from 1900 to 1902, with the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus” before returning “to the Barnum & Bailey Circus for four seasons from 1903 to 1907” (Anon 2009).

behaviour. The depiction of clowns' human/animal dualism as a method of fusion is popular in clown horror narratives.

Goshy's animal characteristics become threatening when the reader realises that he is only 'human' in form and he acts purely on instinct, which tends to be violent in nature. The threatening aspect of Goshy's animalistic behaviour is revealed when his cooing noises are replaced by "a noise like a steel kettle boiling, a high-pitched squealing"; it is "shriller than an air raid siren, loud as an explosion" and makes bystanders' ears bleed, as well as his own (Elliott 2007:9). This sound is also described as a "high-pitched squawking noise" which joins the lexicon of adjectives used to describe Goshy's human/animal duality.

The human/animal motif also extends to marsupials and the following scene shows how this duality supports Carroll's (1990:28) definition of 'horror' which requires that "the monster is regarded as threatening *and* impure":

Stepping out of his room, JJ had to stifle a scream; Goshy was standing right outside the door, marsupial eyes peering directly into his own. First the left blinked, then the right. There was something menacing and surreal about the moment that JJ didn't care for at all and he cringed away. (Elliott 2007:125)

The horror of Goshy's duality is further revealed through Jamie's view of Goshy as showing predatory 'alien' characteristics. Extraterrestrial aliens are one of the most popular expressions of the human/animal duality in horror narratives. The impure and threatening qualities of these monsters are embodied in the representation of aliens as amphibian or reptilian monsters with human characteristics.

A number of seminal clown horror narratives, including *The Pilo Family Circus*, use the fusion of clowns and aliens – which are both already categorically interstitial – to

enhance their horrifying potential.<sup>7</sup> To illustrate, Jamie recounts how, while hiding from the clowns, Goshy's

alien eyes lock onto his and the grip of that gaze holds him still. Goshy's mouth flaps twice without sound...Goshy [stares] at Jamie, predatory coldness in one eye, bewilderment in the other; there is something obscene in the face's ability to pair these two attitudes, as though the clown's mind is shared equally between a moron and a reptile. (Elliott 2006:16)

Elsewhere, Goshy stares at Jamie with "alien coldness" (Elliott 2006:200). Even Goshy's contented cooing noises are experienced with a sense of disgust: "Only Goshy seemed free of lethargy; from his room came an occasional loud coo, sliding like alien fingers into the ears of anyone in range" (Elliott 2006:158). Elliott draws a parallel between the 'alien' appearance of clowns and the reptilian, amphibian 'impurity' associated with many alien monsters. These descriptions highlight the impure and threatening element to the human/animal fusion of Goshy's behaviour and appearance that reflects Carroll's (1990:34) notion that "monsters are not only physically threatening, they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge". This sinister quality is revealed when Jamie first attends the clowns' show, during which he struggles to come to terms with Goshy's nature:

Stumbling out after [Gonko] was Goshy, who looked around at the audience with boggling eyes, peering the way a baby does at a room full of confounding things. *What are these creatures?* But there was still that reptilian, calculating edge, suggesting that deep down Goshy knew very well that *he* was the abnormality, and revelled in it. (Elliott 2006:69)

Winston, one of the other clowns in Gonko's troupe, tells Jamie that Goshy and his brother Doopy joined the circus long before him in 1836, and that they "were both too warped to be younger than multiple centuries each" (Elliott 2007:255). This would

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<sup>7</sup> See Stephen King's novel *IT*, and the Chiodos' film *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*.

explain partly why Goshy is no longer entirely human. Considering Goshy's age, his clowning act could well have consisted of animal impersonations and playing the role of the simpleton since both these styles have roots in ancient clowning traditions. However, having been with the Pilos' circus for centuries, his personality has been almost entirely replaced by his circus character, thereby turning Goshy into a composite figure.

To describe the nature of composite figures, Carroll (1990:45) refers to Freud's idea that "the condensatory or collective figure [in dreams] superimposes, in the manner of a photograph, two or more entities in one individual". Monsters in the horror genre are similarly "composite figures, conflating distinct *types* of being", but Freud also emphasises that "the fused elements have something in common" as illustrated by Goshy's relation to the animal-mimicking clowning tradition (Carroll 1990:45).

In Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull* (1954), Krull's musings on the nature of clowns captures the notion of clowns' animal qualities:

Take the clown, for example, those basically alien beings, funmakers, with little red hands, little thin-shod feet, red wigs under conical felt hats, their impossible lingo, their handstands, their stumbling and falling over everything...are they human at all?...In my opinion it is pure sentimentality to say that they are "human too", with the sensibilities of human beings and perhaps even with wives and children. I honour them and defend them against ordinary bad taste when I say no, they are not, they are exceptions, side-splitting monsters of preposterousness, glittering, world-renouncing monks of unreason, cavorting hybrids, part human and part insane art. (Cline 1983:41)

Krull's enquiry into the doubtful humanity of clowns reveals that the combination of their behaviour, their grotesque masks or make-up, and costumes, casts them as categorically contradictory figures, and underscores the clown's position as an abomination of nature, almost unidentifiable as a human actor.

As stated previously, circus clowns make a conscious choice to present themselves as caricatures for comic effect; they draw attention to themselves as figures who are out of the ordinary. McManus (2003:15) explains the clown's position thus:

The essential "otherness" of clown accounts for the phenomenon of clowns being freakish or deformed in some way...When this inherent "difference" is not part of the performer's person he must take on some external sign in order to add it, hence the grotesque make-up and masks that are associated with clown.

In comedy therefore, a contre-Auguste clown's grotesque appearance is meant to be humorous but outside of the parameters of comedy, the same features become horrific and sometimes terrifying.

As a fusion figure and monster, Goshy "is a composite that unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds with the cultural scheme of things in *unambiguously* one, spatio-temporally discrete entity" (Carroll 1990:43), and he falls under Bakhtin's descriptions of the 'grotesca' as an interstitial mode between biological categories. Although it is not a prerequisite for monsters to be composite figures, "the elements that go into the condensation or fusion are [normally] visually perceptible" (Carroll 1990:45). In this case, he consists of categorically indistinct marsupial, bird-like and human qualities and he is not only an animalistic human, but also a grotesque one. A horrified Jamie describes how, after Goshy's fern – with which he has an unnatural romantic infatuation – 'accepted' his proposal for marriage (Doopy had snuck a ring on one of the fern's branches),

Goshy stood in the middle of the room wearing a look not meant for a human face. His eyes were so wide they seemed about to burst; his lips were pulled back unnaturally far over the gums to reveal small sharp animal's teeth; skin was bunched around his forehead, cheeks, neck and ears like waves of dough, as though someone had tried to peel it off by massage. The ungodly eyes turned to JJ in what he could only guess was a look of rapture. (Elliott 2006:131)

Although Goshy resembles a human clown, his physical manner, instinctual reactions and illogical relationship with objects are purely animalistic. What is generally deemed as a positive 'emotion' can be, in Goshy's case, regarded with disgust and horror due to his human/animal duality.

The comically grotesque body of the clown, as portrayed by Goshy, embodies the human/supernatural duality and subverts the classic ideal of the human body through the human/animal sub-classification. Goshy, as a "composite figure [conflates] *distinct* types of beings" (Carroll 1990:45). As Carroll (1990:45) describes, "distinct and often clashing types of elements are superimposed or condensed" in figures like Goshy which results in the creation of creatures that are regarded as "impure and repulsive".

Having considered an example of a clown who exhibits the 'fusion' method of creating the impure monster body by straddling the category classifications of human/supernatural and human/animal, I will now proceed to the second method used to construct the monster biology, namely 'fission'.

Carroll (1990:48) explains that "[b]y fission, discrete and/or contradictory categories can be connected by having different biological or ontological orders take turns inhabiting one body, or by populating the fiction with numerically different but otherwise identical bodies, each representing one of the opposed categories". The human/werewolf duality and Jekyll and Hyde combinations are the most useful examples with which to explain how clown figures can be subjected to fission in the horror genre. Clowns are often depicted as figures of fusion who embody a range of contradictory characteristics, but there are also examples of horror narratives where a clown character features as *one part* of a character's biological or ontological range of forms.

*The Pilo Family Circus* features a striking example of a clown body that makes up one ontological order, i.e. one form of being, inhabiting the body in a process of fission, in the character of Jamie and his clown alter ego called JJ. To illustrate, Elliott employs clowns' face paint as a device that brings out the anarchic, violating character of ordinarily

composed and mentally sound individuals, i.e. it brings out the 'real' clown in a person and makes them invulnerable to pain during slapstick routines.

Before his meeting with the clowns, Jamie worked as a concierge at Wentworth Gentleman's Club where he "was getting eighteen bucks an hour to politely endure the tirade" of the club's well-to-do clients; he didn't have the nerve to ask a girl out, and suffered constant verbal and sometimes physical abuse from his housemates (Elliott 2006:5). It is established early on that Jamie willingly plays the role of the underdog, but this approach to life is inverted in the character of JJ.

Whereas Jamie is passive and insecure, his self-centred alter ego runs amok and treats everyone he meets with disdain and disrespect, and Jamie considers JJ as a separate individual despite them sharing the same body. After Jamie is abducted and initiated into the troupe, following his successful audition, Winston introduces him to the qualities of face paint. Jamie's clown alter ego JJ emerges and takes complete control of his body:

JJ held the mirror on his palm and tossed it towards Winston. It fell short, crashing to the ground and shattering. He stared at the shards for a moment, leered at Winston again, wondering whether or not he should slap the old man, then turned and ran from the room, lifting his oversized shoes in a knee-bending stomp. Winston sighed. 'Nicer the man, meaner the clown,' he muttered as he picked up the bits of glass. That seemed to be the way of things. (Elliott 2006:103)

Whereas Jamie keeps to himself as far as possible when he is out on the show grounds and tries his utmost not to offend anyone he meets, JJ instantly develops a habit of victimising the carnival folk:

'Carnie rats,' JJ mused, passing a pair of old women. 'Out of my way!' he yelled at them. 'Clown coming through. Fuck yourself. Hear me?' And to JJ's pleasant surprise they flinched back to let him pass... 'Could get used to this,' said JJ.

‘Yeah, you respect me, carnie rats. Stay back, slimy shits!’ They stayed back. *They know who’s boss*, he thought. *Nice deal!* He marched straight through a group of them, ordering them out of his way, knocking boxes from their hands and tripping their feet. (Elliott 2006:105)

Soon after, and despite futile protestations, JJ shamelessly and brashly urinates through the mouth of a plaster clown head in one of the carnival folk’s stalls. These acts establish JJ as an anarchic, vile, conniving and arrogant clown who functions as Mr Hyde to Jamie’s placid Dr Jekyll. This fission correlates with Carroll’s (1990:46) explanation that “the contradictory elements are, so to speak, distributed over *different*, though metaphysically related, identities”.

The two personalities are dependent on the application or removal of the face paint for control over Jamie’s body, demonstrating how the process of fission is based on two categorically distinct entities sharing a body, but not at the same time. The example Carroll uses is the concept of the werewolf. He explains that “werewolves...violate the categorical distinction between humans and wolves. In this case, the animal and the human inhabit the same body...; however, they do so at *different times*” and are therefore “not temporally continuous” (Carroll 1990:46). The clowns’ face paint therefore acts as the proverbial full moon to set the fission of JJ and Jamie into motion.

As it does with Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and with werewolves, the transition has unpleasant physical consequences for the host body. Once the make-up rubs off Jamie suffers from severe nausea and pain as an after-effect of the face paint. He also realises that he has no control over JJ’s behaviour, but is fated to ‘remember’ JJ’s actions when he is in control of his body again:

After Winston had applied his face paint, the day was mostly blurred pictures. He remembered vividly the *mood* – wickedness, gleeful wickedness, completely at the mercy of any impulse. *I became someone else*, he thought...*I did, too. I completely lost control.* (Elliott 2006:120)



The fission of Jamie and JJ through the application and removal of face paint also echoes the tradition of using visual aides, i.e. make-up and bizarre costumes to differentiate and separate tribal ritual and medieval clowns from the public. For example, the koshare clowns from Arizona painted themselves in black and white horizontal stripes from head to toe, painted black circles around their eyes and mouths, and wore pointed hats. Relinquishing control and acting contrary to what is considered normal behaviour, are inherent attributes of clowning and are usually initiated by dressing up.

As explained previously, clowns deliberately set themselves apart with costumes and the application of make-up. Wright (2006:213) agrees that “the red nose has become a public licence for comedy”, as well as the subversion of authority, and the violation of taboos, “rather like the fool’s motley was in the middle ages”, and he adds that Jacques Lecoq views a clown’s red nose as “the smallest mask in the world”.

The process of fission also affects Jamie and JJ’s attitude towards authority figures, echoing the comic subversion and mockery of authority figures seen in the performances of ritual clowns. Freed from the constraints of social decorum, JJ displays a dangerous disdain for authority but also does not hesitate to grovel in mock obedience to Gonko. When meeting the circus proprietor Kurt Pilo, a half-beast half-man who is widely feared by the circus folk, JJ has an incredible urge to test Kurt’s patience:

Perhaps JJ was skating on thin ice here, but the newfound clown in him *wanted* to test Kurt Pilo, by God. He wanted to push him, see what he could get away with before the big goon snapped. It was almost an independent reflex and he could barely control it. *Spit on his desk!* A part of him screamed. (Elliott 2006:114)

The stark difference between the extremity of JJ’s defiant, subversive and hedonistic nature, and Jamie’s reserved, passive personality, is explained through the purpose and motives of the supernatural circus. The Pilos’ circus works as a feeding machine for ancient demons/monsters that are addicted to human souls. By masquerading as an ordinary circus, the circus uses its ticket booth as a portal between the supernatural realm

and various actual circus locations around the world. By arrangement, the circus steals punters' souls in the form of crystals and in turn all members of the circus are granted immortality and they are paid in small bags of these crystals that are used to have small wishes granted.

This arrangement is based on the premise that every soul has a price, and the show harvests souls by exploiting people's weaknesses. Fishboy, the freak show's curator tells Jamie: "The clowns appeal to the rebellious, the cruel, the naturally wicked – everyone has the capacity for wickedness. The clown show always includes an authority figure being usurped" (Elliott 2006:224). In order to extort the punters' weakness for anarchy and the subversion of authority, the face paint is used to extract these qualities from the clowns. JJ is therefore a suppressed aspect of Jamie's personality; he counter-balances Jamie's timid and socially conditioned nature.

This process corresponds to Carroll's (1990:46) notion that the new facet, or being that emerges after fission has taken place "generally contradicts cultural ideas of normality" and the "alter-ego represents a normatively alien aspect of the self", as is illustrated by playing JJ's anarchic spirit against Jamie's repressed and introverted personality. Although Jamie is subjected to "temporal fission", he also undergoes a form of multiplication, not spatially, but in character. Carroll (1990:46) explains this as a "character or set of characters" that are "multiplied into one or more facets, each standing for another aspect of the self, generally one that is either hidden, ignored, repressed, or denied".

Usurpation and the subversion of authority are defining characteristics of the trickster archetype. Jamie/JJ parallels the archetypal trickster – and by extension the ritual clown of tribal communities – who occupies the paradoxical position of being a fun-maker and dangerous, powerful being. Similar to the Devil and Vice characters of the medieval mystery plays, these mythological and allegorical figures inspired fear and laughter in their audiences.

Kimberly Christen (1998:xiii), who compiled a global encyclopaedia of clowns and tricksters, supports the idea that ritual clowns “are not merely funny; they are also frightful, using their power to scare people and force people into giving them things”, and “often use their ambiguous status to take advantage of people”.

In contrast, contemporary western clowns and fools are rarely recognized or depicted as necessarily morally dubious figures, and are forced to acquire a more benevolent and harmless character confined to the circus ring. The clowns in *The Pilo Family Circus* also satisfy their audience’s primitive and taboo desires, but in the context of horror their comic routines are subverted into extortionist and brutal acts.

JJ embodies the archetypal trickster, as is illustrated by the behaviour of the trickster Taugi – creator of humankind, patriarch of the community, ‘inventor’ of sexual relations between the sexes, as well as the destructive force of greed, jealousy and vengeance. Anthropologist Ellen Basso (1988:296) explains that, in the mythology of the Kalapalo tribe in Brazil,

Taugi can be a dangerous and angry *itseke* ‘powerful being’, showing how unpredictable and capricious, absurd and even dangerous is the world. The disorderly, unrepeated, unpredictable, and dangerous nature of Taugi is the source of all human difficulties, particular troubling human emotions: bitter hatred, envy, jealousy, and the terrible grief imposed by the finality of death.

Like Taugi, JJ alternates between hedonism and self-pity and acts only to serve his own ends, even if this is to Jamie’s and other characters’ detriment.

After a series of misdemeanours which included challenging the clowns’ nemeses – the agile and fighting fit acrobats, stealing the fortune teller’s crystal ball, and accidentally depriving Gonko of his trousers – and thus the weapons he carried in his pockets, which left Gonko defenceless and fuming, JJ showed no regret and simply “wondered how

Jamie would react to the day's events" (Elliott 2006:149). Jamie again wakes up nauseous and realising for certain that

[a] lunatic is at the helm, and I am completely in his hands. If he wanted to get me killed, I wouldn't be able to stop him. I attacked the acrobats. I have stolen property which, if discovered in my possession, will probably get me killed. I have the resident psychopath – the psychopath who is now my leader – out for somebody's blood, and it's only a matter of time until he realises that somebody is me. (Elliott 2006:152)

This subversion is not only illustrated by the methods used to harvest punters' souls, but is also revealed by the clowns' propensity to murder and commit gratuitous acts of violence upon other members of the circus, and to citizens outside the circus. During one of the clowns' anarchic 'jobs' in the outside world – which involves the clowns setting a series of events into motion which inevitably leads to a catastrophe – they burn down a house with “a one-month-old baby inside...[who will otherwise] grow up to be a researcher of some kind, who will discover some miracle cures” (Elliott 2007:202).

In summary, although Goshy and Jamie/JJ's categorical contradictions are exhibited in divergent ways – the former as an amalgamation of different species (in behaviour, if not anatomically) and the latter through a sequenced categorical fission in personality – both characters adhere to Carroll's (1990:48) notion that “fusion and fission are meant to apply strictly to the biological and ontological categorical ingredients that go into making monsters”. Goshy's categorically fused nature and Jamie's mental fission with the aid of face paint; illustrate how these devices are used to construct clowns as impure and threatening creatures of horror.

#### Magnification and Massification in the Chiodo brothers' *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*

The next two methods identified by Carroll to construct monsters in horror films are magnification and massification. Carroll (1990:50) takes the view that whereas fusion

and fission amalgamate contradictory categories in order to create horrific monsters, “the horrific potential of already disgusting or phobic entities can be accentuated by means of magnification and massification”. I will now consider how these methods are employed in *Killer Clowns from Outer Space* to reinterpret clowns as legitimate horror monsters.

Firstly, magnification is a visual tool that entails an increase in the size of ordinarily horrible or terrifying creatures (although this is not a prerequisite), or the exaggeration of specific body parts to horrific effect. The contre-Auguste clown’s oversized feet, padded body, high forehead, wide, painted mouth and accentuated eyes are all elements of exaggeration and magnification which constitute the clown as caricature and grotesque body. Cline (1983:5) agrees that the clown is rarely seen “as a fellow human being, a three-dimensional personality like ourselves; we find it easier to see him as...mere human caricature”. Caricature, as a comic form of grotesque exaggeration, works with “the principle that we are all potentially monstrous, as the prominently exaggerated or altered features communicate the identity of the subject depicted, and so caricature makes us identifiable by deforming us” (Stott 2005:91). Exaggeration for the sake of caricature therefore shows the grotesque in a comic as well as horrific light, depending on the context, and the surrounding elements, that come into play within a particular genre.

Bakhtin reveals that there have been efforts to separate the clownish from the grotesque, most notably in the work of the nineteenth century German theorist, G. Schneegans. Schneegans distinguishes between “the clownish, the burlesque, and the grotesque” (Bakhtin 1984:304). Despite what Bakhtin (1984:315) perceives as the limitations of these distinctions, Schneegans provides a useful definition of the ‘grotesque’ by suggesting that the grotesque “starts when the exaggeration reaches fantastic dimensions”. Bakhtin (1984:307) concedes that “hyperbole is one of the attributes of the grotesque”, although not essential to it, and calls for a reconsideration in favour of the ambivalence inherent in the grotesque. All three forms contain examples of hyperbole, exaggeration, and a shared concept of the body “related to the medieval folk culture of humor and to grotesque realism” (Bakhtin 1984:315).

Considering the prevalence of coulrophobia and the contre-Auguste clowns' propensity for physical exaggeration to comic effect, the appearance of the clowns in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* readily lends itself to the method of magnification. These killer clowns are modelled on the typical contre-Auguste, but their features are exaggerated beyond human dimensions with their oversized heads, wide mouths, three clunky white fingers on each hand, and some with extraordinarily short, tall or fat bodies.

This deviation from the 'norm' becomes an even more disturbing aspect of the film when one realises that this is what they really look like; that their grotesque appearance is not only make-up and costume. During the audio commentary of the DVD, the Chiodo brothers (*Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988) explained that they intended "to make the clowns an alien race of slugs that just happen to look like our earth clowns". Whereas the magnification of certain body parts adds to a circus clown's humorously clumsy personality – for example, large feet that turn a simple action such as walking into a comedy routine in itself, and an unbalanced body – the magnification of these same features in a horror context recasts the clown as an alien being.

The contre-Auguste clowns' grotesque bodies are magnified to challenge the concept of the singular, unified and internalised body. They represent the collective human body and celebrate the visceral nature of the body through exaggeration and hyperbole. For Bakhtin (1984:19) the grotesque body

and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words because it is not individualized...That is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.

In practice the "artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's

depths”, hence the magnification of the mouth, nose, buttocks, belly, feet and hands characteristic of the typical Auguste (Bakhtin 1984:318-319).

Bakhtin (1984:354) demonstrates that the outward forms of clowns such as Gros Guillaume – a 17th century figure from comic folklore, also known as Fat William, who was exceptionally obese – “typify the usual tendency of the popular comic figure to efface the confines between the body and the surrounding objects, between the body and the world, and to accentuate one grotesque part, stomach, buttocks, or the mouth.” In the context of horror narratives such as *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, this magnification re-imagines the grotesque clown as an abomination of nature; a supernatural monster. Creatures, such as the film’s grotesque clowns, “tend to make our flesh creep and crawl – [and] are prime candidates for the objects of art-horror; such creatures already disgust, and augmenting their scale increases the physical dangerousness” (Carroll 1990:49).

Outside the parameters of comedy and fantasy “humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order”, and in this case the grotesque clown – a fantastical and surreal body – is regarded as “an extraordinary character in our ordinary world” (Carroll 1990:16).

The magnification of a contre-Auguste clown’s facial features into a single expression plays a crucial role in influencing the perception and interpretation of the clown as a potentially threatening figure. There is a consensus that humans instinctually read and interpret the facial expressions and physical appearance of another person in a matter of seconds. Furthermore, the exaggerated clown face obscures, but does not quite conceal the person’s features underneath as a mask would, and thus creates an uncomfortable dichotomy which renders interpretation problematic.

Contre-Auguste clowns’ costumes also play a pivotal part in perpetuating their dual nature as human/supernatural or real/fantasy figures. In response to the *Yahoo! Answers* poll entitled *Who believes that clowns are evil and scary, and why do you find them so?*(2007a), a third of the answers referred to clowns’ absurd costumes and make-up,

proving that physical appearance is a leading factor in their depiction as figures of horror. Despite a lack of thorough answers, the poll supports the formal causes given on phobia-related websites for why clowns are considered to be terrifying. Several answers in the poll mentioned the exaggeration of the clown face as a source of fear, including one posted by Pete D, who claimed to have spoken to various people on the subject. He argues that

[c]lowns are not evil...it seems that because of their makeup and the way it's put on to show a permanent emotion on their face (smile or frown), that some people have a deeply ingrained mistrust of them because the makeup hides a clown's nonverbal intentions from them. (*Yahoo! Answers* 2007a)

This brings us back to the exaggeration of facial features; not only magnifying them for the sake of caricature, but also as a potential tool to obscure treacherous motives. From these testaments, we conclude that the fixed exaggeration of the face is one of the principal sources of fear and, with the magnification of body parts to create a larger-than-life character, this has the capacity to amuse and to terrify, depending on the context of the magnified body.

One of the most important and commonly magnified parts of those mentioned, is the clown's mouth or rictus. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'rictus' as an "open mouth or jaws", also the "expanse or gape of the mouth" in persons or birds and fishes (Weiner and Simpson 2001:896). Bakhtin (1984:316) argues that "the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body". The gates of hell in the diableries of the Middle Ages were symbolised by a giant gaping mouth and was also called the "Hell Mouth" (Welsford 1935:288). The circus ring adopted a similar entrance, but without any direct religious motivation.

A contre-Auguste clown's oversized mouth, painted into an exaggerated smile, is disturbing because of the paradox it creates on the face: the fake smiling mask acting independently of the face on which it is painted. The artifice and lack of sincerity relates



back to the ‘hell mouth’ of the trickster Harlequin – the smile used as a decoy to hide ulterior, sinister motives. The respondent Bob Lashley insisted that “their red nose, evil smile, colourful face make people scared”, while another contributor recalled how “one clown... kept smiling at [her] and when [she] looked away he sprayed water on [her] face” (*Yahoo! Answers* 2007a).

For their part, the alien clowns in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* are biologically modelled on the contre-Auguste clown prototype and their mouths consequently span the length of a painted mouth, again emphasising the grotesque nature of the clown body and recalling the image of the ‘gaping hell mouth’. Other examples include Pennywise in Stephen King’s *IT* and the Violator’s clown persona in the comic series *Spawn*. Pennywise’s mouth creates a similar effect by gaping wide and revealing rows of pointed teeth, when he prepares to attack or simply to terrify his victim. The Violator, in his clown form, has a similar, exaggeratedly wide grin with overcrowded teeth.

The exaggerated mouth, or rictus, is also the trademark of the Joker in the *Batman* comics: a trickster/jester figure whose mouth is a giant slit in his face and opens to an exaggerated degree, especially in renditions after the 1970s when the Joker became a more diabolical figure. One such example is the Joker in Grant Morrison’s graphic novel *Arkham Asylum* (1990), whose mouth is filled with monstrous, elongated teeth. The Joker, played by Jack Nicholson, in Tim Burton’s film *Batman* (1989), has a painted mouth which creates a similar effect, although not painted in the contre-Auguste style. Whereas the contre-Auguste clowns merely suggest size through face paint, the fictional characters’ mouths manifest the symbolic significance of the grotesque, all consuming mouth in carnivalesque terms.

Carroll’s fourth strategy, namely ‘massification’, refers to the duplication of a single monster entity into a threatening mass. Films as diverse as Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963), Frank Marshall’s *Arachnophobia* (1990) and John Carpenter’s *Village of the Damned* (1995), centred on the massification strategy. One or two creatures might not necessarily be as horrifying, but once multiplied, they prove a significant threat, and if the horror

monster is already horrific, massification serves to accentuate the effect of horror. Carroll (1990:51) makes the point that

one may exploit the repelling aspect of existing creatures not only by magnifying them, but also by massing them...Massing [a number of] already disgusting creatures, unified and guided by unfriendly purposes, generates art-horror by augmenting the threat posed by these antecedently phobic objects” or figures.

This method of constructing the monster biology as threatening and impure is not commonly used in killer clown narratives, and the majority of killer clowns appear as solo figures.<sup>8</sup> However, circus clowns often performed in groups of two or three, known as clown troupes, and have more recently multiplied to *scores* of clowns appearing in the circus ring at any one time.

With P.T. Barnum’s creation of the three-ring circus in the USA, the status of the circus clown has largely deteriorated from its former glory as comic hero – as he was on the pantomime stage – to interval amusement. In Barnum’s three-ring circus format, the audience’s attention is divided between three separate shows. It sparked a competition between performers to heighten the spectacle of their performances in order to maintain the audience’s attention, thereby pushing the clowns into a marginal and facilitating role between acts. This meant that a greater number of clowns were needed to provide entertainment for the entire audience and more clowns meant that more intricate and elaborate pranks could be performed to keep audiences interested. In *The Circus Book*, R. Croft-Cooke argues that

[t]he great difference between the old-time circuses and those of today is the status of the clown. In other days he was the principal attraction; the success of the show often depending on his efforts. He improvised, told stories, argued with the ringmaster, commented on the acts and sang songs. Now the clown is usually one of the dozen who fill up the gap between one act and another, and whose

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix.

chief stock-in-trade are bizarre costumes, knock-about business and acrobatics.  
(Cline 1983:50)

*Killer Klowns from Outer Space* is one of the films that illustrate how the technique of massification accentuates the potential of clown figures to be horrific and threatening in two ways, namely group victimisation or ‘threat by numbers’, and the potential for multiplicity of the collective clown.

The ‘massification’ of clowns also illustrates the collective quality of the clown body. Considering Pulcinella of the *Commedia dell’ Arte* as a type of clown, Nicoll (1963:88) observes that Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804) – the Venetian painter and printmaker who famously depicted groups of Pulcinellas in various scenes, such as *Pulcinella on Holiday* or the more well-known *The Swing of Pulcinella* – does not see Punch “as a single recognisable entity but as a stock type capable of extended reproduction...[or] lifeless clay statuettes turned out mechanically by the score from a single mould and tinted in various colours according to individual fancy”. As a collective term, *clown* incorporates many variations of clowns showing a range of ‘family resemblances’, thereby enabling the multiplicity of the clown figure.

This multiform nature is demonstrated by the fact that contemporary ‘carpet’ or ‘interval’ clowns perform in groups. They are mostly of the contre-Auguste variation, or a combination of Whiteface leader and Auguste ‘cronies’. Clowns also owe their potential for multiplicity and massification to the trickster archetype which shows “a tendency to be multiform and ambiguous, single or multiple” (Babcock-Abrahams 159-160).

Massification in clown horror narratives heightens the predatory aspects of their motives by subverting the comedic circus clowns’ tendency to single out and ‘pick on’ audience members during performances. In *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, for example, the female lead, Debbie Stone, is pursued by a large clown in her house. As she tries to escape through the window she finds a group of clowns holding out a trampoline. In a circus context one could expect the clowns to pull away at the last moment to humorous

effect but in a horror context this prank signifies an act of victimisation that she cannot escape from. Debbie turns back to find two more clowns in her living room who proceed to imprison her in a balloon. In other scenes in the film the clowns appear in groups on people's doorsteps at night 'delivering' pizzas and boxes of chocolate as a ruse before trapping them in cocoons. The Chiodo brothers (Audio commentary in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988) argue that the "idea...was that people don't question the activities of clowns, you wouldn't suspect clowns would kill you" and, referring to the clowns' domestic attacks, point out that "this is home invasion, right here". Not only are people no longer safe in their own homes, but the film also sends out the message that if one clown doesn't get you, another inevitably will. The clowns' presence is stifling and gives the sense that there is no escaping the multiple wide grins and grotesque features. Although the clowns attack individually and in groups throughout the film, the Chiodo brothers highlight the element of massification in group scenes to exploit people's fear of clowns. One clown may be scary, but a whole group of them is even more terrifying.

The technique of the massification of clowns is illustrated in a very similar way in two other horror narratives. In Steve Sessions' film *Dead Clowns* (2003), a multitude of zombie clowns are seen to rise from a watery grave during a storm, summoned back by a hurricane from the silt of a Florida bay in which their clown car lay buried for fifty years, to launch a series of attacks on the residents who neither saved them from the bay nor acknowledged their deaths with a plaque, or other memorial. There is a similar misty, night-time setting during a group of vampire clowns' pursuit of the lead characters Ben and his sister Claire in Robert Dodd's children's novel *The Midnight Clowns* (2000). As they run away, Ben and Claire "see the shapes of the clowns start to form in the mist, their bodies moving relentlessly onward, jerking like puppets on strings" (Dodds 2000:98). This scene is also replicated in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* when the clowns' striped and dotted trousers come into view one by one as they descend on the town. During the climax of the film, around forty clowns surround the main characters in the clowns' arena armed with weapons, bats and hockey sticks. Although numerically multiple and with a variety of costumes they are all clowns and sport a variation of the same features thereby giving the appearance of a multi-coloured mass of clowns.

In summary, this chapter has illustrated that the grotesque appearance of the contre-Auguste clowns and their tendency for caricature, and the multi-form performance tradition of contemporary circus clowns, provide the platform for the use of magnification and massification in killer clown narratives such as *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* and the narratives mentioned above to enhance and intensify the impurity and threat of the clowns.

## Chapter 3

### Clowns and Horrific Metonymy – From Clown Alley to Back Alley

Carroll lists horrific metonymy as the fifth method of constructing the monster body as an impure being. Although horrific metonymy does not expressly apply to the monster's anatomy or physiology, it is a prevalent method used to enhance the killer clowns' impure and horrific nature as illustrated in the horror narratives *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, *The Pilo Family Circus* and *IT*. Using horrific metonymy in the above films as the central frame of reference, the metonymic themes are divided into blood, scatology, bodily decay and horrific spaces.

Carroll (1990:52) identifies horrific metonymy as “a means of emphasizing the impure and disgusting nature of the creature – from the outside, so to speak – by associating said being with objects and entities that are already reviled: body parts, vermin, skeletons, and all manner of filth”. In a study on the relationship between comedy and horror entitled *Laughing Screaming*, William Paul (1994:354) explains that

[i]f *The Exorcist* established the body as a site of horror, the horror film through the 70s became increasingly focused on the body, and specifically on the two interconnected aspects of the body: its excretions (products of the body beyond our control), and as corollary of this, lack of control (the autonomic responses of the body).

In relation to horrific metonymy, Bakhtin (1984: 318,319) reveals that the image of the clown as a “grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs” – features illustrated by a body that “copulates, defecates, overeats”, and is expressed through dialogue that is “flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts”.

Paul Wells elaborates on the fused composition of the grotesque body and draws a direct comparison between the comedy and horror grotesque. According to Wells (2000:29), the grotesque body

constitutes a model of 'grotesque realism' which in its openness, flux, and overt display of processes and functions collapses socio-cultural distinctions. The excessive re-orientation and display of the grotesque body operates in a way which is amusing, because of its incongruous relationship to the socially-determined limits of body and identity, but horrific because it violates the classical norms and orthodoxies of bodily representation, rendering both the unknown interiority and external 'completeness' of the body as wholly arbitrary.

The quotes above show that both comedy and horror revolve around the lower stratum and the 'taboo' subjects of human nature in a civilised society, e.g. bodily functions, mental and physical deformities, decadence, and deviant impulses and desires such as violence. The difference between Carroll's and Bakhtin's assertions rest with the genre's respective approaches to these reviled themes. Whereas the medieval grotesque celebrates the corporeal body and all its grotesque aspects, these themes serve to heighten the impurity and horrific nature of monsters in the Romantic view of the grotesque.

Taking Carroll's and Bakhtin's points into account, I will explore how the horror narratives in this chapter utilise the strategy of horrific metonymy, often overlapping in symbols and physical characteristics, to establish killer clowns as legitimate monsters. The task of this chapter is not only to identify the elements of horrific metonymy found in the narratives listed above, but also to investigate how this method inverts clowns' comic association with, and subversion of, the themes of impurity mentioned above.

Horrific metonymy is a crucial element in the creation of the horror body because it fixes the monster in a 'negative' visual and descriptive space. It is not only the body, but also the surrounding environment, behaviour and the descriptive language of these horror narratives which horrify their audiences. According to Carroll (1990:51), the "association

of horrific beings with disease and contamination is related to the tendency to surround horrific beings with further impurities". The fact that the history of clowning is tied up with the scatological and corporeal, and with death and decay, raises the question of how horror narratives utilise these associations to further the killer clowns' re-interpretation as impure and threatening creatures.

Horrific metonymy is one of the central methods used by Stephen King in *IT* to establish Pennywise as a legitimate horror monster. King uses horrific metonymy as a device specifically to link death, blood and decay, and underground spaces, with clowns and circus imagery. The Chiodo brothers, whose film *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* was released two years after the publication of King's novel and two years prior to the release of the film adaptation of *IT*, and Elliot, whose novel *The Pilo Family Circus* was published over a decade later, also capitalised on the horrifying potential of symbols generally associated with carnivals and circuses.

### Clowns and the Blood Taboo

Blood is an integral element in the making of horror. Along with wounds and bruises, splattered or spilled blood signifies the damage and destruction of the body, it also serves as an effective tool with which to emphasise a horror monster's threatening potential and its impurity, and the monster's lack of respect for the letting of blood.<sup>9</sup> The more blood spilled the more monstrous and revolting the creature. In the clown horror narratives considered here, blood is not only used to indicate bodily destruction but it is also put to creative use.

Contemporary clowns have an ancestral link with blood and the use of blood in healing ceremonies. Although contemporary clowns are not closely associated with blood as such, the stigma of these earlier clowns' ritual abilities has survived in the collective unconscious and these 'blood taboo' customs have survived, albeit in a much changed and diluted form, in contemporary clowning routines.

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 5, page 105.



Ritual clowns took on the roles of ‘violator of taboos’ and transgressor of civil and social laws in order to exempt the community from these transgressions. Makarius (1970:57) explains that the

amalgamation of power to do good with power to do evil in the person of the clown, with the result that people turn to him for his capacity of healing...and at the same time recoil from him as from an unclean being, to whom every kind of impurity is assimilated and whose contact is defiling and baneful...is elucidated when brought into relation with the belief that blood, being dangerous, may be turned against noxious objects, and that the overdetermination of its now beneficent use, though negative in character, endows it with the quality of bringing about positive results.

This dangerous, yet necessary potential in ritual clowns concerns their designated role as breakers of the blood taboo – a powerful and magical substance that is regarded with fear and apprehension in many cultures. It is the ritual clown’s role as violator of the blood taboo that endows him or her with the sacred power to handle blood.

In *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, one of the clowns uses blood for creative purposes when turning Officer Mooney into a ventriloquist doll. Two trails of blood that run from the edges of Mooney’s mouth, signifies his characterisation as a ventriloquist doll and, as the Chiodo brothers (*Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988) describe, the “clown’s thumbprint made with Mooney’s blood” signify a doll’s red cheeks.

Using various scare-tactics Pennywise spends his time terrorising the Lucky Seven, a group of children, and later as adults, who take it upon themselves to end the monster’s reign of terror in Derry.<sup>10</sup> When *IT*’s Pennywise addresses the young Beverly from a plug hole in the bathroom sink, she witnesses, to her horror, a balloon slowly emerging from the hole that eventually bursts, splattering blood all over the sink and mirror. In this

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<sup>10</sup> The group, who consists of the characters Bill Denbrough, Beverly Marsh, Mike Hanlon, Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, an Ben Hanscom (who commits suicide after receiving the news) reconvene thirty years later when Mike informs them of It’s return.

scene the metonymy works on the level of establishing an association between drains and the character Pennywise, and also links balloons with one of the body's reviled secretions and excretions – blood – in a horrific twist on a comic water balloon prank. Pennywise repeats his balloon 'trick' in Derry's library later in the film. He releases a number of balloons in the library which splatter Richie Tozier and oblivious library members with blood once the balloons burst. In this scene, King again makes use of balloons as a symbol associated with the comedy genre and carnivals, and turns this symbol into a metonymic horror device, thereby drawing new associations between threat and impurity, and the world of clowning.

Likewise, in *The Pilo Family Circus*, Elliott makes use of blood to heighten the clowns' horrific and impure nature. Gonko and JJ use blood in a 'creative' fashion that recalls the ritual clowns' violation of the blood taboo. Carroll uses Dracula as an example of a creature who, although not "*perceptually* loathsome", is "nevertheless still disgusting and impure", and in the case of Gonko and JJ "the association of such impure creatures with perceptually pronounced gore or other disgusting trappings is a means of underscoring the repulsive nature of the being" (Carroll 1990:52). For example, when Steve, Jamie's housemate, disappears after his own compulsory audition for the clowns, Jamie enters Steve's room to find

blood on the bed. Blood on the pillow. Blood on the floor. On the walls. A hand streak of red down the wall. Jamie tottered and nearly fainted. His belly gave a heave...He had never seen *so much blood*. (Elliott 2007:42)

Unknown to Jamie, the blood in the room had belonged to the clown Rufshod and had simply been "spilled for effect" by Gonko (Elliott 2007:50). The buckets-of-blood motif is repeated when Jamie's alter ego, JJ decides to wreak revenge on Jamie. The latter wakes up in a bed of blood:

[His] bed felt hot and stuffy and stank of sweat. Sweat, and some other smell, not dissimilar. There was something sticky on his fingers...At the sight of blood his

heart kicked into gear before his mind understood what he saw. Blood covered his hand, coating every finger, down to the wrist. (Elliott 2007:209-210)

Using words such as ‘stuffy’, ‘stank’, ‘sweat’ and ‘sticky’, Elliott emphasises the repulsive qualities of this substance, which becomes even more repulsive when it is revealed that the blood belonged to the gypsy whom JJ had hacked to death, and that Jamie had been sleeping in it all night. Jamie then recalls JJ’s murder of the gypsy man in intricate detail and continues the metonymic emphasis with descriptions of being coated in, and slipping on, a puddle of blood: While hacking away at the body of the gypsy, JJ had been

panting like a wolf, spattered so thick with blood it was a second skin. Finally he’d slipped in a puddle of it...Jamie recalled all this, done with his own hands...Nausea flushed through him. He got up from his bed and collapsed. His sheets were drenched in blood; he’d slept in it all night...He threw up and retched on his knees, saliva running from his mouth in long strings. And there was more. JJ had left him a message, painted it in blood with a perfectly calm hand. Up on the cupboard door: ITS COMING JAMIE. (Elliott 2007:210)

Jamie’s nauseous reaction to the sight of great quantities of blood is the metonymic device used to guide the audience’s perception of the clowns as threatening and impure beings. By adding vomit and saliva from the body’s range of involuntary excretions, the horrific metonymy climaxes with an image of Jamie throwing up. These excretions are linked to blood in the ritual clowns’ repertoire which survived, albeit in a vestigial form and substituted with water, in contemporary clowns’ shows.

### Scatology

Rituals centred on the clowns’ violation of the blood taboo include all substances closely related to it, such as urine, faeces and spittle, and are directly linked to scatological practices. Scatology, which refers to a vulgar preoccupation or obsession with faeces,

excretory functions and obscenity, plays an integral role in the use of horrific metonymy to render horror creatures impure and revolting.

Makarius (1970:48) describes these rituals by using the practices of the Zuni and Hopi tribes' clowns, from New Mexico and Arizona respectively, as an example:

Among the Zuni, the Newekwe are the clowns associated with the medicine. Formerly, it is said, they used to drink bowls full of urine and feed on excrements and all sorts of filthy matter. Together with the Koyemshi, other Zuni clowns, they used to drench the public with urine. During the Shalako ceremony, women pour water on the public...In all likelihood water is used as a substitute for urine...during the ritual combats between the feminine societies and clowns' societies of the Hopi, large quantities of dirty water and stale urine are poured on the participants. The urine and the water that replaces it carry a definite connotation of 'medicine'. If the urine, which in principle ought to be feminine, does not represent menstrual blood, it is its nearest substitute.

Vestigial references to the blood taboo in the use of water in contemporary clowns' repertoire can be seen in such examples as the hole-in-the-bucket routine, spurting water at one another from their mouths, sticking water hoses in their trousers, and so forth, and the use of whoopee cushions and the sounds of passing gas are not unfamiliar in clowning routines. In Clive Barker's play *Crazyface* (1997b:76) for instance, the eponymous Crazyface comes across an old mute clown who "blows out a long, slow column of water" as "his eternal greeting". In a typical *Commedia dell'Arte* scene "water was thrown about, and characters spat fountains of water out of their mouths to drench their companions" (Speaight 1980:13). These routines have their origin in the tradition of throwing liquid at audience members and each other, as a healing ritual. Other liquids stand in for the blood as its substituted symbol when dealing with the public, and while the use of blood has disappeared from most practices, its substitution remains a prominent feature.

The dichotomy between contemporary circus clowns and ritual clowns brings to light an interesting tension in the popular perception of the clown figure. Although the contemporary clowns' water routines may have originated from healing rituals – and although these clowns have incorporated many of the characteristics of the trickster and ritual fools as relics of these early comic figures – with the loss of ritual significance and civic duty, they do not fulfil the same role of designated healer and powerful member of society.

As described above, scatology features strongly in Elliott's *The Pilo Family Circus* and most, if not all, of the body's excretions are used as metonymic devices at some point during the narrative. To illustrate, soon after the clown troupe had wrecked Jamie's abode in as many ways as possible in their efforts to teach him a lesson, Jamie found "On his pillow...what looked to be a giant pile of human shit, curled up like a fat dead snake" (Elliott 2007:20). Later the clowns return to burn down the house and Jamie walks in to his room to find one of the clowns "carefully lifting the pillow from Jamie's bed; he seemed to be rescuing the mound of shit from the flames spreading over the blanket, as though he held a sleeping infant" (Elliott 2007:24).

Gonko's obsession with scatology and consequent expression of this obsession in creatively repulsive ways, subverts the contemporary clowns' censored nod towards the scatological in their repertoires. As Jamie made his way through the wrecked house, he found

a thin rope tied in a hangman's noose, from which a small teddy bear hung by the neck. There was a scrap of paper stuffed into the ripped hole in its backside. Jamie took it out and read the block crayon message: GOOB BYE CRULE WORLD [sic]. (Elliott 2007:20)

Gonko's most invasively scatological act is revealed after Jamie's comedy incident with the rolling pin<sup>11</sup> clowns during which he blacked out, Jamie wakes up to realise that

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 2, page 23.

“[s]omething was lodged in his rectum – God help him, there was. With a shaking hand he patted his backside and felt something stiff jutting out. He pulled it free...It was a rolled-up note” inviting him to a clowning audition (Elliott 2007:26). This incident underscores the view that Gonko’s scatological obsession is not only impure; it is also violating and abhorrently intrusive.

In an ultimate scatological act – the climax of the clowns’ tirade – the clowns reverse the plumbing of the house so that all the sewage contents are expunged from the pipes. While walking past the toilet, Jamie

saw the rest of his clothes had been stuffed into the bowl. Another wet drop slid through the floorboards above and landed on his head...On the back of his hand was a brown streak across the knuckles...Through the gaps in the floorboards above, sewage was trickling like melting snow. Jamie managed to walk calmly outside and run his head under the laundry tap before he keeled over and was silently sick. (Elliott 2007:26-27)

Once Jamie becomes embroiled in the clowns’ world, he spends a great deal of his time vomiting or feeling nauseous, not only from the clowns’ scatological obsessions and vile body odours, but also, as discussed in the second chapter, from sharing his body with a psychopathic clown alter ego.

These reactions regularly occur when Jamie comes in contact with Goshy. In one example, to compensate for a botched clown show, one of the circus proprietors, George Pilo, sends the clown troupe on a mission to the outside world – a trip which requires them to squeeze into an outdoor latrine and later a portaloos which serve as portals between realms. During this trip JJ finds himself

pressed uncomfortably against Goshy whose breath smelled like rotting fruit...JJ didn’t know how much longer he could stand it – Goshy’s breath was getting worse by the second, creeping like snails into his nostrils. (Elliott 2006:199)

The association with typical outdoor toilet facilities – which are dirty, unhygienic and reeking of sewage by reputation, combined with the imagery of snails and decomposed fruit, and JJ's nauseated response to Goshy, act as metonymic devices with which to sketch a picture of Goshy as an impure, revolting figure and encapsulates the clowns' environment as a whole.

This revulsion is also communicated through descriptions of other characters' experience of Goshy. Moments before the Goshy's marriage to his fern – an event arranged by the clown troupe's leader to satisfy Kurt Pilo's fascination with Christian ceremony, Elliott (2006:266) describes how "Goshy was coaxed into the tent, waddling like some mutant penguin in his suit" while the guests stared "in sullen revulsion at the plant and at Goshy". Whereas this bizarre display can be considered as a comic skit in the circus ring, in Elliott's novel Goshy's grotesque nature is established, not only through his human/animal duality but also through what the characters perceive as a repulsive physical nature.

Jamie is caught in the 'honeymoon suite' after JJ deliberately hid away in the cupboard before removing the face paint. Jamie's description of what he encounters after waking up to Goshy and the fern 'consummating' their marriage, works as a metonymic device with which to horrify the reader and is reminiscent of the language surrounding Rabelais' iconic carnivalesque characters, the hedonistic and grotesque giants Gargantua and Pantagruel. The scene is described in acute detail:

Forward and back Goshy's backside plunged and withdrew. His throat made that horrible gargling whistle sound as the plant's leaves shook with his thrusts. The buttocks loomed over Jamie larger than life...Shivering, he slid the door back in place...Goshy turned around, his face pulled back into fleshy rings, eyes bulging...His face flashed with livid alien fury. Then came the screams. (Elliott 2006:268)

During a rebel group of the circus's violent and chaotic uprising against the Pilos', Goshy returns to his room to find the flower pot on the floor, the soil spilled, and his beloved fern ripped to pieces, with a trail of leaves leading out the door:

Goshy's face was changing colours from one moment to the next; his skin went blue, yellow, green, black, bright red then back to its sickly pink. He stood motionless in the doorway of his room, like a pile of lard sculpted into a vaguely human shape and painted tacky colours. (Elliott 2007:284)

Goshy is compared to a range of impure and vile objects and substances. These descriptions of Goshy, and other characters' behaviour towards him, are used as a metonymic device to establish him as a figure of disgust and horror and an embodiment of the grotesque.

The grotesque image of contre-Auguste clowns "displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs", illustrated by a body that "copulates, defecates, overeats", and through dialogue that is "flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts" (Bakhtin 1984:318, 319). However, whereas the corporeal body and all its aspects are celebrated with medieval grotesque, as I have shown, the opposite applies in the Romantic view of the grotesque.

Carroll (1990:52) argues that horrific metonymy "need not be restricted to cases where the monsters do not look gruesome; an already misshapen creature can be associated with entities already antecedently thought of in terms of impurity and filth". *Spawn's* Clown – the earthly form and persona of a demon called the Violator – embodies the medieval grotesque and scatological preoccupations in his obscene physical appearance and behaviour. Clown is an overweight, drooling, malevolent, grovelling, clown-hating clown with a pallid, bloated belly constantly on display. In his on-screen manifestation, we are invited to view Clown as an impure, horrifying creature through his constant salivating and disgusting behaviour such as eating a pizza slice crawling with maggots (allegedly



the actor John Leguizamo ate live maggots for the scene), and snacking on worms dipped in a jar of lard. He also breaks wind and comments on it – “ooh, twins”, and, parodying the angel Clarence in Frank Capra’s film *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), jokes that “every time somebody farts a demon gets his wings” – and at one point Clown waves his dirty underpants in Spawn’s face (*Spawn* 1997). The anarchic, socially transgressive characteristics of the clowns described above, tie in with the mythological trickster who is “frequently involved in scatological and coprophagous episodes which may be creative, destructive, or simply amusing” (Babcock-Abrahams 1975:160). This holds true for the character of Clown; despite the effects of his revolting, anarchic and morally corrupt behaviour, one cannot help but be torn between repulsion and amusement.

One of the seminal scenes in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* – intended to rival the iconic shower scene in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* – draws on scatological and otherwise reviled elements to enhance the impurity of their killer clowns. During this scene, a handful of popcorn that had been clinging to Debbie’s sweater since she was shot at by one of the clowns starts to ‘hatch’ while she prepares to take a shower, revealing snake-like, skeletal monster clown puppets with razor sharp teeth. It becomes clear that the clown shot at Debbie and her partner Mike Tobacco and as a means to pollinate them with the popcorn-shaped eggs. The Chiodo brothers forged a scatological link between popcorn as a circus symbol, and the vile and horrific creatures that emerged from them, by setting the scene in a bathroom and by having the first of the snakelike clowns emerge from the toilet to attack Debbie.

### Death and Bodily Decay

Death and corpses are also central to the iconography of horror. Taking Julia Kristeva’s view of the abject, the body’s excretions and secretions signal the ultimate abjection, namely the corpse, or more specifically, the body’s decay. Kristeva (1982:3) explains:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death...A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly acid

smell of sweat, of decay, does not dignify *death*...No, as in true theater...refuge and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly, and with difficulty, on the part of death.

The decaying body is one of the most popular metonymic devices used in horror films, especially in zombie films. Carroll agrees that “zombies with great gobs of phlegm dangling from their lips exemplify horrific metonymy. In *Dead Clowns*, for example, Steve Sessions combines the clown and zombie figures to produce the film’s horrific monsters. Sessions’ zombie clowns are at an advanced stage of decay by the time they emerge from the bay and are only recognised as clowns, or even as formerly human, by their costumes.

For Bakhtin (1984:319) the “body that figures in all the expressions of the unofficial speech of the people is the body that fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks defecates, is sick and dying”. David J. Skal (1993:311) adds that “[h]orror films of the seventies and eighties began exhibiting symptoms remarkably similar to some of those suffered by victims of post-traumatic stress syndrome”, most pertinently the “endlessly repeated images of nightmare assaults on the human body, especially its sudden and explosive destruction”.

Whereas the medieval grotesque celebrates the abject as an integral part of human existence, the Romantic grotesque presents it as an undesirable, abominable state, and yet the fascination with mortality and its bodily symptoms is no less diminished by the change in perspective. Stott (2005:76) explains the abject as “an ever-present sight of horror and fascination that pollutes the self, because the self partly consists of it”. Julia Kristeva’s (1982:4) essay on abjection sheds light on the potential of the grotesque body to repulse us and presents the corpse as the epitome of the abject:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not

part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

Whether in horror or comedy, the grotesque body is interstitial in terms of straddling the living/dead duality and as embodiment of the abject. Maurice Willson Disher (1925:29-30) agrees that the “clown who dies in mirth-paint gives an added terror to the spectacle of death”. This duality is illustrated by Disher’s (1925:29-30) account of the horror a boy had endured after finding a clown dead in full costume:

As a child Mr Chance Newton felt this shock at the time he was a sprite in a pantomime. The clown, William Buck of Surrey fame, did not appear. The sprite, sent to call him, found him dead – he had snuffed the bismuth of his white make-up into his brain.

The abject corpse is ever-present in the clown’s costume. Even in the event of a contre-Auguste clown’s death, he still looks like a clown because the mask conceals, and partly represents, death while at the same time mocking it with a garish, ‘happy face’.

In the horror genre, as a form of Romantic grotesque, the tension between the will to live and the inevitability of death finds its extreme negative expression in the embodiment of this paradox: the living dead. If the clown’s white face was a source of delight in the seventeenth century – with clowns such as Gros-Guillaume who entertained the audience by blowing the flour from his face during performances – it later became associated more with the pallid, ashen faces of ghosts and vampires.

As Carroll insists, horror creatures are not always automatically perceived as horrific, but, with the use of horrific metonymy, their impurity and threatening potential is emphasised. As I will illustrate using examples from a number of horror narratives, killer clowns are associated with death through their white face paint, as well as the images and descriptions of bodily decay that surround them, in the form of excretions.

The Chiodo brothers appropriate candyfloss, another carnival symbol, as a horrific device and forge an association with death and ‘body juices’ in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*. The clowns trap their victims in pink ‘candyfloss’ cocoons which are filled with digestive juices, similar to that of spiders. The bodies then slowly dissolve into a type of syrup that the clowns ingest using ‘wacky’ straws.

This process is graphically illustrated during the scene where Mike and Officer Dave Hanson enter the cocoon chamber to save Debbie. A fat clown enters the chamber and tests the cocoons, as one would do with fruit to verify its ripeness, before plunging a multi-bent ‘wacky’ straw into one of the cocoons, on which he leisurely sucks. There are close-ups of the pink fluid flowing through the straw and the clown’s mouth sucking in rhythm. The slimy consistency of the fluid inside the cocoons and the suggestion of what it actually consists of, forge a metonymic association between the clowns, candyfloss, body fluids and the horror of putrefying bodies.

In another example, a group of clowns pelt a night guard with cream pies at a seaside fairground, covering him entirely in cream, but instead of the victim merely suffering a bruised ego and messy face, he is dissolved to the bone by acid. Cream pies are one of the staple props used in clown shows on stage, in the circus ring, and even in film and television with the likes of British and American clown duo Laurel and Hardy pelting one another for laughs. The Chiodo brothers subvert this popular gag by adding a deadly twist to it as well as linking cream pies with the horror of a dissolving body.

### Underground Spaces and the Derelict Carnival

As described in the novel *IT*, Pennywise the clown inhabits a sewer plant and coaxes his first victim, George, Bill’s younger brother, from a sewer drain in the street using the smells and images associated with carnivals and circuses to lure him closer:

George leaned forward [to take the balloon Pennywise offers him]. Suddenly he could smell peanuts! Hot roasted peanuts! And Vinegar!...He could smell cotton

candy and frying doughboys and the faint but thunderous odor of wild-animal shit. He could smell the cheery aroma of midway sawdust. And yet...And yet under it all was the smell of flood and decomposing leaves and dark stormdrain shadows. That smell was wet and rotten. The cellar smell. (King 1987:21)

Similar to the metonymic devices used in *The Pilo Family Circus*, the above scene draws a link between cellars, sewers and drains, and the seemingly wholesome images and smells of carnivals and circuses. The novel's introduction to the clown in the storm drain also sets the standard for the impure spaces and degradation common to horror films, from which Pennywise emerges and into which he lures children. These include a swamp-like lake near the sewage plant in Derry and the town's sewage system.

To cite a specific example, during a shower scene in the film where Eddie meets the clown for the first time, Pennywise starts speaking to him from the plug hole and asks him to "Hold on while I make a few adjustments", then begins to stretch the drain hole, fingers first, before popping up midway crying, "Here I am Wheezy!" (*IT* 1990). He proceeds to torment Eddie verbally and using his catch-phrase, invites him to come down where he will "float" like the rest of Pennywise's victims.

The killer clowns' habitation of derelict, underground and liminal spaces, which emphasises their representation as horrific and vile beings, echoes the geography of the spaces inhabited by the archetypal trickster. The trickster, as

marginal figure[,] effaces spatial boundaries in several distinct ways: (1) he is a vagabond who lives beyond all bounded communities and is not confined or linked to any designated space; (2) he lives in cells, caves, ghettos, and other "underground" areas – like the spider inhabiting the nooks and crannies of social spaces. (Babcock-Abrahams 1975:155)

However, the Trickster's habitation of underground spaces reinforces the idea of his or her liminality and marginality, or 'otherness'. In clown horror films, on the other hand,

the ‘underground’ aspect of these spaces is given a strictly pejorative meaning and the negative connotations are highlighted to underscore the killer clowns’ threatening and impure qualities.

In the bathroom scene mentioned previously, Pennywise’s voice also emanates from the plughole of the bathroom sink in Beverly’s house, again signifying the monster’s preference for inhabiting sewers and drains. In keeping with Babcock-Abrahams’ description, the final scenes in the film version of *IT* reveal the monster to be a giant spider living in a cave deep underneath Derry. As the above scenes illustrate, clowns inhabiting underground spaces, is a recurring theme in killer clown narratives<sup>12</sup>.

The negative, seedier aspects of circuses and carnivals are often fore-grounded in horror narratives and various clown figures in the horror genre occupy an ‘underground’ or derelict carnival space. The carnival/circus setting is not simply a place that signifies comedy, joy and fun. It also symbolises the immorality, dereliction and social decay that feature strongly in various fun-house horror films and other genres, with or without clown figures as antagonists, and provides a rich resource for horrific metonymy in clown horror films

Depictions of the carnival and circus as a cesspool of criminal activity and moral depravity are legion.<sup>13</sup> Circuses and fairgrounds carry the reputation of a ‘hard life’, of squalid conditions, underhand dealings and shady characters and the image of the clown, often seen as the ‘face’ of circuses, is inherently associated with this reputation. David Hammarstrom (1980:44) quotes a performing clown as saying:

You may be reaching for the stars when you join a circus...[but in time] you’ll settle for a gas station across the street with hot running water and a lock on the door so you can keep your associates out while you enjoy the luxury of a private

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<sup>12</sup> The killer clown in Kevin Kangas’s film *Fear of Clowns* (2004), lives in the cellar of a derelict house, while in *Dead Clowns*, the zombie clowns rise from their watery grave.

<sup>13</sup> William Lindsay Gresham’s pulp novel *Nightmare Alley* (1946) and Tod Browning’s film *Freaks* (1932) are but two examples.

shave...[the] quest for romance and glamour will fade into a struggle for the basics.

In another passage, Hammarstrom (1980:58) explains that when ticket sales didn't break even, the seedy side of the circus would reveal itself, opening its business to

the bad guys: fixers and phonemen, short-change artists and pickpockets; card sharks and shell workers, alias precocious little devils in their youth. Scoundrels of all persuasions who come alive where crowds form and there are ample distraction to keep their defences down.

The negative side of circus culture extends beyond fraud, poverty and criminal activities; pointing to a far more disturbing duality and paradoxical motives. Skal (1993:29) explains that “[c]arnivals and circuses have included close encounters with the macabre almost since their inception [with] Sergeant-Major Philip Astley (born in 1742), the English inventor of the modern circus ring...presenting both animal and human freaks and other bizarre exhibits”. Skal (1993:30) continues:

Popular ‘amusements’ have a flip side that is often less than sunny, and the very word ‘recreation’ has some usually overlooked connotations. Any process of recreation or rebirth necessarily entails a death of some sort or another. This may explain the prevalence of sugar-coated intimations of morality in carnivals and fun parks – spook shows, wild rides involving heart-stopping plunges and near-collisions, and the omnipresent, endlessly cycling wheels and whirligigs of chance, fate and destiny. Freak shows similarly offer a glimpse of ourselves, re-created along strange physical or behavioural lines. Nothing is fixed, and everything is possible.

It is not enough to claim that circuses are simply institutions geared toward benevolent entertainment when considering that “[f]airgrounds and carnivals were the original

laboratories for entertainment that thrilled and frightened, from the freak show to the roller coaster to the ghost-train” (Skal 1993:37).

In horror narratives such as *The Pilo Family Circus* and *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, this aspect of circuses is brought to the fore and, together with the behavioural habits and physical features of the horror clowns, these elements function as metonymic devices with which to accentuate the contre-Auguste clown’s grotesque and horrific nature in the context of horror.

Both *The Pilo Family Circus* clown troupe and the clowns in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* inhabit derelict show grounds – the former in an alternate realm of reality and the latter in a seaside amusement park. In *The Pilo Family Circus* Jamie finds himself surrounded by the cliché of seedy, somewhat sinister fairgrounds. His first impressions of the show grounds by day soon evaporate when he encounters a multitude of “foul-tempered little” dwarves and gypsies, a real freak show – with creatures ‘remodelled’ by a character referred to as the MM, the matter manipulator or flesh sculptor – and the funhouse, the MM’s ‘workshop’ from which “bestial howls, women’s screams, a sound like giant teeth grinding together” can be heard (Elliott 2007:65).

In the horror narratives described above, metonymy not only links clowns to “perceptually disgusting things” (Carroll 1990:53), but also inverts archetypal clowns’ celebration of the corporeal and the use of these substances for healing, and later, humouring, purposes. The metonymic devices reinstate the taboo, hence the focus on the revolting, impure, and in some instances dangerous and threatening, qualities. Lucile Hoerr Charles (1945:32) makes the point that “a clown is concerned always with something which is not quite proper; with something embarrassing, astonishing, shocking, but not too much so”, a fact that “seems to be a constant at all times and in all places”. However, a clown is only an acceptable figure as long as “[h]e is playing with fire; but...is not the fire” – and once “he identifies himself with the fire he is no longer funny; that fine, delightful sense of balance and mastery is lost, and the clown becomes pathetic, ineffective, disgusting”, and in some cases threatening (Charles 1945: 32).



As the above excerpts demonstrate, once a metonymic link is created between the killer clowns and the elements of the lower stratum of humanity, and they become directly associated with death and decay, their impure and threatening qualities as horrific creatures are emphasised.

To summarise, the comic body of the contre-Auguste circus clown, as seen in light of Bakhtin's theory on grotesque realism, lends itself to subversion when the clown figure is transposed from its role as comedy circus entertainer to the role of monster and killer in the horror genre. The appearance of horror clowns plays a seminal role in perpetuating a fear of clowns because they deliberately exploit the fear of beings that do not conform to socially accepted forms. Clowns are reinterpreted as figures of horror when they no longer represent the comic celebration and disarming of violent impulses, insanity and deformity and instead represent these three elements as impure and threatening.

## Chapter 4

### Mad Clowns – From Mountebank to Maniac

Having looked at how clowns' physical aberrations are utilised in the methods employed to create monsters, this chapter concerns itself with mental aberration, and the task is to see whether the theme of mental illness in clowns' comedy repertoire, in the form of comic madness, carries the potential of threat when coupled with violence and the Romantic grotesque. I will investigate the potential for horror and repulsion in comic madness in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1990), as well as in *The Pilo Family Circus*.

In his essay entitled *Laughter*, Henri Bergson (1956:146) reveals that "the comic expresses, above all else, a special lack of adaptability to society" and is at odds with his environment. McManus (2003:12) explains that despite "superficial differences from tradition to tradition", the clown's "peculiar status both inside and outside of the dramatic fiction", is a status achieved by clown logic: "a different logic of performance practice from the other characters".

Clowns' performances are created from the basis of the natural fool's bafflement: simple tasks made complicated, comic disruptions of structured events, inability to follow 'protocol' or observe social decorum, and illogical relationships with ordinary objects. The role of the clown is structured around a distinct and absurd plain of cognition; a way of 'being' in the world, regardless of his or her motives. This tradition of 'self-mockery' and the execution of illogical acts to humorous effect, endures and is prevalent in circuses and at children's parties to this day. Wright (2006:180) describes clowning as

the only socially acceptable expression of stupidity...It's the only mode of performance that doesn't require you to know why you're doing something. Clowning turns idiocy into an art form. It's an open invitation for you to do what

you like, how you like, but only for as long as we like it. Our pleasure as an audience is your only control factor in playing a clown.

He refers to this level of performance as the clown's bafflement or idiocy – a mode of performance dictated by audiences' approval in the form of laughter.

Clowns' innate tendency towards contradicting their environment, which McManus sees as the one corresponding quality common to all clown types, allows them to be interpreted as criminally insane, once interpreted in a context where the rules and regulations flouted by the clown are geared towards reason, order and civility. Transposed from the mad world of clowning into a horror narrative, clowns become, to paraphrase Carroll, extraordinary monsters in an ordinary world where they are portrayed as psychopathic and/or criminal characters.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of the clown-as-maniac can be viewed as a result of the fission of the clown's paradoxical nature – i.e. the splitting of contradictory elements into a mode of being where these elements are presented as “mutually exclusive identities” – to create or accentuate his horrific potential (Carroll 1990:46). The archetypal clown's doppelganger, or alter ego, is therefore represented as a maniacal killer clown in horror films. This fission takes place in varying degrees, ranging from entertaining monster to an extreme psychopath with little or no sense of humour. His earlier position as volitional transgressive and violating figure for the purpose of restoring rational behaviour in his community – as the ritual clowns have done – is thus displaced in the depiction of a threatening maniacal and criminal figure in the popular imagination.

Furthermore, when a clown's 'idiocy' is appropriated in the horror genre, the balance of power identified by Wright as a clown's license for mad behaviour shifts away from the control of the audience into the hands of the clown. The killer clowns in the *Batman*

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<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding the chosen texts, examples where clowns have been coupled with madness and psychopathy include films such as *Gacy*, Tommy Brunswick's film *Mr Jingles* (2006), Victor Salva's film *Clownhouse* (1989), *Fear of Clowns*, the *Camp Blood* trilogy. Examples can also be found in Barker's play *Crazyface*. The relationship between clowns and insanity also inspired such musical groups as the *Insane Clown Posse*.

graphic novels and in *The Pilo Family Circus* behave as they like regardless of whether or not their audiences approve. The horrific potential of the clowns' madness emerges once clowns no longer 'play dumb' for the audience's delight; instead, they act only to serve their own needs by inverting the position of power and turning their audiences into the butt of their maniacal jokes.

The baffled clown's principal influence is the natural fool, who is considered to be 'destitute of reason'. In Europe, most notably in the Middle Ages, fools were kept by the wealthy to illustrate their generosity in the hope of a form of recompense from God – a custom that was based on a "feature of medieval society that the lunatic was regarded with some awe as one 'possessed by God' and it is from these simple-minded fools there developed the profession of court jester, who was probably recruited from the ranks of the minstrels" (Speaight 1980:7). The Clown in his guise as one of the *zanni* was "essentially a buffoon, a stupid servant, he was the 'village idiot' of the *Commedia* and, subsequently, of the Harlequinade" (Lathan 2004:31).

Disher (1925:28) thus describes how the court jester has, through mimicking the natural court fools, come to be identified with the clown, at least in name:

[f]olly became profitable. The quick-witted coveted the place of the half-witted and obtained his privileges without shame. That is the origin of the jester, the "material fool" whom Shakespeare dubs clown, because in his day the servant licensed to abuse had become confused with the mummer subjected to abuse. But the real stage clown is different in origin. The country lout was not dressed in livery and given a seat at lords' tables. The only share he took in the profession of mirth was to inspire comic actors to mimic his ways. Then, as the name of fool stuck to the jester long after he had ceased to resemble the half-wit, so the name of clown was kept by comedians.

Disher's reference to the use of the term *clown* implies that the medieval travelling actors who played the sot had also been imitated by court jesters. The travelling actors and the

jesters both mimicked the ways of the infirm and the peasant class, and contemporary circus and festival clowns still draw on the amusing aspects of the mentally and socially inept, and play 'stupid' to amuse their audience.

The difference between clowns who played the fool and natural fools is the difference between "volitional and non-volitional marginality" and between low and high intelligence (Babcock-Abrahams 1975:153). The distinction is made between non-volitional and volitional trampling over rules and norms – the former being the speciality of the illiterate traditional clown, and the latter that of the mischievous jester. A clown's level of 'madness' can be classed either as that of the 'village idiot' who does even the simplest task incompetently, or the 'wit' whose idiocy is art rather than an affliction, and works on a set of subversive, self-determined principles.

The role of non-volitional idiocy is predominantly played by the Auguste and his offshoots: the contre-Auguste, and the Hobo or Tramp clowns. Banham (1995:223) explains that "*august*, signifies a 'stupid grotesque clown'". Swortzell (1978:214) reaffirms the Auguste's position as the butt of the circus duo or trio, by describing him as "a likeable simpleton in the medieval German tradition of Hans Sachs, Hans Wurst, and Pickle Herring", who is forever jeopardising the Whiteface's 'projects' and having to bear the brunt of his scorn. In turn, the Whiteface is hardly if ever slow-witted and his or her actions are premeditated. Fo (1991:125) supports this distinction by differentiating between the "one who remains almost silent throughout, listening, nodding slightly, disagreeing with elaborate politeness, looking round with an air of wonderment, showing amazement at every little thing, however ordinary it may be", and the "fast-talking clown who fires words ten-a-penny at the audience and at other clowns".

In the clowning tradition they represent "two alternatives: to be dominated, and then we have the eternal underdog...or else to dominate, which gives us the boss, the white clown" (Fo 1991:172). The Whiteface "bears a strong resemblance to Harlequin, spiritually if not physically, with his love of mischief and his ingenious ability to get in and out of trouble [and] has a distinct preference for bright colours, mild vulgarity, and

slapstick” (Swortzell 1978:213). He is, as Fo says, the ‘boss clown’; the witty clown with the mischievous ideas and sinister motives who is forever victimizing the hapless Auguste. Speaight (1980:68) describes the Whiteface as a “haughty, pompous individual who gives orders”.

From clowns’ traditional association with natural fools, two basic levels of madness developed, as exemplified by both comedy and horror clowns: slow-witted insanity, and psychopathy or calculated madness. In killer clown narratives, the Whiteface’s quick-witted style is appropriated as a psychopathic, maniacal streak bent on premeditated violence, and the Auguste who fulfils the role of the unwitting loon, is reinterpreted as criminally insane with diminished responsibility due to low intelligence. The difference between the two forms of madness can be observed, for instance, in *The Pilo Family Circus*. Gonko and JJ represent the fast-talking Whiteface whereas Goshy and Doopy fulfil the role of baffled and slow-witted clowns. As represented by the Pilo clown troupe, both volitional and non-volitional insanity have the potential to be appropriated as threatening characteristics in a horror context.

#### The Unwitting Loon in *The Pilo Family Circus*

The second form of insanity depicted in clown horror narratives is the non-volitional type: the inability of the mentally deficient to comprehend the rules and conventions of a structured society and modified human behaviour is akin to the Auguste’s inability to “negotiate the arbitrary rules that govern the plot and characters in a dramatic context” (McManus 2003:12). Of the two brothers in the troupe, Goshy best illustrates how the clown’s non-volitional idiocy can be appropriated into a horror context. Even though Jamie’s alter ego JJ becomes one of the most feared and repulsive clowns, even he feels threatened by the least sane clown of the troupe, Goshy.

As discussed in the first chapter, Goshy’s verbal communication skills consist solely of cooing noises, a whistling sound and a high-pitched screeching which Jamie compares to

a “steel kettle boiling” (Elliott 2007:9). This illustrates his human/animal duality and also reveals his mental instability.

Goshy’s bizarre behaviour ranges from a random and inexplicable outburst while staring at a tent peg, to an infatuation with his fern which he eventually marries (Elliott 2006:176, 89). He is also found staring at the door panels outside Jamie/JJ’s room for no obvious reason, and responds excitedly to an ambulance siren as some form of ‘call’ (Elliott 2006:184, 203). Apart from his instinctive reaction to protect his fern, there are no rational explanations for Goshy’s behaviour or his relationship to objects. His outbursts are as bizarre, illogical and disturbing as his general behaviour and lack of reasoning capabilities. To illustrate, during one of their shows, Goshy offers an audience member a daisy, only to respond with violence when she accepts the flower:

She smiled at him and hesitated a second before she took it. Goshy stared at her, blinking: he seemed to be waiting for something. Then, suddenly displeased for reasons all his own, he let fly with a slap. Her head rocked sideways with a rustle of blonde hair...Goshy stared around wildly as a murmur broke out in the crowd, his hands up over his ears, his mouth flapping without sound. (Elliott 2007:69)

Even though Goshy’s actions do not seem to have any bearing on a rational thought process – he does not distinguish between audience members and actor and, as discussed in the first chapter, his relationships to objects are those of a severely mentally challenged individual – the basis from which his instinctual responses arise is purely corporeal and violent.

Goshy turns to extreme violence in an instant. His murderous nature is further made evident by the instinctive act of reaching for a wood saw after he catches Jamie hiding in the honeymoon suite during the consummation of his marriage to a fern:

Goshy turned around, his face pulled back into fleshy rings, eyes bulging...His face flashed with livid alien fury. Then came the screams...Goshy stopped

hollering and seemed to come to some kind of decision. He reached for something on the floor then took a step towards Jamie. It was a wood saw. (Elliott 2007:268)

Not only does this scene utilise horrific metonymy as a device with which to highlight Goshy's impure physical nature, but it also illustrates his instinct is to respond with extreme violence, and his animalistic duality. These qualities work together in establishing Goshy as a creature of horror. There is a historic relationship between animalism and insanity, a relationship which persists in the descriptive language of the criminal world and inextricably links predation with psychopathy. This is illustrated by the use of phrases such as "stalk" and "prey" when referring to the actions of murderers, paedophiles and rapists.

Foucault presents animalism as the element of human nature that is more commonly used to describe the criminally insane. He explains that

there was a certain image of animality that haunted the hospitals of the [classical] period. Madness borrowed its face from the mask of beast. Those chained to the cell walls were no longer men whose minds had wandered, but beasts preyed upon by a natural frenzy: as if madness, at its extreme point, freed from that moral unreason in which its most attenuated forms are enclosed, managed to rejoin, by a paroxysm of strength, the immediate violence of animality. (Foucault 1988:72)

However, far from condemning the insane as lower forms of being, Foucault (1988:73) notes the

negative fact that "the madman is not treated like a human being" has a very positive content: this inhuman indifference actually has an obsessional value: it is rooted in the old fears which since antiquity, and especially since the Middle Ages, have given the animal world its familiar strangeness, its menacing marvels, its entire weight of dumb anxiety.



The primitive, bestial aspect of insanity adds another layer to the human/animal dualism connected to various clown figures. As is illustrated by Goshy's behaviour, the archetypal clown as a manifestation of the trickster, "is not really evil, [but] he does the most atrocious things from sheer unconsciousness and unrelatedness" because his nature combines an "animal unconsciousness" with a human "extraordinary clumsiness and lack of instinct" (Jung 1991:264). This ties in with the notion of a human/animal duality in clowns and underscores the point that audiences view clowns as 'creatures' rather than as strictly human performers.

### The Calculating Psychopath in *The Pilo Family Circus* and the *Batman Comics*

The other form of insanity, namely volitional madness, is a characteristic also shared by certain manifestations of the trickster figure and horror clowns. Babcock-Abrahams (1975:159-160) agrees that as earthly counterparts of the trickster, ritual clowns "frequently exhibit some mental and/or physical abnormality", and are "generally amoral and asocial – aggressive, vindictive, vain, defiant of authority". There are killer clowns who exhibit a calculating madness – they engage in premeditated violence that stems from the basis of mental aberration.

In *The Pilo Family Circus*, the psychopathic clown is represented by Gonko, the Whiteface or 'boss clown' who revels in sadistic acts. The extremity of his violence is committed with a humorous bent, as shown in the following scenes. The narrator describes the carnage Jamie finds as he returns home thus:

His fish were floating dead, and the letters RIP had been drawn on the tank in crayon, along with a hieroglyph of a penis...On the floor were pieces of plastic and wire arranged in the shape of letters, and he recognised the smashed pieces as the remains of the telephone. The letters spelt, HES NOT HOME. Jamie somewhat abstractly noted that this piece of vandalism took a degree of patience and care, as though intended to contrast with the random violence around it; there was an almost artistic attention paid to each attack. (Elliott 2007:20-21)

The clown troupe soon returns to complete the carnage with a mixture of scatological and violent ‘gags’, extreme destruction and ironic displays of niceties. After his first face-to-face altercation with the clowns, Jamie wakes up to find that his bedroom wall

had gaping holes of torn wood; it looked as though the clowns had been working at ripping some kind of pattern – there was the beginning of what may have been a smiley face...nails had been hammered into the wall around it from the other side, so their tips would jab any hands fumbling in the dark. He almost admired the effort the clowns had gone to...over on his desk was something that made no sense: a vase of daisies, undamaged and as pretty as a picture in the middle of the carnage. And there on the charred mess that was once his bed, was what looked to be a greeting card...in the shape of a heart and said ‘For a Special Guy’. A kiss had been smudged on it with lipstick. (Elliott 2007:25-26)

Gonko’s psychopathic level of violence is not limited to objects and animals but extends in equal measure to other people. Once Jamie is recruited, Gonko repeatedly releases his psychopathic humour on the nameless apprentice who had failed his clowning audition. Gonko reinvents the concept of ‘firing’ an employee by setting the apprentice alight:

He set the match to the apprentice’s pants. A lick of flame crawled over the flower-printed fabric...Gonko stood in the doorway and watched with a smile. The apprentice stirred and rolled around as the fire spread to his shirt...he let out a wheezing strangulated croak before bolting up and out into the night. Gonko stuck out a boot and tripped him as he passed. The apprentice got to his feet and staggered away, the fire blazing across his shoulders. (Elliott 2007:93)

Gonko continues this tirade before finally killing the apprentice during a premeditated act and in a graphic display of brutality. He derives unadulterated pleasure from grotesque violence and shows no hint of remorse. The narrator describes in this scene how the “clown leader blew the apprentice a kiss then raised the pipe over his head, and slammed it down” repeatedly; “each blow sang out a dull chiming note, singing in sick harmony

with crunching of bone” and the “lead pipe thundered down steadily long after the limbs had ceased thrashing” (Elliott 2007:208). What makes this scene so horrific is not only the physical destruction of the apprentice’s body, but the knowledge that it is ‘perfectly normal’ according to Gonko, who calls his level of violence “genuine slapstick” (Elliott 2007:90).

JJ is similarly amoral, and driven only by self-gratification, he refuses to take any side unless there is something to be gained from it. Jamie realises with horror that regardless of JJ’s subordinate position to the old clown Winston, “JJ would have stabbed him in the back just for chuckles” (Elliott 2007:140). As discussed in the previous chapter, after witnessing the apprentice’s death at the hands of Gonko, an incited JJ goes out to replicate the murder, substituting Gonko’s victim and weapon with a carnival gypsy and an axe, hoping to shock Jamie into submission with his prank. When Jamie wakes up after this, he instantly recalls the murder and JJ’s dissociation from the reality of his actions and the enjoyment he felt:

Up. Down. Up. Down. The flat of the axe into his skull. The calm emotionless ease of the swings, not a moment’s hesitation, the small grunt the gypsy made as his skull was crushed. That had been the moment of death but the beginning of JJ’s fun. (Elliott 2007:210)

The aspect of horror comes into play not only in the acts themselves but in our realisation that Gonko and JJ do not commit crime and inflict violence for any reason beyond personal enjoyment and self-amusement – to play a ‘joke’ on their victims. In this, both characters bear a resemblance to the most prolific and longstanding mad, criminal clown figure in popular culture: the Joker of the *Batman* comic series.

The Joker – a character modelled on “a photograph of actor Conrad Veidt wearing make-up for the silent film *The Man Who Laughs* (1928)”, and referred to as the “Clown Prince of Crime, the Harlequin of Hate, [or] the Ace of Knives” (Anon 2008c) – has a

propensity for violence, anti-social behaviour and his deliberate disregard of laws echoes Whiteface or ritual clowns' inclination towards malevolence and anarchy.

The Joker epitomises the subversion of comic idiocy into psychopathy with a criminal bent. He is known as the ultimate and longest running mad clown whose audiences have been suffering his maniacal gags for decades. He is a prominent example of the appropriation of the clowns' 'idiocy' and inherent tendency to contradict their milieu. He exemplifies the psychopathic end of the insanity spectrum and throughout the series victimises and strikes fear into the residents of Gotham city – whom he treats as his audience and as pawns in his 'jokes' – with his violent and destructive displays of lunacy. The Joker's behaviour illustrates the shift between comedy and horror that takes place once the audience no longer has control over a clown's 'idiocy' and once idiocy is combined with grotesquery and violence.

The Joker was first portrayed in the comic book series in 1940 as a mass murderer, before changing into a harmless mountebank and then again, more recently, into a raging sociopath (Anon 2008c). Toned down from his 1940s origin as a serial murderer during the 1950s and 1960s,

Joker's pranks were lighthearted, harmless, and always easy to see through. But when Batman and the Joker re-emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, after 50 years of their "game"...a major motion picture and a renewal of the original comic series, along with other offshoots, introduced a more savvy and ruthless Joker. Like other evil counterparts of the 1990s, the Joker turned from a fool to a cool killer, with his "jokes" ending in murder, mayhem, and destruction. (Christen 1998:96)

Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (1991:199) explain that "[t]he Joker started his career as a smiling killer who murdered for profit, countered by an uncomplicated, non-nonsense, vigilante Batman"; he then "became a relatively harmless merry prankster, countered by an uncomplicated, good-natured, boy scout Batman", before his current role in the comics as "an increasingly out-of-control Joker [who] is a raging madman".

Throughout his comic book career, the Joker bases his ploys and vendetta against Batman on subversion and undermining authority, clownish pranks and the concept of fooling his audiences and victims. Batman strives to bring order to Gotham City, while the Joker does his best to frustrate Batman's efforts. As the character develops, he begins committing serious crimes with no other motive than to create mayhem and undermine law and order in any imaginable way. In Tim Burton's film *Batman* (1989) and Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker is portrayed with a scarred face, which accentuates his grotesque and mad characteristics.

In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker, played by the late Heath Ledger,

kills erstwhile allies for pleasure, and...enjoys a sexual frisson from shattering other people's lives. But the Joker's true motives are unexplained, unlike those of all previous comic-book villains. 'Some men', says Batman's butler Alfred, the moral center of Bruce Wayne's universe, 'just want to see the world burn'.

(Ackerman 2008)

Whereas Batman puts his faith in the potential of order and justice, the nihilistic Joker seeks solace in chaos. This is made clear in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, when the Joker says "It's all a *joke!* Everything anybody ever *valued* or *struggled* for...it's all a *monstrous* demented *gag!* So why can't you see the funny side?" (Moore 1988:40). The Joker chooses to embrace the random absurdity and 'insanity' of human existence, and most importantly, he derives pleasure from 'upsetting the balance of things'. For Christopher Sharrett (1991:36),

[t]he Joker is not so much a Doppelgänger as an antithesis. A force of chaos. Batman imposes his order on the world; he is an absolute control freak. The Joker is Batman's most maddening opponent. He represents the chaos Batman despises, the chaos that killed his parents.

In keeping with McManus' description of clown's comic logic, the Joker's sociopathic deeds serve no other purpose than to 'contradict' the environment in which he finds himself, and he derives simple pleasure from destruction and chaos. The Joker attempts to impose his view that it is not only his world that 'conspires against him', but that the world in general is a madhouse and life randomly and indiscriminately makes fools of everyone.

The Joker embodies the clown's inability to adapt to social norms – a mental deviance that manifests itself in the iconic physical disfigurement of a rictus, white face and green hair. Whether portrayed as criminals in clown disguises or as mad clowns by nature, insanity, psycho- or sociopathy and criminality are key aspects in clown horror films and the Joker, who wears insanity as a badge and uses the rictus as his trademark, embodies all of these characteristics.

The Joker, although not strictly a contre-Auguste, adopts the exaggerated smile and laughter from the iconography of clowning and comedy – in the form of cackle<sup>15</sup> and rictus – to accompany his anarchic and criminal acts. The rictus, described in the second chapter as a key characteristic of the grotesque, is closely associated with insanity.

Clive Barker (1997a:173) states that “[o]ne of the most unendurable experiences we can have goes like this: we look into a human face and see madness there. Insanity is the most pure, the most undiluted horror”. He makes this statement with reference to the series of grimacing sculptures done by the German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xavier Messerschmidt (1736–1783), which were based on his own facial expressions during a period in which he “suffered from dementia, paranoia [and] hallucinations”, claiming that they were “mementoes of his encounters with the spirits that tormented him” (Barker 1997a:173).

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<sup>15</sup> The clown's cackle is used as a motif in *Mr Jingles* to announce his presence before committing murder and in Craig Ross's film *Killjoy* (2000) the eponymous clown laughs while playing fatal jokes on his victims.

The Joker's rictus not only features as a symbol of madness, but also acts as a symbol of death. The rictus has been linked with death, specifically through the image of the skull. Michel Foucault (1988:15-16) holds that

in the last years of the [fifteenth] century...the mockery of madness replaces death and its solemnity...What death unmasks was never more than a mask; to discover the grin of the skeleton, one need only to lift off something that was neither beauty nor truth, but only a plaster and tinsel face. From the vain mask to the corpse, the same smile persists. But when the madman laughs, he already laughs with the laugh of death; the lunatic anticipating the macabre, has disarmed it.

The macabre coupling of death and madness through the rictus is expressed in the Joker's uses of 'Joker juice', a serum which he injects into his victims, leaving the corpses with a permanent grin on their faces. The Joker's signature grin inspires terror, not laughter. This is illustrated in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, where the Joker injects the serum into a carnival proprietor who acquires the fixed rictus of his murderer. In Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the Joker fatally gasses an entire audience and the corpses are all left with the same grimaces. After a protracted battle with Batman, the Joker dies, also retaining the same frightful rictus that appears to mock the solemnity of death. There is something in the juxtaposition of criminal or malevolent motives against the fixed smile of the clown mask or make-up that conjures the image of the maniac and psychopath. This juxtaposition correlates with Kristeva's definition of the 'abject'. It is not only tangible or physical objects which can cause feelings of abjection, but also modes of being. The clown, as an inherent transgressor and violator, as one who "does not respect borders, positions, rules" and as a liminal figure related to the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite", enhances his abject position (Kristeva 1982:4). Kristeva (1982:4) gives a thorough description of this manifestation of the abject:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience,

the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior...Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.

The Joker, Gonko and JJ embody this form of abjection precisely because they are portrayed as violating, cunning, scheming and self-serving criminals.

Crucially, the trickster and ritual clown's position in tribal societies is not that of a criminal, because it is a designated role accepted by the community; their amorality is approved and celebrated, as with the grotesque figures of medieval folk culture, and is conducive to the upholding of societal structures. Kristeva (1982:4) agrees that "[h]e who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law – rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime", but in the form of the clown depicted as a monster, functionality is replaced with pure self-indulgence and deliberate connivance – and often while presenting a benevolent front. This constitutes abjection. It is "immoral, scheming and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you" (Kristeva 1982:4).

The clowns of the horror genre subvert the idea as presented by Wright, that "[c]lowning is no more than a credible idiot playing for an audience...Everything's a game; everything is for the audience, and as long as the audience are laughing, then anything is possible" (Wright 2006:184). With a permanent grin on their faces, these clowns enjoy the cruel jokes they play on their victims and the abject horror of their insanity is manifested in their ability to make jokes during acts of violence. Not only are the clowns' prey, victims of crime to varying degrees, but they are also demeaned as the butt of the clowns' jokes.

To cite another example, Dean Koontz draws on the popularity of the 'mad clown', albeit not supernatural, in his novel *Life Expectancy* (2005) and presents his own brand of



psychopathic clown. Although the circus clowns Beezo and his son Pulcinella are the product of incidental madness, this madness manifests itself in criminal acts with a 'humorous' bent that only the clowns find funny. The novel's protagonist, Chris Tock, underscores this in his view that "[i]nsanity is not evil, but all evil is insane. Evil itself is never funny, but insanity sometimes can be" (Koontz 2005:155).

In a botched attempt to blow up a bank, Chris manages to disarm Pulcinella by driving a nail file into his crotch and having him arrested. Years later Konrad Beezo, Pulcinella's father, returns for the protagonist's firstborn, wanting to pass on the clowning tradition he initially meant for Pulcinella. If, in an earlier scene, Beezo showed signs of a disturbed mind, he is by this time certifiably insane, claiming that Chris and his pregnant wife Lorrie "owe" him, as compensation for leaving Pulcinella infertile, "one bouncy baby, one cute itty little baby" (Koontz 2005:198). During this bizarre encounter, the narrator remarks that "[a]lthough he was not a dwarf, he was deformed in mind and spirit, which caused Lorrie to think *Rumpelstiltskin*" (Koontz 2005:298,299). Even though Beezo no longer wears the clown outfit in which he is introduced at the start of the novel, he has been established as a mad caricature of a man, an 'extraordinary monster in an ordinary world'.

Beezo subverts the rule of audience-controlled comic idiocy by dictating his own terms of humour in the 'funny' way he murders and presents the corpse of Chris and Lorrie's neighbour, Nedra. Before stowing his victim in a freezer, Beezo had

stripped her naked. Then he painted her entire body – front-and-back, neck-to-toes – in the brightly striped and polka dotted patterns of a traditional clown costume [and] greasepainted her face to resemble that of a clown. He blackened three of her teeth and colored her tongue green...he used a needle and thread to sew shut her eyelids. Then he painted stars over them. (Koontz 2005: 340-1)

He also glued a basting syringe's bulb to her nose and fitted deer antlers over her head. The officer in charge of the murder case concluded that Beezo "did this 'cause he thought

it was funny. He thought someone would open that freezer and laugh, that we'd all be snickering about Nedra in her clown getup for years to come, talking about what a joker that Beezo was" (Koontz 2005:341). Beezo intended for his 'audience', i.e. whoever finds Nedra, to find the act humorous but the extremity and shock value of the act itself are determined solely by Beezo's mental state and level of madness. This level of insanity falls into the category of psychopathy and exemplifies the mind that cannot comprehend its own depravity and macabre motivations, the mind that functions according to its own twisted 'comic' logic. Beezo's act illustrates the shift from comedy to horror that takes place once the clown, and not the audience, controls the level of idiocy at which he executes a prank or a skit.

Beezo's macabre act can be compared with the Joker's creed of 'murder by comedy'. It mocks the solemnity of death and strips the body of its dignity to a degree of complete psychopathic dissociation – a quality exhibited most notably by serial killers. To return to the Joker, Sharrett (1991:44) remarks that

[t]here seems to be an attitude now that the Joker is at least as appealing as Batman in terms of the dark forces he represents. His kind of madness seems associated with the Ted Bundys of society, who seem to hold a powerful fascination for people in the '80s and '90s. An issue of *Film Threat* magazine calls mass murderers "the heroes of the '80s".

Society's fascination with the human-monster duality was made evident by the rising cult status of American serial killers such as John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy and Ed Gein, and by the number of horror films that took inspiration from the popularity of serial killers during the 1980s and 1990s. Wells (2000:13) explains that "[u]ltimately, and particularly in the post-1960 period of horror films, the greatest fear which had been addressed is the fear of *other* people". This applies in particular to figures who either deliberately or unwittingly, do not adhere to the laws and rules set out to protect the rights and safety of civilians.

In contemporary horror films the fear of others finds its clearest expression in the portrayal of the serial killer who takes a prominent position as murderer, sadist and psycho- or sociopath – the type that ‘kills with a smile’. As ‘monster’ the “serial killer individuates a dehumanising process and operates within the horror text largely as an ‘abstraction’ which distracts attention from the damaging social phenomena and historical antecedents which produce him” (Wells 2000:14).

Wells (2000:6) observes that “Freud’s ideas have served to underpin a self-consciousness in the [horror] genre which has deliberately engaged with ‘madness’, ‘dysfunctionality’, and ‘psychosis’ as key aspects of the horror text, proving that the monster is in fact ‘all in the mind’”. The horror antagonist is, according to Freud (in Wells 2000:9), “a projection of threats, fears and contradictions that refuse coexistence with the prevailing paradigms and consensual orthodoxies of everyday life”.

For horror narratives “to be culturally and historically pertinent, film-makers have to engage with an aesthetic space free from the moral and ethical obligations of the social paradigm in which they live – only then can they comment on, and critique the conditions of, the material world” (Wells 2000:24). According to Benjamin F. Fisher (in Carroll 1990:5), this confrontation is in fact a culmination of the “inward turn” that took place in the nineteenth century, when the horror genre experienced “a shift from physical fright, expressed through numerous outward mysteries and villainous actions to psychological fear”. This shift still holds in contemporary horror narratives. The figures employed are the “zombies or psychos”, who “open the door” to our anxieties and neuroses, but we find that “horror’s true interest is in providing a set of oblique strategies for dealing with anxieties about everything from isolation, transformation, disfigurement, madness and death, to traumas we have already experienced” (Marriott 2004:2).

To the public, the clown figure, in his historical role of scapegoat, embodies the incomprehensible otherness of people with ‘sick’ obsessions and monstrous drives, who resemble, and negate, the governing structures of humanity. They are at once feared and fascinating, which may explain why the Joker is horrifying and at the same time regarded as the most interesting and popular of Batman’s nemeses.

The Joker acts as a projection of the fear of chaos and anarchy, but he also subverts the notion of the dysfunctional monster by presenting the ‘average human’ as a grotesque being – a circus freak. In *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker abducts the Commissioner, a pillar of the Gotham City community, and subjects him to humiliation by having him stripped almost naked and locking him in a cage surrounded by laughing circus freaks. He thus presents his ‘find’:

Now, *shudder* as you observe, *before your very eyes*, that most *rare* and *tragic* of *nature’s mistakes*! I give you...the *average man*! Physically unremarkable, it has instead a deformed set of values. Notice the hideously bloated sense of humanity’s importance. The club-footed social conscience and the withered optimism...Most repulsive of all, are its *frail* and *useless* notions of *order* and *sanity*...Faced with the inescapable *fact* that *human existence* is mad, *random* and *pointless*, one in *eight* of them *crack up* and go *stark slavering buggo!* (Moore 1988:34)

The Joker’s ‘presentation’ of humanity as a freak show subverts the traditional, self-effacing credo of clowns. He violently humiliates his victim instead of comically humiliating himself. Moore presents the Joker as a symbol of the collective dissident voice, the proverbial finger that prods at the fragile structures holding societies, communities and even ‘reality’ in place; and as the scapegoat, mentally and spiritually mauled by a corrupt society, but instead of simply being a victim, the Joker harnesses the ‘cruelty’ of a ‘mad world’ as his own personal creed.

In the graphic novel *Arkham Asylum* (1990), writer Grant Morrison questions the paradigms of normality by presenting the Joker as a postmodern figure whose mental instability and bafflement are a spontaneous response to the impulses of a postmodern society no longer governed by a master narrative. Playing at picture association in a mock therapy session, the Joker shows Batman an ink blot and says “Well, I see two angels screwing in the stratosphere, a constellation of black holes, a biological process beyond the conception of man, a Jewish ventriloquist act locked in the trunk of a red Chevrolet...What about *you* Batman? What do you see?” (Morrison 1990:30). In this

scene, the Joker taunts Batman as he only sees a bat – the symbol of fear that defines Batman’s character. In contrast to this, the Joker’s ‘interpretation’ of his ink blot satirises the world’s obsession with political correctness, sex, science, politics, religion, art, and finally psychotherapy, the very method used to diagnose mental afflictions and distinguish between the sane and the insane.

In reference to the Joker’s psychological profile, Ruth Adams, the in-house psychotherapist of the asylum, explains to Batman that

It’s quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of super-sanity here. A brilliant modification of human perception. More suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century. He can only cope with that chaotic barrage of input by going with the flow...*That’s* why some days he’s a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He *has* no real personality. He *creates* himself each day. He sees himself as the lord of misrule, and the world as a theatre of the absurd.  
(Morrison 1990:29-30)

At the end of *Arkham Asylum*, Joker chooses to stay in the asylum and wishes Batman a farewell, telling him, “Enjoy yourself out there. In the asylum” (Morrison 1990:102). By referring to the outside world as an asylum, Joker warns that the concept of a sane society made possible by the exclusion and/or incarceration of unwholesome and mentally unfit figures is an illusion.

Wells (2000:24) insists that the horror genre’s creative freedom, with the monster as its mascot, is a necessary tool in order to make audiences “confront our worst fears, our more perverse feelings and desires, our legitimately complex ‘darker’ agendas, and in this it serves an important function as a progressive and sometimes radical genre”. Although he is cast as a figure of horror, the Joker is one of the few villains who have a rapport with Batman. Through manic attempts to destroy Gotham, and instigating murderous mayhem (killing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters without prejudice), the Joker asks pertinent questions about Batman’s obsession with justice and ‘order’ in an obstinately seedy and corrupt city. The Joker’s nihilistic approach to crime is dangerous and threatening

because he is the sociopath with nothing to lose and presents life in Gotham as a bizarre, absurd and unsympathetic play in which it is not the clown but everyone else who suffers as the butt of the ‘grand joke’.

Madness and violence, which in combination define the sociopath and psychopath, find a suitable host in clown figures like the Joker who expresses both, partly because the disruptive behaviour that is regarded as “socially peripheral or marginal”, is expressed as “symbolically central and predominant” in both trickster and clown archetypes (Babcock-Abrahams 1975:155).

Habitual lies and deception are leading elements of the main psychopathic traits. This can be applied to the tales of Taugi, the Brazilian Kalapalo trickster, who shares many of the characteristics displayed by the Joker. To begin with, Taugi’s name was derived from *taugiñe*, meaning ‘lies about himself’ and he was also known by epithets as “someone who doesn’t tell about himself” (Basso 1988:295). Similarly the Joker, as depicted in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, has no traceable identity, which links his history with the ambivalent origins of the trickster figure. When Batman goes to visit him in his cell in Arkham Asylum, the door is marked “Name Unknown” (Moore 1988:3). Later, in the Batcave, Batman stares at the Joker’s electronic file which just shows a demonic grin underscored by “Name: Unknown; Age: Unknown; Relatives: Unknown” (Moore 1988:11). The Joker reveals that this lack of a past is a personal choice. He exclaims to Batman:

What *made* you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the *mob*, maybe? Brother carved up by some *mugger*? *Something* like that, I bet. *Something* like that...*Something* like that happened to *me*, you know. I...I’m not exactly *sure* what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another...If I’m going to have a *past*, I prefer it to be *multiple choice*! (Moore 1988:40)

In *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker repeats this equivocal version of the events of his past. He “tells his victims a story of his past abuse he suffered, but offers many permutations – sometimes he says his father cut his face into a gruesome smile, other

times he says he did it himself – as if to underscore the foolishness of looking to the Joker as a reliable narrator” (Ackerman 2008).

Morrison’s and Nolan’s versions of the Joker thus embody the archetypal trickster and Bakhtin’s carnival fools of the Middle Ages, who resist definition as singular, fixed entities. Although contemporary clowns’ comedy routines, specifically in circuses, are largely controlled, the Joker’s fluctuation between comic madness and mania is not uncommon in the history of clowning.

The Joker’s critique on his society and defiance of its rules echoes the role of fools during festivals of rebirth throughout the centuries. In *Arkham Asylum*’s postscript the various characters’ motivations for their ‘being’ are revealed in what seem to be diary entries or testimonies produced during a hypnotic state. The Joker’s entry recalls the *Festum Stultorum* of the Middle Ages, and in particular the celebration of the subversion of rules, desecration of holy rites and questioning of accepted authority:

And who is this pure fool? Lo, in the sagas of old time, legend of SCALD, of bard, of druid, cometh he not in green like spring? O thou water that art air, in whom all complex is resolved! Oh yes! Fill the churches with dirty thoughts! Introduce honesty into the White House, write letters in dead languages to people you’ve never met! Paint filthy words on the foreheads of children! Burn your credit cards and wear high heels! Asylum door stand open! Fill the suburbs with murder and rape! DIVINE MADNESS! Let there be ecstasy, ecstasy in the streets! Laugh and the WORLD LAUGHS WITH YOU! (Morrison 1990:108)

The Joker’s manifesto is a throwback to the trickster and the ritual clowns with whom he shares the following qualities:

Eccentricity in dress and demeanor; systematic trampling over rules and norms; full license to ignore prohibitions and break them; ambivalence; magical power; ominousness; “non-violence” prohibitions and prerogatives; “backward speech”

and reverse behaviour; individualism, asocial characteristics, insolence, buffoonery, phallicism, vulgarity, a sort of madness. (Makarius 1970:66)

These qualities “mark off the [ritual clowns] clearly from ordinary mortals, who, although they may ritually break taboos, do not come to personify the prototype of the violator of taboo” (Makarius 1970:66). Basso (1988:305) supports the representation of tricksters and clowns as ‘madman’ – as classified by the dominant positivist model – by saying that

Scholarly puzzlement over Tricksters’ anomalous and paradoxical characters seems to be connected to an implicit application of this positivist notion of personality as a self that “holds still”, one that is stable, regular, and consistent – and therefore definable. And, if we work with the assumption that truth is an objective and describable quality which can be contrasted with falsehood, we necessarily come to define it as an inconsistent, unstable, or simply ambiguous self tinged with a dubious morality. Thus, at least by implication, a scattered self is an incoherent, unstructured self, a false or even a psychotic selfless chaos, or an evil self that orients the person towards suicide.

With motivations similar those of the participants of the Saturnalia of ancient Rome, Christian revellers of the medieval *Festum Stultorum* reportedly “leapt and danced through the church like madmen, sometimes stripping themselves quite naked during the performance, and provoked the priests with filthy rites at the high altar” (Disher 1925:43). Jung (1991:258) explains that “[t]hese ceremonies, which still reveal the spirit of the trickster in his original form, seem to have died out by the beginning of the sixteenth century”. However, he adds that “when they vanished from the precincts of the Church, they appeared again on the profane level of Italian theatricals” in the guise of “the Pulcinellas, Cucorognas, Chico Sgarras, and the like” (Jung 1991:260).

The European churches’ abolition of these anarchic festivals, along with the gradual secularisation of state and royalty’s later rejection of the jesters, did little to curb the disruptive spirit. It is an inherent part of human nature that still finds outlet at



contemporary music festivals, sports tournaments and carnivals – but censorship managed to confine the clown to the fictional and fantastical boundaries of the circus and theatre space, thereby aiding the clowns’ shift into their strictly regulated and toned down current position. This has forced many clowns to either ‘naturalise’ as comedians, or face being regarded suspiciously as a possibly threatening and unstable anomaly: an ‘extraordinary monster in an ordinary world’.

Clowns, with their spontaneity, creative imagination and ‘unorthodox’ approach to their environment, signify a particular world-view that attracts a negative social and mental classification. Swortzell describes this world-view by comparing the contemporary clown to the anarchic spirit of the trickster previously set out by Basso. He admits that “[m]ore important than a rubbery face, a fright wig, or a card file full of jokes is a point of view, a way of looking at the world that is different, unexpected, and perhaps even disturbing” (Swortzell 1978:2).

However, some clowns’ mad behaviour can be seen as a necessary creative and transgressive world-view that casts doubt on established conventions and provides an alternative to our relationship to the world and other people. This view is interpreted as mental deviance exactly because it does not conform to the accepted world-view, but it depends on how this view is presented. The positive aspects of clowns’ creative and functional insanity reverberate in medieval folk culture. Bakhtin (1984:39) explains that

[t]he theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by ‘normal’, that is by commonplace ideas and judgements. In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official “truth”. It is a festive “madness”. In Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, madness acquires a somber, tragic aspect of individual isolation.

Horror clowns do not simply parody accepted social behaviour and break taboos, they reveal the real horrors of which humans are capable. There are various examples in the

history of clowning where performers gave a dark, malicious edge to their clown personas and even exhibited signs of dementia and madness. George L. Fox, for example, the American clown of the 1850s who played at the National Theatre (1850) and later the Bowery (1858) in New York, showed signs of individualized mental disturbance during his performances (Speaight 1980:36). Speaight (1980:36) insists that although “his mad-violence reflected that of the mid-nineteenth century New Yorker”, these outbursts were “a trait in his own character” which only became more erratic with age, and he goes on to recount how Fox’s

grimaces became increasingly hideous...[he] would suddenly break out into obscenities...his dresser had to be kept in the wings, ready to dash on to the stage and bring him to his senses...in 1875 he was [finally] taken away after the first act of *Humpty Dumpty in Every Clime* and committed to an asylum.

There are also instances of other performers who sported psychopathic tendencies, such as Jean Gaspard Deburau, the early nineteenth-century Czech-born French mime.<sup>16</sup> Speaight (1980:32) insists that the “sinister element that many spectators sensed in Deburau’s performance was, indeed, an element in his personality”. To prove this, he describes how Deburau once “coolly and cold-bloodedly” struck a boy fatally “for insulting him in the street”, concluding that “[a]s with all great clowning laughter is just around the corner from horror, and Deburau emphasized the dark side of the clown character”, as exhibited by the Joker and *The Pilo Family Circus’* Gonko (Speaight 1980:32).

These accounts uncover another interesting aspect of the nature of clowning, namely the problematic relationship between performer and costume. Moral deviation and violent behaviour cannot be blamed on the traits of the character without considering that mental disturbance features in other vocations and that perhaps these individuals merely happened to be clowns. For every mentally unbalanced clown performer there are a

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<sup>16</sup> Although Deburau is remembered as a mime, he qualified as both mime and clown, according to Speaight (1980:32), who professes that “a great clown must be a great mime”.

dozen sane ones, but it is the inherently transgressive nature of the clown that provokes speculation about clown madness and inherent traits of instability.

The opportunity of concealing one's own features behind the clown 'mask' provides an excuse for unsavoury characters to don a clown costume or clown mask to commit crimes or indulge in dubious behaviour.<sup>17</sup> It can, however, also be argued that a certain outfit is specifically chosen because it evokes the symbolism attached to the mask or costume, hence the killers' use of an Edvard Munch 'The Scream' mask in Wes Craven's film *Scream* (1996).

As stated before, in order to remain current and employed, many clowns have succumbed to a more people-friendly image and conformed to the dominant worldview. Fo (1991:171-172) laments the fact that in

our days, the clown has come to be a figure whose job is to keep the children happy. He is synonymous with puerile simple-mindedness, with picture-postcard ingenuousness, and with sheer sentimentality.

The clown as entertainer now takes precedence over the clown as violating, transgressive and paradoxical allegorical figure. What was once regarded as a constructive approach that prioritizes abundance and merriment above the seriousness of 'official reason' through subversion is now seen as a form of delirium that hides a deeply troubled spirit. This partly explains the phenomenon of the concept of the 'sad clown' or 'crazy clown' who hides his or her traumatised upbringing or dark motives behind a 'friendly' face. Spontaneous, consistent happiness is in turn regarded with suspicion and tends to be interpreted as a form of mental imbalance. In a quote taken from Charles Williams' novel *The Greater Trumps* (1932), for example, the narrator thus remarks on the Fool of the tarot pack: "man's eyes were very bright, he was smiling, and the smile was so intense

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<sup>17</sup> Examples include the killers in the films *Urban Massacre*, the *Camp Blood* trilogy, and *Clownhouse*, who use the clown mask and costume as an incidental disguise (see Appendix).

and rapt that those looking at it felt a quick motion of contempt – no sane man could be as happy as that” (Cline 1983:13).

Notably there were clowns in various guises who drew on the more dangerous aspects of insanity rather than comic bafflement and through their mental instability and unpredictability inspired humour and fear in their audiences. In support of this, Wright (2006:180) reminds the reader that although the “painted face, red nose, big shoes and baggy trousers of the traditional circus clown” is one of the most popular images, “clowns of one sort or another crop up in all cultures, they’re anarchic spirits, madmen, fools, scapegoats or just popular entertainers adept at being stupid in public”. Once the clown’s bafflement and idiocy are coupled with the Romantic grotesque humour and Grand Guignol violence, idiocy is reconfigured into insanity. The clown’s apparent inability to follow the rules of social interaction becomes a source of self-amusement and the audience’s laughter is replaced with fear or terror – only the clown is left laughing.

Historically, insanity, scatology, grotesquery and violence are inextricably linked with comedy, and the extraction of the horrifying potential of these themes from comic parody, is in fact a throwback to earlier forms of comedy, where this duality between humour and fear was celebrated rather than suppressed. Clowns’ unorthodox and discomfiting world-view, their subversive characteristics and historical relation to the natural fool, and their dissociative tendencies, are qualities that define them in the contemporary public mind, not as necessary components to maintaining a balanced society, but as mentally dubious and therefore threatening figures.

## Chapter 5

### Clowns and Violence – From King of Clowns to Killer Clown

The subversion of violence to comic effect is one of the defining and long-standing characteristics of comedy as a genre. The killer clown's role as a contradictory figure that inspires humour and fear is, in part, the result of the audience's interpretation of violence committed by and upon these clowns in the horror genre. The killer clowns' subversion of comedy violence to horrific effect plays a significant role in the reinterpretation of clowns as monsters or 'bogeymen', and features in two ways. Firstly, clowns defy the causal relationship between the comic body and violence by appearing immortal and unstoppable, which can be seen as a physical aberration in the context of horror films. Secondly, they subvert comedy conventions to violent ends through psychopathic means.

The task in this chapter will be to explore how the horror genre utilises and inverts clowns' comic subversion of violence in the process of reinterpreting clowns as monsters and objects of fear, as illustrated in the Chiodo brothers' *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*. When a clown fulfils the role of the antagonist in horror films, the rules of the comedy and horror genres are blurred and the comic symbolism attached to clowns is used to deliberately betray their victims', and the audience's, expectations. What makes the contre-Auguste clown a successful monster is not only the grotesque appearance and 'indestructibility', but also the realisation, by virtue of the conventions of the horror genre, that his or her traditionally comic approach to violence will have damaging, if not fatal consequences.

'Horror' and 'comedy' elude fixed definitions and function as canopy terms that incorporate many sub-divisions. Rather than being mutually exclusive genres, it is possible to blur the distinctions between these genres in the form of black comedy or spoof horror; both subgenres in which elements of violence and comedy feature strongly.

Although violence is one of the central themes in comedy, and more so in horror narratives, the horror genre differs from comedy in its depiction of the causal effect of violence inflicted on the body. In order to delineate the forms and levels of violence portrayed in comedy and horror respectively, and the differences in the effects of violence on the body, I will use Stott's definition of comic violence, also known as slapstick or knock-about comedy, and Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson's definition of Grand Guignol as a term for a particular mode of violence.

According to Stott (2005:92), slapstick is "generally understood as physical humour of a robust and hyperbolized nature where stunts, acrobatics, pain, and violence are standard features". He adds that the term is

derived from the sound made by the wooden paddles clowns used to beat one another with in the burlesque touring theatres. These were in turn versions of the inflated sheep bladders filled with dried peas that accompanied clowns on the early modern stage, themselves an echo of the tools used to beat the ritual scapegoat in ancient ritual. (Stott 2005:93)

The slapstick technique, which was employed in the English harlequinade, music hall and vaudeville, became a standard feature in clowns' comedy routines as one of their main techniques for evoking laughter. There also seems to have been little difference between the performance styles of the circus ring and on the pantomime stage at the turn of the twentieth century when travelling circuses became popular in Europe and the United States of America. Walker (1922:219) insisted that "much of the comic stuff which comes from America on the films is simply an exaggerated form of the old knock-about harlequinade 'business' of the English pantomime".

Violence and comedy also played a central role on the Grand Guignol stage. This theatre tradition provides us with a prime example of the "dialectic of humour and horror, although contemporary theoretical investigation would argue that these are not so far apart as they seem" (Hand and Wilson 2006:77). I further reinforce this supposition with

French theatre historian Agnes Pierron's argument that "Grand-Guignol emanates, in part, from popular theatre traditions such as the *Commedia dell'Arte* with its use of violence and the grotesque for comic and subversive effect", and that "certain elements of the medieval carnivalesque and Bakhtin's notion of grotesque realism can be found within the Grand-Guignol" (Hand and Wilson 2006:139). While Grand Guignol originated in a theatre in Paris known as the Théâtre du Grand Guignol, the term "has entered the language as a general term for the display of grotesque violence within performance media" (Hand & Wilson 2006:ix). The use of the term in this chapter pertains specifically to its use as a term for the violence committed by killer clowns in horror films.

Both Grand Guignol and slapstick focus on corporeal themes and the violation of taboos – involving scenes of grotesque self-indulgence and sexual depravity – and on the representation of the human character as a *guignol*, or 'puppet', on which all levels of violence can be inflicted. The focus on the contre-Auguste clown as a figure of horror reflects both comedy's and horror's preoccupation with the representation of the body and violation of the body in all possible ways – sexual, scatological and mortal – and in the peculiar, audience-focused relationship to the depiction of violence.

Both the terms 'black comedy' and 'spoof horror' are used to classify killer clown films because clowns are inextricably linked with comedy whether or not they are regarded as funny. The Chiodo brothers (Audio commentary in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1998) admit that they intended for the film to be played

really straight, it's not a parody it's not a satire, it's not a lampoon, it's a serious monster movie but the dialogue that we're delivering here is dead serious but just ridiculous in its content.

The simple act of reporting an assault or threat from a clown to the police, for example, lends an even more ridiculous aspect to the scenario than, say, victims citing supernatural agencies as the cause of their panic and fear in what is a typical motif of the horror film.

Therefore, slapstick and Grand Guignol are not so much on opposite ends of the scale of violence, as they are divided by a permeable border. Using Cyril Tourneur's *The Revengers Tragedy* (1606) as a reference, Skal (1993:263) describes "the line between farce and tragedy" as "that flashpoint at which slapstick gets carried away into violence, or vice versa – the difference between petit Guignol and grand". The audience's interpretation of the clown as an object of fear, as opposed to a harmless comic figure, is in part determined by the transition of violence from slapstick to Grand Guignol.

### Betraying Audience Expectations in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, *IT* and the 'Rope Trick' Murders of John Wayne Gacy

As mentioned in the first chapter, the Chiodo brothers (Audio commentary in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988) recall how they "tried to think of every circus motif and every clown gag and give it a perverse twist, something deadly at the end of it". They not only turned carnival and circus symbols into horrific metonymic devices, but also turned slapstick into Grand Guignol. An examination of specific examples from the film will show how the reinterpretation of violence allows the clowns in the film to transgress the rules of the comic conventions to horrific effect. With the application of clown logic in the horror genre, the killer clowns act as a "mimetic bridge...between the mimetic world of the play...and the world of the audience" and turns comic violence into horror violence (McManus 2003:14).

The conventions of slapstick and Grand Guignol determine whether an audience believes the effect of violence to be inconsequential, and therefore interpret the violent and threatening act as a comic moment, or whether the act will have harmful consequences, which leads to an interpretation of the scene as a horrific or tragic moment. The neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, director of the Centre for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, explains an audience's choice of interpretation of violence via what he terms the 'OK signal'.



One of the topics covered by Ramachandran in a lecture entitled *Phantoms of the Brain*, which formed part of BBC Radio 4's 2003 Reith Lectures, was the subject of 'laughter'. He defined laughter as a uniquely human trait and as an OK signal used to indicate the triviality or inconsequence of a potentially or dangerous action. Ramachandran (2003) explains the process as follows:

When you look at all jokes and humour across societies, the common denominator of all jokes and humour despite all the diversity is that you take a person along a garden path of expectation and at the very end you suddenly introduce an unexpected twist that entails a complete re-interpretation of all the previous facts. That's called a punch-line of the joke.

In the context of slapstick, laughter acts as an OK signal for audiences to interpret instances of violence as humorous, or as Wright (2006:6) interprets it, "[l]aughter evolved as Nature's way of signalling the all-clear". Ramachandran (2003) illustrates this point with the following example:

Here is a portly gentleman walking along, he is trying to reach his destination, but before he does that, he slips on a banana peel and falls and then he breaks his head and blood spills out and obviously you are not going to laugh. You are going to rush to the telephone and call the ambulance. But imagine instead of that, he walks along, slips on the banana peel, falls, wipes off the goo from his face, looks around him everywhere, and then gets up, then you start laughing. The reason is...because now you know it's inconsequential, you say, oh it's no big deal, there's no real danger here. So what I'm arguing is, laughter is nature's false alarm.

Ramachandran (2003) adds that "it's not merely sufficient that you introduce a re-interpretation but the re-interpretation, the new model you have come up with should be inconsequential, it should be of trivial consequence". In other words, for an act of violence to be regarded as comic, the twist at the end of the scene – what Ramachandran calls the model of reinterpretation – needs to break with causality and consequence, at

least in any logical sequence, since an unrealistic comic death can still evoke laughter. A violent act must adhere to the conventions of comedy to have a comic effect in a ‘safely chaotic’ space.

To illustrate, director Mel Brooks notes that “[t]ragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down an open sewer and die” (in Stott 2005:1). Brooks is playfully making a statement about personal, unfortunate, yet highly plausible accidents having the impact of tragedy, and he presents the nature of comedy, and specifically slapstick, as a representation of our basic human reaction to implausible and often ludicrous accidents. Brooks’s observation can be used to explain how it is possible for an audience to laugh when someone unexpectedly slips on a banana peel: it is an out of the ordinary occurrence during which a normally predictable scenario ends with a surprising and unexpected twist.

I reiterate that comic violence is divorced from the consequences anticipated by audiences when violence is committed in the horror genre. American Film and Theatre theorist Donald Crafton (in Stott 2005:95) states that

[r]ather than provide knowledge, slapstick misdirects the viewer’s attention, and obfuscates the linearity of cause-effect relations. Gags provide the opposite of epistemological comprehension by the spectator. They are atemporal bursts of violence and/or hedonism that are as ephemeral and as gratifying as the sight of someone’s pie-smitten face.

With regard to a comedy narrative, the audience is reassured because there is no ‘real’ causal effect at the end the clown’s stick, sword or falling water bucket. It is safe to laugh at comic violence and to trust that the ‘victim’, whether it is a fellow performer or a singled out spectator, is safe from actual harm in the comic space because the stick is made of rubber foam, the sword retracts, and the bucket is filled with streamers.

There are different levels of comedy that inspire different responses. In view of this, Wright (2006:5) subdivides Ramachandran's OK signal, into four types of laughter: the "recognised laugh", the "visceral laugh", the "bizarre laugh" and finally the "surprise laugh". He explains that

[e]ach type of laugh defines a different level or quality of audience response, and each type is a catalyst that enables us to identify different levels of emotional engagement and rational understanding of the work. The four aspects of comedy operate either independently, each with its own specialised dramatic function, or in conjunction with each other as a part of an entire comic sequence. (Wright 2006:5)

Wright draws on an ancient Japanese myth<sup>18</sup> to illustrate how these forms of laughter are evoked by comedy scenarios. To summarise, the myth concerns a young goddess's performance in an act of mockery of the Sun goddess, who is found sulking in a cave and depriving the world of light. The young goddess starts by stamping on an upturned bath "as a small child having a tantrum", and as she stamps and shouts, the other gods who have gathered around the Sun goddess's cave become enthralled by her performance, and "they laugh and they laugh and they all want more" (Wright 2006:4). Her performance becomes increasingly risqué as they laugh and demand that she go further, and the performance finally reaches a climax when she "grabs her nipples and rips them out and holds them up for all to see, with the blood running down her arms, and she laughs and the gods roar and roar and roar" (Wright 2006:4). This final act, and the gods' raucous reaction, prompts the Sun goddess to rush from her cave and restore light to the world.

Firstly, Wright defines the 'recognised laugh' as a type of laughter inspired by the recognition of our human behaviour, social and personal traits and cultural quirks. To use an example from *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, a clown deceives his audience, a group of commuters waiting at a bus stop, using shadow puppets. The clown symbolises

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<sup>18</sup> The myth is recorded in "*The Kojiki*, known as *The Record of Ancient Matters*, written 712 AD in Japan" (Wright 2006:3).

the comic world that operates within its own physical laws and logic, and none of the audience members question his presence or motives. Recognising the clown as a source of fun and comic entertainment, the bystanders marvel at his shadow puppets. Laughter is used as a signal to reassure others that there is no cause for alarm. According to the Chiodo brothers (Audio commentary in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988), the spectators argue:

What can possibly go wrong with [shadow puppets]?...As soon as a clown or a mime does something, everybody crowds around, amazed at the simple little antics, just ripe for being victimized...That's exactly how the clowns operate, by the time you realise they're evil, it's too late.

The audience delights in recognising the popular cultural shapes the clown forms without questioning the increasingly unlikely complexity of the figures.<sup>19</sup> His three fat fingers, juxtaposed with the absurdly elaborate detail of the shadow forms, underscore his audience's unquestioning belief in the clown's OK signals. The punch line occurs when the clown finally forms the shape of a seemingly harmless shadow dinosaur complete with red eyes, which proceeds to devour the crowd to the shock and horror of protagonists Mike and Dave.

Further evidence of the use of clowning to subvert the OK signal can be found in the influence that Stephen King's *IT*, had on how clowns are perceived. Pennywise is a persona adopted by It to *lure* children, and not as an embodiment of what children fear most, as is the case with the other monsters into which he transforms. This subversive strategy is effective because the 'harmless' clown figure has the ability to deceive his victims by using the recognised laugh to his advantage. For the audience, Pennywise exists on the level of the bizarre, between humour and horror.

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<sup>19</sup> The shadow figures include a belly dancer, the iconic Iwo Jima image of the soldiers raising the Stars and Stripes, and a tyrannosaurus rex.

The Chiodo brothers (Audio commentary in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988) utilized the same strategy by exploiting the

idea that your first impression of a clown is that it's friendly, but these clowns are quite the opposite...There's always the basic concept that when you see a clown, they're funny, they laugh...you can get close and that's how they lure you in. When you're too close to notice that they're not friendly, it's too late.

As discussed in chapter three, Pennywise introduces himself from the drain, and uses the smells of the carnival and a bunch of balloons to lure George closer and to disarm him. Pennywise presents himself as a recognisable and 'safe' figure. As described by the narrator, the

face of the clown in the stormdrain was white, there were funny tufts of red hair on either side of his bald head, and there was a big clown-smile painted over his mouth. If George had been inhabiting [sic] a year later, he would surely have thought of Ronald McDonald before Bozo or Clarabell. The clown held a bunch of balloons, all colors, like gorgeous ripe fruit in one hand...He was wearing a baggy silk suit with great big orange buttons. A bright tie, electric-blue, flopped down his front, and on his hands were big white gloves, like the kind Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck wore" (King 1986:21-22).

Pennywise applies the conventions of clown logic in order to trick George into trusting him. Being six years old, George does not question the fact that the clown suspiciously appears in the storm drain, however implausible this may be, since clowns inhabit a liminal and naturally incoherent space where anything is possible. It is only when Pennywise "seized his arm" and "George saw the clown's face change" into something "terrible enough to make his worst imaginings of the thing in the cellar look like sweet dreams" that the clown instantaneously changes from comic body to monster, thereby redefining his generic characteristics (King 1986:22). This is the moment of transition

when the mask of the clown is exposed as a façade and the comedy scenario gives way to Grand Guignol.

Skal (1993:364) attributes the utilisation of the clown for horror purposes to the public's general view of carnivals and the characters associated with them and he explains that

as in a lot of King's fiction, the threat of sex gives way to Grand Guignol violence; when the child is close enough to touch, Pennywise seizes the moment and rips off his arm...[T]o surrender to the circus is to encounter a sideshow of horrifying mutilation. It is perhaps significant that King has elsewhere used the circus metaphor to describe the baby-boomer experience: 'We were fertile ground for the seeds of terror, we war babies...we had been raised in a strange circus atmosphere of paranoia, patriotism and national hubris'. In *It*, King resurrects and celebrates the dark carnival motif that was first depicted in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and kept alive by Tod Browning and Lon Chaney.

I present Skal's statement only by way of noting that the suspension of natural and social laws in the comedy genre is strongly linked to fairground and carnival culture by the presence of the clowns.

Wright's second type of laughter, namely the 'visceral laugh', relies on the instinctual and emotional for its effect. The visceral laugh is inspired by a show of terror as an "appropriate response to the circumstances of the drama", but is defused when pushed to an extreme, where the circumstances are recognised as feigned and "preposterous behaviour" (Wright 2006:12).

Given the origins of slapstick, the "Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* is our clearest reference for visceral comedy", with the action in *Commedia* scenes often going "beyond the visceral into the bizarre" (Wright 2006:12). Wright (2006:13) provides the following examples: "An accident, like a trip, a fall, or near miss, can provoke visceral humour. Hits, acts of aggression or violence are all capable of inspiring a visceral response." What

qualifies these examples as humorous is the general interpretation that the effects are trivial or inconsequential.

In Wright's retelling of the Japanese myth, the gods recognise the goddess's behaviour even when it ventures into the erotic and masochistic, "and her constant laughter of recognition tells them that everything is alright, it's only a game" (Wright 2006:10). To illustrate this point I will take another scene from *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* where a clown uses humour as the OK signal to deceive his audience and presents violence as a game. The scene develops as follows: a man arrives at a marquee bandstand where a puppet booth has been erected. Two puppets appear and invite the spectator to join in the drama, but he shakes his head, preferring to remain an observer. Although he sports a relaxed, smiling disposition and does not seem to sense danger, the spectator prefers to stay outside the space in which it is understood that 'anything is conceivably possible'. This invitation is a foreboding one, because the spectator inevitably becomes a victim of the world in which the clowns operate. The two puppets enact a Punch and Judy type scene. The female puppet then produces a laser gun with which she obliterates the other puppet. The spectator laughs at this, despite the other puppet actually having disappeared.

The puppet master uses the conventions of slapstick and puppetry as a way to disarm his victim with the knowledge that the violence of *petit* Guignol (puppetry) is not 'real', it only a 'game'. Comedy elements during violent scenes undermine the Grand Guignol moment, thereby allowing audience members to distance themselves from the events, and provide the OK signal which reassures them that it is 'all part of the show'. The puppet finally turns toward the disarmed and laughing spectator and a tall clown emerges from the booth, firing the laser gun to envelop him in a cocoon. During the audio commentary one of the Chiodo brothers (*Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988) remarks that this scene "[j]ust again, show[s] us how you're lured into...clowns and circus elements, the most harmless thing going on that proves to be deadly". The clown figure's location in a performance space that does not adhere to accepted physical laws, and by extension, the laws of mortality and physical harm, affect the audience's interpretation of the clown figure when *petit* Guignol gives way to Grand Guignol.

Skal (1993:55) explains how the shift from slapstick to Grand Guignol reconfigures the conventions of comedy and subverts the audience's expectations and he recalls that the "Théâtre du Grand Guignol of Paris had...subjected human characters to the same kind of exaggerated violence that was formerly the province of the little *guignol*, or Punch-and-Judy show", with the key difference being "that the big puppets bled, or convincingly seemed to".

The historian Enid Welsford's reading of the motives of Charlie Chaplin's clowning supports the theory of comic inconsequence. She agrees that "if Mr Wyndham Lewis (*Time and Western Man*) is right, sadism is at the root of both tragedy and comedy...[but] if a joke is recognised as a joke, it can hardly be taken seriously as a political or philosophical slogan" (Welsford 1935:316). Although the interest of this study is not in the political or philosophical implications of comic sadism, Welsford still makes a strong point about the nature of the joke – that basic tool which refutes serious consequences by implication. The premise is that if something is deliberately presented as comic, it can be enjoyed without being taken seriously.

In a study made of various age groups' responses to horror, Wells found that the youngest age group, 16 to 24, stood out as the most significant in their preference for visual stimulation in physical violence and gore depicted, in their ready acceptance of the artifice of slasher films, and in their interest in how the special effects were constructed. According to this group,

[c]omedy was also perceived as a clear mitigating factor in the acceptance of extreme scare effects and the potential levels of brutality. Horror texts were more often seen in the light of black humour or the 'grotesque'. (Wells 2000:28)

The boundaries between Wright's four types of laughter are not always clearly delineated, and clowns' comedy routines often fluctuate between the visceral and the bizarre in both a comedy and horror setting. The bizarre operates on the cusp between humour and horror, where we decide whether to laugh or not, whether we are reassured



by the OK signal and respond with a 'surprise laugh', or take it seriously and feel disturbed by it.

I would like to qualify Wright's theory of the third type of laughter, the 'bizarre laugh', because his approach to 'clown' as a level of performance is based on a solely practical approach, and excludes the diversity of the clown figure's historical development and the multiplicity of contemporary clowning methods and social functions. Wright (2006:17) holds that "[i]f the *Commedia dell'Arte* is a fruitful reference for the visceral, then the clown is an equally fruitful reference for the bizarre", adding that he was

not interested in the big shoes or baggy trousers of the circus clown so much as clowning as a level of play...you're simply invited to generate meaning from the inconsequential and the trivial – from the lowest denominator of comedy.

Although clowning as a level of performance may be used as a 'reference for the bizarre' which "defies conventional logic" and "comes from a place of immense honesty, simplicity and naivety", the clown figure functions equally well on *all* comedy levels, especially the recognisable and visceral, according to Wright 2006:18). Considering that clowning developed from *Commedia dell'Arte*, these theatre forms cannot be clearly distinguished as models for two separate playing levels. The one is implied in the other and we need to assert clowns' function within the recognisable and visceral in order to understand why their transgression into – and role within – the bizarre has such a dramatic effect on the audience in a horror context.

*Killer Klowns from Outer Space* illustrates the transition between the visceral and the bizarre during a scene where a clown uses a corpse as a 'ventriloquist doll'. Fatso the clown uses Officer Mooney's body as a mouthpiece to reveal the clowns' purpose on earth to his only audience member, Dave. During the scene it is not clear whether Mooney is actually dead, because up to this point there have not been any explicit murders. His doll-like appearance being both comic and grotesque creates an ambiguous OK signal that confuses and stops the audience from making a clear decision: "Do we

laugh or don't we laugh? Is it funny or just plain revolting?" (Wright 2006:19). The horrific consequence is completed by a macabre visual punch line when the clown pulls a bloodied hand out of Mooney's back and the body slumps forward, thereby switching the bizarre act of violence from slapstick to Grand Guignol at "the point where events overtake the game and make laughter impossible" (Wright 2006:8).

This scene echoes Wright's example of the goddess's dance. Once the goddess moves from the visceral to the bizarre, her laughter no longer reassures, but instead becomes "ambiguous; we can't decide if this is an attempt at comedy or self-mutilation, and we're confronted with an ascending spiral of violence...she has become grotesque: what she's doing is more alarming than funny" (Wright 2006:12). The point Wright (2006:20) makes is that "[l]aughter and violence go well together, laughter and blood don't, and that's why they make such wonderfully resonant clashes" and provide "prime territory for the bizarre".

Wright (2006:20) further observes that

[s]omething significant happens on stage with the letting of blood. But we've got to believe it. If we don't believe that actual physical harm has been done then it's little better than the false nipple joke. The letting of blood is only funny if you have no respect for human life. To see someone seriously hurt and bleeding is the ultimate act of recognition and it is irrevocable.

I will use another example from *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* to illustrate how violence can only be interpreted as comic if it is shown not to have any serious consequences, and only if the performing body is seen as indestructible or at least resistant to harm. Tiny, the shortest and smallest clown, peddles his small multi-coloured tricycle up to a gathering of bikers. This scene establishes Tiny as a contre-Auguste in contrast to the 'leader' of the biker group, who inadvertently takes on the role of boss clown. The leader ridicules Tiny's comical tricycle and jumps on it to the amusement of the crowd. Throughout this scene, the biker and the gang exchange laughs to indicate

their amusement and lack of fear. The small clown jumps up and reappears in boxing gloves, challenging the leader, before decapitating him in an unexpected twist, thereby betraying the crowd's expectations of what they perceive to be a typical comedy scenario. In keeping with the comedy conventions, Tiny takes on an obviously more capable opponent but then subverts reasonable expectations not only by taking the upper hand but also by the fact that the punch line of this comedy scene is an unexpected act of violence with shocking consequences.

Wright (2006:21) argues that, in the world of the bizarre, a person is “perfectly capable of laughing and crying at the same time”, but one has to be clear about whether the bizarre entails the descent of violence into the ‘letting of blood’, as in the case of the young goddess’s performance, or simply ends in a ‘false nipple’ joke as illustrated for example by Monty Python’s famous dead parrot skit, and the butt or Auguste clown’s sheer bafflement at the world that surrounds him. It is imperative to qualify the reason for laughter, because these distinctions are not simply interchangeable, and laughter does not imply ‘humour’ by default. As Stott (2005:2) says, “while not the exclusive property of comedy”, humour is “closely associated with it” and “laughter...is equally induced by humour but also embarrassment, fear, guilt, tickling, or laughing gas”.

The ‘betrayal of trust’ within the generic conventions of clowning and comedy can also be found in the clowns’ performances of the circus troupe, Archaos, a “French circus created by Pierrot Bidon in 1984” described as “an alternative circus (no animals) with a dangerous theme involving stunts like chainsaw juggling, fire breathing, wall of death, etc.” (Anon 2008b). Jason Covatch, a member of the circus troupe, explains that the success of their performances is based on the following premise: the “natural response to terror is initially to laugh, which is why if a child fears that he or she is threatened they will laugh, because they’re not actually aware of the possible violence and damage and pain” (in Barker 1997a:88). Archaos’ main aim is to blur the boundaries between slapstick and Grand Guignol – between pretend and actual threat. As Covatch says, “[t]he thing about clowning breaking the rules is fundamental for us...We use our clown-like abilities to make people feel that they aren’t safe, to make them feel like they might lose

things...So it's essentially a crossing over, breaking down that spectator/performer boundary" (Barker 1997a:92).

Wright (2000:12) underscores Covatch's description of their performances with the reminder that "[d]isturbing violence and raucous laughter are a hair's breadth apart, and our ability to laugh depends entirely on whether we believe the 'OK signal' or not". The scenes in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* and *IT* demonstrate this moment of transgression in the transition between the recognisable, visceral and the bizarre – when violence turns from slapstick to Grand Guignol, and where the audience's trust is betrayed – revealing the clown's duality as monster/entertainer.

A more chilling example of where the OK signal of comedy is used to mask Grand Guignol as slapstick, is seen in the killing methods of serial killer John Wayne Gacy. Gacy is famously referred to as 'The Killer Clown', even though he did not actually commit any murders dressed as his persona of 'Pogo' the party clown. Despite Barker's assertion that the title is a misnomer, Gacy not only appealed to his reputation as a harmless philanthropic clown in an attempt to exonerate himself in the days leading up to his arrest, but also inextricably linked his hobby as a performing clown to his serial killer status through the method by which he committed the murders.

Gacy reportedly used magic tricks from his clowning repertoire to disarm some of his victims before killing them. He explained how he allegedly convinced his victims to handcuff themselves, and told them the trick was to have the key. Having immobilised his victims, he then performed the 'rope trick'. Sullivan and Maiken described the 'rope trick' as "looping a rope around their necks, knotting it twice, then tightening it, like a tourniquet, with a stick" (Sullivan and Maiken 1983:116). To give an example: when one of his victims pulled a knife on Gacy and took his money, this

enraged the contractor, who first showed the youth some magic tricks, then got the rope around his neck. He was [then] buried in the crawl space. (Sullivan and Maiken 1983:163)

Gacy therefore used his clown status and magic tricks to disarm some of his victims who recognised these symbols as comedy elements. He proposed to show them clown tricks, thereby casting himself in the role of entertainer, and the victim as his audience. To use a further example: “[Detective] Albrecht asked how he managed to get the rope around his victims’ necks [to which] Gacy replied that sometimes he didn’t have to – the boys themselves would put it on, anticipating an interesting trick” (Sullivan and Maiken 2006:177). One of the victims, John Butkovich got into a fight with Gacy about his wages, and allegedly started hitting him. It is reported that Gacy

finally calmed him down and showed him the handcuff trick. Butkovich became enraged and threatened to kill him. Then, Gacy said, he performed the rope trick. (Sullivan and Maiken 1983:207)

Although not situated in a conventional clown/audience relationship, this is a clear indication of how his status as a performing clown – as archetypal comic figure working within the precepts of the ‘comedy space’ in which violence does not follow a logical consequence – allowed Gacy to present himself as a safe, harmless figure. This enabled Gacy to overcome his own physical weakness by ‘tricking’ his victims – who were much younger and probably far more agile – into interpreting the rope and handcuffs simply as clowning paraphernalia instead of murder tools, thus facilitating their own deaths. Gacy’s killing methods illustrate how dangerous and fearsome a corrupt clown can become by being able to rely on the conventions of clowning and comedy, and the interpretation of violence within these conventions, to manipulate his victims’ expectations. Gacy’s methods of disarming his ‘audience’ and then violating their trust in the most extreme manner are a macabre illustration of how the clown’s transition from slapstick to Grand Guignol has allowed the reinterpretation of the clown as monster and potential threat.

Wright (2006:22) describes the fourth type of laughter, the ‘surprise laugh’, as going back “to that infant game of ‘peek-a-boo’, to the infant delight of jack-in-a-box. It’s the little surprise, the little trick that catches us unaware”. In *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* Officer Mooney is offered a bouquet of flowers before being surprised with a squirt of

water in the face. Mooney, who interprets this simply as a comedy routine, handcuffs the clown, but is surprised when the clown walks away, leaving his cuffed hands behind in Mooney's hands. These typical comedy gags and the notion of 'clowning around' reinforce the OK signal and lure Mooney into a false sense of security. Once in the cell, the clown turns his head 180 degrees to face a shocked and baffled Officer Mooney before choking him with a party blow-out. This moment of 'surprise' is horrific because it defies the laws of nature, which do not support such physical distortions.

In another example, the night guard at the seaside carnival witnesses a ludicrously small car drive into the carnival grounds. In a typical comedy scenario, five clowns of different shapes and sizes emerge from the car, one by one. Although the surprised night guard is not laughing, this typical clowning routine acts as an OK signal, thereby disarming the guard. He consequently makes no effort to run away when they start throwing cream pies at him, and does not realise that the pies are made of acid that finally reduces him to a steaming heap of bones. To complete the gag, Tiny, the smallest of the clowns, puts a cherry on top of the heap. The surprise of a trick, twist or punch line that defies natural laws is a staple of clowns' comedy routines, and in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* there are various scenes, such as the ones described above, during which the clowns disarm their victims with tricks and pranks, and lure them into a false sense of security before revealing a nasty and horrific surprise.

#### Invulnerable Clowns in *The Pilo Family Circus*

The world in which the killer clowns operate is based on a logic that does not correspond to the laws that govern the space beyond the footlights and circus ring. Makarius provides an example of the dynamic of the comic world as put forth by the ritual clowns of various North American tribes, presenting the comic inversion of the natural laws of cause and effect as a necessary process to validate the clown's role as a breaker of taboos. Thus the "thesis that backward speech and reverse behaviour have the function of accompanying and rendering more explicit the violation of taboo rests on firmly ethnological evidence" (Makarius (1970:62)). For example, during performances the clowns will pretend to be

sweating during cold weather and ask for extra blankets in hot weather. They will complain of being thirsty after drinking and claim that they are satisfied when thirsty. Makarius (1970:63) reports that

[o]ther types of reverse behaviour are manifested in the handling of live cinders and the picking of meat from a kettle full of boiling water...The Cayuga clowns [also] plunge their fingers into the fire, rub the sick with the burning cinders, and declare that their masks give them the capacity to act in that way without feeling pain.

Therefore, these inversions even extend to the ritual clowns' denial of pain and physical discomfort in order to set themselves apart and validate their role as clowns in the community. Comedy defies the basic laws of nature that inform us of the actual consequences of punching a person on the nose, or dropping an anvil on their head. It follows that if we had any reason to believe that a man had broken his back after slipping on a banana peel, our response would be one of concern and shock rather than laughter.

Comic violence is based on the premise that the comic body is invulnerable to violence. The comic body not only sets itself apart from humanity for the sake of grotesque representation and the licence to rebel, but also dictates its relationship with violence. Taking 'guignol' in its original meaning as 'puppet' and, by extension, viewing the clown as puppet, is an important element in our understanding of the clown's relationship with violence in both genres.

The concept of the clown-as-live-puppet plays a pivotal role in the clown's relationship with violence. In a typical circus routine neither clowns, nor their victims, are subject to realistic consequences of their violent behaviour. In reference to slapstick comedians such as Charlie Chaplin's Tramp, Stott (2005:93) explains that "[yet] however often the [comic] body was assaulted it was largely indestructible, rendering concern or sympathy for a character's pain irrelevant". The violence found in clown skits, and puppet shows, provides audiences with a licence to laugh at the giving and receiving of seemingly

harmless blows between clowns or puppets, and under ‘normal’ circumstances, does not inspire concern or fear.

Advancing from that point, Stott (2005:83) says that “[a]ny Tom and Jerry cartoon exemplifies [comedy’s] extenuated corporeality in its parade of bodies that mutate, disassemble, reconfigure, and suffer endless punishment while refusing to die”. When the conventions of comedy give way to horror conventions, we find a blurring of boundaries and a change in the outcome of violent acts, with the exception that the clown, like a puppet, retains the immunity provided by his historical comic role on stage and in society. Within the parameters of the horror narrative, comedy characters’ perceived immunity to violence allows for the reinterpretation of the killer clown as a threatening monster and indestructible antagonist.

*The Pilo Family Circus* illustrates the clown’s invulnerability to violence, and the fine line between ‘*petit guignol* and *Grand Guignol*’ within a circus carnival setting. Elliott juxtaposes his clowns in a supernatural circus against the laws of the ‘real’ world. As discussed in chapter two, the clown troupe introduces Jamie to the hidden properties and benefits of face paint and clowning. The face paint not only brings out the visceral and hedonist in a person, but also makes the wearer practically invulnerable to pain.

The notion that the comic body is indestructible is best illustrated by the masochistic behaviour of the supporting clown called Rufshod, who is described as “a thin crazed-looking clown” with an addiction to pain (Elliott 2007:70). Rufshod pleads with Jamie to “Stab me. Cut me. Do something” and after obliging by crushing Rufshod’s knuckles with the blunt edge of a hatchet, Gonko remarks to Jamie, “There, genuine slapstick” (Elliott 2007:90). Later, after a fallen crate accidentally flattens Rufshod’s chest, Gonko tells Jamie that

This is a fix for Ruf, probably the highlight of the week for the sick fuck. Takes more than this to kill a clown, my lovely. Clowns take some killing, make no mistake. (Elliott 2007:174)



This adds a further implication to the clown's relationship with violence. Elliott implies that even if clowns inflict their brand of violence on others, their nature as clowns protects them from coming to harm themselves, but excludes their victims from having the same privileges. The evidence is in Jamie's alter ego JJ who, after being incited by Gonko's abuse of the apprentice, goes out and savagely kills a carnie with an axe.

Goshy's encounter with an audience member in the circus ring also demonstrates this point. Having lost his mind, and any hold on human reality, Goshy is incapable of distinguishing between performance and reality. After an audience member takes the flower that he holds out to her, Goshy slaps her. Shocked by the sudden blurring of the laughter/terror dichotomy, the woman is unable to respond appropriately: "He stopped making the kettle noise and pointed to the woman in the front row, who was rubbing her face with a look of astonishment" (Elliott 2007:69). This is placed in contradiction to the well-known clown trick involving filling a bucket with water, trying to balance it with a pole and then 'accidentally' dropping it towards the audience who anticipate water but are surprised to find themselves dry and then to notice a hole in the bucket. Later, Goshy slaps the apprentice, who had been stripped of the privileges of face paint: "A look of fear dawned on the apprentice's face. Goshy squealed at him from close range and then with a stiff arm slapped the apprentice hard, as he had the woman in the front row" (Elliott 2007:70).

These scenes depict the clowns as inhuman and seemingly indestructible which, as a common trait of monsters in horror films, heightens the threatening aspects of clowns as horror figures. The majority of clown horror narratives echo this theme of indestructibility by depicting clowns as aliens, demons, or zombies and vampires.<sup>20</sup>

Clowns are easily adaptable to the horror genre partly because they retain their role as interstitial figures between fantasy and the social and natural laws, and partly because they maintain an unconventional and illogical link and relation to violence. It is not only

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<sup>20</sup> Clowns appear as aliens in *IT*, or as demons in the films *Killjoy*, *Mr Jingles* and the *Spawn* comic series. They also appear as zombies in the film *Dead Clowns* and as vampires in Dodd's children's book *Clowns at Midnight*.

clowns' appearance as grotesque, interstitial bodies that allow them to be reinterpreted as objects of fear, they also become objects of fear because they transgress the comedy conventions to which they inherently belong when the same rules are reinterpreted in the horror genre.

The killer clowns transgress anticipated comic codes during the shift from slapstick to Grand Guignol – when the punch line or unexpected twist is a logical consequence of the act of violence instead – thus subverting the comedy's OK signal. By appropriating an inherently comic figure in the horror genre, comedy's implied OK signal can be used as a form of deception against fictional and non-fictional audience members and victims of the clowns' violent acts. Similarly to puppets, clowns are given licence to 'get away with murder', and it is only when the boundaries of comic inconsequence and comic representation are transgressed that the clowns' violent behaviour turns into Grand Guignol and is reinterpreted as an act of horror.

## Conclusion

This study posed the questions of why clowns can be regarded as both funny and frightening, and attempted to provide a comprehensive theory of the primary causes that allow for the interpretation of clowns as legitimate figures of horror.

I showed that '*clown*' as a collective term incorporates the satirical and subversive approach of the Saturnalian and ritual fools and how, due to their necessarily subversive nature, clowns have the potential to 'break the rules' in comedy as well as in horror. This proves to be a complex issue since clowns subvert both the rules of the genre, as well as the social rules "governing the cultural norms of the world being imitated" in fictional narratives (McManus 2003:13).

McManus (2003:17) argues that "[c]lown logic does not have an essential meaning other than to contradict the environment in which the clown appears", whether it be politically motivated or not, adding that "meaning is defined by the individual performer, context of the performance and reception of the audience".

The characteristics of grotesque clowns play a seminal role in the horror narratives' exploitation of the social "fear of a human being who doesn't act, think or look like a human being" (Barker 1997a:88). When encountered outside the parameters of dramatic conventions, in an everyday situation, clowns continue to subvert the rules of their milieu and, in the context of a horror film, the comedy elements and signs identified by the audience as typical of clowns' designated genre, are deliberately distorted. Clown logic is not only a cognitive process; all aspects of the clowns' world, namely physical, behavioural and material, are subject to clown logic and in the horror genre, this logic is demonstrated in the killer clowns' physical aberrations – which include the subversion of the accepted norms of appearance, and immunity against the realistic effects of violence – and mental aberrations, as well as by their 'natural habitat'.

The interplay between parody and potential horror inherent in the above phenomena is a throwback to earlier forms of comedy, where clowns' humour/fear duality was celebrated rather than suppressed and clown horror narratives extract this duality with the use of Carroll's identified strategies. Using *IT*, *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, and *The Pilo Family Circus*, along with references to clown figures from other horror narratives, I have demonstrated how the characteristics of the grotesque clowns are adapted using Carroll's model for the construction of the monster biology. The strategies are identified as fusion, fission, magnification, massification and horrific metonymy. It is Carroll's (1990:52) view that "the horrific creature is essentially a compound of danger and disgust and each of these structures provides a means of developing these attributes in tandem".

Firstly, the grotesque clown body is a fusion of what is real and surreal, human and animal, the living and the dead and by reinterpreting the comically grotesque bodies of clowns according to the Romantic view of the grotesque, clowns are turned into 'vulgarity' and are thus identified as monsters. Next, the process of fission is used to split the historically paradoxical nature of clowns to create a Jekyll and Hyde complex in the horror narratives discussed. In addition, clowns' multiplicity is revealed through massification, and clowns are often portrayed in groups of three or more to enhance their threatening potential. Furthermore, the contre-Auguste clowns are prime candidates for horrific magnification with their exaggerated bodily and facial features, especially the mouth which holds strong symbolic connotations with the concepts of insanity and hell and in the context of horror, the contre-Auguste clown's costume, as a parody of deformity and physical excess, is subverted. Lastly, horrific metonymy in killer clown narratives such as *IT* presents clowns as horror figures in an environment that augments their status as impure beings. Clowns' traditional focus on scatology in their comedy repertoires, and their association with liminal, 'underground' spaces, further emphasise horror clowns' impure and hence repulsive nature.

By exploring how these strategies are used to construct monsters in various horror narratives, I demonstrated that clowns' comically grotesque nature, as described by

Bakhtin, are reinterpreted in light of the Romantic grotesque in order to extract and heighten their horrific potential.

Clowns also challenge rational thinking through the mental aberration of socio- and psychopathy or imbecility, as embodied in the mad simpleton. As demonstrated in the fourth chapter, clowns can be reinterpreted as mentally disturbed and therefore threatening figures, because of their ‘animal unconsciousness’ and/or dissociative tendencies, their deviant and discomfoting world-view, as well as their subversive characteristics.

The final theme addressed in this dissertation was clowns’ ability to betray their audiences’ expectations of the harmless effects of comic violence, as well as the comic body’s invulnerability to violence, and how this is appropriated in the horror genre to fulfil the prerequisite that the horror monster needs to be threatening. I endeavoured to show that, through deceptive use of the ‘OK signals’ of comedy, clowns betray their victims’ and their audience’s trust in those signals and their expectation of a comic outcome.

Thinking back to Carroll’s three criteria for a creature to be a legitimate monster, the idea that the monster is a *possible being* is achieved by clowns’ unique position of having an actual presence in the world while, through their extraordinary characteristics, retaining their mythical and archetypal, almost supernatural, qualities. As demonstrated in this dissertation, killer clowns also have “the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening”, and they exhibit “the property of being impure” (Carroll 1990:27). Killer clowns’ horrific and terrifying potential, and their status as possible beings in the horror genre, satisfy Carroll’s required criteria and adhere to the primary elements required to elicit the desired horror effect.

When grotesque clowns step outside the framework of comedy and into the horror genre, the comic features and actions which subvert and disarm taboos on deformity (in the form of the grotesque), scatology, violence and insanity, are used to reinstate these themes as

phenomena of impurity and fear. Thus these symbols of comedy are recast as monsters and with the newly-perceived motive of causing actual harm and instilling terror, they become deadly funny.

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## **Filmography**

*Batman*, 1989. Directed by Tim Burton. USA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Incorporated.

*Camp Blood Trilogy (Camp Blood, Camp Blood 2, Within the Woods)*, 2004. Directed by Bradley Sykes. USA: Razor Digital Entertainment.

*Clownhouse*, 1989. Directed by Victor Salva. USA: Commercial Films.

*Clown Murders*, 1976. Directed by Martyn Burke. Canada: Magnum Films.

*Dead Clowns*, 2003. Directed by Steve Sessions. USA: Cryptkeeper Films.

*Fear of Clowns*, 2004. Directed by Kevin Kangas. USA: Kangas Kahn Films.

*IT*, 1990. Directed by Tommy Lee Wallace. USA: Green/ Epstein Productions.

*Gacy*, 2003. Directed by Clive Saunders. USA: DEJ Productions.

*Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, 1988. Directed by Stephen Chiodo. USA: Chiodo Brothers Productions.

*Killjoy*, 2000. Directed by Craig Ross. USA: Full Moon Productions.

*Mr. Jingles*, 2006. Directed by Tommy Brunswick. USA: Crossbow Entertainment.

*S.I.C.K :Serial Insane Clown Killer*, 2003 Directed by Bob Willems. USA: Boke Entertainment.

*Spawn*, 1997. Directed by Mark A.Z. Dippé. USA: New Line Cinema.

*The Dark Knight*, 2008. Directed by Christopher Nolan. USA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Incorporated.

*Urban Massacre*, 2002. Directed by Dale Resteghini. USA: Mogal Productions.

## Appendix

This appendix contains a break-down of all the horror narratives researched during the preparation of this dissertation. The killer clowns are classified according to the type of narrative in which they appear, their clown type, their biological nature, and whether they attack alone or in groups.

### Clown Horror Films

1. ***Camp Blood Trilogy (CBT)***: Solo human killer wearing clown mask.
2. ***Clownhouse (CH)***: Trio of contre-Auguste clowns. Humans in clown costume, but criminally insane and therefore exhibit mute and dumb-clown behaviour.
3. ***Clown Murders (CM)***: Solo human killer wearing a clown mask.
4. ***Dead Clowns (DC)***: Large group of circus clowns in various styles but most are barely recognisable as clowns. Clown elements are incidental.
5. ***IT (IT)***: Solo contre-Auguste clown. Alien. Wears clown costume as lure, but demonstrates clowning behaviour.
6. ***Fear of Clowns (FC)***: Solo clown. Wears clown costume as character. Contre-Auguste in part, but without a wig or shirt.
7. ***Killer Klowns from Outer Space (KKOS)***: Group of contre-Auguste clowns. Aliens, but they represent clowns in behaviour and dress.
8. ***Killjoy (KJ)***: Solo clown. Possessed clown doll come to life. Clown exhibits comedy behaviour. A combination of contre-Auguste and a jester.
9. ***Mr. Jingles (MJ)***: Solo contre-Auguste clown. Party clown resurrected as a host for demons.
10. ***Serial Insane Clown Killer (S.I.C.K)*** Solo clown. Human killer wearing clown mask.

**11. *Spawn* (S):** Solo clown. Demon, but in amphibian form. Manifests as clown figure in behaviour and dress but not strictly in contre-Auguste costume.

**12. *Urban Massacre* (UM):** Solo clown. Human killer in rubber clown mask and contre-Auguste costume. No clowning antics. Incidental.

### Clown Horror Literature

**13. *Batman comics: The Joker* (TJ):** Solo clown. Whiteface clown, but with exaggerated hair and mouth. Clown in behaviour and dress.

**14. *Life Expectancy* (LE):** Solo clown. Hobo clown. Human in appearance, but clown by vocation and in behaviour.

**15. *Clowns at Midnight*. (CM)** Group of contre-Auguste vampire clowns. Clowns in behaviour and dress.

**16. *The Pilo Family Circus* (PFC):** Group of clowns. Are clowns by supernatural force in dress and behaviour. One contre-Auguste. Two Augustes, one Hobo clown, one Whiteface.

### Break-down of Horror Narratives

5/16. Group of clowns: PFC, CH, CM, KKOS, DC,

11/16 Solo clowns: IT, FC, CBT, KJ, MJ, TJ, LE, S, UM, CM, S.I.C.K

4/16 Clown mask: CBT, UM, CM, S.I.C.K

2/16 Alien clowns: IT, KKOS

4/16 Demonology: S, MJ, KJ

5/16 Human Mad clowns: TJ, CH, FC, LE

2/16 Supernatural clowns: PFC, CM

1/16 Zombie clowns: DC