



Clown apocalypse and creepy clowns

O apocalipse dos palhaços
e os palhaços assustadores

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ABSTRACT

This article examines creepy clowns and what is defined as a clown apocalypse. By reporting the recent events of this phenomenon, we analyze possible relationships between the clown mask and the Harlequin mask, both containing elements that redirect to the image of the medieval demon. We show that clowns are recognized today by the technique they use, as creepy clowns move away from the original clown's actions, and damage both socially and artistically the image of professional clowns.

Keywords: Clown. Scare. Mask.

RESUMO

No presente artigo trata-se dos palhaços assustadores, ou do que se define como apocalipse dos palhaços. Ao relatar os recentes acontecimentos deste fenômeno, são analisadas possíveis relações entre a máscara do palhaço e a máscara do arlequim, que contêm elementos que reconduzem à figura do demônio medieval. Indica-se que o palhaço se reconhece na atualidade pela técnica utilizada, sendo que os palhaços assustadores se distanciam do fazer do palhaço e prejudicam social e artisticamente a imagem dos palhaços profissionais.

Palavras-chave: Palhaço. Susto. Máscara.

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Since mid-August of 2016, a singular phenomenon began to quickly spread, consisting of a growing number of individuals going out to the streets wearing clown mask and costumes, with the intention of scaring people walking in public places. These actions, as a whole, were named “clown apocalypse,” and involve characters who are called creepy clowns, who created law and order problems in various countries of the world and performed acts, including violence and physical attacks.

The actions performed by creepy clowns have become real security issues that concerned government agencies because, in only two months, hundreds of cases occurred in different contexts. Some of these creepy clowns were even arrested under the accusation of promoting acts of terrorism.

According to news recently reported in mass media, this fad began in the United States of America and quickly spread across Canada and England, also with cases in South America, including Brazil. The scenes happen mostly in urban centers, but there are also recorded cases of performances in rural areas, which had violent responses by the victims affected by these approaches of creepy clowns, with nonrational actions. For example, there were cases of people “defending” themselves from these clowns with firearms, while others organized groups and improvised “clown hunts,” creating conflicting situations, not only with the individuals promoting this new phenomenon, but also with professional artists who work in public spaces using the clown technique as part of the spectacle performed, which is inserted in an activity that is typical of the tradition of street theater.

Thus, cases of a type of psychosis named clown hysteria started to happen, in which, in acute cases, the fear might even evolve into a clinical pathology specifically called “coulrophobia,” a form of phobia linked to the clown figure.

A clear example of clown hysteria, according to news widely circulated in early October 2016, was a fact that occurred in the city of Bardstown (USA), when a man even fired shots into the air with an AR-15 rifle after being warned by his wife about the presence of these creepy clowns on the street next to the house. This fact is extremely disturbing, especially because this figure was not one of the individuals that promote clown apocalypse, but just a woman who was walking her dog in the middle of the night.

The consequences of the creepy clown increase and of the positioning of the media and society regarding the clown in general have even encouraged a multinational fast food

company to limit the appearances of its mascot, who, for decades, is represented by the figure of a clown.

Another consequence from the phenomenon of scary clowns was that civil society started avoiding contact with the clown figure, even promoting the distancing from this figure in events where, in general, there was constant hiring. Thus, a significant number of cancellations of shows involving clowns took place, this without considering that many professionals were deliberately called assassins, even by children, while walking characterized in the streets.

The speed with which the phenomenon of clown apocalypse has spread, along with the answer from society, which started treating the clown figure negatively and prejudicially, regardless of who the individual is or which is his relationship with creepy clowns, has definitely worried the artistic class that works as clown, which manifested against this in Brazil.

In the state of São Paulo, artists went to the streets to promote the idea of the “good clown.” Positioning themselves against the creepy clowns, these performing art professionals walked through the streets showing pamphlets and posters that conveyed protest messages, such as “a clown is not a killer, a clown is joy” or “a clown is not a killer, a clown is love.” Manifestations of this type took place in October 2016 not only in Brazil, but also in other countries, such as Mexico.

The phenomenon of creepy clowns as scenic performance was born in Italy in 2013 and designed by a young man of almost 30 years old named Matteo Moroni, which is known for having founded the production company “DM Pranks,” which operates in the audiovisual field producing videos that involve, specifically, creepy clowns.

From that year on, Moroni started dressing and making up as creepy clown and recording several prank videos that were published on YouTube. These videos, recorded with cameras previously placed in hidden places, focus on people walking around, who are unexpectedly surprised by a scene of aggression or crime staged by one of these clowns. When these clowns – who, at that moment, are busy in performing fictitious violent actions – make eye contact with the passer-by, they record their reaction, even chasing them, so as to be able to record a good scene of the reaction, which is the focus of all the staging.

Moroni has millions of followers who watch his videos all over the world, which were mainly recorded in Italy and, more recently, in the USA, exactly where this phenomenon of clown apocalypse exploded.

According to indications of a set of information from different websites, the mastermind of these performances, however, does not seek to surprise people randomly, but rather follows a list of rules about what type of audience should be reached. In this list, for example, there would be indications that the actions of creepy clowns should not be directed to unaccompanied women, children, and older people. In addition, it would also be written about the need for placing signs to warn that the activity is being performed, to prevent the transit of people using pacemaker.

However, it seems that those who dress as creepy clowns and promote the clown apocalypse do not follow a set of ethical standards and, therefore, they end up creating situations that, as previously announced, became public security issues. The first case of this type reported to the authorities happened in mid-August of 2016, in the city of Greenville, South Carolina, in the USA, when a group of clowns armed with knives tried to attract a group of children who was passing on the street into a forest.

However, it is interesting to note that the “newness” factor of these scenes lies mainly in their performative nature, because the clown figure is used as protagonist of an audiovisual production that emphasizes the obscure side of the clown himself, so that the scenes, when recorded, can be compared to what happens in a reality show, in which the participants perform normal and spontaneous actions according to the situations experienced, not being characters created for a fictional situation, but that later become part of a spectacular event.

Thus, the phenomenon of clown apocalypse consists in the association of a specific type of audiovisual production that involves a particular type of clown with the fact that a large number of people, in several countries, is performing actions that mimic, to some extent, what is disclosed in these videos.

It is worth noting, however, that there is no novelty regarding the protagonists involved in this type of production, because, over the years, there have been many movies and other film products that focused their narratives and staging in characters that are called killer clowns.

In films, the character of the macabre clown has been widely used and investigated, especially in feature films and miniseries. Among the films produced, we can mention the following as examples: “Drive-thru,” of 2007, in which a person with clown mask murders people near a cafeteria; “Gacy,” of 2003, which tells a true story of a serial killer

who, characterized as clown, killed people and buried their bodies in his backyard; “The clown at midnight,” of 1998, in which the protagonist is a clown who terrorizes people in a theater where, years before, a diva would have been murdered; “Clownhouse,” of 1989, which tells the story of three mentally ill people who escape from a psychiatric clinic, kill the clowns from a circus and, after stealing their costumes, sow terror throughout the city where the circus is installed.

Certainly, one of the best known horror films that has as protagonist the figure of the killer clown is “It,” of 1990, which was one of the great disseminators of this type of look on the clown. It is also worth mentioning one of the oldest film productions that has the presence of killer and scary clowns as protagonists, the movie titled “Killer klowns from outer space,” of 1988, which tells the story of the arrival of a UFO on earth that turns into a circus tent and has the killer clowns who came directly from space.

The cast of the films mentioned here has only a part of the many sequences of images already produced and presented to the general public over almost three decades, which have the killer clowns as protagonists. Currently, there are still productions in progress, such as the new movie “It,” which will be released in 2017 and is currently advertising its release.

After describing the trajectory of the recent clown apocalypse and creepy clown phenomenon and its relationship with the scope of performance action intertwined with audiovisual language, we ask: why, among so many figures and masks of the theatrical and circus tradition, as well as other examples of folk figures that may represent negative and violent elements and instincts of the human being, the clown stood out as central figure of this occurrence?

If we observe the specific literature about the clown technique, especially regarding the process of formation and initiation in this art, we can note that most authors, among whom Farneti (2004) can be highlighted, often indicate the existence of a “clown philosophy” and a “clown psychology.”

Preparing a brief account about these terms, one can highlight that the principles of what Farneti (2004) calls “clown philosophy” are especially the values of the clown as a being. The author indicates that he is an emblem of simplicity, authenticity, innocence, self-mockery, masked and disguised capacity. Farneti (2004) highlights the aspects that are evident in publications that approach the clown, mainly based on the books of Galante Garrone (1980) and Dário Fó (2009).

The clown mask, which is often associated with the red nose and a characteristic make-up, still according to

Farneti (2004), is appropriate, because it allows hiding one's own ego and fears, leaving space for the freedom to play with the less accepted parts in oneself. The principles of this "clown philosophy" are based, therefore, on the possibility of expression, especially through the body, including actions that require acceptance of losses, learning to feel small and without skills, learning to express emotions, using gestures and objects in unconventional ways, making the game and spontaneity the center of one's own action, looking with wonder as if everything was always new and different – all this considering the differences as an aspect of cultural wealth.

Jara (2010), in the chapter entitled "philosophy and psychology of the clown," highlights the social importance of the clown because he amuses, entertains, and makes laugh as purpose. The author stresses that clowns convey a positive global image as a person, and states that "we would not accept an evil, rude, or unfriendly clown, because this would prevent familiarity and identification" (JARA 2010, p. 45). In this part of her publication, Jara (2010) still deals with the importance of laughter therapy and emphasizes the approximation of the clown with childhood, highlighting that the clown, however, is not a child, but behaves as such without forgetting his age.

From this aspect, one can observe that, although the association of the clown with positive values and qualities is pertinent, Jara (2010) also states that clowns offer a range of emotions that are part of the essence of the human being, certainly reflecting love and joy, but also pain, sadness, and anger, among other emotions.

It is important to note that the creepy clowns approached here mostly use a characterization that redirects us to the figure of the modern circus clown, a circus type that emerged since the end of the 18th century, which stands out for the frequent use of the red nose, exaggerated clothing in size and color, and heavy makeup that extends the features of face and body as a whole.

One should also not forget that the figure of the modern circus clown has among its more immediate predecessors the comic types of *Commedia Dell'Arte*, which wore masks such as those of Harlequin and Pulcinella. The Harlequin, in particular, who receives his name from Hellequin, is, according to Toschi (1976), a type of demon that, in the medieval representations, incorporates grotesque aspects of the medieval demon, and what approaches more this type of demon to the comic type of this mask is mainly his laugh.

Possibly, it is by this link and cultural heritage with the Harlequin's mask and laugh and by this approach with the medieval demon that it is common to find the term clown associated not only with ingenuity, childhood, and positive qualities, but also with concepts that approach the horror, terror, evil, and the macabre. Having said that, it is possible to think that there was influence of this cultural heritage and of the mask itself in the emergence of these aspects that led to the creepy clown phenomenon. However, there is a relevant point often found in the literature of different authors dealing with the clown, among which we can highlight Farneti (2004) considerations, which indicate that the clown is foremost constituted from the scenic action.

Therefore, it is the action and technique used that distinguishes, first of all, what is a clown. When discussing this topic in the article "History and direction of the clownesque mask" (GALLO, 2012), it was possible to show that, although in some historical period the characterization identified the practice of the clown, which also includes the modern circus clown, nowadays it is no longer the clothes and make-up that identify this character, but what can be defined as the clown technique in the scenic composition, which involves, among other things, the determination of the action of this character on stage: 1) creating a comical body; 2) targeting the focus; 3) recurring use of triangulation with the audience; 4) comic timing; and 5) dramaturgy and stage action, based on what can be called "clown logic," with the presence of a possible "clown philosophy and psychology."

The elements related to the clown technique are not present in the activities carried out by the creepy clowns, because they use merely a characterization that approaches specifically the dress code and makeup of the modern circus clown, thus inducing a identification of clowns with creepy clowns.

For this reason, we can say that those who are called creepy clowns, which fostered the clown apocalypse and contribute to the emergence of clown hysteria and coulrophobia, do not redirect to the clown figure, because they do not act as such, especially regarding technical and artistic issues.

The phenomenon of clown apocalypse is a fad that is possibly based on a revisit of vestiges linked to the cultural heritage that permeates the figure of the clown, with the mistaken creation of an association between the term clown and creepy clowns. This approach is only based on the rede-

termination of visual elements of the modern circus clown to thus promote a mischievous look on the work of the clown who acts in the field of performing arts.

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