

# On the birth of the clown

## Sobre o nascer palhaço

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I describe the birth of the clown Verde Gaia Filho. To this end, I make use of Roland Barthes' notion of biographeme and of the lover's discourse, as well as the notion of contagion in Artaud's work. Besides describing some specific aspects of my experience in the contagious encounter with the clown, the objective is to analyze more deeply some of his principles and to understand how his logic is intensely expressed in the body of the one who experiences him, constituting him as otherness.

Keywords: Clown. Body. Otherness.

### RESUMO

Nesse artigo narro o nascimento do palhaço Verde Gaia Filho. Para tanto, aproprio-me da noção de biografema e discurso amoroso de Roland Barthes, bem como da noção de contágio presente em Artaud. Além de descrever alguns aspectos pontuais de minha experiência no encontro contagioso com o palhaço, o objetivo é aprofundar alguns de seus princípios e perceber como sua lógica se expressa de forma intensa no corpo daquele que o experiencia, constituindo-o como uma alteridade.

Palavras-chave: Palhaço. Corpo. Alteridade.

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The proposal outlined below is the narrative of a birth. Not just any birth, but the birth of a clown. More specifically of the clown Verde Gaia Filho<sup>2</sup>, who has accompanied me since 2012 as otherness. In this sense, it is important to note that although my background in theater is mainly related to theatrical improvisation and to the clown, I am also a biologist and currently a professor of biology. However, gradually, in my teaching activities, I started to make an effort to resist the biology within myself. To breathe some life into it amidst the rigidity of science. Rather than emphasize dichotomies and dualities, try to find also positivity in this biology of science. Is there not something that could relate to the rhythmicity of life in the midst of the scientific definitions and boundaries that are part of biology?

The birth of “Verde Gaia Filho” is related to this incessant quest to immerse myself in the different dimensions of what constitutes me. It arose from an invitation to lecture a module of the extension course “Training Program for Environmental Educators – PFEA,<sup>3</sup>” organized by the “Center for Environmental Dissemination – CDA” in Itá, western Santa Catarina state. The idea was to give a body workshop involving exercises, drama games and clown training as a basis to establish a relationship with environmental education. Upon receiving that invitation, I felt like putting on a performance before the workshop. The idea was to express artistically and through my body the pre-workshop discussion. I decided not to explain how I understood environmental education in relation to the exercises and interplay proposed in the workshop, but to introduce that “explanation” in the performance. It would be almost a manifesto. I then started to think about the contradictions and limitations that mark the discourse of environmental education and sustainability when they are based on overused verbs such as prescribe, define, raise awareness, preserve and so on. And, based on that, about how I perceived the power of environmental education when related to a reintegration with oneself, based on personal life experiences, bodily knowledge and the visualization of one’s own contradictions and limitations in order to perceive the limitations and contradictions of environmental discourse in society.

Thus was born Verde Gaia Filho. As a clown, he is the expression of all the contradictions and limitations that make up the mainstream discourse on sustainability and environmental education. He emerged as an idea, and I gradually started thinking of elements that would express that contradiction in simple actions, such as using a sustainable bag made of raw cotton in daily life, but surrendering to thousands of plastic

2.  
I sometimes refer to Verde Gaia Filho affectionately as simply Verde Gaia or Verde.

3.  
The Center for Environmental Dissemination of the Itá Hydroelectric Plant (CDA), maintained by the Itá Consortium, was created to divulge and deploy information related to the environmental research and technical information of constructive and operational processes of UHE Itá.  
Cf. <http://www.cda.org.br>

bags when shopping in the supermarket. Or owning a huge pottery mug as a vigorous stand against plastic, but serving it out of a plastic bottle. In the improvisations that led me to his encounter, the most interesting idea that started flourishing in my body was precisely that of the sustainable bag.

Gradually and delicately it became the key element that helped to develop the show and Gaia Verde. Initially it arose as a large mask that covered our face and could help in the dramatic and bodily development of the initial scene. Later, as a saddlebag for the countless objects that gradually became scene partners. During the performance, they slowly emerge from it and establish the pathways we traverse on stage. Objects that come to life. They cease to be static to become partners in the narrative.

They are all simple and even ridiculous objects. However, the presence of these simple and banal objects also demonstrates the power of the clown's logic and of his unexpected and constantly unprecedented gaze on the world. Each of the objects ceases to be something banal in the relation it establishes with Verde Gaia through his inventive gaze. Thus, an unthinkable pathway is gradually established. From awakening to makeup. From makeup to the removal of the other bags of raw cotton. Via the plastic bags, the inorganic food, the planting of a tree on stage with earth, water and seeds. To the sip of water from the sustainable pottery mug and arriving at the vest made by Verde Gaia Filho with cotton swabs.

It is a pathway full of detours, pauses, returns and much movement, which with the company of objects becomes even richer and more multiple. However, there is something prior to the development of the performance with Verde Gaia Filho which concerns the gestation of the clown as a logic for my body and my life story. Inevitably, that gestation traverses my life story as a biologist and professor.

More than a biographical narrative, the intention of which would be to express the story of the truth of a life, a biographical narrative. Who offers me the notion of biographeme in a somewhat fleeting way is Roland Barthes. Luciano Bedin da Costa, appropriating Barthes' notion, says that "the biographeme makes of whoever who reads and writes a life the very playwright of that life. What he records is not the truth of that life, but the truth of an encounter with that life" (COSTA 2011, p.13). The idea of biographeme becomes significant when one thinks that for the clown, truth as essence does not exist. What exists is the truth of a certain moment that can quickly fade away.

As pointed out by Pucetti (2009, p. 211): "The clown has no labels, he is not necessarily 'pure,' angel or devil, male or

female [...]; we must not try to pigeonhole the clown. [...] He is everything and nothing. The everything, which in a moment of pause for the public gaze [...], becomes nothing.”

Thus, based on this labyrinthine course of my life story as an actor, clown and biologist, I highlight a few aspects that describe my contagious encounter with the clown, as well as some fundamental principles related to his art, linked to philosophy and literature, which make the encounter even more significant and powerful.

### *The birth of the clown*

TO WRITE. Enticements, arguments and impasses produced by the desire to “express” amorous feeling in a “creation” (particularly of writing).

I am both too big and too weak for writing: I am *alongside* it for writing is always rigorous, indifferent [...] What hinders amorous writing is the illusion of expressiveness (BARTHES, 2003, p.157).

Any birth is an extremely significant event. A small seed, which strenuously advances through layers of soil and rises resolutely toward the sun. The microscopic bacterium, which magically splits into two and proliferates, safely and decisively. The bird, which with precise blows from its small beak breaks the hard shell of the egg and invades the outside. The uterus, which in intense movements spits out the child for its first manifestation of life: the crying that announces its presence in the world. Biologically, the preparation of a new human life is one of the most beautiful and sophisticated events ever created. The multiple cell divisions ordered in a continuous and intense process. The extremely precise modifications, in time and space, yielding tissues, organs and systems in a complex way in perfect operation. The dynamics of intra-uterine learning that starts instructing the new life about its body and its infinite possibilities. The paradox of a small and fragile body, yet in full possession of all potentialities.

The birth of a clown is also a significant and very special event within working proposals that do not view him as a burlesque and ready-made character, but that seek to generate and refine him from the very individual who gives rise to him. Such a statement strongly reminds of the words of Marcio Libar in his clownish autobiography, *A nobre arte do palhaço* (The Clown’s Noble Art), describing the birth of his clown Cuti-Cuti during a fortnight clown initiation retreat organized by LUME<sup>4</sup> and led by Carlos Simioni and Ricardo Pucetti, the *Messieurs*. A symbolic figure of the circus world,

4. Núcleo Interdisciplinar de Pesquisas Teatrais da Unicamp (LUME). Coletivo que se tornou referência internacional no redimensionamento técnico e ético do ofício de ator. Cf. <http://www.lumeteatro.com.br>.

he represents the circus owner and master of ceremonies, the highest authority, in charge of hiring and firing artists to the benefit of the show's success.

When he took part of the retreat, Marcio already enjoyed a well-established career as actor and clown, and was also a member of *Teatro de Anônimo* (Theater of the Anonymous<sup>5</sup>), a renowned and active group founded by Marcio himself. However, in participating in this retreat based on intense physical work capable of leading one to unfamiliar and often uncomfortable territories of oneself, he was able to find, following a painful and liberating depuration, the essence and soul of his clown. It happened during an exercise proposed at the retreat called circus ring. Each clown had to perform before the *Messieurs* a scene that would be convincing to them and to the audience. When he attempted to present his circus ring, Marcio was punished by Simioni and forced to stay behind the curtain, outside the audience, banned from seeing his colleagues' circus rings. After some time thus grounded, he was called back and narrated a dream he had had the night before in which he saw a boy. Based on that dream and with Pucetti's guidance (*apud* LIBAR, 2008, p. 112), "Go back and release that boy you have confined and done away with. Bring him close to you," Marcio returned behind the curtain, lay down and wept uncontrollably for over an hour:

I was on the floor, feeling all my strength being drained in a petition for mercy. The crying was not caused by depression, but by a kind of turmoil of rebirth. I was alone, behind the curtain, and by now everyone on the other side could hear my uncontrolled, oozing crying. When a colleague's circus ring was over, I was called back. I was completely withered, devoid of all signs of vanity. When I appeared, devastated, and faced the audience in that state, I saw all faces light up in smiles that turned into tears in most people. It was as if they were witnessing a miracle. And they were. At that moment, Simi looked up, made a cute face, and said in the voice of a mother cooing at her child: "Ooooh! Cuti cuti!" I sniffled through my runny nose and the audience immediately burst out laughing. My clown had just been born (LIBAR, 2008, p. 113).

This moment represents an encounter that is more than artistic. It becomes an existential movement, a moment of rediscovering oneself and recognizing personal aspects that were faded and forgotten in Marcio, as he further relates in his clownish autobiography:

The LUME retreat was an extreme experience. Without doubt the most extreme and transformative I have ever had. To this day it resonates in my things. Not only because it was where I found my clown's soul, but mainly because it was through it that I found

5.  
Cf. <http://www.teatrodeanonimo.com.br>.

[...] a new meaning for my life and for my art. I can affirm that this work helped me to undo the stereotype of a macho, wise guy, *carioca*, suburban and resentful person I had spent my whole life building up. It made me see how ridiculous that shield was and accept my condition of mediocrity and wretchedness before the laws of nature. Above all, it made me laugh at everything. He who laughs at himself, laughs best (LIBAR, 2008, p. 114).

I did not take part in the Lume retreat like Marcio Libar, but I can say for sure that the entire course that culminated in the birth of my own clown also led me to recognize important issues in relation to myself. I rediscovered myself in him. I rediscovered myself in Verde Gaia Filho. He was born in me, as in the short story by Mia Couto (2013, p. 133) *Mulher de mim* (Woman of Me), in which a man resists for a while the passion he feels for an unknown woman. At a certain point he discovers that the woman is part of himself: “In her I would find not a woman who was mine, but the woman of me,” and thus accepts her delicate plea: “Let me be born in you.”

It so happens that as a discovery of otherness, Verde Gaia is also greatly appreciated. I love him deeply. As I try to describe his birth, what I do here is plunge passionately into a maze of relationships, memories and feelings in the (un)pieces of my body. In every bend of this complex labyrinth, I find an element that seems meaningful in this description and... Sigh. I have already understood that Verde Gaia is the expression and manifestation of the various dimensions that constitute me as subjectivity. In him are evident the others that I also am, and in him are alive the contradictions that involve the presence of those *myself others* in me. Mia Couto adds his voice to mine by saying that

The truth is that we are always not one but several people, and it should be a rule that our signatures never coincide. We all live with our different selves, many people claiming our identity. The key is not to let the choices life imposes on us force us to kill our inner diversity. The best thing in life is being able to choose, but the saddest thing is having to choose (COUTO, 2011, p. 80).

In deciding to describe the birth of my own clown and prevent the death of my inner diversity, I realize that he inevitably withdraws from my body and I feel abandoned. Here is the paradox: although the clown is born as otherness entangled with me, sharing spaces, logics and flesh of my own body, he is defined by a state of continuous presence-absence. I cannot be, at all times, what I am when clowns we are. So although I understand his absence supported by the words of Barthes (2003, p.35), “Now, only the absence of the other can



exist: it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain. The other is in a state of perpetual departure, of travelling; the other is, by vocation, migrant, fugitive,” yet I suffer. However, in this suffering I am also motivated by Barthes:

Absence persists, I must endure it. Therefore, I will *manipulate* it: transform the distortion of time into swaying, produce rhythm, open up the stage of language [...]. Absence becomes an active practice, a *chore* (which keeps me from doing anything else); there is a creation of fiction which has multiple roles (doubts, reproaches, desires, melancholies) (2003, p. 39, emphasis added).

And I decide to manipulate this absence by describing the birth of Verde Gaia Filho in text and writing. In the (mis-guided) paths that constitute me (us), I find small elements that are meaningful to make him present again in his absence, and perhaps to help me realize that the marks of his absence are so vivid that his presence is more than fiction. Verde Gaia remains with me. He radiates himself in his logic and presence to other spaces, other desires, other relations. As this becomes a conviction, I am even surer of reencountering him as both text and writing. “Meaning (destiny) electrifies my hand; I will tear open the other’s body, compel the other [...] to enter into the interplay of meaning: I will make him speak” (BARTHES, 2003, p.86, emphasis added). Therefore, from now on, every moment that follows in the text sheds (un)pieces of my (our) body. The writing lacerates me (us) and the words are stained by my (our) flesh and secretions. The writing is not always comfortable. At times it becomes truncated, scathing. I cannot know or plan its course, or even how far it will go. Yes, this encounter also made – and makes – me suffer. That’s why I don’t hesitate to say that my story with Verde Gaia Filho is a love story. Filled with passionate and intense moments. And in this I find inspiration in Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (2003). In the book he says that the replacement of the description of the lover’s discourse by its simulation restores to it its fundamental person, the *I*. In this way, what is staged is an utterance and not an analysis. It is the utterance of the one who speaks within himself, amorously, confronting the other who does not speak (the loved object). It is in the enlacement of this proposal of interplay that I continue with the passionate narrative of the gestation of the clown in me.

### *Who I am, what I do*

ENCOUNTER. The figure refers to the happy period immediately following the first seduction, before the difficulties of the amorous relationship emerge.

At every moment of the encounter, I discover in the other another myself: *You like this? Well, me too! You don't like that? Me neither!* [...] In the amorous encounter, I keep jumping, I am *light* (Barthes, 2003, pp.135-138, emphasis added).

My first encounter with the clown was intense and intensive. It took place between July and August 2008, less than a year before I took a comedy course for actors and non-actors with Mauro Zanatta<sup>6</sup> in Curitiba. At that time, I barely knew Mauro and his work proposal. I was only aware that he was a great actor, director (I had seen a wonderful mask performance directed by him) and professor (some friends had taken the comedy course that semester and said his proposal based on theatrical improvisation was incredible). He would be giving an intensive workshop called *The Universe of the Clown*, whose prerequisite was having had some theatrical experience. It would last two weeks, Monday through Friday, from 7 to 10 p.m. It was a great opportunity to get to know Mauro's work.

My interest was not so much the clown, for I knew little about it as a theatrical way of expression. I do not recall any striking presence of a clown in my life. I may have seen some during my childhood in the few circus shows I had the opportunity to watch. It is possible that my earliest recollections are related to men dressed as clowns, wearing caricatured clothes, make-up faded and disfigured by abundant sweat and a crude red nose who sold balloons and candy at the entrance of Barigui Park in Curitiba. But those memories are not at all stimulating. On the contrary, they reveal a degraded and even alarming condition. Sometimes, arriving at the crowded park on a sunny Sunday, we would wait a few minutes in the car line to enter the parking lot and they would come by from car to car, offering those dull balloons and candy. That situation made me sad, for it had none of the fun and magic that, for me, the clown should convey. I saw only a few men wearing extravagant, colorful costumes and bad make-up trying desperately to make some money. At a distance, they even did seem to be bearers of fun, play and joy, but as they approached the car window and started haggling their souvenirs, all the magic disappeared. What was left was only man with a sweaty face, pathetic clothes, serious talk and a blank stare.

Therefore, without any specific aim regarding the clown, much more motivated by the desire to have contact with that professor's work, I signed up for the workshop. However, against all expectations, it proved to be the most terrifying experience I have ever had regarding the theater. I could never imagine that my first encounter with the clown would be so overwhelming. Although I had some theatrical experi-

6. Actor, playwright and clown from Curitiba. Cf. <http://espa-coexcentrico.com.br/>



ence, the logic of the course, the improvisation, that was new to me. Today I realize how all the foundations of theatrical improvisation underpinned the work with the clown proposed by Mauro. Almost all the proposals consisted of improvisation exercises. However, those exercises required a level of commitment I had never known before. At that moment, the theater for me was still a straightforward process, consisting of acting, body expression, text reading and rehearsal.

On the very first day of the workshop, Mauro proposed an individual entrance from behind a red curtain. One after another, when Mauro hit a wooden staff on the floor, we should emerge from behind the curtain and improvise based on the prompt “*who I am, what I do.*” I panicked! Entering alone from behind a curtain, facing a partially unknown audience to answer an existential question that drew a total blank. Of course I did not let the panic transpire. My pride would not allow me to reveal my difficulty to everyone. I would not let Mauro Zanatta and those people realize I did not know what to do. After all, even regarding difficulties hidden only to myself, I had always tried to preserve a successful outward appearance in daily life.

### *A great frustration*

TO UNDERSTAND. Suddenly perceiving the amorous episode as a knot of inexplicable reasons and obstructed solutions, the subject exclaims: “I want to understand!”

Repression: I want to analyze, to know, to express in a language other than my own; I want to “look in the face” what divides me, cuts me off. [...] Is not understanding dividing the image, undoing the I, proud organ of ignorance?  
(Barthes, 2003, pp.139-140, emphasis added).

When there was no more avoiding it, I went behind the curtain. I don’t remember exactly what I did. Without realizing it, I did not even wait for the cue of the staff striking the floor, indicating that the scene should start. I came on early. He intervened, saying I had come in early and asked me to start over. The second time I was able to hear the signal indicating my entrance, but I could not follow through on any of the ideas my thoughts proposed. I failed. I tried a few more times, but I couldn’t do it. Maybe for the first time in my life, I overtly failed. Everyone noticed my failure, including me. Some understood the reason for my failure, including Mauro. I did not.

It took me some time to understand, for understanding that failure required trying to grasp it not through reason and

intellect, but through experience and body. When I finished the exercise I was sad, embarrassed and angry at that professor who had exposed me in such a cowardly and cold way. I could not understand how my friends could like that violent and aggressive method. It was only the first day of the course and I had no wish to continue. I was devastated and unmotivated. I did not feel nurtured. Of course, I was in the same condition as everyone else, having to deal with my pride, my impotence and my failure. I wasn't supposed to charm people, not even Mauro Zanatta. My everyday mask of an intelligent, charismatic fellow was of no avail there.

From totally unimportant, the clown had quickly become somewhat of a great frustration. However, contrary to what it may seem, there was something in that degrading condition of having failed, of being exposed and trampled on that motivated me. It was not a masochistic motivation, but a desire to understand the meaning of all that. Where would that workshop lead me? What was the clown and how to find him within myself? Who was I when I was on stage that way, failed and destroyed? How to find belonging in that situation? I completed the long two-week course amid such questionings, disappointments, failures and difficulties. Without understanding what it all meant. Something had changed, however. The clown, through Mauro, had infected me.

### *Circulating in my blood*

REVERBERATION. Fundamental mode of amorous subjectivity: a word, an image painfully reverberates in the affective consciousness of the subject.

What reverberates in me is what I learn with my body: something tenuous and sharp abruptly awakens this body, which, in the meantime, had dozed in the rational knowledge of a general situation: the word, the image, the thought function like a whiplash (BARTHES, 2003, p.287).

*The Theater and the Plague* is one of the essays in the book *The Theater and its Double* by Antonin Artaud. In it, Artaud (2006, p.9) begins by describing a fact that occurred in 1720. Those were hard years; the Black Plague was ravishing Europe and terrorizing entire cities by ferociously decimating their population. The disease is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Transmitted to humans through the bite of infected fleas present in black rats, it was responsible for one of the most terrible epidemics in the history of mankind, which occurred during the Middle Ages, decimating 30% of

the population of Europe. In 1720, the viceroy of the city of Cagliari, in Sardinia, prevented a ship from docking in its port after having a prophetic dream in which he saw that ship bringing the plague and destruction to the city. Artaud suggests that the viceroy had received emanations from the plague: "It cannot be denied that a palpable yet subtle communication was established between him and the plague" (ARTAUD, 2006, p.11). Even without direct contact or any indication that the plague was present on the ship, the fear of contagion was sufficient to make the viceroy act against the frightening presence of the terrible reality. Certainly this fear relates to the gravity and terror of the Black Plague in those years. Artaud succeeds in building the image of this terror when he proposes to describe intensely and in a poetically overwhelming way the symptomatology and biological behavior of the plague:

Before the marked appearance of any physical or psychological distress, red spots spread throughout the body, which the victim only suddenly perceives when they become darkish. He scarcely has time to be alarmed, and his head already starts to boil, to become formidably heavy, and he collapses. Then, he is seized by an atrocious fatigue [...]. His uncontrolled body fluids, unsettled, in disorder, seem to race through his body. [...]; the red eye, inflamed and then glazed; the tongue that suffocates, huge and thick, first white, then red and then black, as if charred and cracked, all this heralds an unprecedented organic upheaval (ARTAUD, 2006, p. 14).

This description alone would be enough to create a frightening picture of the plague, but Artaud goes further. He also describes what it causes in the depths of the body from the dissecting of a corpse, in an attempt to identify possible damage to internal organs that might help to explain the traumas of the disease that lead those affected by it to such an abrupt and violent death:

When opened, the corpse of the plague victim shows no lesions. The gallbladder is swollen, almost bursting, filled with a dark, viscous fluid so dense that it resembles a new form of matter. The blood in the arteries, in the veins, is also black and viscous. [...] In the walls of the stomach membrane appear to have awakened numerous blood sources. Everything indicates a vital disorder in the secretions. But there is neither loss nor destruction of matter, as in leprosy or syphilis. The only two organs actually affected and injured by the plague, the brain and the lungs, are those that depend directly on the consciousness and the will. [...] The plague, therefore, seems to manifest its presence in the sites [...] where human will, consciousness and thought are imminent and apt to occur (Artaud, 2006, p. 16).

To this description of how the disease affects the body without causing it significant lesions, and yet potentially leading it to collapse, Artaud adds some strange episodes. One of them, for example, refers to the fact of the disease having entered and decimated a fortified city which had assigned a cordon of armed men to prevent infected people from entering, and spared those very armed guards who came face to face with it. From these elements Artaud (2006, p.17) discusses the difficulty of scientifically determining the laws governing the plague. That is, when a disease sets in and spreads throughout a certain place, there is always a component of mystery, contradiction and insoluble strangeness that gathers alongside the increasing number of corpses. In addition, it appears that the disease has the ability to promote substantial change in psychic, political and social conditions, in addition to those of a biological nature. It is as if the disease, besides entering the body and eroding its health and life, had a much greater power, i.e., to infect the psyche, the political and social life of the city. The disease, uncontrolled, spreading, infecting with no foreseeable limits. The disease as collective contagion threatening the public order with its symptoms and establishing a chaotic regime, with the collapse of the regular public hygiene, police, and administrative services. Pyres are lit to burn the dead while wood is available, and then the dead begin to clutter the streets. When nothing else works, the houses open and the delirious plague victims scatter through streets with their minds crowded with dreadful visions (ARTAUD, 2006, p. 18).

In other words, contagion as an overwhelming condition that prevents any discernment and leads to an act that is unthinkable, yet full of meaning within the situation that is expressed. In this situation one can perceive how the psychic and social contagion is also full of urgency, like the biological contagion of the plague. The speed with which the plague spreads from body to body, destroying the physical health of bodies and leading them to collapse, seems to correlate with the speed with which the social contagion spreads, established not only in the relationship between bodies as biological entities, but also in the intersubjective relationship between them. In the way that an individual, intensely marked by the social experience of the plague and its real, imaginary and fictional consequences, can overwhelmingly affect and destabilize another individual. This social contagion slowly grows in strength, because if biologically the disease causes a series of definite and constant organic symptoms and consequences, the social and psychic disease is much more plural and can acquire multiple variations according to individual experi-

ences, real and imaginary, of each person affected by it. “The last of the living ones are exasperated: the son, hitherto submissive and virtuous, kills his father; the chaste man sodomizes his kin. The libertine becomes pure. The miser throws his gold in handfuls out the window...” (ARTAUD, 2006, p. 20).

In this intense description of the plague, Artaud finds a connection with theater. He realizes the relationship that exists between the actor, who surrenders to theatrical performance, and the consequences of the installation of the plague in the biological, psychic and social body of a given place. The plague and the theater introduce a gratuitousness that leads to useless acts with no profit for the present moment. Both are boundary situations:

The state of the plague victim who dies with no material destruction, with all the signs of an absolute and almost abstract disease upon him, is **identical to the state of an actor fully penetrated and overwhelmed by his feelings, with no benefit to reality**. Everything in the physical aspect of the actor, as in that of the victim, shows that life has reacted to the paroxysm, and yet nothing has happened (ARTAUD, 2006, pp. 20-21).

This state of gratuitousness is expressed in the possibility that both the theater and the plague must give rise to the other by entering into unknown states and bodies, in previously unimaginable relations, in deeper layers of subjectivities, and make them vibrate intensely with an overwhelming power. As Artaud (2006, pp. 23-24) suggests: “The plague takes dormant images, a latent disorder, and suddenly leads them to the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and exhausts them: like the plague the theater rebuilds the link [...] between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature.”

In my ambiguity as an actor and biologist, I see no more interesting and timely possibility to appropriate the relationship established by Artaud and affirm the conviction that I was infected by the clown. Something in that traumatic workshop experience with Mauro Zanatta had taken hold of my body and now evolved within me dubiously. At first I did not even realize it. On the one hand I was disillusioned by the end of the workshop, but that was not all. My failure had motivated a quest. There was a power in that failed condition of the clown that captivated me. And, in assigning a new meaning to that feeling, Barthes strikes up a conversation with me. He comes to tell me that

The world subjects every enterprise to an alternative: that of success or failure, victory or defeat. I profess another logic: **I am simultaneously and contradictorily happy and unhappy**; “to suc-

ceed” or “to fail” have for me only contingent, provisional meanings (which does not prevent my sorrows and my desires from being violent); what inspires me, secretly and obstinately, is not a tactic: I accept and affirm, beyond truth and falsehood, [...]; I live withdrawn from all purpose, I live according to chance... Faced with adventure (with what happens to me), I am neither victorious nor defeated: I am tragic (2003, p. 16, my emphasis).

Roving unbalanced between success and failure, victory and defeat, in the comic tragedy of that failure, I started approaching the clown. I would attend performances, read and research the story of great clowns. I had already started taking the comedy course for actors and non-actors with Mauro Zanatta, but without understanding yet what had happened in that first encounter. The experience had led to a crisis. I wanted to get closer to that strange being the clown symbolized for me, but I also felt a certain degree of repulsion and fear. I had not yet identified who that other was, dressed up as a clown for me. And once again Artaud (2006) comes to my aid with words that make me realize the need to overcome that ambiguous condition and surrender myself to that contagion, to the plague that had settled in my body, that had occupied my being and originated all that organic, psychic and existential disturbance, because for him: “The theater, like the plague, is a crisis that is solved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or extreme purification” (pp. 28-29).

Slowly the contagion of the clown took over me. It began to germinate in my body. Sometimes in an improvisation exercise, the clown visited my body through the memories of that first workshop. And when that happened, there was also a small existential understanding about that strange being who had failed me. In this I recall Merleau-Ponty (1990) and how he discusses the experience of the other in life:

In an individual’s life there are fertile moments in which he is particularly the expression of himself, in which he apprehends from an unexpected meaning, and which has belonged to him, certain facts of his past; he finds a meaning thanks to something that appears within or around him. The expression of himself is then a trade-off between what is given and what will be done (p. 313).

I was not yet a clown, but he was already circulating in my blood, parasitizing my tissues, muscles, and sometimes particles of his were also snuggling in my brain. In short, he was another that, still incipient, was beginning to whisper his existence in me.



## The symptom of failure

OUTCOMES. Enticements of solutions, whatever they may be, which afford the amorous subject [...] a temporary respite; hallucinatory manipulation of the possible outcomes for the amorous crisis.

*Imagining* an extreme solution, [...] I produce a fiction, I become artist, I produce a scene, I paint my way out [...]. The *art* of catastrophe calms me down (Barthes, 2003, pp. 295-296, emphasis added).

Perhaps one of the most important things that first failure had taught me was to be patient. I have always had great difficulty controlling my anxiety and several times it has overwhelmed my desire, creating unwelcome situations. In this I feel the echo of the Barthesian text I once improvised: "I simultaneously desire and need. Desire disintegrates in the need" (BARTHES, 2003, p. 39). Anxiety, for me, is the need that I cannot yet understand, and often my desire disintegrates and disappears in its midst. My first failure with the clown was such a situation. On entering the stage before the cue of the staff hitting the floor, anxiety seized my body and carried it without my even realizing it. After the failure, I began to pay more attention to what I was doing; even when inebriated by anxiety, I tried to keep myself present. That was precisely the first symptom that contagion by the clown brought me: being in the present. As I mentioned before, the incubation time had been long and I only realized that I was suffering from this symptom during the comedy course for actors and non-actors, where we also performed the fateful entrance from behind the red curtain. But looking back on that first experience clearly revealed the relationship between that failure and my anxiety. I was not in the present. My body was simply dragged along by my anxious need to create something, to correspond, to succeed. In this memory, I hear Ariane Mnouchkine whispering to me:

You are so rushed that you explain instead of living. [...] You did not take your time to act, to follow the course, to show the anger. You are not in the *present*. You are already here and I do not see your course. I want to know where your course is before you reach the goal (FÉRAL, 2010, p. 63, emphasis added).

It was a hard but essential learning process. Gradually I let that symptom take over me. I would breathe before starting a scene. I would feel what my body was asking for. I would try to inhabit the feelings and guide myself by them, rather than by the anticipated need to create something

definitive. Today I understand that that is one of the reasons why theatrical improvisation and the clown fascinate me so much. The symptom of being in the present afforded by the clown and also by theatrical improvisation enables me to control my constant anxiety. The need to be in the present allows me to occupy a comfortable space I can barely afford to have in my daily life, when I am always urged by this characteristic anxious need. My body acts differently, I feel it is more insightful. I feel things more fully. It is as if I were congregated with the world, perceiving and feel it much more broadly. A very pleasant sensation whose description I encounter in Merleau-Ponty:

The subject of sensation is neither a thinker who notices a quality nor an inert environment that is affected or modified by it; it is a power that grows simultaneously with an existential environment or is synchronized with it. The relations between the sentient being and the sensible being are comparable to the relations between the sleeper and his sleep: sleep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from the outside the confirmation which it was expecting (2006, p. 285).

This understanding had also afforded me a level of confidence that had been debilitated since the failure. I was already beginning to realize the need to once again take risks as a first condition to coming closer to the clown, which was also essential in theatrical improvisation. And risk reminds me of Hans Schnier, the protagonist of the novel *The Clown* by Heinrich Böll. Hans is an irreverent character who is about to sell his soul of professional clown in exchange for keeping his wandering life. Persistent and uttering painful truths, he refutes his upper bourgeoisie family and leaves in a rather quixotic quest for the love of his life. At a certain point in this search, which is not free from loss, suffering, and intense critical humanism, he says: "I accept things as they come, not even the gutter is unwelcome" (BÖLL, 2008, p. 47). Like Hans, albeit not so convinced as yet, I started to yearn for risk and accept all conditions in the quest for the clown. I had understood that if I wished to know how far the clown would take me, I should take my chances, commit myself fully to that fragile situation of difficulty, failure and loss, for I gradually understood that the clown was made of such matter. He was not made of success, of understanding and perfect images. The clown welcomes risk. He is, paradoxically, a fragile foundation, which may not sustain its own weight. Nonetheless, as fragile as he may be, it is this fragility that empowers his action. The risk of the clown not happening is great, as I had already understood in my own experience. It takes risk to make a clown happen. It

is not enough to wear a red nose and silly make-up, like the men who sold balloons in Barigui Park. You must leave the safe zone where the situation is under control and you know how to act and allow yourself to be lost and confused. To not know. The subtlety that makes people love the clown is very much related to how much he improvises and takes risks. How much he leaves aside his convictions, his established meanings, and allows himself be led by the unexpected, by chance. Such unrestraint does not mean he should abandon himself, but rather be willing to expose himself, to show his frailties, his ridicule, his handicaps, and play with that.

Although I still had not really understood the clown and that first experience of mine, I was taken over by yet another symptom: risk. Surrendered to that condition which delightfully imposed upon me the desire to take my chances, I resolved once again to invest in the clown. I was not yet ready for a new workshop or formal experience where I would be asked to honestly confront my difficulties and fears, but alongside the actress, partner and friend Camila Jorge, who was also in search of the clown, I decided to do some unpretentious “clown acts.” We presumed that the streets would be an interesting place for experimentation and risked it. We chose a Sunday morning, during the traditional “Largo da Ordem Fair,”<sup>7</sup> precisely for being a fair, with a great flow of people supposedly open to fun, various stalls with various possibilities for interplay and clown acts. We also decided to work as a pair, as this would greatly facilitate our relationship with the interplay and with the clown; we would feed on each other, on other people and on our clowns. That experience was very intense and extremely meaningful in my story with the clown. We learned a lot from that exchange with people. Often we didn’t have to do anything; the visitors themselves would propose situations of interplay. We simply needed to be in the present, to feel our body and perceive the multiple and vibrant world we were sharing. As Merleau-Ponty once again reminds me:

In reality, the other is not shut up in my perspective of the world because this perspective has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other’s perspective and because both are brought together in a single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception (2006, p. 473).

Those were delightful Sunday mornings, and I was subtly and increasingly taken over by the clown. Some encounters and interactions are still alive in my memory through my body. For example, I fondly remember the interplay at the stall that sold meringues. Whenever our clowns passed

7. An arts and crafts fair that takes place at Largo da Ordem, in the historical downtown area of Curitiba, on Sundays, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Cf. <http://feiralargo-daordem.com.br>.

before the stall, they were greeted with a smile by the owner, who generously offered them small meringues. We always accepted them (the interplay and the meringues), and, after melting those delicious little meringues in our mouth, we would interact with the people passing by the stall saying those meringues were really effective, because we had already eaten them and could still feel their effect. At that, our clowns would let out a long sigh<sup>8</sup> of pleasure that vibrated throughout the whole body. This modest interplay resulted in the writing of a simple haiku:

A clown wanders through the fair.  
The stall that sells meringues  
Meringue wanders through the clown.

Another delightful encounter was at the Japanese-owned stall that sold doorstoppers. These were small objects made of some heavy material covered in fabric in the shape of sofas, chickens, cats, etc. The stall owners would also welcome our clowns with a warm smile. The interplay became very interesting when parents approached the stall with their kids. Our clowns had a hard time lifting the small doorstoppers. After choosing one, we would take hold of it on both sides and, with a tremendous effort, lift it off the counter and place it on the ground before the stall. By then we were already exhausted and panting. The parents and Japanese stall owners would look at us with a warm smile on their eyes and lips, while the children would stare in serious amazement, thinking the clowns were really exhausted and tired. After all our suffering, kids would often show empathy and help us in the weary task of replacing the doorstoppers on the counter. They would simply lift the little doorstoppers effortlessly, feeling proud of their deed. Our clowns would stare in wonder at these demonstrations of strength, incredulous that such a small person could perform a feat like that. These were short interactions that we loved to do and repeat every week.

So they became small gags<sup>9</sup> of our clowns. Every Sunday our clowns would visit the meringue and doorstopper stalls.

In describing such interplay and recalling the relationships we would establish with children, I realize that our clowns are like them. Our relationship with the world, our discoveries of the multiplicity of shapes, possibilities, colors and relationships at the fair were those of a child's. Merleau-Ponty suggests:

The child lives in a world which she unhesitatingly believes accessible to all those around her, she has no awareness of herself or of others as private subjectivities, she does not suspect that all of us,

8.

TN: In Portuguese, the word for meringue, "suspiro," also means sigh, hence the clowns' joke.

9.

As gagues, ou *gag's* do inglês, são tiradas curtas. Ou seja, uma piada ou um gesto que não pressupõe um entendimento anterior para ser engraçada (POSSOLO, 2009).

including herself, are limited to a certain point of view about the world. That's why she subjects to criticism neither her thoughts, in which she believes as they present themselves, without attempting to link them to each other, nor our words. She has no awareness of points of views. For her, men are empty heads turned towards a single world, a self-evident world where everything happens, even dreams, which she believes are in the room, even thought, since she does not distinguish it from words. For her, others are gazes that inspect things, they have an almost material existence, so much so that the child wonders how these gazes do not break when they meet (2006, p. 475).

The clown relates to the world like a child. He is constituted through becoming-child. For him, as for the child, the problem of the other does not exist. There is no difference between what I and the other perceive. Thus, he is able to engage with the world and with what is suggested to him as a proposal of relationship, with existential intensity. Absolute surrender. And, alongside Mia Couto, who tells me that

childhood is not a time, it is not an age, a collection of memories. Childhood is when it is not too late. It is when we are available to be surprised, to let ourselves be entranced. Almost everything is acquired during this time in which we learn the feeling of Time itself (2011, p. 104),

I find myself in this experiential discovery fully infected by these further symptoms that make up the clown and operate together: naivety, surrender, becoming-child. The clown does not question, he acts. He has no definitive stances, crystallized desires, conditioned choices. He is the fullness of the moment that is in the present and surrenders fully to what happens in the lived experience. He is, fully, at the exact moment he experiences his action. Happening. That is why the clown approaches becoming-child. A singularity entirely powerful and intense. For he does not spread prejudices, definitive truths, moralized behaviors. Being total ineptitude, he is both beyond and short of all the limitations that we accumulate in our lives guided by the constant need to do well, to succeed, to show conviction, to be coherent, to correspond. That is why the clown is constantly deterritorialized by becoming-child. For Jódar and Gómez, the

Becoming-child is entering an area of proximity and indiscernibility in which there is no distinguishing oneself from a child. Now, this "a" child is in no way a generality. It is a singularity at its highest expression (2002, p. 35).

Intense becoming-child. Full: of outside powers, of desire savored at length, of animality, of the intensive experience

of the real, of restlessness and affirmation of life, of cartographic occupation of space, of minor language that vibrates the tongue and of constitutive vitality. It is this intense and powerful becoming that guides the clown's action. While he exists, he is always unfinished with the world he experiences. He professes a distinct logic at every moment. Therefore, it is always a unique discovery. That unique discovery was what we were trying, with great difficulty, to find every Sunday at the Largo da Ordem Fair through those impromptu interactions shared with strangers. Most of the time we failed. We knew that the way we perceived the interactions and proposals we performed was already conditioned by an understanding and definition of the world. That resulted in action that might even be funny, but was not legitimate. For the clown is not necessarily funny in his action. The clown's comicality lies much more in the innocence, truth and legitimacy with which he performs his actions and surrenders to becoming-child than in the fact that he tries to perform an action in a funny way.

Gradually I learned to grasp that failure in a different way. No longer as the absence of success, but as the inability to experience a relationship with the world and with life, new, unexpected and naive. That was when the failure symptom was able to express itself in all its power, because I understood that failure in the clown does not mean the same thing as failure in the logic we are used to. In the case of the clown, failure means not being able to understand failure as just another possible and acceptable possibility. In the few times we were able to access that space which transcends failure, success and any other understanding or definition, and simply experience the present to the fullest, we felt exquisite pleasure. Empowering and magical. An energy that invades the body and mobilizes it completely. That would happen only occasionally, but when it did, it was amazing, because during those moments we truly experienced the finding of our clowns.

### *Mysterious paradoxes*

IRKSOME. Discrete feeling of jealousy that seizes the amorous subject when he sees the interest of his beloved attracted and distracted by people, objects and occupations that to him function as rivals.

The world is precisely this: *an obligation to share*. The world (the worldly) is my rival. I am constantly disturbed by irksome people. [...] Everything is irksome which briefly grazes the dual relationship, which changes the complicity (Barthes, 2003, pp. 215-216, emphasis added).



Writing about the birth of Verde Gaia Filho is an intense experience, since it is writing that engenders a description of something I am, albeit not completely. I describe my own perception, the memories of my body, but at the same time describe something that is external to me, as it is constituted as this other that inhabits me. How to describe this ambiguity and what is its form of writing?

Merleau-Ponty gives me a clue, discussing the experience of the other through the relationship between what is experienced and gesture in theatrical expression. He tells me that when the actor has his first relationship with a dramatic text, this relationship is not only intellectual, but has a double aspect, an ambiguity. It is intellectual and corporeal, in the sense that it involves the actor's life experience. A comedian, for example, on encountering a given situation in the text he will play, must lend his experiences to that imaginary situation in the text. In other words, the imaginary emotion (present in the text) is replaced by the actor's experiences, through his body. However, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that this imaginary situation never equals the real and experienced situation. Thus, "an actor is neither marked by intelligence nor sensitivity, but he is someone capable of derealizing himself in a role" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1990, p. 308).

However, also I realize that Verde Gaia Filho is not a character that I merely play as an actor. He does not exist in a script, he is not primarily defined in an imaginary situation. He is a behavior that is part of me, prior to existing imaginarily in a text. I can affirm the following: the clown is not a character. He does not share the same laws of the theater, he does not exist outside the actor, for he is made of his very parts, pains, fears and weaknesses. Here I recall two passages of great clown-artists in which that statement is explicit. First in Henry Miller, the great American writer who amid harsh criticism and retaliation towards various works deemed obscene and degraded writes the beautiful story *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, where he presents Auguste, the clown. A clown that had always attracted him and that many friends considered him to be. At one point in story, Auguste tells us:

To be yourself, just yourself, it's a great thing. And how does one do it, how does one bring it about? Ah, that's the most difficult trick of all. It's difficult precisely because it involves no effort. You try neither to be one thing nor another, neither great nor small, neither clever nor maladroit... You follow me? You do whatever comes to hand. You do it with grace, *bien entendu*. Because nothing is unimportant. Nothing (Miller, 1979 p. 25).

Then comes Marcio Libar, who at the end of his clownish autobiography firmly states:

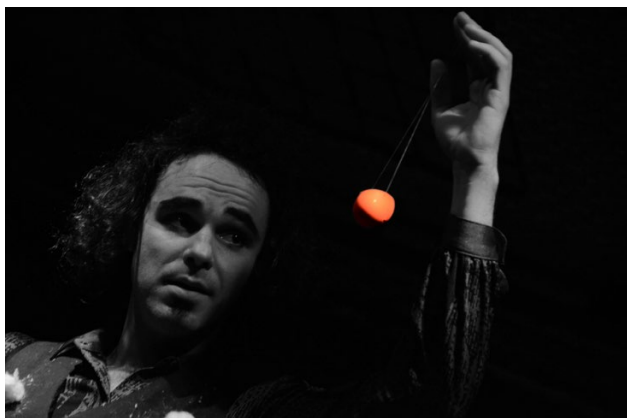
In a way, the clown's technique is closer to the sense of a state of mind than to the sense of a character. The clown does not represent, he does not interpret; he jokes, he plays, he acts. He is simply alive and whole in the present time. And the hardest thing in this world is to be exactly who you are (LIBAR, 2008, p. 203).

I view Verde Gaia Filho like that, as being *myself*. However, in the same way that he is *myself*, he is also *another myself*. Not as a role I play, but as a layer of what constitutes me, that is explicit. His logic is different from mine, his way of perceiving the world and others is also different, even though we are one. In this confused and ambiguous encounter I feel again Merleau-Ponty approaching me. This time he whispers to me something that allows me to view Verde Gaia Filho exactly that way:

The experience of the other is always that of a replica of myself, of a response to myself. The solution must be sought in the field of that strange filiation that makes the other forever my second, even when I prefer him to myself and sacrifice myself to him. It is in the depths of myself that this strange conjunction with the other is fashioned; the mystery of the other is nothing but the mystery of myself. That a second spectator of the world may be born from me is something that is not excluded; on the contrary, I myself make this possible if at least I acknowledge my own paradoxes (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 221).

To recognize the mysteries of my own paradoxes. That is exactly the possibility that from the very beginning, in the first failure, the clown afforded me, and it is precisely for that reason that he has always been such an overwhelming and violent experience. Verde Gaia Filho simply made this experience even more intense, for he plunged me directly and violently into the paradox that engenders and brings together the dimensions that move me: being a professor, being an actor, being a biologist and being a clown. In him are viscerally present all those others that compose me. In him I am able to inhabit this (un)harmonious multiplicity that is daily erased and hidden, in the (un)pieces that constitute me. Silent (un)pieces that often cannot live in harmony in the spaces where I need to be, but are nevertheless marked in my body, in each one of the beings that constitute me and occasionally emerge through unusual encounters in one or another daily situation. In Verde Gaia Filho, all these (un)pieces are lively and vibrant for I do not have to tear any of them out, since as a clown he belongs and is accepted precisely because he accepts

his limitations, his failures, his contradictions, his platitudes, and acts according to them. Verde Gaia Filho allows me to be all these others at the same time. With him I do not have to suffer the pain of having any of my (un)pieces ripped apart to belong and be able to act. I simply am. We are.



**Figure 1.**  
Final scene of the show “Verde Gaia Filho.”  
Auditório CDA,  
Itá-SC, 2012.  
Source: private  
archive.

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