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**Author(s):** Ylönen, Susanne C.; Keisalo, Marianna

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**Sublime and grotesque: exploring the clowns' liminal positioning between oppositional aesthetic categories**

Authors:

Susanne C. Ylönen, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies

Marianna Keisalo, University of Helsinki and Aarhus University

Corresponding author: Susanne C. Ylönen, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, [susanne.c.ylonen@jyu.fi](mailto:susanne.c.ylonen@jyu.fi) / [susanne.c.ylonen@gmail.com](mailto:susanne.c.ylonen@gmail.com)

## **Sublime and grotesque: exploring the clowns' liminal positioning between oppositional aesthetic categories**

### **Abstract**

The horror clown is a potential rooted in the liminalities that are an integral part of the clown figure per se. Drawing on anthropological work and the study of popular culture, this paper argues that clowns can be placed between different dualistic frames such as the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the grotesque, and fear and disgust. This positioning and the ways in which clowns operate between these categories are transmitted aesthetically. In this paper the dualistic aesthetics and violent potential of clowns is examined on hand of three different clown examples: the ritual clown, the circus clown and the horror clown. Field observations made by Keisalo of the Chapayeka rituals clowns in Sonora, Mexico in 2004, 2006 and 2007 are contrasted with a case description of circus clowns provided by Paul Bouissac and a well-known example of a horror clown, Stephen Kings Clown Pennywise in the novel *It*. While these clowns serve different purposes and represent different cultural contexts, we claim that they all occupy a liminal space that can be analysed in aesthetic terms.

Keywords: Clowns, liminality, sublime, grotesque, sacred, profane, fear, disgust, violence

### **Introduction**

As noted in the introduction to this special issue, clowns hover between the sublime and the grotesque in their aesthetics. They defy logic and push matters/actions into unexpected directions, thereby evoking affects of weirdness and even otherworldliness - affects that can be traced to the experience of the sublime. Yet they often do this by means of grotesque exaggeration and wittiness that might come across as degrading or ridiculing in its humorousness. In the case of circus clowns, everything from their outsized shoes to their overstated emotions (not least visible in their make-up) evokes an inflated reality that challenges norms and corrupts standards. And as will become visible in this article, this duality can be found in ritual clowns and horror clowns as well. While the grotesque has been discussed as being related to laughter and humor, the sublime is mostly discussed in the context of awe-inspiring experiences. Notably, both the grotesque and the sublime have been used to explain the seductive power that horror has on us humans.

In some ways the horror clown, then, is a potential rooted in characteristics that are an integral part of the clown figure per se. The above described duality or split in the aesthetic of clowns transmits both tragic and comical (or frighteningly hilarious) affects, which is why clown performances may be experienced as comically entertaining or scary. Often clown performances oscillate between these seemingly opposite poles. As Benjamin Radford notes in his book *Bad Clowns*, clowns can be mysterious, scary and malevolent as much as they can be playful, whimsical and friendly. This ambivalence of the clown can be found already in the trickster figure, who, according to Radford, may represent trickery, chaos, deceit and death as well as humor, power, authority and wisdom (Radford 2016, 2). Western horror clowns are, thus, not the first example of how fear, violence and disgust are part of comedic figures and performances. Trickster stories have violence, sex, rape and death and ritual clowning in native North America

has included eating feces, while the Kwakiutl clowns of the Northwest coast have even stabbed people to death during rituals (Tedlock 1984, 107).

The ability to cross boundaries makes clowns unpredictable. Ambivalence and the way they do not fit into clear categories make them a threat to the systems of classification used in the cultural contexts the clowns exist in. Clowns, then, contain elements that make them potentially dangerous. Violent clowns might seem like a natural culmination of this threat, but even comedic figures tend to be marginal and chaotic - and venturing too far into violence could easily undermine their comedic aspects. They do not respect rules or boundaries and they seem to be able to take liberties in what comes to established social codes. This can be exemplified by the fact that while other circus performers usually stay in the arena, clowns may venture into the audience in order to make some of the spectators participate in their performance.

In previous research clowns, tricksters, and other comedic figures have been approached through duality and ambiguity - as boundary crossers (see e.g. Babcock 1975, 1984, Handelman 1990, Hyde 1998, Hynes 1993). This can be placed into the broader tradition of studying humor as incongruity, the combination of incompatible elements (see e.g. Oring 2016.) Our text builds on and extends these views through a careful analysis of very specific dualisms and how they are related to each other in each case.

In this paper, we dissect the liminal position that clowns - especially violent clowns - often occupy by examining the aesthetics of three different types of clowns: the ritual clown, the circus clown and the horror clown. Our approach is defined by our respective roots in anthropology and aesthetics and our joint interest in comedy/humour and horror studies. We proceed by analyzing the chosen three examples in the dualistic frame, using dichotomies of sacred/profane, sublime/grotesque and fear/disgust, thereby probing the efficiency of various aesthetic terms in the analysis of this dualistic divide. We also show how clowns question and subvert these dichotomies by combining and mixing elements from both categories. Methodologically our paper relies on a close reading of selected examples/excerpts and semiotic analysis of the visual elements and performances of these examples as well as the effects they have in their respective contexts. The questions addressed can be formulated as: How do the clowns in each of the cases produce the extremes of fear and sacredness on the one hand and disgust or profane merriment on the other? And how can the aesthetics of their ambivalent performances be conceptualized?

The materials/examples discussed in this paper are chosen according to their representative/illuminatory power and their difference from another. Field observations made by Keisalo of the Chapayeka rituals clowns in Sonora, Mexico in 2004, 2006 and 2007 are contrasted with a case description of circus clowns provided by Paul Bouissac and a well-known example of a horror clown, Stephen Kings Clown Pennywise in the novel *It*. These clowns serve different purposes and represent different cultural contexts, but they all occupy a liminal space that can be analysed in aesthetic terms. Therefore these examples may also be used to discuss the question: "How is the liminality of clowns produced and affectively transmitted?"

## Ritual Clowns: between the sacred and the profane

Paul Bouissac, writing about circus clowns, notes that they often profane the sacred, thereby “bringing out into the open what was secluded and protected by taboos”. According to him, this is visible already in the name of the *auguste* clown, which attaches the noble name August, a name that in its Latin form Augustus referred to “being blessed by the gods”, onto a slow-witted, clumsy and possibly inebriated person. On the stage or in the circus ring Augustes are traditionally mocked and victimized and when paired with a more skillful whiteface clown they generally represent the underdog. Yet they, like their other clown companions, may, from their position as weird outsiders, also mock and lampoon the surrounding society and its rules, thereby wielding analytical and performative powers that not all members of a society have access to. This mocking may be defined as a kind of profanation.

Profanation signifies the challenging of the limits that “determine normalcy and decency in the culture in which it occurs” (Bouissac 1997). Just as religions may be threatened by blasphemy and sacrilege, the norms of secular societies may be derided and caricaturized. An example provided by Bouissac describes a clown show, in which two clowns profanate an everyday life circumstance: motherhood. The example will be discussed in more detail below, and it aptly shows, that profanation may also be interpreted/experienced as humorous. (Bouissac 1997, 200.) Next to religions/religious content, profanation may thus also address everyday structures, tragic events or disasters, celebrities and other happenings/rituals of importance (Blank 2013 etc.).

However, and importantly in what comes to our argument, the performative lowering that profanation accomplishes, may, of course, also be experienced as insulting and thus violating. This connects clowning to acts of violence in a spiritual or cultural sense. Furthermore, clowns may also act violently in a physical sense, while simultaneously acting as sacred ritualistic ambassadors or characters imbued with special, spiritual powers, as becomes obvious in the case of Chapayeka ritual clowning as observed by Marianna Keisalo (see also Keisalo-Galván 2011, Keisalo 2016). This will be explored next.

The Chapayekas are masked clowns that represent Judas in the Easter ritual of the Yaquis, an indigenous group in Northern Mexico. Clowning in rituals is a common feature among indigenous groups in the Americas, and although these clowns and rituals differ from each other, they share certain characteristics. They generally mock sacred acts, performers and objects, act obscenely and cause chaos within the ceremonies (Tedlock 1984, Steward 1991 [1929]). In the first anthropological text devoted to ritual clowns, Julian Steward argued that they are distinguished by four traits: duality, association with otherness, insatiable needs and appetites and poverty. While not all clowns evoke poverty (some of the Chapayeka masks portray a figure called ‘the president of the United States’), duality, otherness, and transgression of boundaries for individual wants can usually be found. Poverty can be thought of as status within a social structure, and it is true that clowns do not often come from a powerful status, but create their power on the spot, through their transgressions.

The violence of ritual clowns is tied to these traits. Duality is often a case of serious and playful, and the association with otherness is a way to undo some very basic category distinctions which can result in a sort of symbolic violence that threatens the very foundations of meaning. The

right to transgress allows the clowns to violate rules and norms within the performance context. The power of ritual clowns is not always destructive, among some groups the clowns are also known as healers (Tedlock 1984).

The Chapayekas are a central figure in the Yaqui version of the Way of the Cross, the Passion Play that depicts the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Yaquis have practiced Catholicism since the 17th century, with varying relations to official Catholic hierarchies. In the form of the Chapayekas, the role of Judas has been amplified - the events of Easter start with the rebirth of the Chapayeka, leading to the death of Jesus, whose resurrection in turn leads to the death of the Chapayekas. The Chapayekas are part of the Fariseos (pharisees) whose aim is to capture and kill Jesus.

The Chapayekas are at once in opposition to both the sacred and the profane while also exhibiting characteristics from these categories. While Bouissac's claim that circus clowns engage with cultural norms that are often unstated but central to the point of sacredness and profane them in their acts within a secular performance context is convincing, ritual clowns that act in direct contact with the sacred are more difficult to define in relation to categories of sacred and profane. Emile Durkheim (1965 [1912], 55) argued that all societies make a separation between the sacred and the profane; "the sacred thing par excellence is which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity". However, ritual clowns often subvert and muddle the distinction between sacred and profane in their performances. What effects does this have within the sacred context of ritual? What happens when the clowns violate the boundaries that separate the ritual from its more profane contexts?

In the Yaqui Easter, sacredness is most clearly identified in places, objects, and actions. The figures, the altar, and the church are sacred. Certain areas outside the church, marked by the crosses, are sacred. Singing and dancing are sacred actions, which also make spaces sacred. On one hand, the Chapayekas are quite clearly opposed to the sacred. In this sense, the Chapayekas are even a kind of indexical marker of the sacred; in their fear of it, they react very strongly to sacred objects and words, shaking in fear or scraping their clothes as if to get rid of contagion. At the same time, they have many attributes of sacredness. The Chapayekas are the most untouchable in Yaqui ritual. Taking their picture is banned, while all other performers may be photographed, and, for example the figures of Jesus can be touched to acquire blessings. The Chapayekas themselves must not be touched and should not even be looked at too intensely. The Chapayekas and their masks are at once the most dangerous and the most vulnerable objects among the Yaqui rituals. As Judas, the Chapayekas kill Jesus, yet they are integral to the success of the ritual. The mask, which is the center of the Chapayeka power, is called *sewa*, flower, which is also the symbol of blessing. The first Chapayeka emerges from the altar, the very center of sacredness.

However, ritual requires some kind of mediation between the sacred and the profane. In embodying aspects of both the sacred and profane the Chapayekas mediate between these categories. They transgress various boundaries in acts that can be considered violence, but do this from different positions within the sacred/profane. As Judas, the Chapayekas are responsible for capturing Jesus and taking him to be crucified (although in the Yaqui adaption, it is Pontius Pilate who delivers the death blow). The Chapayekas are thus a central part of the violence

carried out towards a deity figure. They are cast in opposition against the main god in this sense, but in the cosmological context this is part of a necessary sacrifice that is also a part of the renewal of sacred powers. In our view, this transgression on the part of the Chapayekas happens from a place of sacredness - they are reborn so that Jesus may be sacrificed, and as Jesus is reborn, the Chapayekas are sacrificed. These events are repeated yearly in the performance of the Easter ritual. The changeable elements of the Chapayekas present different boundary violations and relate differently to the sacred/profane.

All but two Chapayeka masks are destroyed by fire each year. Two are kept in case there is a funeral of a man who has performed as a Chapayeka, and as 'seed' for next year. This means that each year new masks are made, and new figures introduced. All the masks must be male, but otherwise there is a lot of room. Some of the masks portray figures from popular culture, such as Homer Simpson, or Chucky, the murderous doll from a series of horror movies. This bringing of profane figures to the sacred ritual can be seen as violence to categories, and puts the Chapayekas into a position of the profane threatening the sacred.

Further acts of violence by the Chapayekas may take place within the performance of the ritual. These are often small acts perpetuated among the Chapayekas, such as pushing or slapping each other. They may also take things from onlookers, either by force or stealth. Among things Keisalo observed as being stolen or borrowed were a bottle of soda and bicycles. In an example of the Chapayekas making use of sacred power towards the profane, they are allowed to punish onlookers if they transgress rules. For example, Chapayekas may take a camera away from a spectator trying to photograph the ritual.

As Bouissac (2015, 177) notes, "[d]eviant behavior can always become normative." This may be why comedic performance often includes at least some measure of unpredictability; if deviancy is repeated and given a stable form, it becomes the norm. If comedic figures are to retain unpredictability and deviance, they must keep changing. The normative aspects of the Chapayeka performance place them within the sacred, while the ability to draw on profane contexts is a way to renew their deviancy and power, which in threatening the sacred ultimately makes it stronger.

## Circus clowns: between sublimity & grotesque exaggeration

The circus clown, one of the most well known clown categories in the Western world, is characterised by delivering humorous performances as a form of entertainment for a mass of paying spectators. Circus clowns are similar to humans, but the scale, colors, or textures of the clothing and mask are exaggerated or off. The huge shoes and exaggerated facial features of circus clowns distort human features. The figures often have a 'motley appearance' (Babcock 1984), they may look poor or otherwise strange. The mask of circus clowns has also been said to resemble a child's face (i.e. Bouissac 2015, 162).

Typically, these figures narrate comical scenes via chaos and different reversals and inversions, such as turning hierarchies upside down. Thus it may be easier to see their grotesqueness than their sublimity, but as we will argue next, the circus clown, too, operates in a liminal position similar to the ritual clown and thus also close to the sphere of the sublime. In his article "The

profanation of the sacred in circus clown performances” Paul Bouissac describes an act that aptly illustrates the liminal, transgressive character that even circus clown performances may have. The description is worth quoting as a whole, in order for the semiotic elements to become visible via first hand narration:

“Basically the act unfolds as follows: The August, who has donned grotesque female attire with a false and abundant bosom, enters the ring pushing a baby carriage of the type used for very young infants. He behaves as a mother of nanny would do if a baby was resting in it. Suddenly loud and shrieking cries are heard, coming from the perambulator and the August asks the circus hands to go and fetch some milk. They soon return with a huge bottle (or a glass tank) full of a white liquid. The end of a rubber pipe which is connected to the container is put into the carriage, supposedly into the baby’s mouth. The milk level gets lower and lower at a fast rate and the bottle is soon empty. As the “child” starts crying again the August picks it up, and the audience suddenly discovers that the “child” actually is a piglet wrapped in cloths. This revelation forms the punch line, so to speak, of the gag and this is when the White-face clown intervenes. Sometimes the act is expanded in the following manner: the August attends the baby’s well being but either because it keeps shrieking or because the August wants to engage in some other temporary action, he trusts his charge to a “spectator” or a circus hand. Then the piglet abundantly “urinates” on its new guardian and is carried away, still dripping, from the ring, accompanied by the unfailing laughter of the audience.” (Bouissac 1997, 200)

At first, one automatically pays more attention to the grotesqueness of the scene: the fake bosom that reveals gender-transgression, the exaggerated amount of milk consumed by the assumed baby and the soiling of innocent bystanders. Yet, a closer look at the description of the scene reveals that there are indeed also some sublime features in it. First of all, the combination of mother and child is an almost sacred one. One just has to think of the prominence of images of Maria holding baby Jesus in the Christian tradition to see the sanctity of this constellation. The fact that this constellation is portrayed by a clown who does not even pretend to be credible, but rather parodies the standards of feminine habitus thereby underlining the artificiality of gender, can be regarded as a form of profanation. Yet, this transgressing of gender boundaries may be perceived as bold as well as playful. In a sense, this kind of cross-dressing always carries with it the promise and the danger associated to the challenging of fixed and rigid binaries, according to which we humans order our everyday experiences. If sublimity is defined as a combination of fear and awe, such a performance may, thus, strike someone in the audience as awesome and daring; something that we ourselves might not be able to pull off, but nevertheless appreciate and admire, when it is done by others. Hence, the sublimity of the scene is also related to the circus clowns role as a performer and artist.

Another feature that addresses sublimity, although arguably in a grotesque-making manner, is the fact that the baby turns out as fake as the mother. To equate a human child with a pig, an edible animal that is associated with filth (although being intelligent, and, in many ways human like) is a transgression that likewise brings to the fore many unsaid assumptions about the symbolic nature of children and childhood in Western culture. First of all, children are routinely compared to animals and valued as freer and more natural than grown-up human beings that have adopted the norms and restricting habits of their surrounding culture. Yet this animality may also be

experienced as dangerous and possibly corrupting, a feature to be diminished by socialization. Children, it has been noted, thus occupy a liminal stage that has been defined as both dionysian and apollonic, frighteningly free and creative on one hand and promising a better future on the other (Jenks 1996, 70-74). What the clown act addresses, in this sense, is, then, the duality that makes babies and children at once frighteningly unknown and othered as well as cherished and protected as more pure and natural than adults.

Sublimity and grotesqueness, then, form a contradictory pair similar to the sacred and the profane. As noted in the introductory paper of this special issue, the conceptual history of the sublime is rather edifying: it starts out with rhetorics and ethics and “culminates in moral sense theory and interpretations of augmented self-consciousness” (Jürgens et al. 2019), thereby having an uplifting, exhilarating character. Compared to the grotesque, which is deformed, ugly, decadent and degraded and altogether very corporeal, the sublime might thus seem rather ethereal and spiritual, something that one might want to degrade or profane in order to make it graspable, controllable, less intimidating. Victor Hugo states something similar to this, when he writes that “The universal beauty which the ancients solemnly laid upon everything, is not without monotony; the same impression repeated again and again may prove fatiguing at last. Sublime upon sublime scarcely presents a contrast, and we need a little rest from everything, even the beautiful.” Hugo’s argument in favour of the grotesque thus presents the grotesque as something that provides variety and interest in juxtaposition to the oneness and smooth surfaces presented by sublimity or beauty. (Hugo (1827) 2001.) This “respite” is exemplified in the reversal of the gender binary and the focus on a child’s otherness as well as the profanation of the mother-child-constellation’s holiness in the clown act described above.

Sublimity can, hence, be related to the sacred and grotesque-making can be interpreted as a sort of profanation. But how has this division between the sublime and the grotesque been addressed by theorists in the case of violence and horror? In the case of the sublime, the Antique orator Dionysus Longinus already noted that the sublime, as a rhetorical means, may be used to ravish or to take the audience by force. According to him, the sublime “throws the audience into transport”, has “the rapid force of lightning” and “triumphs over every hearer” (Longinus 1996, 22). These forceful descriptions are deepened in the 18th century, when philosophers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant further explored of the violent or awesome character of the sublime: Burke by tracing it in empirical examples like obscurity, power, pain and death, and Kant by exploring its sense-explorable-world piercing and imagination-overthrowing, transcendental character (Burke(1757) 2015, 47-71 , Kant (1790) 2008, 75-164). The sublime, can, then, by no means be described as an easy experience. Instead, it is an affective experience that has the power to overwhelm our mind, which makes it, according to Burke “the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke (1757) 2015, 33-34).

In what comes to the grotesque, the relation of grotesqueness and violence becomes obvious in, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on medieval and renaissance laughter and the upside-down turning power of carnivalesque. Bakhtin notes, that carnivalistic rituals fulfill an essential role in the upkeep of societal structures. His exploration of medieval and renaissance folk/market laughter states, that carnivalistic performances that mockingly upturn existing social hierarchies were an essential part of any major celebration, providing a time and place for the momentary suspension of existing power relations. According to him, grotesque exaggeration and the

focusing on the corporeal/carnal pleasures of copulation, birthing, eating and defecating were an important part of carnival laughter. Definitions that relate the grotesque to horror, in turn, can, according to him, be explained by later developments that relocated the grotesque from its original, communal market surroundings into the private studies of people consuming gothic stories. Thus, even violent scenes and merry beatings were, in their medieval grotesque forms, part of the comedic, liberating laughter that sought to overturn existing power structures, while the grotesques of the later, Romantic period, could be interpreted as merely horrible. (Bakhtin 1984.)

So, to recap, circus clowns can be seen as operating between the spheres of the sublime and the grotesque somewhat like ritual clowns operate between the sacred and the profane. Like other circus acts, the clown act takes place in the ring or on stage, which in itself is a place defined by miraculous skills and excitement. But as Bouissac argues, the clowns' role is, to a great extent, defined by their ability to provide comic relief from other circus performances that often make use of the evocation of mortal danger - a feature that is present in much of the discourse that frames acrobats, for example (Bouissac 2015, 159-160).

## Horror clowns: between fear and disgust

But comic relief is not the first thing that one would associate to horror clowns. Their frightfulness and their disgusting features, may, at first glance, seem like two not really oppositional aesthetics and it may be hard to see their aesthetics as being linked to the above described pairs of sacred/profane and sublime/grotesque. Nevertheless, we argue, that a link exists even here. In order to exemplify our claim, we turn to a well-known horror clown example, Stephen King's monster in the novel *It* (1986).

In Stephen King's horror story *It*, the Losers's Club, a group of seven children, fight a monster that often takes the form of a clown. The monster itself is said to surface from a sewer every twenty-seven years "to feed on the primal fear of children" (Strengel 228). It pretty much owns the town of Derry, in which the story is placed, and most people living under its influence seem to be quite ignorant of the fact that the town has an unusually high violent crime rate. Heidi Strengel, writing about fate and the mythical good and evil in King's works, notes that the monster, who often appears as the clown Pennywise when outside the sewers, may be perceived as a universal antagonist. It embodies evil and undying hunger, while the Loser's Club are representatives of the good, epitomes of love and friendship (Strengel 2005, 229). Thus, there is a larger mythical construction underlying the good-bad juxtaposition of the story.

This constellation becomes evident in the final encounters that the group has with the monster, first in 1958 as children and then again in 1985 as adults. In the final encounter of 1958, Bill, the leader of the group, is catapulted into the void of eternity while fighting *It* (now in the form of a giant spider). In the void, he encounters the Turtle, an assumed counterforce to the hungry monster that lives underneath Derry. The Turtle, however, remains disappointingly passive in the face of the children's plight, and refuses to help them in their fight. Fortunately, the Loser's group are backed up by an even larger force, The Final Other, a God-like force that has created

both It, the evil that only eats, and the Turtle. With the help of this God-like force, that brings the kids together in the first place, and their own ingenuity, the group finally manages to defeat the monster.

While the background constellation to the story is one of grander juxtapositions of good and evil (as narrated by the monster itself in the 21st chapter), the story itself is filled with everyday descriptions of the monster's violent deeds. These scenes make use of disgust as much as they evoke fear. According to Stephen King, works of horror always do their work on two levels: the gross-out and the dance, "a moving rhythmic search". One is primitive, physically horrible, and the other is enlightened, suggestive, creepy. He also talks about these levels as terror, horror and the gross-out stating that while terror is the finest form of these three, he is not too proud to resort to even the lowest form of gross-out to move his readers. (King 1981, 10, 22, 23, quote on p.10)

In light of this, it is notable, that the scenes, in which Pennywise appears, are both ominous and terrifying, and disgustingly violent. He is referred to as "floating" (we all float down here) in his sewer environment, an ethereal presence both in voice and figure, and a figure that is eternal and acts on a macrocosmic level next to the everyday surfacings in the human reality, which he (or actually, she) visits in order to feed. Yet the carnage that he/she/it leaves behind is gross: bodies without arms, horribly mutilated children and adults, people going missing only to be found rotting somewhere, partly consumed. Furthermore, the monster itself takes on forms that are extremely disgusting, as for example in the scene, in which Eddie encounters it as the leper (still wearing a clown's costume), who has a three-foot tongue, crawling with insects and covered in sticky foam (King 2015, 321). The supernatural evilness of the monster is thus grotesquely contrasted by his appearance, which often includes orange pompoms or buttons and other clown paraphernalia, that might seem like a ridiculous detail, were it not such a stark contrast to his murderous presence.

Studies on horror and the aesthetics of disgust have sought to define the differences of fear and disgust, delineated as the two main components of horror by, for example, Noël Carroll (1990), by resorting to different concepts. Next to the already discussed concept of the grotesque, terms such as the abject and, more recently, the sublate have been applied to this end. The abject, something located in-between the subject and the object, is mostly discussed via the work of the psychoanalytically oriented literary theorist Julia Kristeva. This theory traces disgust back to the separation of self and other, the rejection of that which falls in-between or is cut off or cast away from the subject but that remains too close to be wholly separated and thus threatens one's identity (Kristeva 1982). The sublate, in turn, is as concept that has been suggested as a new counterpoint to the sublime by art philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer. In her book *Savoring Disgust* (2011) Korsmeyer argues that disgust has similar philosophical potential to the sublime, and suggests that the conversion which turns the initial shunning of that which is disgusting into something that exercises a magnetic pull over us, might be compared to the conversion which turns fear into awe in the experience of the sublime (Korsmeyer 2011, 130-132). However, the frivolousness and humoristic potential of the disgusting is not explained in these theories.

Yet humour is present even in King's *It*, where the children eventually come to the conclusion that the orange tufts are the monster's trademark and that it seems to be enchanted by everything

childish - especially childish beliefs that concern cartoon villains and such (King, Tammi 2015, 718). Hence, they figure out that belief may also be used against it. In one encounter, the children manage to defeat it by using silver bullets, because in their mind, it has taken the form of a werewolf and they believe that werewolves can be defeated by silver bullets. In the final battle, in turn, they use, among other things, an asthma inhaler as a weapon against it, because belief in the asthma spray's power makes the spray hurt it. Silver bullets and asthma spray have distinctly different aesthetics: the bullets are noble, mythical and made of precious metals, while the asthma spray is a medicine characterised as a placebo elsewhere in the story and described as foul-tasting. The humorous potential is obviously located only in the baser weapon.

In the final fight between the children and the monster humor also stars prominently in other ways. When the monster, in its spider form, is finally confronted by the children in its subterranean den, the monster and its would-be vanquisher bite into each others tongues and have a mental battle that takes on witty forms. Overcoming the monster by the ritual of chüd (revealed to the children in "an ancient native american ceremony") requires courage and the embracing of childish beliefs. Thus the asthma spray becomes a weapon and even a rhyme to treat Bill's stuttering is revealed as a way to hurt the monster. And when the monster boasts, that it is "the Eater of Worlds", Bill promptly replies, "Well, you've had your last meal, sister." Although the final defeat of the monster also requires physical violence, this is an interesting paradox within the story; while the monster-as-clown could be seen as a parody of a comedic figure, it is also vulnerable to banter, and derision becomes a weapon to be used against it.

## Conclusion

What becomes obvious in the above presented argument is that the simultaneously humorous and frightening potential of clowns is derived from their liminality or the way in which they operate in between two worlds: the sacred or sublime sphere of religions, artists and the good-evil divide, and the profaned, grotesque and ridiculed or merely disgusting approaches that promise respite from everything too awesome. Whether we define this liminal positioning in terms of the sacred and the profane, the sublime and grotesque or fear and disgust, it is clear, that this positioning is, to a large extent, aesthetically transmitted. Yet surprisingly few theorists seem to have tackled the role of humor in relating to these aspects of the human condition. Turning to further theoreticizations of humour/dirt offers one perspective on the relationship that humour has with the sacred/sublime.

Many of the papers in this special issue draw on Noël Carroll's theoretical work, which traces the harmonious coexistence of horror and humor to their respective roots in the incongruous combinations of seemingly incompatible elements. Carroll, who defines horror via category violations, builds his argument on Mary Douglas's (1966) anthropological work on purity and danger.<sup>1</sup> Douglas, in turn, already noted that incongruities may result in either jokes, sacredness,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Carroll, horror and humor resemble each other as genres. Both attain efficacy through breaking category boundaries or changes in scale. Where humor and comedy often play on the possibility of danger, in horror the threat is realised.

or abominations, and that we need to know the social and cultural context to understand which is the result and why. Douglas also famously claimed that since dirt is “matter out of place” the presence of dirt both indicates and reveals a specific system of categories. Other scholars have further discussed the role of dirt especially in relation to trickster and clown figures (e.g. Babcock 1975). Anthropologist Rupert Stasch (2014) has, for example, written about the relations between monsters and norms and has pointed out that people always have a complex relation to norms, as towards their monsters.

Norms, then, are never absolute, they require interpretation. Thus, both the scariness and the humorousness of clowns is time and again traced to their potential as rule/norm-breakers. And hence, it can be argued that much of what anthropologists have said about monsters applies to clowns as well. Monsters and clowns both cross boundaries, mix categories, question norms and open them up to reflection. What connects clowns, tricksters and monsters, is that in their messiness and ambiguity, all these figures have the ability to call attention to normative systems. They take up liminal positions which can be approached and apprehended through dichotomies such as sacred-profane, sublime-grotesque or fear-disgust as we have shown.

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