

## Violent Clown Artists between Science & Art

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*Abstract: This article explores the violent clown as an artist and border crosser at the intersection of science and art. Its aim is to introduce to a broader audience a forthcoming special issue of the scholarly journal Comedy Studies, in which clown violence and humour are explored from an array of academic and artistic perspectives. Artistic approaches to the violent clown phenomenon are broached in interviews with an Australian author, a professional clown and clown trainer, and a special effects artist and film director.*

*Note: Articles exploring the interfaces between science and art in the field of [Circus & Science](#) are highlighted by a pink frame.*

He may be omnipresent in our media and pop cultural contexts, but in his most iconic incarnation this year, the violent clown is literally bursting out of Arthur Fleck's dance moves in Todd Phillips' cinematographic take on the famous comic book super villain. Phillips' infamous and highly polarising *Joker* movie, with Joaquin Phoenix in the title role, is the most successful R-rated film of all times. The *Joker* is just one contemporary manifestation of a phenomenon that can boast a fascinating cultural (performance) tradition, leading way back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century's popular stage. The roots of the *Joker* character<sup>[1]</sup> – who in many of his narratives is a comedian himself – can be traced back to violent pantomimes and comic-cruel clown plays popular at the turn of the century. A violent clown, the *Joker* has been defined by art critic, media theorist and philosopher Boris Groys<sup>[2]</sup> as an “avant-garde iconoclastic artist” – an artist attacking and destroying cultural icons (objects of cultural ‘devotion’). This makes the *Joker*/violent clown an interesting subject of discussion for w/k. ‘Artistic’ in his destructive sprees – we will come back to this later – and an inspiration for artists and scholars alike, the violent clown appears at the intersection between art and academia, between pop culture and scholarly discourse. He is a quintessential border crosser.<sup>[3]</sup>

In a forthcoming special-themed journal issue on “Violent Clowns” of the Taylor & Francis journal *Comedy Studies*, academics specialising in the Visual and Performing Arts, Anthropology, Film Studies, Popular Entertainment Studies, Applied Digital Media Studies, Literary Studies, Linguistics, and Philosophy explore the cultural power and relevance of the ubiquitous violent clown. These scholarly explorations are accompanied by three interviews: one with Will Elliott, the author of two extraordinary clown horror novels: *The Pilo Family Circus* (2006) and *The Pilo Traveling Show* (2015) ; another with the professional clown, clown trainer and theatre performer Dr Ira Seidenstein; and one with the special-effects artist Stephen Chiodo, creator of the 1988 cult classic horror-comedy *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*. The papers in this special-themed journal issue explore such questions as: What makes violent clowns funny from different scholarly and artistic perspectives? What has the interweaving of humour and violence – in particular, the *comic* appeal of violence – come to mean in culture? What cultural work does violent clowning do? And what kind of aesthetic achievements make violent comic performances possible, according to their creators and artists on the one hand, and academic investigators and interpreters on the other? This article is a brief introduction to both the violent clown as an artist and border crosser, and to the special issue. As space does not allow for a full review of all the contributions

to the “Violent Clowns” issue of *Comedy Studies*, this piece focuses on perspectives that examine the ways in which the violent clown’s border crossing emerges from an ability to embody seemingly paradoxical characteristics. What follows sheds a tiny spot light on a panorama of perspectives – and thus on one of the most challenging and complex ‘artistic characters’ in popular culture.

### **Introducing Joker, a destructive artist, from a Media Studies and art critic’s perspective**

In the 1993 animated movie *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*, in which he fights Batman, Joker ravages the theatrical space of a miniature city that represents an architectural icon: the Futurama pavilion of the 1939 New York World’s Fair.<sup>[4]</sup> The destruction of a space that echoes and evokes the realm of the theatre and popular stage alike iterates patterns that lead to popular cultural and art discourses, and renegotiates pre-existing media and cultural traditions. This Joker, however, is just one of many Jokeresque destroyers of cultural icons – which also include fine art and sculpture. Another example is Tim Burton’s 1989 *Batman* movie. Burton’s Joker (aka Jack Nicholson) and his gang frolic around in a museum, where they expressively paint and spray colourful slogans over pieces of classic art, graffiti-style, while cheerfully dancing and singing to a silly pop song. They add to Rembrandt’s self-portrait their own hand-prints in pink colour, crowned with a splash of neon green paint. With fanciful, artistic gestures they paint pink lines over a Degas, and smash various sculptures while moving through the exhibition space in a dance-like fashion. From the perspective of art and media scholar Boris Groys, this art-smashing gesture in Burton’s *Batman* represents a form of artistic expression. It echoes the definition of the artist as a skilled performer in the sense of “artiste”, as someone “who is adept at something”<sup>[5]</sup> – in this case a skilled performer of art destruction. The artistic process in which the Joker’s gang engages in Burton’s film leads to the destruction of old icons embodying outdated messages, and (thus) to the production of new images. This artistic expression draws from Joker’s links to slapstick comedy, to the popular stage and to an iconoclastic – icon destroying – dimension intrinsic to the film medium itself.

According to Groys, film is a medium that, from its beginnings, has fought a more or less open battle against other media such as painting, sculpture, architecture or theatre and opera. Their destruction is regularly celebrated, above all, in early film. Since its earliest beginnings, in the form of slapstick comedy, film has staged true orgies of destruction, damage and annihilation, including traditionally revered cultural assets, which evokes the laughter of the audience. To Groys, all this is reminiscent of a theory of carnival by influential philosopher, literary critic and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin defined carnival as an iconoclastic, cheerful festive season – a celebration of utopian excesses (which may include acts of destruction) – that does not replace the profaned icons of an old order with newer ones, but invites us to just enjoy the downfall of the existing.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, carnival, circus and other forms of popular entertainment have much in common; the latter even preserved aspects of the Bakhtinian carnival. Bakhtin himself observed that

“jugglers, acrobats, vendors of panaceas, magicians, clowns, [and] trainers of monkeys, had a sharply expressed grotesque bodily character. Even today this character has been most fully preserved in marketplace shows and in the circus.”<sup>[7]</sup>

And, we can add, it is visible in the iconoclastic, grotesquely made-up Joker with his green hair, terrific

smile and purple suit – a clown oscillating between humour and violence.

### **Violent Clowns: contemporary scholarly approaches to border crossers**

Papers published in the special-themed journal issue of *Comedy Studies* on “Violent Clowns” explore how, by challenging social roles (and often also the gender binary), violent clown-delights and macabre out-of-proportion physical humour are characterised by a lack of reason and extravagant over-determination of expression, which is enthusiastically belauded by the audience through laughter. They discuss the ways clowns destroy not only art, but also bodily integrity. American philosopher of art, Noël Carroll, wrote about clowns that

“[t]he anthropological literature on ritual clowns identifies clowns as categorically interstitial and categorically transgressive beings”.[\[8\]](#)

In other words, clowns and their relatives (e.g. tricksters, “a cunning or deceptive character appearing in various forms in the folklore of many cultures”[\[9\]](#)) have been defined as border crossers, as ambiguous characters combining incompatible elements. Juxtaposed with observations made of the Chapayeka ritual clowns in Sonora (Mexico), the anthropological perspective that unfolds in the new special journal issue[\[10\]](#) builds on and extends these views through a careful analysis of very specific dualisms and shows how, in each case, they are related to each other. Clowns – such as Stephen King’s extraterrestrial murderous psycho It – can thus be located on different dualistic frames such as the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the grotesque, and fear and disgust.

From another perspective (the lens of a linguist),[\[11\]](#) the stimuli triggering humour and horror are structurally similar. Both the friendly, nonthreatening clown and their horrific, violent brother can be understood through the notion of incongruity. According to the General Theory of Verbal Humour, incongruity is defined as a clash of two contradictory, cognitive texts (scripts) that partially overlap in the humorous material, in this case the clown. Ideas of normality, reality or possibility, on the one hand, and of abnormality, unreality and impossibility, on the other hand, are examples of basic script oppositions. These theoretical, linguistic concepts help us to better understand the ways all types of clowns combine features that normally do not fit together: they have (normal) human characteristics but also (abnormal) exaggerated features (e.g. huge shoes and noses, colourful make-up) and they seem to exceed physical, political and social borders (clowns, violent ones in particular, stage the breaking of taboos and norms). With respect to the funny clown, the incongruity results in ‘security’, while in the case of the horror clown it becomes ‘danger’. If several oppositions at the same time (a so-called ‘double incongruity’) result in both security and danger, the reader can decide which way to turn. This allows the threatening clown to be perceived from a humorous point of view. The linguistic approach serves to describe why the same incongruities trigger exhilaration *and* fear for the audience. From two (out of many) different scholarly perspectives, the violent clown artist is thus a highly complex cultural protagonist and research subject. In addition, he is equally interesting from an artistic point of view.

### **Making (humans) perform – special effects artist Stephen Chiodo on the *Killer Klowns***

In the 1988 cult classic horror-comedy *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, extraterrestrial clown cannibals

engage in artful, destructive endeavours. Although not smashing painting and sculptures with artistic spree and gestures – Joker-style – they equally remind us of performing artists. For instance, the alien Boss clown acts as a puppeteer, when masterfully ‘staging’ a dead police officer as a hand-puppet (making the corpse mimic, smile and talk). Before wreaking total havoc in a small city, the klowns also entertain some people on the streets by staging a fantastic shadow theatre show. They play humans, and make humans perform – both before killing them, and post-mortem.<sup>[12]</sup> The use of practical effects and references to animation techniques in this film – puppetry, stop-motion, and pre-cinematic theatrical performance (shadow theatre/magic lantern) – reflects the aforementioned transgressive powers of the clown as a border crosser: the clown combines incompatible elements. For instance, even though they are puppet-like, they are ‘alive’ and make humans perform, thus enabling a spectacular commingling of humour and violence. In his interview for the special themed journal issue on violent clowns, Stephen Chiodo – the director of *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* – discusses, among other things, the power of the disconnection between the interior and exterior of the clown, and of familiar storylines whose ending is unexpectedly different. Considering himself a storyteller, an artificer, craftsman, inventor, and a Dr Frankenstein, Chiodo pursued a career in special effects to bring to life his stories involving fantastic creatures – and, in doing so, essentially shaped our cultural fantasies around clowns as mischief makers.

### **Perspectives on violent clowning – conclusion**

The mosaic of perspectives and ideas in recent engagement with the violent clown carve out the different ways in which the delicious art of clowning – an art performed to the very extremes of art – and the clown’s risk-embracing spirit and boldness have been acting as an aesthetic paragon for ambiguous protagonists in different media, combining extreme performance with extreme questioning and trespassing of convention. The multi-disciplinary research strengths<sup>[13]</sup> and artistic approaches discussed in the forthcoming special issue of *Comedy Studies* – of which just a few have been selected and highlighted here – contribute to a better understanding of the role and position of the violent clown in a cultural context, and add new dimensions to the richness of its cultural capital, its societal relevance and aesthetic self-understanding. As both a destructive artist and border crosser, the most essential ability of violent clowns lies in what Enid Welsford called their “art of improvisation”, manifested in their artistic aptitude for spinning and performing tales; they are “amphibian[s] equally at home in the world of reality and the world of imagination”.<sup>[14]</sup>

*In addition to the papers mentioned in this article, the special themed journal issue contains the following texts: “Schlock Horror and Pillow Punches: Introduction to the Dialectics of the Violent Clown – and this Special Themed Journal Issue” by Anna-Sophie Jürgens, Jarno Hietalahti, Lena Straßburger, Susanne Ylönen; “Alien Invaders: Clowning as Metacultural Performance in Stephen Chiodo’s Killer Klowns from Outer Space” by Matthias Christen; “Battles, Blows and Blood: Pleasure and Terror in the Performance of Clown Violence” by Louise Peacock; “Transgressive Clowns: Between Horror and Humour” by Ruth Richards; “Comical Critiques of Violence (Karl Valentin, Helge Schneider/Alexander Kluge)” by Sandra Fluhrer; “Whose Pain Is It, Anyway? On Avatar Embodiment, Slapstick Performances, and Virtual Pain” by Daniel Heßler; “Smash and Laugh: A philosophical analysis on the relationship between humour and violence” by Jarno Hietalahti; “Side-Splitting Amusement: On comic scientists – the sciency type of violent clowns?” by Anna-Sophie Jürgens; “Humorectomy: Engineering Comic Clown Violence – Will Elliott interviewed by Anna-Sophie Jürgens”; “Violence in the Clownlight: Ira Seidenstein on the inner world of the clown, slapstick and dynamite – A conversation with Anna-Sophie Jürgens” and*

*“The Circus of Eternals” by Courtney Carr.*

Picture above the article: *Masked Horror* (2019). Photo: [Tom Roberts](#).

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[1] For a discussion of the cultural background of the Joker as a violent clown, see Jürgens, A.-S. (2014): “The Joker, a Neo-Modern Clown of Violence”, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 5/4, 441–454; Jürgens, A.-S. (2018): “A Funny Taste: Clowns and Cannibals”, *Comedy Studies* 9/2, 171–182 and Jürgens, A.-S. (2018): “Comic in Suspenders: Jim Sharman’s circus worlds in *The Rocky Horror (Picture) Show*”, *Journal of Australian Studies* 42/4, 507–523.

[2] Groys, B. (2013): “Topologie der Kunst: Ikonoklasmus als Verfahren: Ikonoklastische Strategien im Film.” In: *Räume, Körper und Ikonen: (Post-)Konfessionelle Filmikonographien* ed. by Charles Martig, Karsten Visarius, and Joachim Valentin, Marburg: Schüren, 47–62, here 58 (translation mine).

[3] NB: w/k’s editorial team will soon publish another piece on the journal’s definition of the ‘border crosser’.

[4] Keep an eye open for Anna-Sophie Jürgens’ forthcoming paper on “Batman and the World of Tomorrow: Yesterday’s Technological Future in the animated film *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*”.

[5] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artist>

[6] Groys, “Topologie der Kunst”, 51–52.

[7] Bakhtin, M. M. (1984): *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 353.

[8] Carroll, N. (2001): *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 251.

[9] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trickster>

[10] See the forthcoming paper: “Sublime and grotesque: Exploring the liminal positioning of clowns between oppositional aesthetic categories” by Susanne Ylönen and Marianna Keisalo in *Comedy Studies* 11/1 (2019).

[11] See the forthcoming paper: “How to Kill with a Smile – How to Smile about a Kill: Violent Clowns as Double Incongruity” by Lena Straßburger in *Comedy Studies* 11/1 (2019).

[12] On extraterrestrial clowns playing human(s) in the context of space narratives, see Jürgens, A.-S. (2019): “Clowns in Space: An Introduction to Circus Aliens and Spaced-out Comic Performers”, *Southern Space Studies – “Outer Space and Popular Culture”*, ed. by Annette Froehlich, Cham: Springer, 71–89.

[13] Beyond the forthcoming special-themed journal issue and the violent clown phenomenon, clowning has also been studied from multiple science-oriented perspectives. For example, clown doctors’ mission is to reconnect society with joy and optimism through the performance of professional clowning. Thus, they refer to and participate in scientific studies exploring the positive effects of humour and laughter on psychological wellbeing and the body’s basic health and healing mechanisms, on the one hand, and on social interaction and reduction of preoperative anxiety, on the other. Their aim is to improve the understanding of humour in healthcare, education and humanitarian sectors by producing scientific

evidence and developing productive research environments. Psychologists, humour and robotics researchers also explore the societal benefits of (researching) humour in relation to technology in the conviction that 'laughter and amusement might tell us something about the way technology shapes us'. Investigating and/or creating robot stand-up comedy and comic humanoid robots, recent studies aim to contribute to improvements in our relationship with technology and robot sociability. Studies of this kind map out how the realm of engineering may become integrated in our ways of performing and perceiving clowning and circus in the future; they demonstrate that clowns are both a product and producer of scientific and scholarly curiosity – and good stories.

[14] Welsford, E. (1966): *The fool: His Social and Literary History*, Gloucester: Peter Smith, xii, xiii, 14.

### Tags

1. Anna-Sophie Jürgens
2. Circus and Science