Article

The Politics of Laughter: The Afterlives of Clowns Joseph Grimaldi and Jean-Gaspard Deburau in 1920s Cinema

Joana Jacob Ramalho

School of European Languages, Culture & Society, University College London, London WC1E 6BT, UK; joana.ramalho@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

The world of laughter is often deemed frivolous. Clowns have taught us otherwise. This paper investigates the convoluted politics of laughter in relation to clowning, arguing that clowns (and the laughter they elicit) blur humour and horror and, in doing so, offer a corrective to officialdom. I analyse laughter as a social phenomenon (following Bergson, Benjamin, and Bakhtin) and as a mediating form, bound up in power structures and political concerns that are both local and transhistorical. To contextualise the (d)evolution of the clown, I first discuss ambiguity, misfitness, and failure, and then consider the English Clown Joseph Grimaldi and the French Pierrot Jean-Gaspard Deburau. These performers, I suggest, represent the two main strands of clowns in popular culture: the melancholy outcast and the murderous deviant. I explore each strand via 1920s silent films, including Sjöström's *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924), Chaplin's *The Circus* (1928), Leni's *The Man Who Laughs* (1928), and Brenon's *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (1928). These are works of social indictment that debunk monolithic depictions of clowns and laughter, critiquing conformity, social asymmetries, vices, and industrial growth. Clowning is more than playing an artistic, sociocultural role: it hinges on radical resistance and carries a political valence.

Keywords: clowns; laughter; silent cinema; circus; misfitness; failure; Joseph Grimaldi; Jean-Gaspard Deburau; humour and horror; 1920s films

1. Introduction

The world of laughter is often deemed frivolous. Clowns have taught us otherwise. According to circus studies pioneer, Paul Bouissac, the clown's 'raison d'être is […] to elicit laughter' (Bouissac 1977, p. 115). Laughter can be healing, with some clown demonstrations being 'gentle and benign', deflecting attention away from the worries of daily life (Bouissac 1990, p. 195). Historically, however, these sanative properties have been obfuscated by the clown's sustained blurring of the boundary between humour and horror. Walter Benjamin stresses the close bond between these two conventionally obverse states when he defines American slapstick comedies, such as those featuring Chaplin's Tramp, as comic 'only in the sense that the laughter [they provoke] hovers over an abyss of horror' (Benjamin 2008c, p. 330), thus emphasising the social dimension of humour in facilitating a critique of rapid industrial development. In line with Benjamin's observation, I suggest that clown figures have historically spearheaded and epitomised the conflation of humour and horror, and that cinematic clowns have instrumentalised laughter in a uniquely intricate and universalising way. Film has been central to conveying poignant and, more recently, notoriously stereotypical portrayals of clowns as haunting and haunted beings that often generate moments of sLaughter, that is, 'instances when humor is horror, and vice versa' (Dowell and Miller 2018, p. xxi). In the twenty-first century, the dissolution of boundaries between these at once docile and dangerous figures materialised in a surge in coulrophobia, which was fuelled by online networks of clown hating and culminated in numerous reports of scary clown sightings that led to a worldwide 'clown panic', lasting from August to November 2016 (Gordon 2021). At the time, *It* (1986) author Stephen King, whose imagination created Pennywise the Dancing Clown (a remorseless shapeshifting serial killer), spoke out about the 'killer clown' trend, saying: 'time to cool the clown hysteria—most of 'em are good, cheer up the kiddies, make people laugh' (King 2016). It, also known as Pennywise, is a malevolent, supernatural creature

that can shapeshift into its target's deepest fears. It usually assumes the form of a clown, as it proves especially effective at luring its favourite prey: children. The clown's clashing of merriment, melancholia, and madness was not new, but the global dimension and sociocultural visibility afforded the phenomenon was unprecedented.

Clowns in Western culture are recurrently depicted as 'hopeless dupe[s] or naïve idiot[s]' (Beré 2020, p. 4) or else as wicked degenerates, as in Edgar Allan Poe's 'Hop-Frog' (1849), which focuses on the misfortunes and misdeeds of the eponymous court jester. They often appear as covert murderers, as in Fritz Lang's *Spione* (1928), or wanted outlaws, like Buttons in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952). Depictions of clowns as madmen have also become stereotypical, from silent film classics, including Victor Sjöström's *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924) to Krusty the Clown in Matt Groening's animated television series *The Simpsons* (1989–). Clown figures have been central to the cinema since the early experiments with phantasmagorias and other pre-cinematic devices. Ruth Richards highlights Émile Reynaud's animated projections, *Pauvre Pierrot* and *Le Clown et ses chiens*, both from 1892, as two such examples (Richards 2020, p. 64). Early films featuring clowns that meld fun and fright include the British comedy *The New Clown* (Paul 1916), the Russian *Tot, kto poluchaet poshchechiny* (Ivanov-Gai 1916), which is the first adaptation of *He Who Gets Slapped*, and the Danish film *Klovnen* (Sandberg 1917), remade in 1926. Clown-focused films have remained popular ever since. From the late 1970s, however, they became indelibly associated with horror. The 'evil clown' sub-genre firmly cemented the widespread perception of the whiteface clown as twisted and frightful, accentuating a centuries-old cultural heritage. Specifically, popular culture, mainly via the cinematic medium, has magnified the 'profanation of the sacred' (Bouissac 1990) that traditionally underpins clown performances, stimulating an acutely negative view of clowns. Even Andrew McConnell Stott, in his much-acclaimed biography of English star clown Joseph Grimaldi, admits to his own prejudiced view of these professionals in the introduction to his book. While recounting his experience of attending the annual memorial service at the Holy Trinity Church in Hackney, which gathers in homage to Grimaldi since 1940, Stott muses about how clowns and their accoutrements are 'more evocative of forced laughter […] than genuine fun', and how he found himself wondering 'how many diseased minds were lurking behind those blood-red smirks' (Stott 2009, p. xvi). Bouissac summarises some of the ways in which the clown is ordinarily stigmatised:

> a persistent literary theme classifies the clown as an outcast; in American circus films he is more often than not the unsuspected murderer or a criminal in hiding; there are also many signs of a rampant feeling that professional clowns are morally depraved or that being circus clowns is the outcome of some misfortune.
>
> (Bouissac 1990, p. 195)

This is the enduring iconography of the clown, in and outside the ring. Unlike the image of the misunderstood artist, whose persistent inability or refusal to conform to social norms is regarded as a sign of authenticity and genius, the clown's deviation from standardised behaviours is taken as dim-wittedness or deviancy. But why does this happen? And how did clowning come to be associated with anything other than joyous, communal, healing entertainment? To answer these questions, my exploration considers the fear that these uncanny, peripatetic figures articulate via a discussion of ambiguity, bodily 'misfitness', and failure. This approach clarifies some of the central aspects that may cause humour to tip over to horror and thus contributes to scholarly readings of the clown as juxtaposing the comedic and the tragic, the jocose and the jarring (Carroll 1999; Stott 2012; Jürgens 2014; Radford 2016; Richards 2020; Ylönen and Keisalo 2020).[1] 'All comedy and all horror', comedian and screenwriter David Misch observes, 'establish patterns that introduce tension […] often using misdirection' (Misch 2018, p. 74). So, he continues, despite their differences—'one's a pie in the face, the other's an axe in the skull'—they are complementary forms (ibid, p. 74).

The convoluted politics of laughter subtend my readings throughout. My analysis attends to laughter as a mediating form, bound up in power structures and political concerns that are both local and

transhistorical. Henri Bergson, in his seminal study, takes a utilitarian view of laughter, claiming that we must 'determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. […] [Laughter] must have a *social* signification' (Bergson 1911, pp. 7–8). Laughter is, in this sense, a corrective: a social phenomenon that speaks to social realities. The clown's function, in turn, is to provoke laughter. If laughter is 'a sort of *social gesture*' that fosters community, emotion, Bergson warns, inhibits this spontaneous biosocial activity (ibid, p. 20). If, on the one hand, Bergson's approach can be regarded as somewhat reductive, on the other it points to a crucial dimension of laughter as a shared experience and a social encounter, unencumbered by morals.

Indebted to Bergson's theory of laughter, Mikhail Bakhtin posits laughter as a social activity and a model of social conflict. Bakhtin's writings on the carnivalesque in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965), widely cited in theories of humour and circus studies, will not be explored here due to their familiarity, but one passage from *Dostoevsky's* provides a helpful overarching framing for my analysis of the intricacies of laughter in relation to clowning. Bakhtin constructs carnival as an episteme, remarking that '[c]arnivalization is not an external and immobile schema which is imposed upon ready-made content; it is, rather, an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things' (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 166). Carnival, in the Bakhtinian sense, becomes a *Weltanschauung*, a new or alternative way of seeing and understanding, or rediscovering, the world. This idea, especially as developed in *Rabelais*, builds on the concept of laughter, which Bakhtin reworks from Nietzsche, Bergson, and Cassirer; it is through laughter and its corporeality that 'everyone participates' in the celebratory spectacle of carnival (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 7). Bakhtin highlights the communal aspect of laughter and seems to reject Bergson's view that '[b]y the fear which it inspires [laughter] restrains eccentricity' (Bergson 1911, p. 20). Clowns combine these dimensions and build on communality, fear, and eccentricity; in so doing, they use the universal language of carnival, of laughter, as social critique in their transgressive overturning of hierarchical orders and their stressing of the body's permeability to social influences.

Bringing together the overlapping social functions of laughter and clowns permits an exploration of social asymmetries, practices of resistance,[2] and sociocultural subversion. To investigate the subtleties of laughter and contextualise the (d)evolution of the clown, I first concentrate on two renowned late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century performers and then establish a connection between their clown personae and early representations of cinematic clowns. This somewhat eclectic approach that moves from real-world clowns to their cinematic counterparts suits its multifaceted and polymorphous subject, which has often seen life imitating art and vice versa. I argue that contemporary cultural renderings of clowns have their historical roots in two key performers—the English clown Joseph Grimaldi (1778–1837) and the French Pierrot Jean-Gaspard Deburau (1796–1846)—who contributed decisively to the development of the art of clowning. They encapsulate, I suggest, the two main strands of clowns in popular culture: the sad, melancholy outcast (Grimaldi) and the murderous, psycho clown (Deburau). Grimaldi and Deburau are deployed here as mythopoetic archetypes that facilitate an understanding of the complex devolution of clown figures in Western culture.

Silent narrative cinema, 'a pantomimic art' (Chaplin 1922, p. 187), very much aware of its roots in fairground attractions and the theatre, foregrounds multiple clowns and clown-type figures, which stresses the connections between two art forms of awe and wonder—the circus and the cinema. Both appear as privileged spaces for articulating a sardonic commentary on inequities and class struggles, allowing 'a symbolic revolt of the underprivileged against their masters' (Zucker 1954, p. 313), prompting the audience to question the dominant ideology and the hegemonic forces that make up our societies. Crucially, this 'symbolic revolt', I argue, positions laughter as a form of radical resistance, which I will first explore historically, as part of cultural practices of clowning, and then via a selection of fiction films. The ability to laugh and incite laughter can be a strategic way of coping with the hardships of life while questioning dominant power relations and entrenched social discourses. In addition to its role as a shield, then, laughter is a powerful, and sometimes vile, weapon that can be used against others. Through laughter, clown characters destabilise social order, challenge undisputed assumptions, encourage acts of insubordination, and bring forward a touching and violent portrayal of everyday struggles and injustices. Humour may lead us

'to question received wisdoms and untroubled shibboleths, to *provoke critical thought and resistance* through the use of the absurd, and to generate solidarity and support for peoples and communities affected by dislocation and hardship' (Dodds and Kirby 2013, p. 57, emphasis added). Laughter, in sum, is an insidious, if often neglected, form of agency.

Moving from Grimaldi to Deburau, I explore each strand via 1920s silent films that have not received much attention in relation to clowning or laughter. These include Sjöström's *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924), Chaplin's *The Circus* (1928), Paul Leni's *The Man Who Laughs* (1928), and Herbert Brenon's *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (1928). Analysing these early films and focusing on only one decade enables me to highlight representations of clowns in early narrative cinema and examine the significance of clowning and clown laughter to film storytelling. This study furthermore locates the origins of the cinematic clown's evil proclivities in the nineteenth century, shedding light on subsequent, more extreme, iterations of clowns and clowning in contemporary popular culture. Contrary to what we might expect, 'clown' is a capacious category that, through the centuries, has covered a whole gamut of definitions.[3] The clowns that concern me here—stage and circus clowns, pierrots, 'freaks', and tramps—reflect part of this diverse heritage. At a time when Western politics are increasingly carnivalised and humour is not only instrumentalised but often weaponised, my paper invites a reflection on the dynamics of communal laughter and its implications.

2. Eliciting Fear

'Violence lies at the heart of all clowning' (Findlater [1955] 1978, p. 140) and, as Fiona Macdonald sums up, '[i]t's the belief that clowns are meant to be harmless that is recent, not the idea that they are unsettling' (Macdonald 2016). Indeed, the association of clowns with sadness, violence, or evil must be seen as part of an old and widespread tradition. Clown-type figures have been around for millennia in various forms—as jesters, fools, harlequins, or mimes, for instance, descendants of mythological trickster gods, such as the Norse god Loki or the Greek god Pan. They share with the archetype of the trickster the ability to discomfort and unsettle the audience through physical prowess and transformation. The mythical trickster is a mischievous, deceitful, and selfish creature that can shift its form to serve its own interests and desires (we can spot a connection here to King's *It* and its titular creature). Carl Jung describes it as liminal and interstitial, revealing 'his fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter, his dual nature, half animal, half divine, his exposure to all kinds of tortures, and […] his approximation to the figure of a saviour' (Jung 2004, p. 160). In their duality, metamorphic appearance, and cathartic qualities, clowns actualise the traits inherited from the trickster in post-industrial societies. Portraying the clown as villainous thus becomes far less surprising when we consider the origins of clowning and trace it back to trickster-like ambiguity, mischief, and rebellion.

Jesters or fools can be traced to at least the days of the Egyptian pharaohs and can be found not only in ancient Greece and Rome, but in Africa, China, India, Persia, and other kingdoms around the world (Otto 2001). They became popular in the Middle Ages and in Renaissance European royal courts throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The earliest records of the English word 'clown' date from the second half of the 1500s and the term was used to refer to Richard Tarlton, Queen Elizabeth I's most famous fool. Shakespeare included many fools in his works, perhaps most memorably *Hamlet*'s (1603) Yorick. These figures of subversion held a privileged position, as they were often the only people allowed to poke fun at the king and all forms of authority, speaking truths others dared not. In Italy, itinerant troupes performed *commedia dell'arte*, which was popular across Europe from the mid-sixteenth century through to the eighteenth. In the nineteenth century, clowns underwent significant changes with the creation of modern circuses, but retained the ability to discomfort, upset the civic order, and evoke laughter by embarrassing others, in a kind of tongue-in-cheek, socially sanctioned *schadenfreude*. Clowns have therefore always been contradictory, subversive figures that channel dark truths and emotions framed in witty diatribe, colourful clothes, and ludicrous antics. What changed is the intensity of their mischief and the ways in which it manifests and unravels into extreme forms of violence.

The somewhat 'generic "potted" version' of clown history (Davison 2013, p. 18) I outline above, and which moves in a rather straight line from ancient Egypt to the nineteenth century, risks the loss of historical-cultural specificity. Drawing on clown historian Tristan Rémy, Davison concurs that clowns were,

in fact, shaped by many histories: 'cultural, social, political, economic, technological, ideological', and others (ibid, p. 19). As such, analysing clowns as multidimensional and evolving in synergy with the social context provides a sharper understanding of these ever-wondrous, ever-appalling figures.

The clown in Western popular culture has become virtually indissociable from a sense of terror and horror. The horror genre, especially from the 1970s onwards, has capitalised on the figure's inherent ambiguity and sired a host of productions that present evil, killer clowns—an 'efficient image' and 'modern phenomenon' that '[places] the pleasures of laughs in close proximity to mortal threat, [embodying] a particularly tense and volatile contradiction' (Stott 2012, p. 4). These clowns often steer away from genuine comic relief, and their cheeky pranks and traditionally benign, healing character turn murderous. In films such as *Amusement* (2008) or the *Killjoy* franchise (2000–2019), the mask no longer shelters complex human beings, but becomes a superficial prop to disguise a killer's identity. The colourful pom-poms, oversized clothes, white facepaint, and other clown accoutrements and paraphernalia serve as an easy, humorous counterpoint to horror and violence. The development of the evil clown gradually empties this ancestral figure of its aura, which sees its almost mystical mischievousness, melancholy, and madness replaced with murderous mayhem.

Stripped of its complexity, the evil clown nonetheless retains its connection to humour. King's *It* is a case in point in its use of cunning wittiness to defeat the otherworldly creature. The 'monster-as-clown' parodies the comic and entertaining public image of the clown but, in its susceptibility to raillery, humour 'becomes a weapon to be used against it' (Ylönen and Keisalo 2020, pp. 21–22). Overall, King seems to tell us, fear grows if unchecked, if there is no counterbalance to its expansion. Laughter acts as the proverbial antidote to evil, and its weaponisation clearly aligns horror and humour, thus presented as part of the same continuum. The philosophical questions brought about by this proximity intersect with the clown's socio-political significance, another element which the evil iteration of the figure has preserved. The pop culture icon the Joker, from the DC Comics *Batman* series embodies humour and horror, and helped embed sLaughter in the popular imagination. Drawing on philosopher, art critic, and media theorist Boris Groys, A.-S. Jürgens positions the Joker at the intersection of art, pop culture, and academia (Jürgens 2019)—an artist who paradoxically delights in destroying art. Jürgens recalls the museum sequence in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), in which the Joker (Jack Nicholson) defaces numerous works of art, including a Rembrandt and a Degas. These destructive acts, performed with recourse to playful singing, dancing, and slapstick, carry a political message: old icons give way to new images; in other words, a new order overthrows and replaces institutionalised powers (ibid). To understand the tension between humour and horror, and to contextualise the ascension of the brutal image of the impulsive and cruel psycho clown, we must look both to such performative qualities of clowns as ambiguity, misfitness, and failure, and also to the birth of modern clowning in the nineteenth century.

2.1. Ambiguity and the Body

Wolfgang M. Zucker argues that the clown 'evokes laughter and gives some strange psychological satisfaction by an appearance and a behavior that elsewhere in society are repudiated, abhorred, and despised' (Zucker 1954, p. 310). Indeed, becoming a clown entails dressing the part; it is an inherently performative role that signals a disruption of normality, of everyday actions. The baggy clothes, unusual garments thick make-up, coloured wigs, red nose, oversized shoes, knockabout humour, and blurring of boundaries—for instance between male and female, human and object, funny and fearful, order and disorder—generate a disconcerting ambiguity; an ambiguity which is intrinsically disturbing and yet integral to the clown. This ambivalence positions the clown between 'comedy and tragedy, smiles and tears, ridicule and gravity, mirth and fear' (Fink 2018, p. 29). In a passage worth quoting at length, Zucker describes the clown thus:

> he is deliberately outlandish and yet undoubtedly familiar. His costume is grotesquely out of fashion and yet not without glamor and elegance. He certainly cannot boast wealth, yet his poverty is not pathetic. He has neither office nor recognizable vocation, but he can do practically everything and may

therefore often appear in the role of a resourceful servant without question his presence is accepted, although he actually does not belong anywhere; either he does not know or he disregards all conventions, but at the same time he is able to extricate himself with hundreds of tricks from the most unpleasant situations. […] Sometimes *we may doubt whether the clown is human*.

(Zucker 1954, pp. 310–11, emphasis added)

This ontological 'doubt' that the clown's liminality triggers is reflected in the fact that a study has listed 'clown' as the creepiest of all occupations, largely because of our inability to identify the person under the mask and predict their behaviour (McAndrew and Koehnke 2016, p. 12). This fearful, anxious reaction could be an evolutive defence mechanism that demands alertness from the subject in the face of potential danger. In defamiliarising the human, they unsettle standard categorisations and carry with them a distinctive element of unpredictability that 'combine[s] the superficially contradictory human feelings of horror and humour' (Radford 2016, p. 26). Other factors of creepiness include distinctive physical characteristics that fall outside of the norm and a display of disconcerting patterns of nonverbal communication and behaviour.

Their privileging of non-verbal means of expression is the result of externally, which is to say, state-imposed regulatory practices that sought to sanitise 'low' entertainment while distinguishing it from 'high' forms of aesthetic fruition encountered in the theatre, the opera, or the ballet, for instance. During the nineteenth century, performing venues, including the modern circus were closely regulated and censored, especially in England and France. Laws and government restrictions monitored or downright prohibited the obscenity and scatological humour typical of clown acts. More pointedly, the use of the spoken word was severely restricted; clowns were barred from speaking, so that their acts would not overlap with theatre productions. They were allowed only to speak very little, if at all, and they could not play musical instruments (Sena and de Oliveira 2021, p. 14).[4] As the cycles of liberalisation and censorship often do, they brought about innovative practices and specialisation, which included the fast development of clowns' 'scenic repertoire' through the creation of acts based on the absence of speech and on physical comedy and pantomime (ibid, p. 14). P.T. Barnum accelerated these changes with the expansion of the circus from one ring to three. It is at this point that clowns become associated with children, as their now sanitised and mostly mute acts are more proper and universalising. This silence, in turn, emphasised their overall uncanniness which, together with their physical virtuosity, made them particularly appealing to filmmakers.

'Their stage names exhaust all that they are. Clowns exist only in the ring' (Bouissac [2012] 2014, p. 144). Bouissac's powerful contention contributes an important layer to the study of clowning, in that it draws attention to the clown's appearance and provocative transgressions as already connoting a marginal social position, which would supposedly protect clowns from 'prosecution and retaliation' (ibid, p. 144). 'Whenever they appear outside [the ring]', Bouissac continues, 'they insert a fragment of circus space within the fabric of everyday life' (ibid, p. 144)—and this is all but benign. The chaos and violent disorder that are (seemingly oxymoronically) minutely patterned and organised inside the ring or on the stage may become dangerous, harmful, and potentially fatal outside the constraints of the performance, bringing comedy and horror to the fore.

Crucially, the clown's elicitation of creepiness exceeds the theatre stage and the circus tent. As Brenda Assael explains in her study of Victorian circuses, 'masks, so important in the business of clowning, both concealed and revealed important aspects about the artist, provoking a mix of admiration and curiosity that inspired laughter' (Assael 2005, pp. 94–95). Such concealment, combined with disorderly clown banter, sometimes intruded upon bourgeois codes and could carry legal implications. Clown masks

provided the perfect cover for hiding. When […] clowns performed in the open air and in bourgeois metropolitan neighbourhoods like Marylebone […], the noise they were said to emit disrupted codes of civility. The inventor Charles Babbage notoriously launched a stream of complaints against these minstrels and their German and Italian counterparts, though he found that 'it is difficult to identify them' before the police because of their make-up […].

(Assael 2005, p. 99)[5]

This idea of the clown persona as refuge from the law and the mask as a productive and pragmatic protection from punishment (Meyrer 2018, p. 240) is epitomised on celluloid in DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952), in which Buttons the Clown (James Stewart), unbeknownst to his travelling companions, is a physician who has euthanised his wife and is being hunted by the FBI. As DeMille tells us in the trailer, 'For some mysterious reason, Buttons never removes his make-up'. Clown make-up effectively acts as a mask, a hide. Popular culture has led us to distrust 'masked merrymen' (Fink 2018, p. 30), not the least because 'by cloaking the face, the mask also cloaks those restrictions, which the individual normally imposes on his or her self' (Milne 2007, p. 398). There is, in fact, a long history of legislations prohibiting the donning of masks, namely during carnival festivities. Between the early fifteenth century and the first decades of the 1600s, ordinances passed in Switzerland, France, and Germany revealed emerging social, religious, and psychological concerns against masking and '*ridiculous spectacles with masks*', which were promptly connoted with Satan (ibid, p. 397). Mask wearers were prone to excesses and associated with chaos, misrule, and madness, which already hinted at the dark contours that would come into prominence with the clown's decisive evil turn in the nineteenth century and its quick devolution during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Disguising oneself under layers of paint and wearing 'transformative props' that 'hide their civil identities behind their circus personae' making them 'unrecognisable' (Bouissac [2012] 2014, p. 144), construct the clown as a suspicious yet familiar figure that stresses the permeable boundaries between self and other, reason and unreason, law and anarchy. Their camouflaged bodies, masked faces, and unusual movements thwart our expectations of natural human behaviour and display a certain rigidity and mechanicity that provoke negative familiarity. Jürgens points to the 'ungraceful and even mechanised' body of the clown (Jürgens 2014, p. 443) and links it to Bergson's *Le Rire* (1900), in which the author identifies a 'mechanical inelasticity' in the comic, '[*s*]*omething mechanical encrusted on the living*' (Bergson 1911, pp. 20, 37). Pantomime and slapstick give us '*the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement*' (ibid, p. 69), concurrently inciting laughter and suspicion. Briefly, the disparity between resemblance (or human likeness) and behaviour provokes humour and terror. This leads to a tense relationship between us and the clown, so that it comes to occupy the space of what Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori has famously called 'the uncanny valley'—that chilling and fascinating realm of the eerily lifelike where affinity and appearance do not coincide, engendering 'an eerie sensation' of revulsion and fear (Mori 2012, pp. 98–99). In essence, what is at stake here is a dehumanisation of clown figures through a perceived incongruity, a concept which also defines one of the most influential theories of humour developed by Kant. In this sense, clowns become haunting symbols of liminality, sublimely odd and oddly appealing, singularly suited to dramatise our deep-seated fears and anxieties with their '[h]alf red, half white, half grand, and half grotesque' faces (Blanchard 1891, p. 406).

Historically, the grotesque has been linked to evil, fear, and laughter. In his taxonomy of the contemporary grotesque, Noël Carroll notes this close relationship, stating that whatever fails to meet our expectations of morality is perceived as a potential threat—'and we tend to regard threats as evil' (Carroll 2003, p. 297). In addition, things or people that collapse or violate standing, normative cultural categories, including amputees, 'dwarves', and 'giants', are 'impure', 'ambiguous or interstitial', and therefore disturbing and fearsome (ibid, pp. 300–1). Carroll refers to clowns specifically as central examples of the combination of humour and the grotesque: '[they] are grotesque because they are improbable representations of the human; their features wildly exaggerated and misshapen, while their biological and cognitive capacities are humanly anomalous' (ibid, p. 303). They resist neat sociocultural definitions and this 'categorical interstitiality' (Carroll 1987, p. 55) mobilises fear and helps to clarify the unease with which clowns are repeatedly perceived in Western popular culture.

2.2. Failure and 'Misfitness'

Failure requires attention when attending to the visceral distrust of clowns. While human beings naturally seek to avoid and escape it, clowns instead embrace failure. Failure is, in fact, at the core of clowning: 'clown starts from the acceptance that we inevitably fail' (Davison 2013, p. 299). Failure occurs

on different levels: failure to fit in, failure to ascend the social ladder, failure to communicate, failure to understand, failure to adhere to predetermined roles. Professional clown and academic Marcelo Beré advances that 'failure can be either a bodily failure or the failure of dealing with an object, the failure of fitting into a social or cultural context or even a failure in the interpretation of a situation' (Beré 2020, p. 7). Beré deploys the concept of 'misfitness' to characterise the 'intrinsic *dysfunction-ability*' clowns display in their expert use of the body in a way that runs counter to socially stipulated, standardised behaviours (ibid, p. 13). He uncovers in clown performances an 'underlying logic of misfitness—a logic that aims to disclose the world of everyday norms by revealing its incongruities' (ibid, p. 24). The body, Beré argues, evinces a 'unique misfitness' that exposes 'our general *ontological* condition' of what Heidegger calls *Dasein*, 'being-in-the-world' (ibid, p. 7). In other words, the clown lays bare 'the *world* through failing to fit into this same world' (ibid, p. 5). Shaun May likewise draws attention to the clown's engagement in bodily failure, arguing that it induces an existential anxiety 'that reveals the fundamental groundlessness of the world' (May 2015, p. 163) and, in doing so, bodily breakdown 'returns us ineluctably to this world' (ibid, p. 177).

The clown's inherent inability to learn from repeated failures paradoxically unsettles and liberates. We resist failure to protect our dignity, psychological wellbeing, and social standing. What the clown's hopeless and hapless failures do is give us 'the permission and freedom to fail, to be stupid, to celebrate, to play' (Ramsden 2015, p. 149). Hilary Ramsden acknowledges humour and clowning's liberating potential through rehearsed failure, in their 'offer[ing] opportunities for the intangible and ephemeral precariousness of life and humanity to be unpicked and examined without fear, for taboos to be broached and lines overstepped' (ibid, p. 146). Laughing at a clown is laughing at failure, which grants the audience release from shame. Yet shame is not without its comforts: it is a self-regulatory emotion that precludes certain behavioural excesses. In this regard, clowning is both escapist and political, a cultural mechanism of social control that may nonetheless encourage a sense of unrestrained freedom. Ramsden, an activist clown herself, offers an overly positive view of the cathartic and even revolutionary possibilities of the clown's symbiotic relationship with failure. Although these revolutionary potentialities certainly exist, the chances that glimpsing 'the groundlessness of the world' will lead to actual (social, political) change are minimal. This, I argue, in no way diminishes the socio-political significance of clowning. In line with philosopher William Desmond, who defines comedy as 'a kind of *metaphysical commentary* on finiteness and failure' (Desmond 1988, p. 303), French mime and acting instructor Jacques Lecoq notes that, '[t]hrough his failure [the clown] reveals his profoundly human nature' (Lecoq 2020, p. 156). In failing, clowns reassert our humanity, so that the disconcerting fear they instil speaks directly to the dire and horrifying reality that we 'will *always* and *inevitably* fail' (Desmond 1988, p. 303). According to Desmond, laughter, in this context, 'makes the failure inconsequential. It too is nothing. And where failure cannot be healed, laughter at least makes us forget it' (ibid, p. 303). In clowning, then, failure, coupled with laughter, becomes productive.

3. Grimaldi and Deburau

The final decades of the eighteenth century and the early 1800s brought us two pivotal figures which, I argue, encapsulate the two main strands of clowning in the modern and postmodern eras, and who exerted an indisputable influence on twentieth-century theatre, circus performance, and contemporary perceptions and reappraisals of clowns. The history of modern clowning begins with the English Clown Joseph Grimaldi and the French Pierrot Jean-Gaspard Deburau, two contemporaries who conceived two distinct whiteface clowns. Both rose to fame in theatres rather than circuses, where clowns performed with acrobats and equestrians (Simon 2014, p. 189), and both became artists whose funny public personas sharply contrasted with their private lives.

Succeeding famed director, theatre manager, and performer John Rich (1692–1761), who reworked and popularised Harlequin as a mute character on the English stage, Grimaldi gained notoriety for his innovative pantomime as Clown. To the present day, clowns all over the world—known as Joeys—take their name from him (Findlater [1955] 1978, p. 9). Raised by an abusive father who displayed 'a morbid fascination with death' (Ward 2014, p. 26), Grimaldi contributed decisively to significant developments in

nineteenth-century theatre. His Clown was highly physical, requiring extraordinary fitness, and was also sublimely aesthetic, with an unusual style of make-up that he designed himself, a wig, and a full costume made-up of a mainly white tunic and knee breeches (ibid, p. 30). He enjoyed immense success and performed to sold-out venues across the country from 1780 to 1828. After a series of personal tragedies, including the death of his wife, Maria, in childbirth and constant joint pain from over four decades of slapstick tumbling and contortions, Grimaldi retired at the age of forty-eight. He would endure further heartbreak with the loss of his only son, also a clown, to alcoholism in 1832.

While the exact *je ne sais quoi* that elevated Grimaldi to the status of myth and earned him fame and success may forever remain beyond our grasp, his comic genius is undeniable—as is the sadness that punctuated his life. Stott delineates a predominantly melancholy portrait of Grimaldi, a temperament he himself emphasised in his oft-cited play-on-words: 'I make you laugh at night but am Grim-All-Day' (Stott 2009, p. 200). This melancholy in a way ennobles Grimaldi, raising him to the Romantic ideal of the honourable, solitary artist who would endure enormous pain and suffering to perfect his craft. He set the prototype for the sad clown, which hinges on deception—on a troubled life hiding underneath 'a blood-red wound, a mile-wide smear of jam, [which] form[s] the gaping, gluttonous cavern of a mouth' (ibid, p. 118). In its association of the characteristic uniqueness of clown make-up with gory imagery, Stott's vivid phrasing directly points to the violent simultaneity of horror and humour.

Deburau was likewise haunted. Appropriating a long lineage of Pierrots, dating to the seventeenth century, and weaving into the role a wide array of character traits familiar from the *commedia* (Davison 2013, p. 36), he created the much-beloved modern Pierrot which would become an icon of French pantomime and French culture more broadly. Pierrot's sensitive, lovelorn, moonstruck figure evokes child-like purity and an almost mystical aura that 'project[ed] melancholy', a disposition Linda Simon (2014, p. 184) and Robert F. Storey (1978, p. 105) attribute to Deburau's own personality. While psychologising about the performer might yield interesting discussions, the facts alone create a puzzling, distressful picture of the man, whose 'mercurial temper' (Simon 2014, p. 184) would result in a ghastly crime. On a spring day in April 1836, when he was out strolling with his wife and children, he responded to a young man's persistent taunts (lasting around four hours, according to Deburau's statement) by striking him in the head with his cane; the young man, Nicolas-Florent Viélin, died later that day (Nye 2022, p. 83). Deburau was arrested and stood trial for manslaughter, but with massive support from the public and several high-profile intellectuals, including George Sand, the jury acquitted him. The tragic mime was immortalised in Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945), in which mime artist Jean-Louis Barrault plays Deburau ('Baptiste').

Grimaldi and Deburau, along with their stage personae, became cultural myths, which, to an extent, degenerated into the tragic-comic images of, respectively, the tearful 'sentimental depressive' clown and the evil 'serial murderer' (Davison 2013, p. 53). Both performers evince a close relationship with madness, melancholy, and death, but where Grimaldi subverts the traditional dualistic yet markedly light-hearted nature of the clown, Deburau's temper as it translates into murder perverts the clown's classical attributes; the devolution from subversion to perversion occurs outside the stage and away from the Big Top, when reality violently actualises our longstanding mistrust of the clown. To go back to Bouissac's point that clowns 'exist only in the ring', detached from their socially assigned habitat, they become stylistic and stylised models for gratuitous, senseless, and rampant violence.

The post-Deburau Pierrot grew increasingly darker and more macabre as the century advanced, assisted by a cultural penchant for extreme pantomime and melodrama (Davison 2013, pp. 48–49). Alternately perceived as Romantic hero and anti-hero, comic and tragic, Pierrot evolves into a Modernist symbol (ibid, pp. 49–50) that may not always excite laughter but instead encourage self-conscious reflection, appearing as an avant-garde tool for articulating violent emotions and pondering politics. Davison cites Donald McManus's reading of Paul Margueritte's 1882 play, *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* (*Pierrot Assassin of His Wife*), in which Pierrot tickles his wife, Columbine, to death and subsequently reenacts his crime as a self-inflicted death (qtd. in Davison 2013, pp. 51–52). Laughter becomes a murder weapon. This idea was developed—if decomplexified—in twenty-first-century representations of the Joker, whose laughter, 'like a disease', becomes fatal (Jürgens 2014, p. 441).

The main turning point in the public perception of the clown occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century, especially when its amorphous, interstitial features which, as discussed, conferred upon the clown the uncanny property of precluding audience identification, lose some of their original contours. Specifically, the comical element, which was the purview of the clown and, according to Zucker, was founded on the gap (the distance) between clown and spectator, undergoes a fundamental change, so that the spectators can now see themselves reflected in the clown's plight and performative histrionics. 'Clowning', Zucker suggests,

> was the incidental profession of a man with whom the spectator could identify himself, and his grotesque costume was only a self-denying disguise, under which brave hearts beat passionately for women, children, or professional success. With this development the clown ceased to be comical. He now became psychological and tragic.
>
> (Zucker 1954, p. 315)

While Zucker's assertion about the disappearance of the clown's comical element is admittedly exaggerated, it effectively points to fissures in the mask, which—in allowing the audience to know the performer, as with Grimaldi and Deburau—threaten to make it redundant. With the dissolution of the comic into the tragic, the clown becomes a symbol: both of 'nostalgic', 'picturesque archaism' (ibid, p. 315) and of sLaughter, of something that 'is (subjectively) deemed funny because it is (also subjectively) deemed horrific, and only horrific because it is funny' (Dowell and Miller 2018, p. xix). Those fissures, as noted, had developed over many decades, and became more pronounced with Grimaldi and Deburau. These can be seen in early clown films, which capture the economic precarity, moral challenges, and ethical decline of contemporary societies.

The two performers, each in his own way, clashed merriment with misery, and embodied the experiential unease that has historically been a key marker of clown figures. The following sub-sections group a sample of 1920s clown films into two strands—the Grimaldi strand and the Deburau strand—through their presentation of, and engagement with, the lead clown. My reasoning for linking a film to one of the strands concerns the broader cultural myths that surround the artists Grimaldi and Deburau. In this sense, my focus is on the clown protagonist and the type and degree of violence he *engages in*. As such, a clown that endures the extraordinary violence perpetrated against him but who does not deliberately inflict pain and suffering on others, such as Gwynplaine from Leni's *The Man Who Laughs*, aligns with the Grimaldian strand. Intent and degree are likewise important when we consider a character such as Chaplin's The Tramp, whose violence is unintentional and eschews extreme outcomes. On the other hand, a clown that turns murderous, like HE in Sjöström's *He Who Gets Slapped*, incarnates an early cinematic portrayal of the evil, killer clown. HE is haunted by a traumatic humiliation that led to his personal and professional downfall. Instead of withstanding life's adversities (like Gwynplaine), or killing himself (like Flik, the depressive clown in Brenon's ironically titled *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*), he seeks revenge against those who wronged him.

I therefore invoke Grimaldi and Deburau as symbolic, mythopoetic archetypes for, respectively, the perennially morose or disingenuous clown whose violence is either self-inflicted, sometimes leading to suicide (as in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*), or the hilarious side-effect of failure (failure to fit in, for instance, as with the Tramp). The Grimaldi clown elicits our sympathy and empathy, and evokes a pervasive sense of melancholy—as Gwynplaine does. When the Grimaldian melancholy devolves into purposeful cruelty, it crosses a line that more closely echoes the historical-cultural evolution of the Pierrot, from Deburau through the circus-pantomimes of the English Hanlon-Lees troupe to decadent literature. Extreme violence on the part of the clown, then, is the line that most clearly separates between the two strands. So, the classifying impetus in my analysis pertains the clown's actions rather than the heinous acts committed against him. The clown's evil turn occurs when his radical resistance is overcome with despair and/or madness and results in deliberate, violent acts towards others. In 1920s cinematic incarnations of the Deburau clown (e.g., HE), the figure discloses sadistic inclinations, which are often the consequence of

some injustice, but still retains distinctive elements of melancholy and tragedy that play on the audience's empathy.

As the century progresses, the tone gradually changes and the cinematic clown begins to lose his pathos, in a journey we can compare with that of the post-Deburau Pierrot, which becomes increasingly deranged and detached from the stage or the ring. Jürgens traces the modern evil clown to nineteenth-century pantomimes, infamous for their 'aesthetically virtuosic cascades of violence', vividly described by Baudelaire (Jürgens 2014, p. 442). Acrobatic feats, manslaughter, dismemberment, and the clown's uncanny and unlikely survival anchored theatre and circus pantomimes, the most popular of which were, respectively, those performed by Deburau as Pierrot at the Théâtre des Funambules and, after his death, those of the Hanlon-Lees. Where Deburau presented an elegant appearance but was wicked and bold, the clowns of the Hanlon-Lees were brutal and sinister, sporting grotesque make-up and a ghastly look (ibid, p. 443). In film, this shift materialised in the 1970s, with such productions as the Canadian horror film *The Clown Murders* (1976), which was followed by a range of clown-centred titles in the 1980s, including the low-budget splatstick *Blood Harvest* (1986), the erotic slasher *Out of the Dark* (1988), and the cult sci-fi horror comedy *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* (1988). The clowns in the films to which I now turn exhibit those original, auratic qualities of Grimaldi and Deburau, overlapping humour and horror (which frequently produces moments of sLaughter); moreover, they all display insidious forms of violence, recurrently enacted via laughter.

3.1. The Grimaldi Strand

According to popular myth, the lives of all truly great clowns are plagued by grief, tragedy, anxieties, and heartbreak (Brottman [2004] 2012, pp. 87–88). The struggles of the clown that plunges to the depths of despondency and melancholy are far from mere speculation and fictive representation and find resonance in the dire living conditions of Victorian clown performers. 'Clowns', Assael explains, 'led a paradoxical existence in Victorian society' (Assael 2005, p. 85). Far from the jolly merrymakers that made circus crowds burst into uproarious laughter, everyday empirical experience of reality positioned clowns as afflicted by social stigma, poverty, and maladies of the body and mind. Finding work was frequently difficult and many artists relied on workhouses to sleep (ibid, p. 107). Their low status was threefold, both social, economic, and professional, in that clowns inhabited the periphery of society and were shunned from institutions and networks that, as Assael notes, 'benefited their fellow performers whose skills were more valued' (ibid, p. 85). Bouissac relates the clown's low sociocultural position to his 'ritualistic' mockery of the officially sanctioned and sacred order and his worshipping of the profane (Bouissac 1990, pp. 195–96). Humorous performances were a defiant, socio-political reaction to discrimination.

At the same time as the clown's turn towards sadness occurred in Victorian England, where, often destitute, clowns 'became a casualty of industrial culture' (Assael 2005, p. 107), a similar shift took place across the Atlantic, where the figure of the Hobo clown appeared following the American Civil War (1861–1865). The vagabond mirrors the hardships of those left homeless in the wake of the conflict, and the cinema quickly noticed the poetic and political potentialities of this figure for representing contemporary industrial malaise. John Lennon offers a concise description of different categories of vagrancy that are commonly collapsed: 'a "hobo" is a migratory worker while the "tramp" is a migratory non-worker and the "bum" is a non-migratory non-worker' (Lennon 2004). Although, as Lennon admits, these definitions are mobile and oftentimes overlap, they help convey the complexities of clown-type figures.

Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp emerges out of this context and depicts the grim reality of the everyday. In *The Circus* (1928), released one year prior to the crash of Wall Street, we are introduced to the circus through its proprietor and ringmaster (Allan Garcia), who beats his stepdaughter (Merna Kennedy) and abuses his employees, including the clowns who have supposedly ceased to be funny and are not attracting crowds anymore. The film's premise, then, denounces a crisis of laughter. The circus, that 'magical […] almost divine word' (Serge 1947, p. 6), is presented here as a site of mistreatment, degradation, poor working conditions, and abasement. The ringmaster hires the Tramp after his property men quit due to unpaid wages and eventually engages him as a clown when he accidentally steals the show and makes the audience laugh. The struggling circus serves as a microcosm for a society in crisis. The ending,

where we witness the circus caravans disappear, one after the other, leaving the Tramp once again alone and forlorn, discloses the duality of tone characteristic of representations of clowning. Framed in a long shot, engulfed by the dust the departing caravans leave in their wake, the Tramp occupies the centre of the screen. As the dust settles, we notice a faint circle on the ground and realise he is standing in what had been, just moments ago, the centre of the ring. The ghostly traces of the circus linger, along with a small, torn piece of the tent, which the Tramp crumples in a medium shot and then proceeds to back kick in a final, bittersweet gag. The circus has become nothing more than a 'fabulous mirage', to borrow the words of French journalist, illustrator, and circus expert Serge (Serge 1947, p. 5). Powerful, if lachrymose, in its social commentary, the film offers a succession of failures that benefit the other characters while providing only temporary victories and solace to the protagonist. Poverty and naivety, combined with an overwhelming maladjustment, yield laughter, but life soon resumes its inequities. When the circus takes to the road again, the implication is that the cycles of abuse and destitution will remain unaltered. The film moreover stands as a complex study on laughter—its challenges, joys, and pressures. The Tramp can be funny only unintentionally. Laughter, in this context, depends on spontaneity and chance; it cannot be performed, which dismantles the arduous labour involved in clown performances: the harder he tries to be funny and follow written gags, the less at ease he is and the less effective his act turns out. '[Y]ou'd better try and be funny again or you'll go', the ringmaster warns him. Overall, laughter functions here as a physiological manifestation of a tripartite isolation: social, political, and economic.

Chaplin's Tramp is the prototypical example of how laughter can satisfy an escapist urge while raising serious questions about the social problems underpinning modern urban existence, namely economic destitution. As an intertitle reads, following the Tramp's successful acts, which attract applause and bigger crowds: 'The circus prospered, but not the property man; and the girl led the same hard life'. Once things start looking up after the Tramp faces up to his employer's abuse and exploitation, the change is merely superficial. When preparing to attempt a dangerous tightrope walking stunt, one of the circus employees tells the ringmaster 'He'll kill himself', to which the latter retorts, 'That's all right; I've got him insured'. Chaplin's films enact a form of Bakhtinian carnivalization, with its 'pathos of change', which allows for a comment on human relationships under capitalism, characterised by alienation, solitude, and objectification (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 11). The films play with extreme emotions, actively engaging the spectator: '[t]hey must either double up laughing or be very sad' (Benjamin 2008b, p. 333). In the intervals between the two poles, there emerge other hybrid forms of conceptualising and experiencing laughter.

Peter L. Berger, in his study on the comic, refers to Chaplin as the paragon of tragicomedy, a mode in which, momentarily, the comic overturns the tragic (Berger 2014, p. 111). Note that the emphasis in this phrase is on the tragic. In *The Circus* and other Tramp films, however, there are moments when the tragic is not suspended, but 'absorbed into an absurd universe', which is the territory of gallows or grotesque humour; when this 'absorption' is not pacific and takes the form of a clash, we are presented with instances of sLaughter (ibid, p. 110). As Jeffrey Vance observes, '[n]ear tragedy, terror and agony are transformed into comedy throughout the film' (Vance 1996, p. 195) and this can happen quite suddenly and violently, with a realistic seriousness that strikes a discordant tone in the narrative. The Tramp's unwitting hilarity, which is maintained across different pictures and unfailingly, if inadvertently, leads to mayhem, turns our attention back to the uncanniness of laughter. When the Tramp volunteers to stand in for the tightrope walker and clumsily releases three monkeys from a trunk, his maladroitness culminates in a terrifying tightrope sequence that reaches its climax when the Tramp's safety belt comes loose and he is viciously attacked by the escaped monkeys. This sequence provokes a synchronous mind/body revulsion and attraction that triggers a fleeting sensation, a 'unique form of frisson' that produces a 'fibrillating, sympathetic vibration' (Dowell and Miller 2018, p. xxi), mixing awe and wonder. Slapstick, Ben Urish notes, pushes the limits of the human body, often in a somewhat 'super-natural' way, 'solidifying the terrain' where horror and humour collide (Urish 2018, p. 106). Misch relates the comic horror in Chaplin to the position of the camera, suggesting that, in a medium or long shot, characters 'giv[ing] or get[ting] punishment' is funny, whereas a close-up would place the punches and screams within ear range and make visible 'the bruises, the blood, the tangible toll on the fragile flesh' (Misch 2018, p. 75). The unruly monkeys

in *The Circus* certainly take a toll on 'the fragile flesh'—sLaughter lives precisely in that interstice which momentarily accommodates the funny and the foul.

In Chaplin's films, laughter—benign, grotesque, and tragic—works as a form of everyday resistance and social glue; it generates community between dispossessed men, women, and children. Mark Steven distinguishes between Chaplin's shorts (1914–1917) and his feature films (1918–1923), all concentrating on industrial modernity, 'urban squalor, and the obstinacy of human labour' (Steven 2017, p. 396), arguing that the latter foreground a move from 'social indictment' to 'social lyricism' (ibid, p. 395), which nonetheless does not detract from their political engagement (ibid, pp. 397–98). This idea of lyricism is likewise present in Philippe Soupault's analysis of Chaplin, in which the author remarks upon 'the undeniable superiority of Chaplin's films' attributed to 'the fact that they are imbued with a poetry that everyone encounters in his life, admittedly without always being conscious of it' (qtd. in Benjamin 2008a, p. 335). Soupault and Benjamin both reify the socio-political aspects that subtend and reinforce the poetry, and which, they claim, are achieved through laughter. To Soupault, making people laugh 'is the hardest thing to do' and 'socially also the most important', to which Benjamin adds that 'Chaplin appeals to both the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter' (ibid, p. 337). This 'revolutionary' aspect, as the Tramp makes clear, is about active resistance; it is about engaging proactively with laughter in order to keep going while holding up a mirror to the follies and failings of contemporary societies.

Outsiderdom is one of the definitional characteristics of the tramp-clown, whose peripatetic condition and rebellious defiance of convention disrupt the social order, playing with dominant, industrial capitalist bourgeois values and corrupting expectations of social harmony and democratic stability. Marcelo Beré productively employs the concept of 'misfitness' to read the tramp-clown as an avatar of the human being that has failed to fit in in a given society or culture. Depicted as a harmless, naïf, and hopeless pauper, this endearing vagabond invites the audience to see the world from his underprivileged perspective. By insistently trying, but inevitably failing, to fit in, clowns, Beré observes, display and challenge the laws that govern our daily lives, posing a threat to those who follow the norms and adopt conventional patterned behaviours (Beré 2020, pp. 4–5, 8, 15). The overturning of normative behaviours is clear in the ice-skating sequence from *The Rink* (1916) or the roller-skating skills featured in *Modern Times* (1936), which evince the expert talent required to fail. Misfitness manifests in highly skilled, virtuoso performances. In other words, the misfit body becomes comic through the exceptional mastery of physical performance. Failure requires work. 'To be a clown, then', Beré concludes, 'is to develop the skills of the misfit body; to understand how failure works in terms of helping the comic body reveal the limits of the human body' (ibid, p. 20). The humorous athleticism demonstrated in his performances earned Chaplin success and led critics to compare him with the great, classic clowns of yore, specifically Grimaldi (Vance 1996, p. 197). Sara Lodge likewise uncovers in the Tramp films motifs common in Grimaldi routines (Lodge 2020, p. 141). Chaplin's body 'is marginal in an absolute sense' and he 'remains indefinable and enigmatic'; his failures, moreover, reveal not only the limits of the human body, but the idea of contentment—that despite everything, 'surviving itself is already a stunning victory' (Zucker 1954, p. 316).

In the same year that *The Circus* was released, a far bleaker and more strikingly Romantic iteration of the melancholy clown replaces the Tramp's sympathetic nonchalance and ultimate resignation to his circumstances. Gwynplaine (Conrad Veidt), in Leni's *The Man Who Laughs*, based on Victor Hugo's social criticism novel, *L'Homme qui rit* (1869), encapsulates the image of the stigmatised, working-class outcast who is shunned from society. Early in the film, we become privy to the main character's misfortune: a band of 'Comprachicos' (nomadic child-buyers) permanently disfigured Gwynplaine when he was an infant, slashing open his mouth into a frightful rictus grin. Hugo underlines Gwynplaine's low status even in relation to those on the lower rungs of the social ladder: 'The mountebank is wanted in the streets, the jester at the Louvre. The first is called a Clown; the other a Fool' (Hugo 1869, pp. 24–25). In the film, it is the king's fool who maliciously sells Gwynplaine to appease the king's narcissism after the child's father, a nobleman, refuses 'to kiss [his] hand'. The lips, 'a sensual part of the body', when excessive 'with a crooked or exaggerated smile' recall the carnivalesque (Conrich and Sedgwick 2017, pp. 97–98). Veidt's juxtaposition of the 'often-pained expression of his upper face, with a furrowed brow and downcast eyes' (ibid, p. 102),

and the 'lugubrious mirth' of 'the sneering smile' (Hugo 1869, p. 298), is thoroughly uncanny and compelling. Realising that the mutilated, scarred visage causes 'implacable hilarity' in crowds that 'nearly died with laughter' (ibid, p. 298), Gwynplaine becomes a successful mountebank, a carnival freak, exhibiting his fixed, gruesome smile for profit in a travelling show. Laughter is de-signified in Gwynplaine's pained visage, in which the emotion (of joy, happiness) has been severed from its typical physical manifestation—a broad smile. This disconnection, this incongruity offers a disenchanted view of laughter as unavoidable, inescapable, and imprisoning. In a touching scene early in the film, Leni cuts to a medium close-up of Gwynplaine's face reflected in between two wooden panels framing a vanity mirror. As he closes the panels, avoiding his reflection, we see two images painted on them—the Greek masks of comedy and tragedy. Laughter and misery, humour and horror interlock.

'The listless came to laugh, the melancholy came to laugh, evil consciences came to laugh', Hugo writes (Hugo 1869, p. 333). The author thus describes laughter as an antidote for despondency and depression and as an outlet for sadistic inclinations. It has the power to bring together the upper classes and the working-class populace, as well as all sorts of dispositions, generating what the Earl of Shaftesbury called a form of '*sensus communis*' (Shaftesbury 1709). Communal spaces of shared laughter and spectacle, however, are not empowering in this context. They are not enabling, liberating sites in which difference is applauded and celebrated, and where the characters are allowed to be themselves. These are sites of sanctioned violence. The tragic-comic figure of Gwynplaine epitomises the harsh collision of horror and humour. Throughout, he is framed desperately trying to hide the lower half of his face, utilising scarves, books, his hands, and even Dea's hair—all to the impatient clamour of ever bigger crowds calling out for 'The Laughing Man'. Alone and helpless on the stage before the eager crowds, Gwynplaine bares his savage smile (the horrific outcome of a crime), which Leni juxtaposes to a mass of pitiless, mirthful faces. Gwynplaine's facial difference and his performance as an 'attraction' are immediately, in themselves, prompts for laughter. sLaughter, we realise, encourages a reflexive stance on the part of the viewer. Gwynplaine's resistive, disruptive, and ambivalent laughter affords the subaltern subject a degree of agency in tainting all his social interactions with the iconography of humour, thus destabilising order. The narrative critiques privilege and idleness but also the people's complacency in indulging in laughter rather than revolution. Gwynplaine ultimately finds love and happiness with the sightless Dea (Mary Philbin), whom he had rescued as an infant from her dead mother's arms. The closing shot of the ship sailing away, after the troupe is banned from England, is more hopeful than Hugo's novel, which ends with Gwynplaine's suicide following Dea's death. In both works, the misfortunes of the sad clown can be summed up in the narrator's rhetorical question: 'But is laughter a synonym of joy?' (Hugo 1869, p. 295).

Brottman describes the film as 'one of the most vivid and profound studies of human laughter ever written. Hugo, particularly adept at describing the function of laughter in social and crowd situations, points out that "a laugh is often a refusal" […] and that "men's laughter sometimes exerts all its power to murder"' (Brottman [2004] 2012, p. 66).[6] Gwynplaine-as-clown, however, is not murderous; he remains a sympathetic victim over the course of the film, never weaponising his pain against others, enduring his fate quietly and exposing his body to communal ridicule for profit. Laughing, therefore, can bring people together, but it can also create cruel, insurmountable distance—not solely in terms of class and social status, but in moral and ethical terms. The laugh can indeed be a 'refusal'—a refusal to accept the other, to allow them into the group and validate their experiences; it can be a refusal to come to terms with our own shortcomings; or it can be a refusal to keep quiet and condone discrimination. The linguistic peculiarities in Hugo's association of 'men's laughter' and murder are echoed in Ramsden's question: 'Is it coincidental that man's laughter can be *manslaughter*?' (Ramsden 2015, p. 147). From the 1940s, this association was heightened by the Joker's diabolical grimace which, despite varying accounts by the three *Batman* co-creators, was arguably inspired by Leni's film. A complex descendant of the vile brutality of the Hanlon-Lees pantomimes, the Joker performs outside the bounds of the stage and the ring, carrying out 'circus-like incursions into everyday life' (Jürgens 2014, p. 449) that rework pantomimic havoc.

Desperate laughter also features prominently in Brenon's *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (1928), in which Tito (Lon Chaney) falls for the woman he raised as his child. Pained by his inappropriate feelings, Tito, who performs as a clown named Flik, seeks treatment for his affliction and is diagnosed with 'some sort of

suppression… perhaps a hopeless love'. Unaware of who his patient is, the doctor guides Tito to his office's balcony where, pointing at a billboard of Flik, he prescribes laughter as the cure for his depression, in a way recovering the idea of clowns as healing and of laughter as an antidote, a medicinal cure against individual malaise and social ills. A point-of-view shot of the billboard on the street below is followed by a medium shot of Tito's sombre countenance, which stands in sharp contrast to the doctor's overly enthusiastic laughing and gesturing as he recommends Tito attend one of the clown's shows, calling Flik 'a tonic for a tired world'. While the doctor's body is lively and restless, taking off his monocle, turning to Tito and to the billboard, pointing, and leaning forwards, the clown stands still, his face pained with the realisation that his 'cure' is beyond reach. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of Tito, who solemnly declares, to the doctor's surprise: 'Flik can never make *me* laugh!', adding after a dramatic pause and a deep sigh, 'Because I am … Flik'. In his discussion of Grimaldi's depressive state and the public speculation about his condition, Stott recounts a running joke in the 1820s that involves Grimaldi paying a visit to famous English surgeon John Abertheny. 'Grimaldi, hoping to find a cure for his depression, asks Abertheny for advice, and the surgeon, unaware of his client's identity, prescribes the diversions of "relaxation and amusement":

> 'But where shall I find what you require?' said the patient.
> 'In genial companionship', was the reply; 'perhaps sometimes at the theatre;—go and see Grimaldi'.
> 'Alas!' replied the patient, 'that is of no avail to me; I *am* Grimaldi'.
>
> (qtd. in Stott 2012, p. 9)

The film mirrors the anecdote and, in both, laughter is believed to act as a psychological defence mechanism, which at least temporarily may shield performers from their own fears and anxieties (Sena and de Oliveira 2021, p. 12), including the fear of death. Tito is nevertheless unable to overcome heartbreak and, one fateful night, sabotages his own dangerous stunt and falls off the highwire to his death.

Tito's chilling demise brings forth the painfully striking and obvious relationship between laughter and horror that occurs in the circus. We can sketch, as Henry Thétard does in his 1947 *La Merveilleuse histoire du cirque*, an evocative 'martyrologue' of many deaths that occurred in the ring (Thétard 1978, pp. 611–14). Thétard offers what he calls a 'very incomplete' catalogue of fatal accidents from 1842 to the mid-twentieth century (extended into the late 1970s in the 1978 edition) (ibid, p. 614), which remind audiences of the lengths to which some artists are willing to go, exposing their bodies to terrible strain and a potentially gruesome fate in the cause of their *métier*, much like Grimaldi did, which caused him excruciating joint pain until the end of his days, placing him 'on the brink of permanent disability' and forcing him into early retirement (Stott 2012, p. 12).

There is here a further overlap between Grimaldi and Tito. After the death of his wife, '[g]rief sent [Grimaldi] temporarily insane' and, '[c]onvinced he would make an attempt on his own life, [his brother-in-law] kept a constant vigil' (Stott 2009, p. 101). With more or less intensity, the Grimaldi clown mourns a lost love: the Tramp eventually quits his advances and acts as the unlikely matchmaker for the woman he is infatuated with; Tito, in turn, takes to the ring and zips down a highwire on his head—death is his response to unrequited love. The film's final intertitle—'The comedy ... is ... ended!'—is a verbatim appropriation of the famous closing line of Ruggero Leoncavallo's verismo opera, *Pagliacci* (1892): 'La commedia è finita!'.

3.2. The Deburau Strand

The melancholy clown's evil turn had been a long time coming and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* firmly crystallised this murderous transition. In it, Canio, who heads a *commedia* troupe in which he plays Pagliaccio, is consumed with jealousy and stabs his wife and her lover on stage during a performance. Stott calls Canio a 'meta-clown' that subverts the comic with 'the barren nihilism of death' (Stott 2012, p. 4). One of the earliest cinematic depictions of a sadistic, Pagliacci-style mad clown appears in Sjöström's *He Who Gets Slapped*, a 1924 film in which the dishonest, wealthy Baron Regnard (Marc McDermott) becomes the

patron of Paul Beaumont (Lon Chaney), a scientist on the verge of making an important break-through about the origins of humankind. Excited about Beaumont's discoveries, the Baron, with the aid of his lover, Marie (Ruth King), who happens to be Beaumont's wife, publicly takes credit for his work and, when confronted, promptly slaps him in the face in front of his senior academic peers at the Academy of Sciences, irremediably damaging his reputation.

After the unwarranted act, Sjöström intercuts medium shots of Beaumont's incredulous face and demeanour with shots of the audience emphatically laughing at his humiliation. Staring up at the man he thought his friend, he first raises his hand in a reflective movement, his fingers stretching upwards towards his cheek, but only reaching as high as his chest. A reverse shot of the significantly taller Baron, looking down at and on him, seems to curtail movement and the comforting act of touch, so that Beaumont's hand curls up into a fist and remains temporarily frozen, mid-air, stressing his perplexity. Slowly, almost mechanically, he turns his head to the gallery, where bodies contort with laughter. 'Laughter–', an intertitle reads, 'the bitterest and most subtle death to hope'. This is followed by increasingly closer shots of the audience, intercut with Beaumont's puzzled countenance. He then finally, gently, lowers his hand, underscoring his defeat as two seemingly disembodied, gloved hands seize his arms to escort him off stage. Later that day, he seeks solace in his wife, crying while telling her, 'they laughed—laughed as if I were a clown'. Rather than consoling him, she gazes longingly at the Baron who at that point enters the room. Beaumont is stupefied, his body and facial expressions performing somewhat mechanical movements that exaggerate his astonishment. Marie calls her husband a fool (twice) and a clown and strikes him with the back of her hand. After his wife's brazen betrayal, slapping and ignominy become a recurring thematic element. Five years later, we reencounter Beaumont, who has joined a circus and now performs as a masochistic clown called 'HE who gets slapped', endlessly and masochistically reliving his traumatic past—the cruel image of the upper-class academicians' disparaging laughter now replaced with the escapist laughter of the circus crowd.

There is a substantial distance between the different types of laughter depicted in the film. There is the mocking, highbrow laughter of the Baron and the scientists, which is profoundly cruel and damaging. Laughter does not belong on the academic stage and its unexpectedness generates unsettling incongruity, which may bring with it the fleeting frisson of sLaughter—that clashing of existential or intellectual awareness and emotional or visceral startlement (Urish 2018, pp. 109–10). This type of spontaneous, thunderous, and inappropriate laughter renders the characters impotent and embodies the idea of humour 'as an expression of aggression' (Miller and Van Riper 2016, p. xiv). Individuals fear this humiliating laughter, for '[w]hat is embarrassing is typically comic to onlookers' (Billig 2005, p. 202). That is certainly the case for Beaumont, an aspect stressed later on by the film's philosophical intertitles (Florin 2013, p. 49): 'What is it in human nature that makes people quick to laugh when someone else gets slapped […]?'. The academicians' raucous indulgence in shameless laughter turns Beaumont into a clown figure, well before he joins the circus. This laughter is corrosive and destructive—a form of bullying unconcerned with social decorum that will prove fatal. We can establish a direct parallel here with Deburau and the remarks he reportedly made right after the fateful incident that resulted in Viélin's death. The court found Deburau's words utterly surprising in that they pointed to one of those fissures in the mask I discussed previously—a sense of humiliation that did not accord with his stage character. Deburau presumably stated that 'he would not have struck Viélin if no one else had been present; he was provoked by the arrival of onlookers which caused him to feel humiliated and insulted' (Nye 2022, p. 86). This strikingly illustrates both the immense derisory power of laughter and the idea that Deburau was, in a way, performing for a crowd. Beaumont, in the film, experiences similarly hurtful explosions of laughter targeted at his honour and, like Deburau, reacts by violently attacking his aggressors.

Another type of laughter is the heartfelt laughter of the circus crowd that watches HE's act—a clown act—and whose laughter is therefore appropriate and expected. The reason the film audience may experience it as cruel is because we are privy to HE's personal circumstances and what laughter signifies to him (a brutal, career-ending betrayal). When we first see HE perform, his past and present are visually connected via editing. He is in the ring, acting before two audiences: dozens of clowns who are in the arena with him and the circus spectators (which include the Baron). As he falls from the stilts and faces the clowns,

a dissolve replaces their smiling faces with those of the academicians looking stern, with arms crossed across their chests. Instead of just replaying Beaumont's trauma, however, the image that follows cuts to a shot of the scientists laughing and wearing pointy clown hats. Beaumont's memory seems to be trying to find a way of coping with the past, but he is alas ultimately unable to come to terms with his public humiliation. Another dissolve brings us back to the laughing clowns in the ring.

Finally, there is also HE's laughter, which is, at first, sorrowful, resigned, and 'a sign of discomfort' (Miller and Van Riper 2016, p. xiv). This is clear when HE spots the Baron in the audience, laughing yet again, as HE's fellow performers take turns relentlessly slapping him. Towards the end of the film, his laughter becomes manic and vengeful. Throughout, it is a forced laughter that dispenses with the comic. Until almost the end of the film, this is the laughter of resistance—of quietly, but not passively, enduring daily abasement.

In the circus, Beaumont falls for a fellow performer, Consuelo (Norma Shearer), and eventually professes his love, but she assumes he is jesting and slaps him in a puzzling moment of life mimicking art. To her, this gesture tells us, Beaumont is only and always HE; he does not exist independent from the mask. He cares for her deeply though, and upon learning that her own father intends to force her to marry the despicable Baron who had plagiarised his work, Beaumont confronts him. Consuelo's father intervenes, hits him in the head with his walking stick (another link to Deburau), and then fatally stabs him. The cane was, it turns out, a swordstick—a popular fashion and self-defence accessory for well-to-do men in the nineteenth century. Beaumont is nonetheless able to exact his revenge by ingeniously entrapping the Baron and Consuelo's father in a room with one of the circus's lions. It is here that HE's laughter decisively shifts and becomes hysterical—a type of laughter 'not based on amusement, but on psychological shock' (Urish 2018, p. 106). When both men have been mauled and killed by the lion, HE/Beaumont goes out into the ring to perform his routine one final time only to collapse and die in Consuelo's arms. As with Deburau, emotion takes over and brings about murder. While Deburau was not in character when he struck that fatal blow, he was taunted *as* Pierrot. In fact, during the trial, 'the identities of Pierrot and of Deburau did not part company in the minds of the public in court' and even 'hearing Deburau's voice did not lead them to disassociate the real Deburau from his stage role' (Nye 2022, p. 84). In Sjöström's film, we can see this blurring of identities replayed in Consuelo's slap—the clown and the man are one and the same. After Deburau's acquittal, a journalist called his return to the Funambules 'la rentrée de Debureau [*sic*]' (qtd. in Nye 2022, p. 86), effectively mixing theatre and life, 'person and persona, fact and fiction': Pierrot 'was a filter through which the real Deburau was viewed' (Nye 2022, p. 86). It is telling that Deburau's theatrical image and reputation did not suffer at all with the charge of manslaughter and that, even though Deburau's Pierrot 'frequently kills', *fin-de-siècle* murder and macabre were not attached to the artist during his lifetime, such was his cultural currency (ibid, p. 87).

We can uncover in *He Who Gets Slapped* the early traces of the evil clown—the maniacal psychopath who would plague cinema screens in later years. Beaumont remains nevertheless a somewhat sympathetic figure and a victim: a Romantic protagonist driven mad by years of physical and psychological abuse. A veiled social critique subtends the film, which sees the upper classes taking whatever they want (knowledge, women, lives) with no accountability—unless, that is, the underprivileged revolt. As in *The Circus*, the ring once more stands out as a site of cruelty and outsiderdom. On this, Bo Florin explores in depth the film and its creative aesthetics, highlighting an often overlooked character, a seemingly non-diegetic 'symbolic clown', whose strange presence punctuates the film. He proposes that Sjöström offers a 'film essay on the conditions of life on the globe', implying, in this sense, 'the more general analogy of a global circus; the circus: as metaphor for life itself' (Florin 2013, pp. 53–55).

Laughter, as depicted in the film, can perform a Bergsonian, corrective function, exposing the privilege and affectations of the upper classes and functioning as a way of countering unjust arrangements of power. The fear of embarrassment is also a powerful enforcer of 'the codes of daily behaviour' that protect hegemonic discourses, making people conform to avoid public shaming (Billig 2005, p. 202). In its excessive carnivalesque theatricality, the logic of this laughter is not merely performative or oppositional, but it exposes tensions and 'shared areas of anxiety and stress that only the laughter of topsy-turvydom [can] relieve' (Assael 2005, p. 107). Beaumont, crucially, did not experience these redeeming, healing

properties of laughter. Laughter, in fact, was not purely, or even mainly, escapist: it was a means of enforcing hierarchies of high and low, of imposing order (in the sense that disordered laughter is contained in time and space and restricted to the performance). Assael posits laughter, and circus laughter in particular, as ambiguous and awkward and refers specifically to new etiquette guidelines in the eighteenth century, according to which 'elite laughter' deemed it impolite to laugh and thus make light of the misfortunes of others (ibid, p. 85). We can see how the circus audience laughing at HE blurs the lines of decency, oscillating between wholesome fun and *schadenfreude*. '[N]either crude and barbarous nor essentially trivial and innocent', the circus crowd's laughter 'shed[s] light on class relations and respectability', exploring 'how liberation and transgression were constructed' (ibid, pp. 86–87). The dissolves discussed above articulate these transgressions visually. The combination of the carnivalesque and social realism unhinges a sense of moral, ethical, and aesthetic stability, displacing conventional myths of victimisation and questioning the lines between civilisation and barbarity, justice and wrongdoing, crime and punishment. Affects, then—shame, hatred, revenge—often become attached to laughter; yet when this happens, humour is inhibited, 'for laughter has no greater foe than emotion': 'the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart' (Bergson 1911, pp. 4–5). Laughter must thus shun both thought and emotion, its strength and affect intact only momentarily and mechanically.

Another precursor to the modern-day creepy killer clown hails from Lang's 1928 *Spione*, which brings together the tropes of laughter, murder, suicide, the circus as a hideout, and clowning as front job and a way of eluding the law. Clown Nemo, it transpires, is Haghi (Rudolf Klein-Rogge)—a criminal mastermind intent on world domination who, when cornered by the German secret service in the middle of his act, leans slightly forward with short, violent laughs—another instance of hysterical laughter—raises a gun to his right temple, and unceremoniously pulls the trigger, committing suicide in front of a laughing audience. Just before his dead body hits the stage floor, the theatricality of the scene is highlighted with Nemo/Haghi's last words: 'Curtain!' And the curtain promptly falls before an audience that, unaware that reality has overtaken the performance, erupts in applause. The delirious violence of this moment, in which humour and horror short-circuit (Urish 2018, p. 110), once again draws the viewer's attention to failure and ambiguity. In a film riddled with characters whose identities are constantly changing (Haghi, for instance, is an international spymaster, but also a bank director, secret double agent 719, and a clown in a variety show), it is telling that he performs under the stage name 'Nemo' which is Latin for 'nobody' (Jelavich 2008, p. 593). Nemo's theatrical on-stage death is reminiscent of the violence in *Pagliacci*, and Lang taps into the disturbing potential of the clown as artifice or surface. Crucially, Haghi is not a proper clown—the character uses clowning as a convenient mask to shield his Machiavellian machinations. His cover as a clown permits him to deflect 'society's gaze with seemingly benign entertainment as a mode of social control'—as Nemo, he 'participates in the production of mass distraction' (Dobryden 2015, pp. 89–90).

This superficial usage became central to cinematic clowns from the 1970s. The figure of the mad, murderous clown is, from that moment onwards, taken to new extremes (progressively losing its connections to Romanticism), and a universal type—the 'evil clown'—is gradually established. From this decade, the clown persona loses most of its aura and is not frequently exploited beyond the idea of masking. Following the release of Martyn Burke's *The Clown Murders* (1976), cruel, vicious clowns give rise to a new horror sub-genre fuelled, in 1978, by the arrest of serial killer John Wayne Gacy, who had worked as 'Pogo the Clown' at children's parties. The evil clown thus crosses the boundary between fantasy and reality, exceeding the safety of the stage, the page, or the screen, and poses an actual threat to bodily integrity.

In the films I have explored as part of the Grimaldi and Deburau strands, the laughter that remains is not sanative, benign, or humorous, but pathetic, bittersweet, and sometimes fatal. Grimaldi's demanding life, on and off-stage, was both 'full of excitement and the thrill of laughter' (Stott 2009, p. 49) and bouts of intense despair and melancholia. The Tramp and Tito/Flik exemplify the two principal manifestations of Grimaldi's legacy. The former incarnates the Clown's masterful pratfalls and carefully choreographed chaos that delights the audience; the latter emphasises Grimaldi's undue pain and lifelong mourning that led to an untimely death. Between the two, we have Gwynplaine, whose unforgettable laughter is absent yet

always present, and who, despite his pain, keeps on performing. The ending of the film consists of a hurried escape but is nonetheless hopeful in terms of the clown's personal, if not professional, life.

Turning our attention to Deburau, while his temper resulted in the cold-blooded murder of a young man, this was, by all accounts, an isolated incident and a tragic, unfortunate accident. The intersection of humour and horror had nonetheless provoked an unprecedented impact. Life and art coincided: Deburau and his misguided actions aligned with the violent stage antics of Pierrot, thus offering an archetype for the killer clown. Much like it happened with stage and literary pierrots at the *fin-de-siècle*, cinematic clowns too increasingly lost their compassionate, sympathetic appeal, preserving mainly, or only, the mask and the dark playfulness characteristic of clown figures. This change, as noted, occurs when we can spot the cracks, the fissures, in the mask; when it becomes obvious that clowns 'possess an identity beyond their role', so that they are no longer 'universalized types but individuals in costume and makeup' (Stott 2012, p. 4). It is therefore our access to the clown's private life, generally marked by marginalisation, discrimination, 'sexual rejection and romantic disappointment', that mars our perception of his stage persona by creating a vivid counterpoint (ibid, p. 4). The real-world connection between extreme psychopathic behaviour and clowns irrevocably corrupted the latter with a markedly horrifying sadism which has carried over into the 2020s.

4. Conclusions

Clowns, much like the laughter they engender, offer a corrective to officialdom by 'corrupt[ing] the consistency of the cultural norms they transgress' (Bouissac [2012] 2014, p. 158). This means that clowning is more than playing an artistic, sociocultural role: it carries a political valence. In defamiliarising the human, clowns articulate complex ideas about difference and personhood, the individual and the community, industrial growth and dejection. Laughter is deployed as an ideological tool that helps dissect timely and timeless sociocultural, political, and psychological issues. 'The highest expression of free consciousness' (Assael 2005, p. 86), laughter fulfils a social function, as argued by Bergson, Benjamin, and Bakhtin, one which contains within it a political potential. The works analysed debunk monolithic descriptions and depictions of clowns and laughter, and demonstrate the complex critique we might extract from our experience of clowning. These are works of social indictment that '[use] laughter to rally affirmative energy against the depredations of the prevailing culture' (Steven 2017, p. 401). In clowning, I argue, laughter is not about revolution. While a revolutionary potential inheres in laughter, here it does not overturn entrenched power structures or lead to actual social change. In clowning, I suggest, laughter is instead about radical resistance—radical because it complicates categories of official and unofficial, authority and subalternity. There is power in revealing the failings of established norms and institutions. 'Radical' thus characterises the type of resistance rather than its outcomes.

In the case studies explored, poetry and laughter are inextricable from the representation of failure and misfitness, and the use of laughter does not make the narratives thoroughly funny or entertaining, because the humour clashes with formal and moral realism. As such, the films offset, confuse, or undermine the gleeful light-heartedness typically attributed to displays of laughter. The more grotesque the clown's tragedy, the more powerful the laughter; the more frightful the fall, the more tension is released when the clown, cunningly or miraculously, survives; the longer it haphazardly cheats death, the louder the applause. While incessantly engendering it, the clown nevertheless also stands as a potentially cathartic counterpoint to horror. The proximity between clowning and death, failure and success, leads Philippe Goudard to ask: 'Does [the clown] summon death in his own way so that we can ward it off with laughter?' (Goudard 2015, p. 186). To Goudard, this function of the clown accounts for it having become a universal symbol, from the stage to publicity adverts, hospitals, and combat zones (ibid, p. 186). In this sense, beauty and horror coalesce, fragility and risk intermingle, and realism and lyricism can productively coincide. Henry Miller defines the clown as 'a poet in action' (Miller [1948] 1966, p. 46) and 'the poetic project can be radical' (Goudard 2015, p. 186). In its merging of the social, the political, the poetic, and the philosophical, the clown is death and rebirth, magic and disenchantment, joy and misery, failure and triumph. Clown bodies are virtuosic tools of laughter, often destroyed in the service of their art, which itself courts death at every tumble. The performance thus composes a 'poem of death' as 'an anthem to life' (ibid, p. 188). W. Kenneth Little writes that, for 'new' clowns, 'laughter is not always the standard by which they judge the success of

their and others' work. It is the individual poetic object that counts, and that does not necessarily need to be funny' (Little 1986, p. 55). This poetic object is the radical ability to both reveal the cracks in the social order and offer the audience a world transformed, thus making them see the world anew.

Cinematic clowns are heirs to the legacies of Grimaldi and Deburau, themselves in turn indebted to centuries of performers, both admired and feared, and systematically marginalised, demeaned, and exploited who promoted laughter across social classes. From the Tramp's haphazard adventures that fail to improve the performers' working conditions in *The Circus* to a cuckolded husband's self-punishment and tragic revolt in *He Who Gets Slapped*, to a public suicide masking as an ill-fated stunt in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*, to the mask's failure in fully shielding his wearer in *Spione*, to the mask actually being one's own skin in *The Man Who Laughs*, film has utilised humour and horror as powerful media to lay bare our societies' vices and shortcomings. Such usage continues with the myriad onscreen representations of the Joker and Pennywise and extends to productions that include *Clown* (2014), about a father who is consumed by a clown costume, and *Corona Clown* (2021), about a twisted clown intent on making everyone respect social distancing. Clowns rely on audiences to empathise with them and 'in laughing at them, to laugh at themselves' (Simon 2014, pp. 180–81). The power of clown humour, then, lies in its potential to awake the radical imagination and realise a Brechtian breaking of ties with acritical perceptions of reality. In this sense, laughter becomes a political strategy. Clowns champion grotesque laughter, but our laughing with or at a clown, very much a part of our common cultural idiom, is always grotesque, too.

Notes

1. I consider disability to be one the four main elements responsible for the clown's elicitation of humour and fear. The long, convoluted, historical association of disability and clowning is, however, beyond the scope of this article.
2. Clown activism will not be explored here, as this research focuses on fictional representations of clowns. For more on the parodying of authority and rebel clowns, see Ramsden (2015).
3. Jon Davison (2013, pp. 1–3) offers a compelling review of the literature on definitions of clown. Another aspect to consider is the distinction between different types of clowns, such as whiteface, Auguste, and counter-Auguste, which I do not examine here.
4. All works cited from the original Portuguese and French were translated by the author.
5. Assael is referring here to blackface clowns specifically.
6. It is worthy of note that Hugo wrote his novel when the Hanlon-Lees were at the height of their fame (Jürgens 2014, p. 446).

References

(Assael 2005) Assael, Brenda. 2005. *The Circus and Victorian Society*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

(Bakhtin 1984a) Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984a. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

(Bakhtin 1984b) Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984b. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

(Benjamin 2008a) Benjamin, Walter. 2008a. Chaplin in Retrospect [1929]. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 335–37.

(Benjamin 2008b) Benjamin, Walter. 2008b. Chaplin [1928–29]. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 333–34.

(Benjamin 2008c) Benjamin, Walter. 2008c. Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz [1927]. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings. Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 328–32.

(Beré 2020) Beré, Marcelo. 2020. Misfitness: The Hermeneutics of Failure and the Poetics of the Clown—Heidegger and Clowns. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença* 10: 1–29.

(Berger 2014) Berger, Peter L. 2014. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

(Bergson 1911) Bergson, Henri. 1911. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. London: Macmillan.
(Billig 2005) Billig, Michael. 2005. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: Sage.
(Blanchard 1891) Blanchard, E. L. 1891. Pantomimia [1871]. In *The Life and Reminiscences of E.L. Blanchard*. Edited by Clement Scott and Cecil Howard. London: Hutchinson & Co., vol. 2, pp. 405–7.
(Bouissac 1977) Bouissac, Paul. 1977. From Joseph Grimaldi to Charlie Cairoli: A Semiotic Approach to Humour. In *It's a Funny Thing, Humour*. Edited by Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot. Oxford: Pergamon Press, pp. 115–18.
(Bouissac 1990) Bouissac, Paul. 1990. The Profanation of the Sacred in Circus Clown Performances. In *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theater and Ritual*. Edited by Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 194–207.
(Bouissac [2012] 2014) Bouissac, Paul. 2014. *Circus as Multimodal Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury. First published 2012.
(Brottman [2004] 2012) Brottman, Mikita. 2012. *Funny Peculiar: Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor*. London: Routledge.
(Carroll 1987) Carroll, Noël. 1987. The Nature of Horror. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46: 51–59.
(Carroll 1999) Carroll, Noël. 1999. Horror and Humor. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57: 145–60.
(Carroll 2003) Carroll, Noël. 2003. The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy. In *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Edited by Frances S. Connelly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 291–311.
(Chaplin 1922) Chaplin, Charlie. 1922. *My Wonderful Visit*. London: Hurst & Blackett.
(Conrich and Sedgwick 2017) Conrich, Ian, and Laura Sedgwick. 2017. *Gothic Dissections in Film and Literature: The Body in Parts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
(Davison 2013) Davison, Jon. 2013. *Clown: Readings in Theatre Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
(Desmond 1988) Desmond, William. 1988. Philosophy and Failure. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2: 288–305.
(Dobryden 2015) Dobryden, Paul. 2015. Spies. In *A Companion to Fritz Lang*. Edited by Joe McElhaney. Oxford: Wiley & Sons, pp. 76–93.
(Dodds and Kirby 2013) Dodds, Klaus, and Philip Kirby. 2013. It's Not a Laughing Matter: Critical Geopolitics, Humour and Unlaughter. *Geopolitics* 18: 45–59.
(Dowell and Miller 2018) Dowell, John A., and Cynthia J. Miller. 2018. The Hilarity of Terror: Toward an Understanding of sLaughter. In *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Grimness in Cinema: Sidesplitting sLaughter*. Edited by John A. Dowell and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Lexington, pp. xix–xxxi.
(Findlater [1955] 1978) Findlater, Richard. 1978. *Joe Grimaldi, His Life and Theatre*. New York: Cambridge University Press. First published 1955.
(Fink 2018) Fink, Moritz. 2018. Phallic Noses, Blood-Filled Balloons, Exploding Popcorn, and Laughing-Gas-Squirting Flowers: Reading Images of the Evil Clown. In *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Grimness in Cinema: Sidesplitting sLaughter*. Edited by John A. Dowell and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Lexington, pp. 29–42.
(Florin 2013) Florin, Bo. 2013. *Transition and Transformation: Victor Sjöström in Hollywood 1923–1930*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
(Gordon 2021) Gordon, Sarah M. 2021. A Woman's Place is in the (Greasepaint) White House: How the 2016 Presidential Election Sparked a Creepy Clown Craze. *Journal of American Folklore* 134: 25–52.
(Goudard 2015) Goudard, Philippe. 2015. Les visages de l'horreur au cirque: Réalités, représentations, fictions et absences. In *Représenter L'horreur*. Edited by Frédéric Astruc. Route de la Bonde: Rouge Profond, pp. 159–88.
(Hugo 1869) Hugo, Victor. 1869. *The Man Who Laughs*. Boston: Estes and Lauriat, vol. 1.
(Jelavich 2008) Jelavich, Peter. 2008. Spione (spies). *Modernism/Modernity* 15: 591–94.
(Jung 2004) Jung, Carl. 2004. *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge.
(Jürgens 2014) Jürgens, Anna-Sophie 2014. Batman's Joker, a neo-modern clown of violence. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 5: 441–54.
(Jürgens 2019) Jürgens, Anna-Sophie 2019. Violent Clown Artists between Science & Art. Available online: https://between-science-and-art.com/violent-clown-artists-between-science-art/ (accessed on 12 September 2025).

(King 2016) King, Stephen (@StephenKing). 2016. Hey, Guys, Time to Cool the Clown Hysteria—Most of em Are Good, Cheer Up the Kiddies, Make People Laugh. Twitter, October 3. 8:00 p.m. Available online: https://x.com/stephenking/status/783018957263568896 (accessed on 13 May 2024).

(Lecoq 2020) Lecoq, Jacques. 2020. *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique): Teaching Creative Theatre*. Translated by David Bradby. London: Methuen.

(Lennon 2004) Lennon, John. 2004. Ridin' the Rails: The Place of the Passenger and the Space of the Hobo. *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900 to Present)* 3: 1–11.

(Little 1986) Little, W. Kenneth. 1986. Pitu's Doubt: Entrée Clown Self-fashioning in the Circus Tradition. *Drama Review* 30: 51–64.

(Lodge 2020) Lodge, Sara. 2020. The Body: From Grimaldi to Chaplin. In *A Cultural History of Comedy in the Age of Empire*. Edited by Matthew Kaiser. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 117–42.

(Macdonald 2016) Macdonald, Fiona. 2016. A Surprising History of the Creepy Clown. Available online: https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20161019-a-surprising-history-of-the-bad-clown (accessed on 29 June 2025).

(May 2015) May, Shaun. 2015. *A Philosophy of Comedy on Stage and Screen: You Have to be There*. London: Bloomsbury.

(McAndrew and Koehnke 2016) McAndrew, Francis T., and Sara S. Koehnke. 2016. On the Nature of Creepiness. *New Ideas in Psychology* 43: 10–15.

(Meyrer 2018) Meyrer, Karin Paola. 2018. Would you like a balloon? An analysis of the clown in Stephen King's 'It'. *Letras Escreve* 8: 239–52.

(Miller and Van Riper 2016) Miller, Cynthia J., and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. 2016. *The Laughing Dead: The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

(Miller [1948] 1966) Miller, Henry. 1966. *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. London: MacGibbon & Kee. First published in 1948.

(Milne 2007) Milne, Louise S. 2007. *Carnivals and Dreams: Pieter Bruegel and the History of the Imagination*. London: Mutus Liber.

(Misch 2018) Misch, David. 2018. Ha!/Aaah!: The Painful Relationship Between Humor and Horror. In *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Grimness in Cinema: Sidesplitting sLaughter*. Edited by John A. Dowell and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Lexington, pp. 73–86.

(Mori 2012) Mori, Masahiro. 2012. The Uncanny Valley. Translated by Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki. *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine* 19: 98–100.

(Nye 2022) Nye, Edward. 2022. *Deburau Pierrot, Mime, and Culture*. London: Routledge.

(Otto 2001) Otto, Beatrice K. 2001. *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

(Radford 2016) Radford, Benjamin. 2016. *Bad Clowns*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

(Ramsden 2015) Ramsden, Hilary. 2015. Clowns, Buffoons and the Killing Laugh: An investigation of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army's (CIRCA) power to disrupt and provoke through joy and humour. *European Journal of Humour Research* 3: 145–63.

(Richards 2020) Richards, Ruth. 2020. Transgressive Clowns: Between Horror and Humour. *Comedy Studies* 11: 62–73.

(Sena and de Oliveira 2021) Sena, Jonathan Brites, and Natássia Duarte Garcia Leite de Oliveira. 2021. (Trans)formações do Palhaço: Breve história dos tipos clássicos da Palhaçaria. *Urdimento—Revista de Estudos em Artes Cênicas* 2: 1–22.

(Serge 1947) Serge. 1947. *Histoire du Cirque*. Paris: Librairie Gründ.

(Shaftesbury 1709) Shaftesbury, Anthony. 1709. *Sensus Communis*: *An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*. London: Egbert Sanger.

(Simon 2014) Simon, Linda. 2014. *The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus*. London: Reaktion Books.

(Steven 2017) Steven, Mark. 2017. Communist Laughter, from Lenin to Lubitsch. *Screen* 58: 387–411.

(Storey 1978) Storey, Robert F. 1978. *Pierrot: A Critical History of a Mask*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

(Stott 2009) Stott, Andrew McConnell. 2009. *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi: Laughter, Madness and the Story of Britain's Greatest Comedian*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

(Stott 2012) Stott, Andrew McConnell. 2012. Clowns on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown: Dickens, Coulrophobia, and the Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi. *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 12: 3–25.

(Thétard 1978) Thétard, Henry. 1978. *La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque*, *Followed by L.-R. Dauven's 'Le Cirque depuis la guerre'*. Paris: Julliard.

(Urish 2018) Urish, Ben. 2018. sLaughter as Existential Epiphany. In *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Grimness in Cinema: Sidesplitting sLaughter*. Edited by John A. Dowell and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Lexington, pp. 103–11.

(Vance 1996) Vance, Jeffrey. 1996. *The Circus*: A Chaplin Masterpiece. *Film History* 8: 186–208.

(Ward 2014) Ward, Steve. 2014. *Beneath the Big Top: A Social History of the Circus in Britain*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword History.

(Ylönen and Keisalo 2020) Ylönen, Susanne C., and Marianna Keisalo. 2020. Sublime and Grotesque: Exploring the Liminal Positioning of Clowns Between Oppositional Aesthetic Categories. *Comedy Studies* 11: 12–24.

(Zucker 1954) Zucker, Wolfgang M. 1954. The Image of the Clown. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 12: 310–17.