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THERE IS NO CLOWNING ABOUT IT!

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ABSTRACT

The compelling nature and effectiveness of clowns and their heavily made-up faces could thus be traced back –among others– to the very early experiences of childhood, experiences that have left memories of satisfaction and laughter tinged with the knowledge that something else is going on beneath the smiles, the caring and the love. Beyond the mask of motherhood lurks a desire that cannot be overlooked, the unknown desire of an Other that causes anxiety in the subject who is confronted with it. Clowns –albeit perfectly friendly ones– thus always carry about them a feeling of the uncanny that Freud described in his work.

KEYWORDS

Masquerade | Femininity | Maternity | Clowns

INTRODUCCIÓN

Has it not been for Donald Trump's election to the presidency, 2016 could almost have gone down in American history as the *year of the clown*. Clown sightings started in August in South Carolina when a young boy claimed he had met two clowns that had attempted to lure him into the woods near his home. But soon, the sightings seemed to be happening everywhere and were reported in Europe (Germany, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Ireland, the UK, Spain, Mexico, South America (Chile, Brazil), Australia and Singapore, prompting people to go on the lookout for clowns loitering in incongruous settings. Many of these clown sightings were actually videotaped and are available to see on the internet. Some sites even go so far as rank the sightings, offering the viewer a supposedly chilling countdown leading up to the “scariest clown sighting” (YouTube, 2016). But despite notable efforts on the part of the narrator who puts on an appropriately journalistic tone, presumably in an attempt to build up to a climax, all the viewer gets is a series of images of overweight, badly dressed clowns painfully chasing a bunch of people who –conversely– are safely driving away in their cars: “OMG, WTF!!!” they holler, but their fear remains unconvincing to say the least.

2016 –and this is no coincidence– is also the year Stephen King's famous novel *It* (2016) was adapted on screen for the second time¹ (a previous TV version was shot in 1990). The novel starts off with young George Denbrough aged 6 chasing the boat his elder brother William made out of a newspaper sheet down “a gutter swollen with rain” (King, 2016, p. 9). Eventually, the boat goes down a storm drain and little George peers in only to discover that a clown is down the drain. The clown calls out to Georgie in a pleasant clownish voice and introduces itself as “Pennywise the dancing clown” (2016, p. 26). Pennywise offers Georgie his boat back and throws in a balloon. But

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¹The film, directed by Andrés Muschietti, is scheduled to be released in the United States on September 8th, 2017.

when Georgie reaches in the drain, the clown holds the child's arm in "a thick and wormy grip" (2016, p. 24). King goes on to describe Georgie's demise:

It pulled George toward that terrible darkness where the water rushed and roared and bellowed as it bore its cargo of storm debris toward the sea. George craned his neck away from that final blackness and began to scream into the rain, to scream mindlessly into the white autumn sky which curved above Derry on that day in the fall of 1957. His screams were shrill and piercing, and all up and down Witcham Street people came to their windows or bolted out onto their porches. –They float– It growled, –they float, Georgie. And when you're down here with me, you'll float too. George's shoulder socked against the cement of the curb and Dave Gardener, who had stayed home from his job at The Shoeboat that day because of the flood, saw only a small boy who was screaming and writhing in the gutter with muddy water surfing over his face and making his screams sound bubbly. (King, 2016, p. 28).

There is no mistaking the shabby-looking clowns of last year's sightings for King's *Pennywise* who could be a cross between a psychopath à la John Wayne Gacy (a serial killer and former clown responsible for murdering at least 33 teenagers and young males in Illinois back in the 1970s) and something even darker still. Right from the start of the novel, the horror is set against the backdrop of childhood wonder which King captures perfectly, effectively increasing the tension. In the few pages devoted to him –in a novel which totals over a thousand–, George Denbrough hints at what is truly disturbing with clowns: at first, upon seeing Pennywise's gleaming eyes down the storm drain, George believes he is in the presence of an animal. Only when Pennywise calls out his name does George see the clown's face looming out of the dark:

There was a clown in the storm drain. The light in there was far from good, but it was good enough so that George Denbrough was sure of what he was seeing. It was a clown, like in the circus or on TV. In fact, he looked like a cross between Bozo and Clarabell, who talked by honking his (or what it her? -George was never really sure of the gender) horn on Howdy Doody Saturday mornings. (King, 2016, p.26)

Who/what is Pennywise, the creature only children can see? Who/what is there hiding behind the white face and the big clown-smile painted over the creature's mouth? Is it a he? A she? An it? Or, worse still, could it be that nothing lies beneath the mask?

It seems indeed that clowns are far more ambiguous creatures than we like to think; the figure of the clown hidden beneath layers of makeup both conjures up the familiar and the uncanny. On the one hand, we have the kindly clown that hands out candy, gives away balloons, makes funny faces, tells jokes and causes children to laugh out loud. A clown that draws on first experiences, those that take place before a child can speak or even make out his mother's features, when he only perceives a shape peering over his crib.

In *Seminar 5*, on April 16th 1958, Lacan evoked the form of communication that occurs during this very early childhood. The first true form of communication that takes place between the child and his mother is laughter. Anyone who has observed a child in its first few months will agree, said Lacan, children laugh way before they can speak. And this laughter has to do with what lies beyond the mere presence of the mother standing before the child insofar as the child knows that the presence can bring satisfaction. This familiar presence that the child knows is capable of satisfying his needs is "called upon, perceived, recognized" before the child can speak, in the very special code made up of his first bouts of laughter (1957-1958 [1998])².

²"La présence familière, celle dont il a l'habitude, et dont il a la connaissance qu'elle peut satisfaire à ses désirs dans leur diversité, est appelée, appréhendée, reconnue dans ce code si spécial que constituent chez l'enfant avant la parole ses premiers rires devant certaines des présences qui le soignent, le nourrissent, et lui répondent." (Lacan, 1957-1958 [1998], p. 331)

In this particular case, what lies beneath the featureless mask of the mother is thus satisfaction. An altogether different experience awaits the child further along the line when he discovers that beyond the caring mother he knows, lies a woman who desires elsewhere. A woman that was hidden behind the mask of motherhood.

In one of Robert Altman's 1993 masterpiece *Short Cuts*'s closing scenes, Marian and Ralph Wyman have invited Claire and Stuart for dinner. Claire works as a party clown for children and spends most of the film driving around Los Angeles in her car wearing her disguise. Both couples are quite drunk at the end of the meal and Claire offers to apply clown make-up on their faces. She coaxes her husband Stuart:

Claire: – Come on Stuart: it's only me underneath you know, I can change but I can always go back to me.

Ralph: – Marian? What do you have underneath?

Marian: – You know Ralph, nothing!

Claire (to Ralph): – Who do you wanna be?

Ralph: – I wanna be nothing!

Claire: – Well I know how to do nothing, we'll just erase your face!

The sexual innuendo between Marian and Ralph refers to the fact that Marian is not wearing panties underneath her skirt. This fact was made painfully clear to Ralph before the guests arrived in a conversation with Marian in which he confronted her about a fling he believes she had with a colleague a few years back. But the clown-scene, despite the apparent cheerful drunkenness, sends the viewer to a deeper level that concerns female sexuality: how can femininity be defined? What is there beyond the well-known *womanliness as masquerade* described by British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere in 1929?

Riviere's case concerns a patient belonging to a type of women described by Ernest Jones in 1927 who wish for "'recognition' of their masculinity from men" (Riviere, 1929, p. 225) and claim to be the equals of men, or in other words, to be men themselves. The patient's "resentment, however, (is) not openly expressed; publicly she acknowledge(s) her condition of womanhood" (Riviere, 1929, p. 221). Beneath the apparent womanliness therefore lies a strong masculine identification that cannot be shaken, a man beneath the mask of femininity.

Riviere's patient is thus like a wolf in sheep's clothing. Protecting her masculinity under the veil of femininity. But if femininity can "be assumed and worn as a mask" (1929, p. 221), if "no line is to be drawn between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'" (1929, p. 221), as Riviere concludes, then Marian's witticism pretty much hits the nail on the head: a he beneath the she... or nothing at all?

The compelling nature and effectiveness of clowns and their heavily made-up faces could thus be traced back –among others– to the very early experiences of childhood, experiences that have left memories of satisfaction and laughter tinged with the knowledge that something else is going on beneath the smiles, the caring and the love. Beyond the mask of motherhood lurks a desire that cannot be overlooked³, the unknown desire of an Other that causes anxiety in the subject who is confronted with it. Clowns –albeit perfectly friendly ones– thus always carry about them a feeling of the uncanny, "something which is secretly familiar [heimlich-heimisch], which has undergone repression and then returned from it" to quote Freud (1919 [2010] p. 245).

And sure enough, to put it in the words of Alan Daub (professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature at Stanford University), Stephen King's *It* "dwells on the horror of having

³ And, aptly enough, Lacan, will go on in *Seminar 5* to describe the symptom as the mask of desire.

lived with something terrifying all along, of having become blind and numb to it” (2016). The town of Derry, Maine, where the events take place is clouded in amnesia. “All discovery in this book is rediscovery” (2016). Child abuse, racism, cruel and uncaring mothers are but a few of the evils that pervade the novel.

On October 3rd last year, as the clown-sightings were threatening to go viral, Stephen King attempted to “cool the clown hysteria”: “most of ‘em are good, cheer up the kiddies, make people laugh” he wrote on his twitter account (2016). Most of ‘em indeed...

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