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The Clickable Carnival

Killer Clowns and the Spectacle of Fear within the Era of Late Capitalism

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Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the 2016 killer clown event as a symbolic and affective spectacle embedded in the cultural logic of late capitalism. Moving beyond the limitations of moral panic theory, we argue that the clown functions not as a folk devil but as a hyper-normalised figure of commodified fear, circulated, aestheticised, and ritualised through digital media. Drawing on frameworks from cultural criminology, ultra-realism, hauntology, and graze culture, we show how the killer clown embodies a looping cycle of symbolic transgression that displaces structural anxiety into infantilised, nostalgic, consumable horror. Rather than confronting harm, the craze pacifies it, offering playful menace as algorithmic content and packaging dread within affective templates familiar enough to soothe. The clown's recurrence reveals a culture unable to imagine rupture, where fear becomes spectacle and deviance becomes service. In this light, the killer clown is not a threat to the symbolic order, but a maintenance tool of its survival.

Keywords

killer clowns, hauntology, deviant leisure, pseudo-pacification, nostalgia, graze culture

Introduction

This article revisits the short-lived spectacle of the so-called “killer clown craze”, a 2016 phenomenon in which individuals, at times masked, attired in costumes, and sometimes armed, documented and shared footage of their actions on social media. The

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news media quickly labelled it a ‘craze’ or ‘epidemic’ (Samuelson, 2016), with a flurry of coverage that spread widely. However, the phenomenon vanished as quickly as it emerged, leaving only faint, scattered impressions and unanswered questions.

At first glance, the craze appears to mirror the classic contours of a moral panic: sensationalised press coverage, public outcry, and calls for order (Evans, 2016). However, we argue that this construction, based on Cohen (1972) theory of social control, cannot fully account for the affective and structural nuances of deviance today. It assumes a coherent moral consensus, top-down media manipulation, and a clear folk devil - conditions absent in today’s fractured, digitally saturated media landscape. Drawing on Horsley (2017), and others, we position the killer clown not as a threat to the symbolic order but as an expression of ambient anxiety: a product of *pseudo-pacification* and *objectless anxiety* (Hall and Winlow, 2025). Rather than mobilising public outrage or intervention, the clown operates as a commodified menace - consumed, circulated, and quickly discarded. As Fisher (2009) and Žižek (2008) observe, contemporary culture is defined less by repression than by cynicism, interpassivity, and depressive hedonia: a state in which fear becomes entertaining but politically inert. Hall and Winlow (2017) describe this condition as a “turbulent magma flow” of repressed social harm. An environment in which deviance is aestheticised rather than confronted. The killer clown functions not as a folk devil but as a floating signifier of digitally mediated dread.

This article, therefore, moves beyond moral panic theory to draw on emergent frameworks that foreground affect, spectacle, digital virality, and ambient insecurity. We argue that the killer clown is not an exception, but symptomatic of a late-capitalist media ecology addicted to the simulation of crisis and the commodification of fear.

Methodological note

This article adopts a critically integrative approach, drawing on theoretical perspectives from deviant leisure (Smith and Raymen, 2019), ultra-realism (Hall and Winlow, 2025), cultural criminology (Ferrell et al., 2008), zemiology (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007), hauntology (Fisher, 2014) and infantilisation (Hayward, 2024). Rather than treating the 2016 killer-clown phenomenon as a series of isolated incidents, we examine it as a mediated cultural performance shaped by the symbolic and affective dynamics of late capitalism. This allows us to move beyond Cohen’s (1972) framework, instead focussing on how fear, spectacle, and conformity circulate in contemporary media ecologies (Horsley, 2017). While theoretical tensions exist, most notably between ultra-realism’s structural critique and cultural criminology’s focus on symbolic resistance, this article further demonstrates how their accounts can be reconciled (Hayward and Hall, 2021). Hayward’s infantilisation (2024) and hauntology (Fiddler et al., 2022) are central to current cultural criminological understandings, driving the aesthetic and affective registers of contemporary life into focus. Reciprocally, Winlow’s (2025) ultra-realist account of nostalgia complements it by situating such affective tendencies within a broader analysis of consumer subjectivity, ontological insecurity, and capitalist realism. By entwining these theories, we learn the intricate manner in which mediated spectacles like the killer clown craze reflect not only surface deviance but deep structures of violence, pacification, and conformity.

Our primary data consists of a purposive sample of 195 news stories from August to November 2016, including incidents and analysis from the United Kingdom, the United States and other worldwide contexts. Articles were collated via keyword searches (“killer clown,” “clown sighting,” “clown panic”) across digital news archives. Supplementary data include viral videos, social media discourse, Reddit, YouTube, and TikTok, as well as user-generated content that shaped the phenomenon’s visibility and emotional resonance. These media artefacts are read alongside cultural and cinematic representations of the clown figure, enabling a diachronic and symbolic reading of the archetype (Bala, 2010), before being analysed within the context of late-capitalist society.

Our methodology is theoretically informed, interdisciplinary, and interpretive rather than empirically codified. We attend to symbolic themes, affective climates, and recursive media logics-how fear, humour, and transgression are aestheticised and normalised within digital flows (Yar, 2012). This allows us to interpret the killer clown not as a deviant outlier but as an affective script within wider regimes of commodified fear, ambivalent nostalgia, and mediated conformity.

The 2016 killer clown craze: Spectacle, affect, and viral unease

On 25th September 2016, 16-year-old Christian Torres was fatally stabbed outside his home in Reading, Pennsylvania. Initial media reports claimed the attacker wore a clown-themed Halloween mask, fuelling speculation that the killing was linked to the escalating “killer clown epidemic” across the United States. “Creepy Clown Sightings Have Turned to Murder,” proclaimed headlines (Orange, 2016), as police appealed for information on the “clown killer.” However, it was soon confirmed that Torres himself wore the mask - a twist that did not serve to slow down the media’s narrative pace (Orange, 2016). The metaphor of the clown had already replaced the facts. This attack encapsulates the wider spectacle of the “2016 Killer Clown Craze,” a viral phenomenon that began in South Carolina in August 2016. By October, clown sightings had been reported in more than two-thirds of US states, multiple Canadian provinces and various European countries (Rogers, 2016). Reports circulated rapidly. Individuals in clown costumes were spotted near woods, schools, and public spaces; sometimes standing silently, sometimes chasing people with knives or other props (Teague, 2016). In the UK, police responded to a spate of incidents across Newcastle, County Durham, Plymouth, many involving masked individuals confronting or chasing members of the public, including children (*The Guardian*, 2016). A teenager in Blakelaw was arrested for chasing pedestrians with a knife (*Portsmouth News*, 2016), and another was detained in Norwich (Long, 2016). These episodes unfolded just weeks before Halloween, blurring boundaries between prank, performance, and threat. Few of these incidents involved actual violence, but the eerie aesthetic, digital virality, and media sensationalism amplified their reach.

To describe this phenomenon as a “moral panic” is to apply an increasingly hollow frame. Nevertheless, commentators and journalists reflexively revived the language of moral panic with early analyses leaning on Cohen (1972) folk devil thesis and media-amplified deviance models (Mignanelli and Siggelakis, 2017). Terms like “panic,” “epidemic,” and “craze” appeared frequently (Rogers, 2016). Tabloid pages predicted American-style hysteria sweeping Britain, and academic blogs reflected the same

framings (Ackerley, 2016). That this analytical vocabulary endured attests to its disciplinary inertia. A reflexive impulse rather than a critical paradigm ready to interpret digital deviance processes (Hart, 2020). In reality, such frameworks now struggle to capture the fragmented, affectively diffuse, and digitally mediated nature of the event. As Horsley (2017) argues, moral panic theory depends on assumptions of top-down media control, centralised authority, and passive publics. Conditions largely absent here. Rather, the killer clown craze reflects what Raymen and Smith (2018) term “hyper-conformist” transgression: acts not of rebellion, but of symbolic play crafted for visibility, thrill, and aesthetic impact. These were participatory performances, not incitements to disorder. The so-called “epidemic” was less about a direct threat and more about the circulation of atmosphere, affect, and symbolic disturbance. Within cultural criminology, the clown can be understood as a carnivalesque figure. A performative emblem of ambivalent transgression, merging prank, menace, humour and horror (Presdee, 2000). Not an elite-imposed terror, but a memetic spectacle amplified by new media. The clown functioned as a volatile affective vessel, affective in mood, context-bound, and recognisable across media. Its mainstream popularity lay in its symbolic latency, not the destruction that it sent out.

These dynamics are consistent with what Lyng (1990) might now describe as *digital edgework*. YouTube stunts, TikTok scares, and Reddit folklore offered low-risk, high-visibility thrills where the challenge lay in navigating uncertainty and provoking discomfort. Rather than a moral rupture, the killer clown craze represented a mediated ritual of symbolic disorder in an attention economy saturated with irony, anxiety, and spectacle. This unfolded within what Hall (2012) terms a *pseudo-pacified* society. A cultural condition in which overt violence declines while harmful impulses are repackaged through commodified symbols and aestheticised danger. *Pseudo-pacification* masks the persistence of competitive drives and symbolic aggression, repackaged through images and gestures that entertain more than they disrupt. In this sense, the clown craze did not disrupt order but simulated disorder. It became a form of symbolic currency, offering the thrill of fear in controlled doses. For instance, news coverage followed a ritualistic pattern: a local incident (YorkMix, 2016), media amplification (Samuelson, 2016), police reassurance (ITV News, 2016), public engagement (Horton, 2016), and quiet dissipation (Dodd, 2017). This cycle did not result in legislation or social reform, hallmarks of a traditional panic. Instead, it left behind symbolic residues. Headlines, memes, YouTube compilations. Brief bursts of affect that reinforced rather than challenged the pacifying logic of neoliberal media culture.

Here, the killer clown is not only a topic of viral deviance but also a cultural cypher for the contradictions of late modern life: performative, ambivalent, and symbolically rich. While it channels what Presdee (2000) calls the “carnival of crime”, a grotesque fusion of satire and menace, it remains tethered to the logic of affective regulation and aestheticised fear. It is not revolutionary, but recursive. The killer clown affirms not transgression but conformity through performance. It fills the hollow space where rebellion should be. Not undermining power, but feeding its circuits. More than a prank or costume, the killer clown channels deep-rooted emotional contradictions, fear, fun, menace and absurdity. It is not merely seen, it is sensed. Here we discuss this affective potentiality - how the clown

became a channel for digitally mediated unease, and how its smile became the locus of emotional dissonance of late capitalist existence.

Laughing in fear: The affective logic of the killer clown

Clowns, once a common staple at kids' parties and comedy dramas, have been transformed into strange and, at times, evil beings in the popular imagination. Their familiar recognisable form, bumbling performers with sadistic makeup and oversized feet, has become its dark twin: distorted, unsettling, and menacing. The sinister clown figure is at the centre of contemporary horror and depictions of symbolic transgression. Cultural criminology provides an apt framework for understanding this shift, embracing concepts of symbolic inversion, carnivalesque spectacle, affective performance, and mediated deviance (Ferrell et al., 2008; Hayward and Young, 2004; Presdee, 2000).

Although clinically rare, coulrophobia, or fear of clowns, is a pop-cultural code for discomfort. Freud (1919) *Das Unheimliche* (the uncanny) comes to mind here. The clown's overdone makeup, jerky grin, and unconvincing jollity produce a jarring dissonance. They are both familiar and somehow alien. This is in line with the "uncanny valley" effect, in which *almost* human renditions lead to feelings of discomfort since they are slightly awry. Clowns perform distorted humanity; exaggerating identity, obscuring intent, and destabilising trust. Hayward (2010) suggests that crime in late modernity increasingly operates on an aesthetic plane, and the evil clown is perhaps its most potent visual archetype of aestheticised fear. Recent literature on the topic has revealed that fear of clowns may be more common than initially thought. Analysing a large international dataset, Tyson et al. (2023) have identified several factors contributing to the phenomenon, namely unrecognised emotional expressions, ambiguity regarding the intention to cause harm, unpredictability, and media representations. Clowns occupy an ambiguous psychological space in which familiarity and threat become difficult to disentangle. However, while such explanations help account for why clowns can evoke fear and unease, they are less able to explain why contemporary consumer subjects actively seek out, circulate and derive pleasure from these same affective experiences. From the perspective developed here, the significance of the killer clown lies not simply in its capacity to provoke fear, but in the ways in which fear itself has become a consumable cultural resource, routinely packaged, shared, and enjoyed as a form of mediated entertainment.

Historically, this duality of surface levity masking hidden despair has long been embedded in clown culture. Joseph Grimaldi helped shape the modern clown look, manic energy, painted face, and exaggerated emotion. Offstage, however, his life was marked by illness and depression (Findlater, 1978). Similarly, Jean-Gaspard Debureau, famed for playing Pierrot, fatally struck a boy in 1836 after being heckled. A violent act that blurred the line between performance and reality (Goldhill, 2015). However, the case of John Wayne Gacy crystallised the clown as a figure of horror. Gacy, who performed at children's events as "Pogo the Clown," was convicted in 1980 of sexually assaulting and murdering 33 boys and young men. Despite not committing his crimes in costume, media coverage obsessively focused on his clown persona. This symbolic emphasis appears in fictionalised adaptations such as *American Horror Story: Cult* (2017) and *To Catch a*

Killer (1992), in which the clown serves as a visual proxy for deviance. Gacy's infamous remark, "clowns can get away with murder", reinforced the archetype of concealed danger (Sullivan and Maiken, 2000). As Jenkins (1998) notes, the 1980s were steeped in "stranger danger" and paedophilia panics, with the clown figure emerging as a concentrated site of social anxiety.

This archetype was quickly absorbed into popular culture. Stephen King's *It* (1986) introduced Pennywise, an interdimensional predator disguised as a clown who exploits children's deepest fears. The 1990 mini-series and blockbuster reboots in 2017 and 2019 solidified Pennywise's global status. Other films followed: *Poltergeist* (1982) weaponised a toy clown, and *Clownhouse* (1989) featured escaped psychiatric patients in clown disguise. Contemporary cinema has intensified the clown's affective force. Art the Clown, antagonist of the *Terrifier* series (2016, 2022, 2024), is especially notable. Unlike Pennywise, Art is silent, brutal, and expressionistic, embodying what Ferrell and Sanders (1995) call the *stylisation of transgression*. His violence is theatrical, exaggerated, and choreographed for affect. In *Terrifier 3* (2024), Art is situated within a Christmas setting - an act of symbolic inversion that undermines childlike wonder with sadistic menace. Presdee (2000) describes this as cultural ruination. The joyful turned terrifying, the sacred made profane. That Art and Santa can share the same symbolic terrain illustrates a deeper unease with the commodification and endangerment of childhood, whilst further blurring the lines between childhood and adulthood (Hayward, 2024). Other recent media explore similar themes. In *Clown* (2014), a man dons a costume for his son's birthday and transforms into a demonic figure. *Clown in a Cornfield* (2025) uses the figure to symbolise generational resentment, post-industrial decline, and youth-targeted violence. These snapshots represent a culture that, at an initial glance, may recognise the clown less as celebratory and more as an uncomfortable threat to the symbolic order. However, as discussed further on, a more critical analysis suggests that the clown plays a more hidden but equally sinister role within late-capitalist society. These accounts are situated within what Ferrell et al. (2008) call the "vast hall of mirrors," a cultural landscape in which they reflect and distort each other. Once contained within the circus, the clown has been reshaped over the decades by horror films, true-crime narratives, and tabloid sensationalism. These iterations laid the groundwork for its digital afterlife: a memetic archetype replicated across GIFs, TikToks, YouTube clips, and cosplay. Its symbolic power shifts across platforms but remains affectively potent.

The 2016 killer clown sightings were not merely imitations of media archetypes. They were performances in their own right. Youths adopted the clown persona not to commit harm, but to suggest the *idea* of harm. These were acts of *performance crime* (Surette, 2015). Transgressions designed for spectatorship, often filmed, edited, and shared. In most cases, the performers were prosumer deviants. Simultaneous producers and consumers of their own spectacle. As Yar (2012) argued, digital culture fosters a "will to representation", an all-consuming desire to document and embellish one's activities, including deviance. The killer clown was an easily accessible template for such replication. Instantly recognisable, theatrically unappealing, and risk-free. It exemplified the convergence of prosumerism, symbolic crime, and affective performance, each orchestrated for digital circulation. As Hayward and Young (2004: 259) put it, "the street scripts the screen, and the screen scripts the street". A clown seen in a horror film inspires

a prank in real life; that prank is recorded and shared, inspiring the next. This recursive cycle transforms the clown from a character into a script - an open-source archetype in late modern life's carnival. Like any carnival, the killer clown requires an audience. The public becomes a bystander and a participant, laughing, flinching, sharing, and reacting in real time. The clown's affective logic fully unfolds in this interplay between performance and perception. The evil clown is a mutable, affective, and deeply mediated symbol. It marks the collapse of innocence into spectacle, the erosion of trust into performance. As a cultural cypher, it allows society to express and displace its ambivalence around childhood, deviance, and authenticity. It thrives in a world where fear is entertaining, crime is aestheticised, and identity is scripted.

Pacified by fear: Pseudo-pacification and the symbolic management of anxiety

Rather than one of 'Moral Panic', in most cases, public reaction to the 2016 killer clown events was mild anxiety, amusement, or vagueness. Panic was rarely an outcome. Some pranksters indicated their actions were playful rather than threatening. "Most people like to be freaked out a bit," explained one self-proclaimed Killer Clown (Wood, 2017). Even exaggerated media reporting struggled to sustain a serious tone (Marsden, 2016). This disconnect suggests a broader theoretical deficiency. As described earlier, the moral panic model presumes a pre-existing moral consensus, elite manipulation, and overt folk devils. These presumptions do not hold in the fragmented, digitally oversaturated world we now reside in. Horsley (2017) highlights that the concept has become anachronistic, misinterpreting the ambient, performative nature of modern-day deviance.

The killer clown phenomenon is better explained by the concept of *pseudo-pacification*, in which overt violence appears to decline, yet aggressive desires and competitive individualism have not disappeared but have been reshaped to align with the demands of late capitalism, redirected into commodified and aesthetic forms (Hall and Winlow, 2025). What might appear as civility or restraint is, in fact, a necessary adaptation: violence sublimated into consumption, performance, and everyday behaviours. This is a functional requirement of the market, not a moral achievement.

The anonymous, costumed, and liminal killer clown embodies this shift. Not subverting social order but performing it. The events, often involving youths chasing pedestrians or loitering in public spaces, provoked limited condemnation whilst being absorbed into the media cycle, Halloween costume culture, and digital meme culture. Schools issued brief warnings. Police made statements. The spectacle dissipated. This symbolic script: fear, containment, and forgetfulness, is emblematic of *pseudo-pacification*. As Hall and Winlow (2015) caution, pacification should not be mistaken for progress. The clown craze enacted fear without disorder, spectacle without rupture. The media played a key role in this dynamic. Žižek (2008) theory of *interpassivity*, delegating emotional and political response to external systems, explains the public's passivity of response. They did not demand reform. They witnessed, tweeted, and went on about their day. Fisher (2009) concept of *depressive hedonia*, the desire to consume affective content without engagement, offers insight here. In such conditions, the clown

sighting becomes a closed circuit of *pseudo-engagement*: symbolic anxiety delivered, processed, and neutralised.

This is where the concept of *Graze Boxes*, derived from Kelly et al. (2023) theory of *Graze Culture*, becomes particularly relevant. In late modernity, media consumers increasingly fixate on digestible, emotionally charged instances of subjective violence, such as serial killers or killer clowns, to displace attention from structural harm. A subtle form of harm derived from inequitable social, political and/or economic structures (Galtung, 1969). *Graze Boxes*, the theoretical extension of *Graze Culture*, refer to small, clickable, short-form fragments of fear curated by algorithms for rapid, repeated consumption. Like the snack boxes, they offer stimulation without nourishment. *Graze Boxes* typified the clown craze, TikTok jump-scare clips, sensational headlines about “machete-wielding pranksters” and CCTV stills of masked figures outside schools. Each was affectively potent, instantly consumed, and quickly displaced. These fragments simulate confrontation with danger while preserving the social structures that underpin it. Borrowing from Badiou (2005), we might describe them as *anti-events* - spectacles that mimic rupture without demanding truth or transformation. As Hall (2007) warned, society has confused the containment of violence with its disappearance. The clown does not challenge capitalist realism; it affirms it.

Horsley (2017) extends this logic, suggesting that what criminology mistakes for panic is often better understood as *objectless anxiety*; fear circulating without focus, demand, or resolution. This is an ideal condition for post-political capitalism. It stimulates content production without prompting resistance. The killer clown is a textbook case of this affective inertia. While children were frightened (Davies, 2016) and parents were concerned (Chapple and Shepherd, 2016), the state responded with inertia. There was no national debate, new legislation, or systemic review. Instead, the clown craze completed a symbolic circuit: a cultural loop in which fear was rehearsed, consumed, and ultimately forgotten. Rather than reviving a moral panic model dependent on elite manipulation and public outrage, the killer clown should have been observed as a product of *ambient anxiety*, channelled through the dual mechanisms of *pseudo-pacification* and *symbolic consumption*. As Hart (2020) argues in his work on dystopian video games, late capitalism increasingly simulates resistance while preserving control. The clown craze follows a similar logic; it delivers fear as content. A brief, affective spectacle engineered for consumption and disposal.

The clown is not a folk devil but a feedback loop. Its menace is felt, but its threat lies not in disrupting order, but in reinforcing it. The killer clown does not rupture society; it repeats it. Its return affirms the symbolic routines and cultural logics of an anxious, pacified world, while gesturing toward a deeper unease that refuses to be resolved.

Fear as spectacle, fear as play

Pseudo-pacification explains why fear is neutralised as spectacle; here we show how it becomes play. Rather than a breach of order, most 2016 clown episodes were staged games oriented to visibility. We distinguish three modes:

- (i) *Stunt-play*: prosumer “performance crime” designed for reaction and re-circulation (Surette, 2015; Yar, 2012).
- (ii) *Parodic vigilantism*: responses that mirror the same infantilised aesthetics, such as a costumed “Batman” patrolling to chase off clowns (Horton, 2016), transforming reassurance into cosplay.
- (iii) *Managerial play*: symbolic containment including police advisories and fancy-dress cautions (Halliday, 2016), that manages the *sign* of danger while leaving its conditions intact (Hall, 2012).

Across all three, affect is packaged in short, repeatable units, rewarding memeworthiness and stylised disorder rather than rupture. In this sense, the craze exemplifies deviant leisure; transgression performed as content within a commodified media ecology (Smith and Raymen, 2019), where both “offence” and “defence” are gamified and monetised.

These performances emerged against a broader culture of *infantilisation*, whereby adult identities are defined in aesthetics and affective modes drawn from childhood - cartoons, superhero franchises, and Halloween costumes (Hayward, 2024). In the same way, deviance is gamified, infantilised, and disempowered. The killer clown is another example of this tension: at once childlike and threatening, ridiculous and terrifying. Its power lies in dissonance, playing at danger while remaining safely within symbolic bounds. This dynamic echoes Hayward and Hobbs (2007) account of a market-led, liminal night-time economy and Measham and Brain (2005) notion of consumers seeking a ‘controlled loss of control’. Just as binge drinking offers sanctioned chaos, and shooting another gamer with your favourite childhood character offers authorised disorder, clown performances offer fleeting exposure to symbolic danger. Safe, stylised, and surveilled. In viral clips, the clown always keeps a distance. The fear is theatrical, buffered by context and the implicit knowledge that it is a prank. Thus, the clown becomes a ready-made template; recognisable, theatrical, low-risk, and easily shareable. It exemplifies the convergence of prosumerism, performance crime, and algorithmic circulation.

This cycle of staged menace relies on a knowing audience. Complicit spectators react in real time. Laughing, flinching, sharing. In this interplay between performer and viewer, the affective logic of the killer clown takes shape. This shared simulation resonates with Žižek (2008) concept of *fetishistic disavowal*. We know the clown is not dangerous, but we pretend otherwise to enjoy the thrill. However, in the case of the killer clown, this disavowal becomes what we call *meta-disavowal*: a layered irony in which we acknowledge the disavowal itself. We know that others also know it is fake, and still, we engage. This double removal allows us to simulate fear without consequence and performers to simulate deviance without responsibility. Everyone plays along. The horror is staged, the responses rehearsed, and the effect algorithmically farmed. The clown becomes a micro-symbol of *ironic dystopia*. A world where dread is playful, transgression is aestheticised, and breakdown is monetised. This irony is sharpened when placed against the backdrop of real systemic anxieties: the climate crisis, AI surveillance, austerity, and corporate domination (Hart et al., 2025; Lynes et al., 2024). The clown becomes a vessel for these unmanageable fears, reframed as controlled entertainment. It is not simply escapism; it is *ritualised substitution*.

Such *ritualised substitution* has a deeper cultural dynamic. Even transgression is structurally normalised. Appearance of chaos is a stylised presentation of the system's values. The killer clown is neither a folk devil nor a figure to be abhorred, but a hyper-conformist performer. Its theatrics are a representation of a transgression that succeeds and, in doing so, subverts nothing by enacting the logic of platform capitalism. These clown figures did not occur serendipitously; they orchestrated their terrors for maximum shareability. This was platform-aware transgression for clicks, visibility, and meme currency. From the "will to representation" paradigm of Yar (2012), such acts manifest the desire to perform and be watched performing. These acts are the height of Surette (2015) "performance crime", executed for attention not to protest or harm. Thus, the killer clown represents various truths: that deviance is no longer oppositional but system-friendly, haunting without injury, entertain without censoring, and flowing uninterrupted. Its menace is performative, its meaning algorithmically specified. It returns not to shake society, but to affirm its logic.

The clown as a hauntological figure

Having established the killer clown as a feedback loop of pacified spectacle where fear is stylised, commodified, and endlessly replayed, hauntology allows us to examine the temporal and affective nature of this repetition. The 2016 killer clown craze was part of a recurring cultural pattern, invoking figures like Gacy, Pennywise, and the faded circus archetype. Each return was not a resurrection, but a distortion. A cultural haunting. As Derrida (1994) argues, hauntology describes a temporality in which the past lingers and unrealised futures leave their trace. The killer clown exists within this register; present and absent, fictional yet felt, mediated yet viscerally charged. It becomes a symbolic vessel through which collective anxieties are reanimated, aestheticised, and consumed.

Drawing on Abraham et al. (1975), we might describe the clown as a *phantom* - an internalised residue of ungrieved cultural loss. When trauma cannot be openly mourned, it becomes embedded in a psychic *crypt* of the individual, often transmediated, before surfacing later in distorted and repetitive forms (Gregoriou et al., 2026). The killer clown emerges as such a *phantom*: an uncanny figure that cyclically returns across horror media, viral pranks, and episodic news coverage. It is recursive, not new. Recycling symbolic fragments of unresolved anxiety from better past times, an affective loop in which danger is conjured and neutralised. In this way, the clown becomes a *visual crypt* for collective wounds; encrypted, repressed, and stylised for cultural consumption. Media responses to the 2016 phenomenon mirrored this logic. Among the news articles analysed, reports consistently followed a ritual pattern: masked figures appear, children are chased, panic is hinted at, reassurance is offered, and the story fades. Rashkin (1992) notion of "texts in distress", narratives that appear to confront trauma but actually displace it, aptly describes this genre of reporting. Fisher (2009) argues in his critique of capitalist realism that the future has been foreclosed and culture is stuck in recursive loops. Like many icons of nostalgic horror, the clown does not threaten social order; it affirms its stagnation by allowing us to revisit periods of life that offered greater promise (Reynolds, 2011). Its cultural resonance lies not in subversion, but in recall: 1980s slasher films, Halloween costumes, and tabloid "moral panics". It is a figure of suspended cultural imagination

(Fiddler et al., 2022). Repetition without rupture. Though mainstream coverage has since waned, the clown has continued to surface, especially around Halloween or moments of heightened unease (Dwyer and Michaels, 2024). The aesthetic has been revived in films, as well as in escape rooms, TikTok content, and viral pranks. Videos featuring elevator scares or clown chases in amusement parks are designed to provoke controlled dread and maximise monetised engagement. No longer a cause of panic, the killer clown is a content genre, recycled and resold. Its recurrence, aestheticised menace, and gamified deviance reflect what we might call a *haunting loop*: fear without substance, rebellion without consequence.

While hauntology explains the figure's spectral return, it is nostalgia that gives the return its emotional charge. Winlow (2025) notes that contemporary nostalgia is not tethered to specific memories but functions as a coping strategy for symbolic and material decline. It is ambient, aestheticised, and performative, a balm for the loss of collective purpose. The killer clown fits this affective logic. Across the media archive, journalists drew upon familiar tropes. A Sky News article warned, "[Childline] has been contacted scores of times by youngsters upset by the 'killer clown' craze" (Sky News, 2016), while *The Telegraph* (2016) ran stories of machete-wielding clowns in Norwich. Few reports positioned the events as contemporary or contextually new. They were instead slotted into a symbolic loop of familiar, recycled fear. This aligns with broader nostalgia scholarship. Pickering and Keightley (2006) argue that modern nostalgia is less about memory than managing present anxiety through repetition. Grainge (2002) suggests that nostalgia in media operates through "aestheticised memory", past imagery repackaged for emotional consumption. The killer clown fits this completely, not evoking a specific history but rather a bricolage of film iconography, tabloid panic, and horror branding. The nostalgia it carries is performative, experienced as dread, recognition, and déjà vu. Its horror lies in its familiarity and predictability.

Each return of the clown revives the same cycle: blurry footage, Halloween warnings, recycled headlines. It is what we might call *hauntological nostalgia*. A spectral figure replayed not to resolve past trauma, but to displace it through simulation. It offers no catharsis or closure, just repetition. In this loop, nostalgia becomes not a bridge to history, but a circuit within which fear is circulated and neutralised. The logic of simulation intensifies this. As Baudrillard (1994) argued, *simulacra* do not reflect reality; they replace it. The killer clown is not an index of actual threat, but a simulation of fear. A memetic artefact built for media circulation. Its performances are choreographed for smartphones, preformatted for surveillance, and algorithmically curated for engagement. It is not deviance, but a stylised impression of deviance. An affective trigger detached from structural critique and seeped in reminiscence.

Hauntological perspectives help explain the clown's cross-generational mobility (Fiddler et al., 2022). Older audiences recall Gacy or the eighties satanic panic. Younger viewers associate the clown with Pennywise, Art the Clown, or TikTok prank culture. As Fisher (2009) contends, these symbolic figures have meaning not because they embody futures, but rather because they embody the absence of them. The clown signifies not impending danger, but the complete lack of movement forward. This return is not merely psychological. It is economic and ideological. Just as "retro" fashion trends and revival tours of bands such as Oasis tell us that the past has become commodified. The recycling

of killer clowns demonstrates a commodification of fear embedded within the media spectacle. As seen in *The Telegraph* (2016), costume adverts often accompanied clown scare stories. Even fear is seasonal, ritualised, monetised, and stripped of threat. As Ayres and Kerrigan (2020) argue, haunting is never neutral. It structures perception and re-inscribes dominant ideologies. The killer clown becomes not a figure of critique, but one of entertainment. It is horror for hire: nostalgic, monetised, endlessly repeatable.

This scripting contributes to what might be called a *Phantasmagoric cycle*. An aesthetic loop wherein unresolved anxieties are endlessly stylised and recirculated through archetypes such as the killer clown. The clown returns not to confront real disorder, but to simulate it. It is safely framed, always familiar, and ultimately stabilising. It reconnects present fear to past imagery, offering a brief confrontation with dread that never unsettles the symbolic order. In this way, the clown becomes a *hauntological artefact*, a media ghost recurring across cultural cycles, evoking fear without rupture. It is a symptom and a symbol of a society suspended between nostalgia, infancy and for what has passed and foreclosure of what can be. Its horror lies not in its novelty, but its recognisability: a perverse smile returned to a known face, caught, circulated, then, of course, forgotten.

In this sense, the clown also becomes a beacon for what we call *Infastalgia* and *Infastalgic Violence*. Drawing from Hayward (2024) work on infantilisation and Winlow (2025) work on Nostalgia, *Infastalgia* refers to a condition whereby individuals and groups yearn for a visualised and soothing past that is consumed in an infantilised manner; fleeting, bite-sized chunks of childlike familiarity void of complexity and real conflict or discomfort. Such a process acts as a stabiliser, mobilising feelings of loss and cultural decline into commodified presentations of history. Therefore, “*Infastalgia*” explains the refuge we take into symbolic archetypes, cloaking not how things truly were, but our idealised vision of “how things were”, protecting us from the uncertainties and complexities of the present and future. *Infastalgic Violence*, therefore, interjects Kelly et al. (2023) notion of *Graze Culture* and recognises how consumable and prosumable violence has become increasingly infantilised. Take, for example, cartoon and pop icon characters embedded in violent videogames such as Call of Duty and Fortnite, or recent horror movie trends that draw inspiration from children’s fantasies, such as *Winnie-the-Pooh: Blood and Honey* (2023). And, of course, the clown, once a symbol of childhood celebration and play. Such examples demonstrate society’s turn to nostalgic characters, as according to *Graze Culture*, we seek to disavow the harmful realities of structural violence through the subjective. Here, however, we are not just brushing up against “familiar monsters” but “familiar heroes”. Thus, making much of contemporary entertainment culture a fusion of infancy, nostalgia and violence, working in tandem to stabilise the instability of late consumer capitalism. The result is a culture where danger returns as comfort. Violence rendered cute enough to click, safe enough to sell, and effective enough to keep the wider order intact.

Painted faces, empty futures: Discussion

The killer clown craze sits at the intersection of multiple cultural and criminological currents, each reflecting deeper transformations in subjectivity, consumption, and

symbolic order under late capitalism. To understand why the phenomenon resonated so powerfully and spread so rapidly requires more than examining its surface features of scares, costumes, and viral clips. It demands critical engagement with the structural, emotional, and symbolic economy that made such a figure simultaneously terrifying, laughable, and consumable.

At its most visible level, the killer clown is a classic example of deviant leisure (Smith and Raymen, 2019), offering a fleeting and stylised break from routine. It provides a “controlled loss of control” in which transgression is indulged within the bounds of legality and entertainment. The clown fits neatly within the crime-consumer nexus (Hayward, 2004), where symbolic danger is stylised and sought, not resisted. It is not a real threat, but a product engineered for quick, affective impact and image circulation. This intersects with ultra-realist critiques of late modern subjectivity. As Hall and Winlow (2015, 2025) argue, consumer capitalism produces an existentially hollow self, locked in a cycle of overstimulation and withdrawal. The killer clown epitomises this. It arrives as novel and menacing, but repetition, memification, and saturation quickly neutralise its symbolic force. The clown promises rupture - momentary thrill, engagement, identity - but leaves no trace, feeding a subject trained to crave intensity but incapable of satisfaction. *Graze Culture* (2023) captures this dynamic: individuals consume digestible fragments of subjective violence (killer clowns, true crime, serial killers) not to process harm, but to disavow deeper, structural suffering. The concept of *Graze Boxes* demonstrates how these appetites are curated online: short, emotionally charged clips—a clown scare, a panic headline, a reaction video - are consumed without engaging with the conditions that produce them. The clown becomes a token of danger, a distraction from slow, enduring harms like socio-economic exclusion and environmental decline (ibid). We extend this framework with two concepts, *Infastalgia* and *Infastalgic Violence*. *Infastalgia* names a yearning for a soothing, visualised past consumed in infantilised, bite-sized formats. Recognition without complexity or conflict. *Infastalgic Violence* then captures how violence itself is formatted for easy presumption in juvenile-coded packages, linking Kelly et al. (2023) *Graze Culture* to *Graze Boxes* (short, algorithmically curated fear-snippets). Together, they explain how the clown’s menace is rendered edible. Fear as snackable content rather than a prompt to confront structural harm.

The *infantilisation* of cultural consumption accelerates these processes. Hayward (2024) argues that late capitalism allows for emotional regression and aesthetic reduction. The killer clown is accommodated within this through the coming together of childlike appearance and playful menace. The fear it induces is gamified, felt in controlled bursts rather than existential dread, through arrested ontological development. The adult subject is invited to regress while being denied the tools to interpret or transcend the spectacle. The clown acts as a proving ground for reaction without reflection. Another turn on the cycle of immature fear and immediate gratification. This is *Infastalgia* in practice; adult subjects reach for childlike archetypes and simplified pasts to regulate unease. Moreover, when fear is packaged through those same icons, crossover avatars in Fortnite/Call of Duty, or horror reworks of children’s properties, *Infastalgic Violence* channels dread into playful spectacle, securing circulation without critique. Hayward’s infantocrats: adults trapped in childish subjectivities shaped by consumerism, safetyism, and hollow

institutional promise, are resonant here. This institutional coverage has been an elusive dream to the majority, especially the structurally excluded. Winlow's work on nostalgia complements this, showing how regression is tethered to the collapse of belief in collective futures. What is left is a state of "*Infatalgia*" - a yearning for snippets of yesteryear dressed up as familiar symbols. The clown emerges as a stylised regression and affective mediator - a figure that expresses, displaces, and contains the contradictions of a culture unable to believe in adulthood, structure, or change. This loop is not only affective but also temporal. Through the synthesis of *Graze Culture* and hauntology, the clown emerges as a *culturally recycled figure*, an echo of older icons stripped of historical meaning and reanimated for viral circulation. Hauntology explains how the clown performs nostalgia without memory. It haunts not because it is an echo from the past, but because we cannot move beyond it. Its power is derived from its iterability. It returns cyclically, not in order to restore repressed trauma, but to deflect attention anew.

This dynamic is evident in the 2016 craze's rapid rise and fall. Its lifecycle - viral emergence, media saturation, and near-instant disappearance - mirrors the attention economy's hunger for the new. Like other ephemeral fads, the clown was profitable, emotionally stimulating, and quickly replaceable. Nevertheless, its iconography persists. It has been reabsorbed, stripped of subversion, and repackaged for entertainment. Cultural criminologists have noted that transgression is routinely neutralised through commodification (Hayward, 2004). The killer clown now lives on in genre cinema, Halloween branding, and TikTok filters. Like Che Guevara on a tote bag, its radical potential has been converted into consumer value. The killer clown is hardly unique; rather, it is one iteration of a broader cycle of recurring, commercially reusable figures of fear. Adjacent icons like Slender Man, Momo, and The Backrooms follow similar trajectories: childlike, viral, ambiguous monsters whose power lies in evoking fear without meaning. These figures are mutations within the same Phantasmagoric cycle: a hauntological loop where surface-level monstrosities are endlessly revived and re-formatted. Rather than rupturing the cultural order, they perpetuate it, offering fear stripped of political or structural weight. They are potent yet hollow. Recycled symbols of ambient dread.

Nostalgia underpins this cycle. The killer clown evokes fleeting performative fear, not real danger. It is oddly soothing. When the only menace is the boogeyman under the bed, we are spared confronting whether we will have a bed at all. The clown becomes a *proxy fear*, a manageable monster that diverts from more destabilising anxieties - climate collapse, state abandonment, or AI's erosion of labour and identity (Hart et al., 2025). In other words, this is *Infatalgia* as affective governance; comfort-coded memory that metabolises anxiety into repeatable images. Coupled with *Infatalgic Violence*, danger returns as recognition. Palatable, purchasable, and politically inert. The clown is not a harbinger of crisis but a pressure valve for a culture stuck in symbolic repetition. Raymen (2018) concept of *ultimate fetishistic disavowal* is useful here. This is the process by which subjects recognise their world is broken but displace that recognition into stylised, controllable forms. Importantly, these dynamics do not end with the 2016 clown sightings themselves but continue to shape the wider horror marketplace through which familiar figures of fear are repeatedly recycled, commodified and circulated. We see this in post-apocalyptic and hyper-violent media, the *Walking Dead* television series (2010-2022),

where collapse is safely quarantined behind the phrase “it’s just a show.” However, the killer clown operates at a further level of reflexivity in which *meta-disavowal* occurs as audiences knowingly participate in the simulation. The fear is ironic. The thrill comes from pretending to believe. The persistence of the killer clown is therefore not confined to the original craze but extends into a broader ecology of horror media, where familiar symbols of fear are continually repackaged for new audiences and new platforms.

This detachment is intensified by *hauntological nostalgia*, particularly in figures like Art the Clown, whose design channels are VHS horror and 1980s gore. The horror becomes not only palatable but familiar. Even the soundtrack participates. Dreamkid’s synth-heavy score for *Terrifier 3*, evokes cinematic nostalgia and classic ’80s films adding sonic texture to the temporal dislocation. According to [McClanahan and South \(2020\)](#), affective experience does not just result from visual perception; rather, it involves much more than what we see and relates to broader sensory environments that influence our understanding of environments. The soundtrack does not merely accompany the image but deepens the hauntological pull of a remembered past that never fully existed. The clown becomes what [Hall \(2012\)](#) terms an “insulating sleeve”. A symbolic buffer that manages the emotional chaos of cultural breakdown. Originally used to describe legal frameworks that veil capitalist violence, here the sleeve reprocesses dread into shareable imagery allowing daily life to continue as capitalism’s failures become more apparent - ecological collapse, economic precarity, social fragmentation - the sleeve is straining. Disavowal still functions, recycling fear through increasingly stylised forms, but no longer reassures. The result is an intensification of *symbolic labour*: ever more extreme simulations of collapse. From *The Purge* (2013) and its countless sequels to immersive haunted attractions, we witness spectacles that simulate societal failure while reinforcing the structures that cause it. The clown provides ritualised catharsis without rupture.

Conclusion

The killer clown craze, far from being a quirky outburst of public panic, reveals the deeper operations of fear, conformity, and cultural repetition under late capitalism. What appeared at the surface level as playful menace or a juvenile prank was, in fact, a tightly scripted performance of symbolic deviance, engineered for visibility, curated by digital platforms, and disarmed by commodification. Rather than resisting dominant values, the clown affirms them in spectacular form, reinforcing pseudo-pacified norms through controlled transgression and aestheticised fear. Drawing on cultural criminology, ultra-realism, hauntology, and emerging frameworks such as *Graze Culture*, this article has argued that the clown functions as a symptom of a broader social condition marked by affective dislocation, regressive subjectivity, and symbolic saturation. Its recurrence is not anomalous but cyclical, sustained by nostalgia without memory, disavowal without rupture, and repetition without political consequence. The clown’s mask is not worn to frighten society but to help it feel something, however briefly, in an otherwise flattened symbolic field.

Crucially, this analysis suggests a deeper cultural impasse. As crises intensify and futures recede, symbolic figures like the killer clown increasingly take on the affective labour of managing collapse. They offer not catharsis, but affective continuity.

Reassuring audiences that horror can be familiar, marketable, and fleeting. In doing so, they reveal the central paradox of late modern subjectivity: the more performative our deviance becomes, the more obedient we remain. If criminology is to move beyond the limitations of moral panic frameworks, it must pay closer attention to these cultural scripts; how fear is aestheticised, danger is simulated, and harm is disavowed.

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