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The Triple Mirrors of Clowns: A Brief Analysis of Black Humor in the Dance Theater Work *Clowns*

Haoyuan Hu

Shanghai Dance School, Shanghai 200050, China

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Abstract: Hofesh Shechter's dance production *Clowns* takes black humor as its aesthetic core, weaving a dance allegory that reflects the spiritual alienation of modern humanity. This article interprets the work from three dimensions: first, the clown image maps the spiritual distortion of individuals under industrial conditions, whose mechanized limbs and numb, vacant expressions reproduce the "corporeal discipline" of capitalist society; second, the article deconstructs the circular narrative strategy of "murder—resurrection," wherein this endlessly cycling violence dissolves the meaning of death itself and illuminates the inescapable predicament of individuals within systems of power; third, the article analyzes the inverted truth of the audience-performance relationship—when spectators applaud the aesthetics of violence, they have unwittingly become accomplices to the logic of alienation.

Keywords: Black humor; Character construction; Circular narrative structure; Audience-performance relationship

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1. Introduction

When absurdity and despair intertwine in the dance theater, beneath the playful exterior often lie the ineffable spiritual predicaments of modern humanity. Hofesh Shechter's *Clowns* departs from traditional dance narrative, interrogating reality through the lens of black humor. Onstage, revelry and suffering intertwine, and the boundary between performer and spectator continually dissolves, allowing us, while observing the story, to glimpse our own postmodern existential condition [1].

2. The carnivalesque inscription of alienated personhood: Character construction in black humor

2.1. The clown: The alienated collective persona

In eighteenth-century Western society, people toiled day after day in factories, their subjectivity stripped away, and their longing for freedom and novelty regarded as dangerous consciousness. Society was extremely stratified, power structures impregnable, interpersonal relations saturated with interest and

suspicion, sincerity and trust scarce, equality and dignity absent. People suspected, oppressed, and even slaughtered one another, drifting further from their authentic selves in a state of impasse—living like clowns became a universal mode of existence. William Faulkner observed that humanity is the only theme that never goes out of style. Shechter, with profound insight into this era, sets the work in an eighteenth-century circus, using clowns as his characters and the absurd theatrical space of the "circus" to allegorize a dark age, with the clown serving as a metaphor for alienated individuals. Conversely, these people living like clowns constitute the most biting satire of the era—namely, black humor. Shechter strips away the clowns' customary colorful adornments and makeup, allowing naked humanity to take the stage. Hunched backs, twitching facial muscles, and vacant gazes constitute the visual metaphor of "corporeal mechanization"; distorted limbs imitate the rhythm of the assembly line, and beneath the absurd surface lies a deeper truth: the clown's comicality is precisely the existential norm of alienated humanity.

2.2. Body poetics: The violent transcription of repressive mechanisms

Shechter has stated: "Where there is pressure, there is folk dance." Where repression abounds, there will be groups of people dancing by stamping their feet. This creative manifesto reveals the resistant gene inherent in bodily movement: when one delves deeply into the psychological structure of the characters and profoundly experiences their life emotions, one gains an inner emotional drive that, from within outward, loudly proclaims inner emotional demands and expressive desires through the body. "Folk" precisely means expressing oneself directly through the body in a natural, direct, unadorned, authentic, and pristine manner. In the production, during a bustling and clamorous eighteenth-century circus carnival night, clowns of all descriptions quiver with bodies hard as rock, sway with convulsively hunched backs, gaze with eyes that stir no ripples, and brandish their limbs in wild abandon. Their trembling, swaying, gazing, and surging become continuous bodily rhythms, rebelling against worldly conventions, resisting harm, responding to indifference, mocking darkness, and expressing fervent life sentiments and resounding life attitudes [2].

The continuous bodily rhythms, through the distinctive treatment of temporal cadence, spatial fluctuation, and dynamic gradation, create layered imagery, construct the spectator's logic, and intensify expression. The clowns leap vertically, hurling their entire body weight upward momentarily before stamping it down instantly, as if their inner universe rises in an instant and then explodes upon the ground—perhaps this is the long-pent-up resentment erupting in clamor, an attitude responding to the noisy marketplace. When they tremble, surge, roll, and seethe like water bubbles about to boil, bursting, leaping, and overflowing—perhaps this is the unruly soul seeking to break free from its corporeal shell, to leap forth in search of a romantic realm of tranquility and freedom. Even though they are different clowns with different skin tones, faces, body types, and costumes, what unites them is that their bodies, in opening and closing, inhaling and exhaling, tensing and relaxing, express individual life attitudes and, moreover, constitute a resounding proclamation of collective life connection [3].

The body is like an emotional player, projecting inner demands outward with tone, volume, and attitude, clearly and accurately expressing the heartfelt words it wishes to confide. At times they advance rapidly like wind chasing the sun, as if unruly souls roaming freely; at times they linger in place like shifting clouds, as if empty minds untouched by dust; at times they plunge to the ground like torrential rain, as if exhausted bodies breathing their last. The clowns' bodies are unkempt, unconstrained, sincere, and plain—sometimes tense and coarse, sometimes relaxed and natural, sometimes hunched and bowed, sometimes upright and proud...

Myriad bodily forms become microcosms of their life world and existential condition. They sway, rock, tremble, twist, and leap, rebelling, resisting, mocking, and jesting in continuous rhythm; with bodies that are sometimes humorous and sometimes deadpan, they mock the cold world that has disappointed them.

These unconventional bodily expressions constitute a dual metaphorical system: spasmodic muscle tremors are both a parody of industrial machinery and a rebellion against corporeal discipline; the surging "human waves" in ensemble sections both reproduce the production rhythm of the assembly line and, through exaggerated deformation, achieve visual manifestation of the collective unconscious. When dancers complete the pantomime of killing with the rigid posture of marionettes, the critical edge of black humor points directly at the predicament of modernity—are our bodies ultimately vessels of free will, or standardized components within the social machine?

3. The circular labyrinth of violent aesthetics: Narrative strategy in black humor

3.1. Circular narrative: The mechanism of eternal recurrence of violence

The circular narrative structure is non-linear and non-scattered; its chapters are dispersed along the ring, oriented toward the central thesis, with beginning and end interlocking, repeating in succession; it dissolves causal logic, employing collage, flashforward, and flashback to endow the spectator with multiple layers of meaning; its thesis possesses an internal fulcrum of cyclical recurrence. At the opening of the dance, the performers hold hands in a semicircle, when one suddenly stabs another with a dagger gesture, throwing the formation into chaos. Subsequently, one makes a gun gesture pointing directly at another's temple, who collapses in world-weary despair, while the others disperse indifferently. Next, a row of performers fires with machine-gun gestures, the front row falls, and the hunters deliver coup de grâce. Then, one seizes another and slits their throat with a blade; the deceased revives, draws a gun, and kills in return; the killer revives with a slingshot, then revives again with a sword, then again with a gun... they slaughter one another, and the victor howls like a beast. Finally, a woman kisses the victor's neck from behind, then suddenly fires a machine gun into his back, and the production concludes. Shechter points directly at human indifference; the ten clowns construct a repetitive narrative through objectless gestures such as "shooting," "stabbing," and "slingshot," and through the infinite cycle of "killing—resurrection," form a circular structure. All murders lack causal logic, presenting absurdity, fragmentation, and temporal-spatial rupture. The repeatedly enacted murders constitute parallel narratives under conditions of non-logicality, intensifying effect through repetition [4].

3.2. The black humor revealed by the Möbius strip

"Black humor cinema accompanies many symbolically charged signifying factors through the plot's progression with 'deconstruction—reconstruction—re-deconstruction—re-reconstruction,' ultimately shaping the story to reach a comic or tragic climax amid loss of control, endowing the film with profound significance."

Shechter skillfully plucks at the spectator's heartstrings; although the entire production reveals no temporal logical thread, it cycles endlessly in the temporal vortex of "calm—restlessness—calm—restlessness..." This is a "black" temporal experience, suffused at every moment with suffocating repression. When people pushed to the extreme of repression erupt into barbaric behavior, harming one another unto death, and then miraculously return to life for a new round of violent warfare, they enter the infinite resurrection-like vortex of violence, cycling endlessly; the unexpected reversals of unmotivated violence are

both startling and thrilling, magical and realistic, satirical and jesting. One cannot help but sigh that, within "black" space-time, the clowns' fate is suffused with the satirical meaning of infinite "humor."

This narrative strategy forms an exquisite deconstructive humor: when death becomes a revocable program setting, killing is stripped of its ethical weight; when the identities of perpetrator and victim continually interchange within the resurrection mechanism, the absurd essence of violent logic is laid bare. The phenomenon of temporal collapse within the circular structure—the rupture of the causal chain of past, present, and future—aptly mirrors the existential predicament of modern society: within the eternal recurrence of capital and power, the individual remains trapped within the Möbius strip of violence [5].

4. Self-deconstruction in the carnivalesque of metaphor: The ultimate irony of black humor

4.1. The allegorical expression of violent signs and absurd logic

When the repeated killings onstage are endowed with a gamified resurrection mechanism, the allegorical nature of black humor surfaces. In *Clowns*, Shechter, through the absurd narrative logic constructed by violent signs, insinuates the violent desires of people in modern society. The repeatedly appearing playful signs in the production—"shooting," "stabbing," "slingshot," "firing," "fencing," "grappling"—dissolve the bloodiness of real killing while amplifying the essence of human alienation: when violence becomes the rhetoric of daily interaction and death is reduced to revocable game tokens, human reverence for life has completely collapsed. The clowns, trapped in the infinite cycle of calm and killing, cannot find an endpoint or conclusion.

This evokes a Kafkaesque absurd logic: "The absurd phenomenon in Kafka's works manifests as the characters' fates losing direction, with all goals difficult to achieve and ambiguous in meaning. Kafka, through continual negation of the characters' actions, reinforces this sense of absurdity again and again; consequently, the characters' actions in the works are forever caught in a meaningless predicament of dilemma." When the spectator regains clarity, one might ask: where lies the contradiction in the production? Where is the turning point of conflict? Where is the fuse of violence? The spectator, immersed in the extreme audio-visual of restlessness and the continuous cycle of violence, loses reason and logical speculation along with the clowns onstage. Only when one steps outside this game, observing the world directly like the audience in *The Truman Show*, does one discover that this is an absurd cycle akin to *Waiting for Godot*. The meaning of *Waiting for Godot* lies precisely in the act of waiting; the Godot who never arrives becomes the most complete spiritual closure of the entire play. Turning to *Clowns*, it constructs another self-referential closure through circular narrative: the mutual interchange of perpetrator and victim identities corresponds to the endless cycle of exploitative relations in capitalist society; the intensification of violence accompanying each resurrection symbolizes the continuous expansion of the alienated condition.

When the audience, mobilizing their restless kinesthetic sense through the dancers' exaggerated and convulsive limbs, trembles along, as if possessed, completing the infinite cycle of killing through the dancers' marionette-like rigid postures; when the spotlight suddenly turns toward the auditorium, the audience, in dumbfounded laughter, suddenly realizes that this game-like dream is both a parody of the traditional circus clown performance formula, a sharp irony of the "corporeal mechanization" of industrialized society, and an interrogation and ultimate irony of the violent desires latent within our own hearts. The infinite reversals deliberately arranged by the choreographer are precisely the practice of Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt in

dance, compelling the audience to shift from entertaining spectatorship to philosophical reflection.

4.2. The inversion of the audience-performance relationship: From voyeur to accomplice

"When spectators first encounter a literary or artistic work, they often complete superficial aesthetic appreciation as pure bystanders; at this point, there exists a significant gap between the subject's life experience and the meaning of the text, maintaining a stable aesthetic distance and Verfremdungseffekt." Yet as the audience's aesthetic consciousness gradually enters Shechter's stage, gradually constructing their own imagined carnival through extreme audio-visual experience, and immersively stepping into the clowns' arena of slaughter: on the one hand, the audience connects the violent signs accumulated during the appreciation process through their own aesthetic experience, completing personalized interpretations of "each finding their own resonance," ignoring the events that do not constitute events and the unmotivated contradictions in the script, filling in the narrative gaps of the work, and making uncertain factors concrete through their own logical self-consistency. On the other hand, they become trapped in the violent game, identifying with the characters, unconsciously mobilizing individual life experience, and venting and dissolving all the pressure and violent desires they could not realize in real life through this game. "When the two achieve sufficient fusion of horizons, the originally fragmented aesthetic distance is completely dissolved. The spectator is no longer a detached bystander, but glimpses their own life trajectory within the artistic narrative, completing the identity transformation from detached appreciation to immersive empathy, from outsider to 'character in the play.'"

"The more deeply you observe the mysteries of your own humanity, the more you will understand yourself, and consequently the more you will understand others." This cognitive logic of inward examination precisely articulates the ultimate irony of "upon looking again, one is already a character in the play," which is realized and completed within the deconstruction of power in theatrical space. When the tenth clown collapses with a crash, the stage lights suddenly turn toward the auditorium, the harsh light stinging everyone's vacant eyes and astonished expressions. At this moment, the safe barrier between stage and reality vanishes instantly, and the traditional boundaries of the audience-performance relationship are completely shattered.

Previously we sat comfortably in the dark, watching the farce onstage with a trace of easy amusement, treating the clowns' suffering as a distant performance, feeling that those absurdities and violence had nothing to do with us. But the harsh light surges forth, leaving nowhere to hide, forcing us to confront the parts of ourselves we are unwilling to acknowledge. Are those spectators laughing in the dark not also indifferent onlookers in the theater of reality?

Through this Beckettian theatrical revolution, Shechter reveals the most profound critical dimension of black humor—every spectator intoxicated by the aesthetics of violence, believing themselves to be detached, has unconsciously become an accomplice to the logic of violence. We mock the predicament of the characters onstage, only to turn and discover that we, too, are trapped in the absurd cycle of reality. As dance critic Susan Foster observes, "the ideological nature of the body" is confirmed here. When the audience applauds the exquisite technique of bodily control, they are in fact consuming the symbolic value of violent aesthetics; when people clap for the dramatic reversal of death and resurrection, they have unconsciously identified with the capitalist logic that life can be quantified. This inversion of the audience-performance relationship

constitutes the most pungent satire of contemporary cultural consumerism. The circular killing onstage ultimately completes its meaning-closure in the auditorium—we are both the "final victors" surviving at the play's end, and the potential initiators of a new cycle of violence.

5. Conclusion: Awakening in the rift between laughter and pain

Shechter's *Clowns*, through the progressive layering of three dimensions of black humor, articulates in dance the existential predicament in which modern humanity is entrapped. The alienation metaphors concealed within the characters, the violent destiny of the closed loop from beginning to end, and the reverse irony formed between stage and audience together compose a realistic allegory belonging to postmodern society.

Often when we laugh while watching a play, we are merely grateful that the suffering of the story has not befallen us. Yet the struggling limbs and repeated conflicts onstage will quietly strike at the moments of powerless struggle in ordinary people's lives. The spectator falls silent, while the heart surges with ineffable heaviness; this extreme emotional fragmentation is precisely the most authentic aesthetic core of black humor. It never promises redemption, but merely, within the absurd revelry, brutally tears open the mottled wounds of reality. The clowns onstage, using the body as language, dance an unceasing, tender yet stubborn dance of resistance within this displaced human world.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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