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*Über den Clown. Künstlerische und theoretische
Perspektiven* hrsg. von Richard Weihe (review)

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Über den Clown. Künstlerische und theoretische Perspektiven.

Herausgegeben von Richard Weihe. Bielefeld: transcript, 2016. 284 Seiten + zahlreiche s/w und farbige Abbildungen. €29,99 broschiert, €26,99 eBook.

The red rubber nose of the clown, famously known as the smallest mask in the world, conjures up many personalities and cultural impulses. Thirteen essays, plus an introduction and a synthetic conclusion, explore this figure from the inside and from the outside. The collection developed from a 2014 interdisciplinary conference at Monte Verita; editor Richard Weihe, Professor at the Swiss Academia Teatro Dimitri, transcribed and reworked some of the oral presentations for print.

The first half of the book consists of personal narratives of seven professional clowns: their experiences, motivations, and reflections on the profession. From the outset, it is striking how varied their stories and visions are. Russian clown Oleg Popov comes from a classic circus tradition; he identifies the duality of laughter and tears as the core of the clown's art. Others grow out of and work in a theatrical vein. Dimitri, a Swiss performer who found his calling via pantomime, sees the positive power of clowning in the promise of recovery as the clown solves a conflict after stumbling. For him, the clown is (after Henry Miller) a "handelnder Dichter" (58). Both Popov and Dimitri see Charlie Chaplin as a major inspiration, even where he does not appear as an explicit clown figure. American Jef Johnson, who has worked with circuses, actors, and university students, shifts his attention from the circus clown's humor of clumsiness and failure toward an aesthetic of creative nonsense. Actor and teacher Pierre Byland emphasizes his pedagogical approach and connects it to the radical poetics of Bertolt Brecht and Dario Fo.

Central to all clowns are issues of role play and simultaneous, often contradictory identities. As anthropologist and cultural historian Constantin von Barloewen observes in a conversation opening the second section of the volume, "Indem er stolpert, tritt der Clown aus sich heraus und blickt gleichsam aus der Vogelperspektive auf sich selbst. Indem er auf kritische Distanz zu sich selbst geht, gewinnt er an Größe. Er ist das Eingeständnis, dass es eine Welt jenseits der Norm geben kann" (131). Six contributions attempt theoretical and historical approaches through literature, theater, film, television, and political activism, with examples such as Chaplin's Tramp (Renate Juzik), Peter Carey's 1985 novel *Illywhacker* (Anna-Sophie Jürgens), or the 2015 protests against the European Central Bank in Frankfurt am Main. From the commedia dell'arte to the white and red clown (the "Stupid August") of the traditional circus, to dark and evil clowns, the figure is in constant flux, revealing ever new artistic and intellectual potential. Today, the clown maintains a perverse fascination in the horror visions of Stephen King's *It* (especially the television miniseries of 1990; the 2017 cinema adaptation appeared after this volume) and the Joker in the Batman film *The Dark Knight* (2008).

As the volume's subtitle indicates, this is an open-ended collection of diverse approaches, attempting no cohesive or comprehensive portrayal or theory, and the consciously vague definition of the genre of clowns embraces multiplicity and contradiction. The roots of the modern clown trace back to ancient times, in the roles of rural louts, fools and jesters, buffoons and tricksters. The framing essays by editor Weihe give the collection profile, especially the conclusion's discussion of the dia-

lectics of the clown, which reflects on the previous explorations. Weihe offers an ideal vision of the clown's improvisation and playfulness, which can reach the dimension of existential self-reflection, rule-breaking subversion, and even joyous anarchy. Melancholy often underpins the comedy. "What a sad business being funny," said Chaplin in *Limelight* (144). Emphasizing the paradox and inner tensions of the figure, Weihe then proposes a typology of seven forms of the clown that reveal the unity of opposites, for instance wise/foolish, male/female, laughter/weeping, harmlessness/cruelty. (Another duality, the ugly and the beautiful, could also be added.) For Weihe, the clown evokes "die Freiheit, Widersprüche auszuleben" (274). Female clown Gardi Hutter tells us in her narrative, "Es ist einfach, kompliziert zu sein—aber kompliziert, einfach zu sein" (103). Admittedly, the radical individuality and joyous creativity of the clowns themselves stand in dialectical tension with the dispassionate scholarship or *Wissenschaft* in the second half of collection, for theoreticians can all too easily ignore or destroy the pleasure of humor, as when Matthias Christen analyses the Joker's pun, "S/Laughter is the best medicine," as a "semantische Kippfigur" (233–234). "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can," E.B. White wrote in 1941, "but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."

Important aspects of the clown tradition are admittedly absent here, such as musical clowns (for instance the famous Grock) or puppet clowns such as Mr. Punch and Kasperle; there is no discussion of Shakespeare and only a fleeting reference to the scandalous clown scene in Brecht's "Lehrstück" (1929). Surprisingly, there is no mention of the murderous and tragic, self-destructive clown figure famously embodied in Mascagni's opera *Pagliacci* of 1892, who is clearly a forerunner of today's evil clowns. Also missing are female clowns, introduced by practicing clown Gardi Hutter, alias Hanna, who claims to have had no models for her art. Women or *Clowninnen* do not figure in the other essays; Lotte Goslar would have been an instructive example. Byland acknowledges the astonishing breakthrough of women at his school, but this still appears here as a solidly male tradition, where gender issues surface at best in moments of androgyny and gender-bending transgression such as implied femininity or explicit cross-dressing.

The most famous international circus enterprise, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, closed in May 2017, and many in the younger generation have never attended a live circus. As the form of the circus dies or transforms, the role and identity of the clown must necessarily change, too. The villainous Pennywise, Stitches, and the Joker, considered by Christen to be exemplars of the post-classical circus film, are all but removed from the context of actual circus performance, and the "big top" space seems irrelevant. Instead, the chaos of modern civilization has become the modern clown's three-ring theater of absurdity. Historians and performers as well as students of the theater, humor, and culture will find a wealth of forms, references, and inspirations in this collection. The clown offers a rich tradition of creative impulses and, as we see here, remains a vital figure of laughter and tears, of transgression and subversion in today's culture.