

# A Clown's Laughter Specificity: From "Anesthesia of Heart" to "Synesthesia of Love"

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## Abstract

The article provides insight into the insufficiently studied area of synesthesia in the art of clowning. The research methodology is based on the collection of essays by A. Berson "Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic". Herein laughter is regarded as a social creative proofreader, which signals that the creative driving force has been lost in the phenomenon/process. Besides, the author refers to the theory of A.G. Kozintsev. It states that at the stage of the "language Rubicon", anthropogenesis makes an evolutionary leap. After it, with the creation of language, a human being retains a direct two-element connection between signals and messages (inherited from animals), in particular, laughter. The latter is seen as something common between human being and animal. The difference is that a human responds to external signals not automatically, but selectively. The hypothesis of the study is that in the comic arts the connection between laughter stimulus and the response is formalized. The exception is the art of clowning, which goes beyond the comic, back to the tragic. It appears as a manifestation of human creative evolution, associated with the "language Rubicon". The article makes a point that a clown's laughter results from the multilevel structure of the psyche and is in a perfect step with "synesthesia of heart", love and empathy for the clown's character/masque. On the one hand, this unites it with the laughter of animals. On the other hand, this sharply distinguishes it by a strong feeling of laughter drama and tragedy. The laughter in a masque transforms tragedy into comedy. This gives reason to consider a clown's laughter in terms of synesthesia and addiction. The article is based on the author's report "Specificity of synesthesia as a form of world perception and worldview among satirists, comedians, clowns", presented at the conference "The phenomenon of synesthesia in the interdisciplinary space of scientific knowledge" (October 22-23, 2018 in Moscow, Russia).

**Keywords:** laughter, anesthesia, synesthesia, clown, addiction, empathy.

## Introduction

Despite the fact, that science focused on the phenomenon of synesthesia only at the close of the 19th century (this unusual reaction was registered for the first time in 1812) (Jewanski, Simner, Day, Ward, 2011), today there is no shortage of research on this subject (Chun, Hupé, 2016; Mailman, 2016; Rothen, Jünemann, Meador, and other, 2016; Mailman, 2018; Koshkina, 2018; Lunke, Meier, 2018; Steen, 2017; Lunke, Meier, 2018; From Sensation to Synaesthesia in Film and New Media, 2019). The interest in synesthesia raises amidst the global phenomenon of robotization, which results in dullness of intuition and non-fulfillment of creative potential in people, who over trust machines. More and more road accidents happen due to distraction for the gadget, overdependence on vehicle GPS, etc. (Steinert, 2017: 205). A few decades ago, synesthesia was considered as a clinical phenomenon and an anomaly. Today it has been proved that every

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person to some extent has synesthetic potential as an essential creative backup, hyper perceptual and sensual acuity. Synesthesia is interpreted not only as a multimodal experience of perception (Williams, Gumtau, Mackness, 2015), appearing in one sensory modality and unexpectedly provoking a stimulus for another one (Casini, 2017). It is also interpreted as a mono-modal sensation, blocking synesthetic echoes in another sensor channel, and so on. At present, researchers actively study emotional multiple layering of synesthesia. They pay attention to physiological aspects, associated with the perception of coded features that trigger synesthetic sensations. In modern multimodal communication (Van Leeuwen, 2016) synesthesia is regarded as an emotional amplifier. In the theory of new media (Harrasser, 2016) the interest in kinesthetic aspects of synesthesia is explained by the fact that modern media space reduces sensitivity and vitality. Synesthesia to some extent can make the deficit of full-fledged synesthetic sensations beneficial. For this purpose, there are extensive studies on opto-phono-kinesia (OPK), an audiovisual presentation, where all multimedia elements are controlled by body movements (Gibson, 2018). The auditory-visual synesthesia (Londero, Payre, et al., 2018), which promotes a better understanding of the neurobiological properties of multimodal perception, is a subject of particular interest. The so-called “color hearing” includes perception of colors in response to auditory stimuli. Now researchers are studying how to convert audio information into visual (Kawano, Yagi, 2017; Purik, Shakirova, Akhmadullin, 2018); how to use synesthesia in printed, audio and video advertising (Konanchuk, Grigorenko, 2018), as well as in video art (Morcillo, Faion, Zea, and other, 2016). In recent years, there has been a tendency to address synesthesia as a side effect, which occurs due to the extreme psycho-emotional conditions (grief, joy, euphoria, empathy, despair and addiction). Some studies place synesthesia in the context of a broader interpretation of empathy (Caliandro, 2004). Nevertheless, human laughter, as one of the consequences of such extreme conditions, was not interpreted as a synesthetic phenomenon until now. The definitions and metaphors, applied to the sphere of laughter and comic scenes, such as “comic acuity”, “anesthesia of heart”, “black humor”, “peals of laughter”, “laughter through tears”, “play-bite”, “tickling laughter” and so on, seriously makes one pay attention to the particular synesthetic nature of laughter. The reason for laughter analysis through synesthesia is multiple observations, which show that laughter as “physical activity ... can exist without humor” and “that comics or tickling, inhales of laughing gas, nervousness, shock or other non-humoristic incentives could be a source of laughter” (McDonald, 2012: 10). Laughter can be attributed to the synesthetic phenomenon, because it could not only be caused by experience, arising in any sensory modality, but can also provoke or block experience (sensation) in another modality.

The hypothesis of this study is that in the art of clowning as a manifestation of human creative evolution there is a correlation of empathy and laughter, which can be expressed through a particular synesthetic effect: reversibility between “anesthesia of heart” and “synesthesia of love” as processes.

## **Materials and Methods**

The theoretical basis of the study is research efforts on specific humor (Barrett, 2016; Dynel 2014; Gordon 2014; Kalbermatten 2018; Peifer, 2016; Phillips 2016; Shipley 2017; Westcott, Maggio, 2016), which arises amidst deep affection and sympathy. The research methodology based on the collection of essays by A. Berson “Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic” (Bergson, 1914), where laughter is interpreted as a social creative proofreader, signaling that a creative driving force has been lost in a phenomenon/process. Besides, this article is based upon the theory of A.G. Kozintsev. It states that at the stage of the “language Rubicon” when human

development makes an evolutionary leap followed by the emergence of language, a human being retains a direct two-element connection between signals and messages, inherited from animals (in particular, laughter). Here laughter is interpreted as something common between humans and animals. The difference is that a human reacts to external signals not automatically, but selectively (Kozintsev, 2018).

This study employs the theory of movement behavior by N.A. Bernstein. According to the theory, there are five levels of motion synthesis, which gradually develop alongside human evolution. The first level (A) is not leading, but backing, irreplaceable coordination level. It provides analysis of specific information from the muscles (position hold, some rhythms, compulsory movements and vibrations, etc.). Level B – is the level of synergy and stamps, and is responsible for the coherence of body movements, the vividness of facial expressions, the plasticity of movements, rhythmic and cyclical movements, etc. Level C is spatial. Level D is responsible for the interaction of the object with items and their meanings. According to N.A. Bernstein, Level E is responsible for all kinds of distractions, related to designs (artistic, scientific, ideological, designs of images and dreams, etc.). This level is largely attributed to the randomness of actions, as well as to the participation of other coordination levels. For this reason, the level "E" remains the most difficult even now. It is associated with the category of creative individuality (Bernstein, 2012).

This article also addresses the monography by B.F. Lomov. He considered mimic reflection, caused by a multilevel hierarchical system of the psyche, as consisting of subsystems, which are responsible for various functions (Lomov, 1984: 94). The cognitive system includes sensory-perceptual and verbally cogitative levels. The sensory level is important, in particular, for reaction to the external environment and various stimuli. The perceptual level predicts changes in space and time. Sensory and perceptual levels are irreplaceable in the process of anticipation, which manages decision-making (Lomov, 1984: 94). The first basic level of anticipation is sub-sensory (unconscious) (Lomov 1984: 95).

In addition, this research relies on the multilevel system of reaction, irritation and sensation by A.N. Leontyev. The author believed that, if an organism is located at a lower stage of evolution, it does not manifest sensitivity, but only irritability. In his opinion, the difference between the lowest and complex organisms is the following. For the former organism, it is quite easy to respond with active processes to positive or negative effects, which influence its life sustaining. Moreover, simple organisms do not have organs, responsible for absorption and movement (Leontiev 1959: 40). The more complex is an organism, the more selective becomes its irritability. The latter begins to manifest not only in vital but also in discrete non-connected processes. This way appears sensitivity. These processes are related to the object reflection of "environmental properties", affecting the organism (Leontiev, 1959: 45).

The research is based on three outstanding characters/masques (Asisyay, Charlie and Grock), performed by the globally known professional clowns of the 20th century, V.I. Polunin, Ch. Chaplin and Ch. Grock. Each of them had a special color sound palette, which was causing in spectators a particular range of feelings, based on sympathy and love. V.I. Polunin represents the theater of clowning. Chaplin is a comedian eccentric. Grock is the brightest example of musical eccentricity. Finally, the art of clowning was addressed in the context of painful addiction of an individual on their comic-tragic masque. Synesthesia of laughter as criteria of creative potential was investigated based on the in-depth interviews with modern street actors.

## Results

A comparative analysis of the literature has shown that humor is an important parameter in relations, based on empathic care. The researchers, who noted affiliative humor in the stable dyads of friendship, pay attention to the stability of irony within it and non-specific for animals' kind of hostile rhetoric, which performs a rather contradictory social function. It neutralizes aggression and contributes to the preservation of friendly relations, involving into familiar contact (playful beatings, games, etc.). This can occur when friendships risk being transformed into love relations. In this case, in order to maintain a friendship, a person steps back from the object of their sympathy at some ironic distance, despite the non-controlled desire to be closer to them.

Therefore, the researchers find biologically strange, almost abnormal, not only laughter but also its triggers and the actions that it provokes. They note that when people laugh, they violate social conventions (exaggerating the emotions that they do not feel, insulting their soulmates; while pranking, people lie to their friends and make them feel embarrassment and even pain) (Morreal, 2009: 2). In this connection, there is a relevant theory of laughter by the French philosopher A. Bergson. He believed that laughter is the greatest anesthesia of heart. While laughing, people become non-sensitive to a certain kind of feelings, associated with sympathy and compassion, in order to experience sensations of the comic and funny. Another oddity of humor is that what is laughable for one person is not necessarily laughable for another. Hence, a proposition suggested by the lecturer in American literature at Wolverhampton University, Paul McDonalds, is quite true. He states that the concept of "entertainment" is important for understanding the humorous mental state that can provoke laughter (McDonald, 2012: 10). Paul MacDonalld believes that, in the course of human evolution, humor advanced similarly to the development of cognitive ability. For example, John Morrill believes that humor of early humans developed only within the transformation of an outer game into an inner game (a game of thoughts). In his opinion, animals are not capable of it. D. Morrell also suggests that humor created noise and lead to inappropriate use of energy, intended for survival of Homo Sapiens. It made our ancestors more vulnerable and they become an easy trophy for predators (Morrel 2009: 43; McDonald, 2012: 14). Nevertheless, most researchers share the same point that primate's laughter as a meta-communicative signal of play and friendliness (Van Hooff, 1972) in a special way relates to the origin of humor (Polimeni, Reiss, 2013).

Steffen Steinert, the researcher at the Munich Center for Neurosciences of Ludwig Maximilian University, believes that humor and comic in the interpretation of A. Bergson is a new way of thinking in the modern technological culture (Steinert, 2017: 201). The author refers to A. Berson's "Laughter" (Steinert, 2017: 202) and focuses on the idea of automation of a comic creature, whose actions are similar to a machine (Bergson 1914: 29), and on the idea of a mechanism installed into the living (Bergson 1914: 37). Steinert believes that humor allows people to zoom up to the universal scale of the game, fooling around, dominating, confirming their thoughts with neurobiological data, according to which humorous stimuli reward our mesolimbic system. S. Steinert also addresses A. Bergson's theory of creative evolution. According to it, people are vitalized only in the process of creativity. In other words, according to A. Bergson, it happens only in the process of "elan vital" driving force (Bergson, 1998), which is responsible for our flexibility (Steinert, 2017: 2003).

P. McDonalds stresses that "humor is a creative activity, and the repeated studies show that people are more creative and receptive to new concepts when they are in the "humorous mode" (McDonald, 2012: 8). S. Steinert makes a very important point that in his book on creative evolution A. Bergson no longer "makes a significant difference between organs and machines"

(Steinert, 2017: 203). Steinert, addressing laughter in the interpretation by A. Berson, believes that its function is in social correction (Steinert, 2017: 203), in warning about insufficiency of our creative reaction and flexibility; warning people about the "danger of stasis" (McDonald, 2012: 39), the opposite to creative evolution. It is the opposite of understanding of laughter nature that reflects the range of approaches to the understanding of evolution. In a remark by P. Maratti, quoted by S. Steinert, "on the one hand, the evolutionary theory and paleontology indisputably argue for the consistent emergence of new life forms; on the other hand, the evolutionary theories cannot comprehend the creative force of time" (Marrati, 2010: 4).

As a result, given the aspects of A.G. Kozintsev's theory about the "language Rubicon" stage (when human evolution makes an evolutionary leap, followed by appearance of language, a human being gains an ability to react selectively to incoming information), it can be concluded that A. Bergson's theory of theory is very convincing. It allows the researchers to conclude that in the comic arts the connection of laughter stimulus and the reaction fixed is not selectively, but almost automatically, as it happens in animals.

The art of clowning was addressed in the context of temporal addiction of an individual to their comic-tragic masque. This masque is of particular interest since it demonstrates the selectivity of the reaction to the ridiculous and tragic, and the absence of a direct relationship between laughter stimulus and the reaction. Based on the analysis of interviews by several respondents (professionally engaged in the art of clowning and street theater), it was revealed that they demonstrate typical for all clowns and actors example of brooding on their characters/masques, and a temporary empathic addiction on them. We shall note that the same method was applied (in his own way) by D. Rodari in the process of composition of fantastic stories with children. The same principle is strongly expressed in the movies by F. Fellini, in S. Dali's artworks and in the imagination of many other bright actors, directors and artists.

One can say that, in the art of clowning, the phenomenon of personal clown's dependence on their masque is a universal technology of ambivalent melting of "life and disease", and transformation of the disease into the creative energy of carnival. That is why any creative process, associated with self-identification with an object of attention, love, and so on, should give way to dis-identification. The latter is a temporary "anesthesia of feelings", due to which a person begins to "mismatch with themselves", "get out of themselves", "reflect on self-reflection" and so on. The main universal criteria for overcoming addiction by a clown from her twin in the game was presented by. It is not only ironic and comic attitude to it, outsidership, but also a full acceptance of her comic masque.

This reversible melting of "synesthesia of love" into "anesthesia of heart" and back is clearly revealed in Ch. Grock, who, being a virtuoso, always pretended not to be keen on playing the piano or violin, and showing some negligence.

The color sound synesthesia was an inseparable component in his playing, resulting in fantastic musical comic scores and instruments with an unusual sound. Grock organized his playful, comic existence, incorporating in it subject-related transformations. He invented new, unusual musical instruments (a ball that accompanies violin, a piano lid with which he clapped). He created and reproduced in the audience the multimodal sensations (visual, auditory, skin-muscular, osmatic-gustatory and vestibular, etc.). Transformation of a subject, as one of the methods to provoke synesthesia, gives to it a "comic paradoxical sound" (for example, Grock repeatedly misuses the bow, scratching his back with it). Despite the fact that the outstanding clown and musical eccentric Ch. Grock achieved the comic effect in music with gag, an imitation of human sounds, and synesthesia (in particular, enhancing the sound series with visual, and the

visual with sound series, misused in structure of the composition with “squeaking” balloons, allowing to imitate various voices and sounds), he owes his success not to his perfect technique of “causing laughter” in public, but to the empathy for his character. The Ch. Chaplin’s character is built on the same principles.

Color sound synesthesia is the key to Asisyay’s image by V.I. Polunin, who calls his character “Yellow”. The actor always maintains the necessary distance in relation to his character. All the three clowns, being eminent philosophers, develop a common understanding of the essence of clowning. They noted that the clown masque reflects constant mobility of the inner world of an individual. In their opinion, an important feature of the masque is the touching and tragicomic nature, the empathy of the clown in relation to his character. Characters by V.I. Polunin, Ch. Chaplin and Ch. Grock personify precisely this tragicomic, imperfect human essence, which is ridiculous, tragic, absurd and naive. One can see that each masque of these three clowns is not worn, but carried and born. The masque for them is a companion.

The findings of comparative analysis of the emotional-color nature of laughter in clowning are in line with findings in the area of emotional-color synesthesia by D. Ward. He conducted a study of stimuli, provoking emotionally mediated synesthesia. The author revealed appearance in volunteers of synesthesia of color in response to a limited range of stimuli, which have emotional coloring (Ward 2004: 761-772). The study by D. Ward is important for the current analysis because it shows that those words, which have an emotional connotation, tend to cause a synesthetic response (reaction). The valence of love emotion (positive or negative) often acts as a stimulus for the appearance of emotional color synesthesia. D. Ward scrutinized reaction on the pronunciation of the word “love”, on its acoustic sounding, on the preservation of its invariant in the intonation, as well as in a spelling form (L-O-V-E). He examined the affective component of this word, which proximately arises sensation of synesthesia of color.

It was revealed that the names of the clowns studied are more likely to cause synesthesia of color than names of unknown clowns. Besides, they are associated with light or bright colors.

In the course of the pilot study, 20 answers by actors of the modern street theater (Semenova, 2018), who are passionate about finding their own clown masque, were analyzed. To the question of what the clown masque means to them, the idea that it is the only guide in the carnival world rather than in the everyday world sounded most often. Several actors replied that the clowning is a kind of environment, a parallel universe (which exists separately from ours) with its own rules and laws, including physical ones. A clown is an ordinary inhabitant here. In this universe, interaction at the molecular level is different from that in our world. All the respondents tended to associate a clown with a unique human vocation and talent. One actor who joined a street theater over 10 years ago, had an almost Bakhtin understanding of the carnival nature of fools and clowns. In her opinion, a clown always remains a clown: when they sleep or cook borsch, marry or die because they are native to clownery and are a source of clownery. She concluded that a clown is a very intelligent artist who employs all the best of human foolishness in their creative work, raising them to the top of art revelation. One of the performers said that a clown lives in each of us, but not everyone dares to show it to others. Almost all the actors confirmed that, in a close circle, they have a nickname or a name-masque. There was a question about the color association of the clown. The answers showed that the word “clown” is mainly colored in bright, hardly expressible colors, associated with laughter and fun, friends and “fountain of emotions”.

## Discussion

It looks promising to introduce into the definition of clownery additional criteria of "outsiderness", which enables one to get closer to the essence of synesthetic nature of clown's laughter. One can see that Bakhtin's concept of "outsiderness" is present in the art of clowning as the infernal nature of the Other. This Other is not a real person and not someone who can expel my external image and take my own place. It is someone, who participates in my dream and plays a certain role in it. The interchange between "synesthesia of love" and "anesthesia of heart" (Semenova, 2018: 369) in relation to their characters is typical for clowns.

The principle of the Other's infernal nature functions in the Internet environment, where appears a touch-sensitive illusion of the presence of a partner in the game. The question is if this illusion of a partner in laugh's presence in virtual space can completely replace face-to-face contact. In addition, if this illusion can result in laughter epidemics, where laughter is impossible to stop.

## Conclusion

A clown's laughter appears as a result of multilevel construction of psyche and is in perfect step with "synesthesia of heart", love and empathy for their character/masque. On the one hand, it is related to an animal's laughter. On the other hand, there is one big difference between them, since the clown, being a deeply tragicomic character, is capable to evoke in audience one of the most resonating, multimodal feelings — synthesis of laughter, tragedy and love. The clown's laughter is comparable to the protective synesthetic response to the experience of suffering.

Based on the Bernstein's understanding of motion synthesis, a clown's activity was featured as a multilevel structure with the comical background. (The latter becomes more complicated and transforms into more complex integrative formation, comparable to the highest coordination.) The activity as a structure consists of five innate and advancing components: 1) paradoxical reflex, sense of comic, nature of laughter (the first stage, which appears in a child, a comedian and a satirist); 2) sensitivity to the comic (the process of recognition of comic scenes, understanding norms) (also typical for a child, a comedian, a satirist); 3) carnival activity in time and space (typical for clowns); 4) alogisms and paradoxes as objects, considered as object-related actions (common for clowns, children, musical eccentrics, scientists and artists); 5) carnival environment-space of origin of new meanings (the highest creative level, typical for clowns, geniuses and artists).

Therefore, if our irritability becomes more selective, the laughter too becomes more complex. It may cause not only "anesthesia of heart", but also overwhelming by emotions.

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