

Subverting Sonic Conventions: The Languages and Non-languages of Clowns Montreal, February 5–7, 2026

This conference will bring together scholars, artists, and practitioners to reflect on the languages and non-languages of clowns and their relationship to the sound world of clowning. The conference will occur in conjunction with the world premiere of Ana Sokolović's opera *Clown(s)*, presented by the Opéra de Montréal. Inspired by *Masques et bouffons* by Maurice Sand (1859), *Clown(s)* honours the history of clowns through a clown's life cycle, from infancy and childhood through old age. Structured in seven non-narrative tableaux, the opera engages with different artforms—puppetry, *magie nouvelle* (new magic), circus arts, shadow play, and pantomime—and takes inspiration from the performances of Dario Fo and the films of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Jacques Tati, and Federico Fellini. Sokolović varies the number of singers and instrumentation of each tableau, exploring multiple dimensions of the clown sound world and its relationship to opera.

The unconventional languages of clowns—invented languages, the replacement of words by gestures, and other forms of language that break with convention—are often cited as a central aspect of their subversive role. When describing the character of Lucky in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, Michael Bala (2010) notes his “formalistic speech that is directed against language itself,” and then “reverts to beast-like speechlessness.” According to Paul Bouissac (2015), clowns “exploit the resources of particular languages” and “undermine the ground upon which our language and society rest by revealing their fragility.” Similarly, David Robb (2007) describes the “nonsense-speak” of clowns as exposing “the arbitrary nature of symbolic conventions,” a characteristic which allows them “to mock officialdom and subvert power relations.” Finally, Donald McManus (2003) suggests that the clown is defined by an “ability, through skill or stupidity, to break the rules governing the fictional world.”

Despite the importance of languages (and non-languages) to clowning, a comparative study examining their different appearances, modes of expression, and aesthetic and political implications across cultures and time periods is still missing. Furthermore, there are neither studies dedicated to the clown's sound world—the relationship between silence and sound effects, the musical characteristics and instrumentation associated with the clown figure (explored by Sokolović in her opera)—nor on the relationship between this sound world and the visual effects considered central to the practice of clowning (Dutton 2015) or the representation of clowns in film. Clowns can take on many forms: circus performer, sad clown, court jester, trickster, sacred clown, *chou* in *jingju* (Beijing opera), *commedia dell'arte* character, protagonist of slapstick cinema, stand-up comic, or therapeutic clown working with patients in hospitals (Caron 2006, Carter 2011, Christen 1998, Ferrone 2024, Moses Peaslee et Weiner 2015, Robb 2007, Rudlin 2022, Thorpe 2005, among others). What appears to connect them is their marginality, their non-conformity, their ability to break conventions and name taboos—integrating, in the words of resistance theorist James Scott (1990), their “hidden transcripts” (critiques of power) in the “public transcript” (official discourse). Both included in and excluded from dominant discourse, clowns embody the interconnexion between power and resistance (Amoore et Hall 2013).

We invite presentations in English or French that explore the languages, non-languages, and sound world of clowns across time periods, cultures, and artistic disciplines. We welcome a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, including (but not limited to) musicology, film, theatre studies, anthropology, sociology, art history, literary studies, and psychology.

Alongside traditional twenty-minute academic papers, we encourage alternative presentation formats of up to thirty minutes that break with convention, inspired by the theme and spirit of this conference. These include (but are not limited to) performances, artworks, interactive workshops, lecture-recitals, and audiovisual projections.

To submit a proposal, please fill out the following form by June 20, 2025: <https://forms.gle/xuTn3ZU5SVpotQ9h8>. Each submission must include author's name, email address,

affiliation (if applicable), type of presentation, title, and an abstract of no more than 350 words. For presenters proposing a different format than a twenty-minute talk, we invite the inclusion of sample audio and/or video material directly in the form.

The conference welcomes presentation in English and in French and will take place entirely in person. Registration to the conference is free, but it will be possible to purchase tickets for the performance of *Clown(s)* on February 5 or 8 (further information will follow). If you submit a proposal, please hold the dates of the conference (February 5–7, 2026) until the announcement of acceptances in early October 2025.

For any questions, please contact the conference coordinator at the following address: clowns2026@gmail.com.

Organizing committee: Zoey Cochran, Tara Karmous, Ana Sokolović

Program committee: Zoey Cochran, Catrina Flint, Robert Hasegawa, Isabelle Raynauld, Pierre Vachon

Selected references:

Amoore, Louise and Alexandra Hall. "The Clown at the Gates of the Camp: Sovereignty, Resistance and the Figure of the Fool." *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 2 (2013): 93–110.

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Bouissac, Paul. *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning: Rituals of Transgression and the Theory of Laughter*. London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Caron, James E. "Silent Slapstick Film as Ritualized Clowning: The Example of Charlie Chaplin." *Studies in American Humor, New Series* 3, no. 14 (2006): 5–22.

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Cezard, Delphine. *Les "Nouveaux" clowns. Approche sociologique de l'identité, de la profession et de l'art du clown aujourd'hui*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014.

Christen, Kimberly A. *Clowns and Tricksters: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture*. Denver: ABC-CLIO, 1998.

Course, Magnus. "The Clown Within: Becoming White and Mapuche Ritual Clowns." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 4 (2013): 771–799.

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Dagenais, Yves. *Le petit auguste alphabétique: dictionnaire illustré des clowns*. Paris: Magellan et Cie, 2015.

Dutton, Julian. *Keeping Quiet: Visual Comedy in the Age of Sound*. Luton: Andrews UK, 2015.

Ferrone, Siro. *La commedia dell'arte: actrices et acteurs italiens en Europe (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)*. Translated from Italian by Françoise Decroisette. Paris: Sorbonne Université, 2024.

Fleury, Raphaële et Julie Sermon (dir.). *Marionnettes et pouvoir: censures, propagandes, résistances*. Montpellier: Deuxième époque, Institut international de la marionnette, 2019.

Gosselin, Jackie. *Une exploration du jeu clownesque ou les vertus de l'échec*. Montréal: PUM, 2022.

Irving, Margaret. "Toward a Female Clown Practice: Transgression, Archetype and Myth." Thesis. University of Plymouth, 2013.

Kelly, Hana. "The Potential of the Clown to Renegotiate Notions of Femininity in Contemporary Performance: Ester Van Der Walt's *Transparent*." *South African Theatre Journal* 30, no. 1–3 (2017): 46–54.

McManus, Donald. *No Kidding! Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth-Century Theater*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003.

Moses Peaslee, Robert and Robert G. Weiner. *The Joker: A Serious Study of The Clown Prince of Crime*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

Peacock, Louise. *Serious Play: Modern Clown Performance*. Bristol, Chicago: intellect, 2009.

Robb, David. *Clowns, Fools and Picares: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction and Film*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007.

Rudlin, John. *Metamorphoses of Commedia dell'Arte: Whatever Happened to Harlequin?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Russell, Jacqueline. "A Clown of His/Her/Their Own: Clown and Gender Performativity." *Canadian Theatre Review* 183 (2020): 62–66.

Sund, Judy. "Why So Sad? Watteau's Pierrots." *The Art Bulletin* 98, no. 3 (2016): 321–347.

Thorpe, Ashley. "Only Joking? The Relationship between the Clown and Percussion in 'Jungju'." *Asian Theatre Journal* 22, no. 2 (2005): 269–292.

Toffin, Gérard. "Ritual Clowns and Laughter in the Religions of the Nepalese Himalayas." *Anthropologica* 61, no. 1 (2019): 111–122.

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