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# CLOWNS

## Why they creep us out

By FRANK T. McANDREW  
Knox College via  
The Conversation

Hollywood has long exploited our deep ambivalence about clowns, and this fall's film lineup is no different.

Stephen King's evil clown, Pennywise, is currently making his second screen appearance in two years in "It Chapter Two" while Batman's demented nemesis The Joker, played by Joaquin Phoenix, will appear as the antihero of his origin story, "Joker."

How did a mainstay of children's birthday parties start to become an embodiment of pure evil?

In fact, a 2008 study conducted in England revealed that very few children actually like clowns. It also concluded that the common practice of decorating children's wards in hospitals with pictures of clowns may create the exact opposite of a nurturing environment. It's no wonder so many people hate Ronald McDonald.

But as a psychologist, I'm not just interested in pointing out that clowns give us the creeps; I'm also interested in why we find them so disturbing.

In 2016, I published a study entitled "On the Nature of Creepiness" with one of my colleagues.

In 2016, writer Benjamin Radford published "Bad Clowns," in which he traces the historical evolution of clowns into unpredictable, menacing creatures.

The persona of the creepy clown really came into its own after serial killer John Wayne Gacy was captured. In the 1970s, Gacy appeared at children's birthday parties as "Pogo the Clown" and also regularly painted pictures of clowns. When the authorities discovered that he had killed at least 33 people, burying most of them in the crawl space of his suburban Chicago home, the connection between clowns and dangerous psychopathic behavior became forever fixed in the collective unconscious of Americans.

Then, for several months in 2016, creepy clowns terrorized America.

Reports emerged from at least 10 different states. In Florida, fiendish clowns were spotted lurking by the side of the road. In South Carolina, clowns were reportedly trying to lure women and children into the woods.

It isn't clear which of these incidents were tales of clowning around and which were truly menacing abduction attempts. Nonetheless, the perpetrators seem to be tapping into the primal dread that so many children — and more than a few adults — experience in the presence of



Bill Skarsgard stars as "Pennywise" in "It Chapter 2," which is screened at Theatres Ka'ahumanu Cinemas.

as creepy are much more likely females, that unpredictability component of creepiness, and terms of eye contact and other factors set off our creepiness detector. Unusual or strange phys