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A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic, and Laughter

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A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic, and Laughter

Establishing a decisive nexus between gender, laughter, and media, this article not only critically discusses the often contradictorily defined concepts of humour, the comic, and laughter but also introduces to the most important theories in these fields with reference to Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Baudelaire, Sigmund Freud, Mikhail Bakhtin, Helmuth Plessner, Anton C. Zijderveld, Judith Butler, Bernhard Greiner, Hans Robert Jauss, Peter L. Berger, and others. Basic concepts such as the “significantly comic” versus the “absolutely comic” or the “comedy of denigration and exclusion” versus the “comedy of valorization and inclusion” are interrogated and the link between comedy, citationality, performativity as well as parody is established. Moreover, this article explores the sociological, psychoanalytical, bodily and theological dimensions to laughter and questions notions such as the carnivalesque and the grotesque. It is argued that the liberating potential of “full laughter” can be understood as the return of the body, of the repressed, and of the Other, and that if it is precisely this ‘other realm’ which ultimately makes laughter possible, laughter simultaneously is humankind’s best means of dealing with it.

But laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh. It is the peasant’s entertainment, the drunkard’s license; [. . .] laughter remains base, a defense for the simple, a mystery desecrated for the plebeians. [. . .] Laughter frees the villein from fear of the Devil [. . .]. Laughter, for a few moments, distracts the villein from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God.¹

Gender – Laughter – Media

For more than three years, the Canadian-German research project and conference series “Gender – Laughter – Media” has concentrated on how humour, the comic, and laughter question, subvert, criticize, ‘correct’ but also strengthen and affirm gender identities and gender norms. By doing so, “Gender – Laughter – Media” has related the vast territory of laughter – which oscillates between valorisation and denigration, inclusion and exclusion, affirmation and subversion, and extends to the grotesque, the ludicrous, nonsense², and the plainly silly – to gender identities and their representation and construction across various media. That there is indeed a decisive nexus between gender,

¹ Jorge of Burgos (Eco 474f.).

² For a more detailed discussion of nonsense and of linguistic manifestations of humour such as spoonerisms and puns cf. Stemmler and Horlacher; Horlacher, Nonsense; Zijderveld, Trend Report 10–12. For a discussion of laughter and comedy in Anglophone postcolonial literatures and cultures cf. Reichl and Stein.

laughter, and media has, at least partly, been observed by Manfred Pfister in his *History of English Laughter*, where he argues that one “of the main incentives or targets of laughter has, indeed, been the sexual sphere, and, in particular, female sexuality”, and that “gender roles, relations and hierarchies – and, in particular, their transgressions! – have proved the common laughing stock of cultures otherwise far apart from each other” (Pfister vi). Analysing the possible subversion or affirmation of gender identities through humour, the comic, and laughter becomes even more relevant if we consider Sigmund Freud’s line of argument that we “are inclined to give the *thought* the benefit of what has pleased us in the *form* of the joke”, so that we “are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure” (162). From this it follows that to “perceive a situation as humorous causes it to appear less discriminatory, and more acceptable” (Bill and Naus 659). But if sexism “disguised by and delivered through humor” is potentially interpreted “as being harmless and innocent” (646), and thus tends to escape criticism altogether, if “[p]erceiving and labeling an incident as humorous appears to diminish its sexist content” (660), this only increases the necessity for a critical analysis of the “comic mode” (Lodge 170) with special attention to its ability to hide patriarchal, sexist, and even misogynist tendencies in literature, plays, films, and other media.

As a matter of fact, a study of the medial creation and representation of laughter should enable us to “reveal the fault lines of the anxieties and the social pressures at work at any given historical moment” (Pfister vii) and in any culture or society we choose to analyse. For such a study, the literary, auditory, theatrical, and televisual, or cinematic representations of laughter have the advantage of revealing these points of contention and debate even more clearly than actual laughter does since they allow us to analyse “the symbolic systems of representations” – that is “culture as first, second and higher order systems of signs”³ – rather than the social reality they represent and to include the diachronic, historical dimension as well as the anticipatory power of art conceived of as a *savoir littéraire* in the broadest sense (Horlacher, Literatur).

Art is thereby considered as a special sign system which, notwithstanding its historical imprint, transcends any narrow notion of mimesis that would reduce it to a mirror or a simple image of reality. Whatever the medium of artistic expression, be it literary texts, radio plays, theatre, film, body art, or other performances, all of these art-forms are a central part of that “larger symbolic

³ Pfister vii. Any ‘history of laughter’ – just as any ‘history of sexuality’ – “can only be the history of social discourses, representations, performances and practices through which cultural processing of laughter is effectuated”. A history of laughter is then the history of the – often conflicting – norms giving social shape to and circumscribing “the anthropological impulse of laughter in a particular society” (Pfister v).

order by which a culture imagines its relation to the conditions of its existence” (Matus 5). Notwithstanding their medial form, imaginative ‘texts’ “are able to ‘mobilize fantasies without legislating action,’ and can constitute a space in which shared anxieties and tensions are articulated and symbolically addressed” (ibid. 7). They not only represent the laughter of a particular society but simultaneously give shape to it, analyse and frequently problematize it (cf. Pfister). Moreover, these texts, or works of art, are especially rewarding objects of analysis since they have the ability to articulate impressions, intuitions, mentalities, and pre-scientific forms of knowledge long before – if ever – they reach the status of the collective consciousness (Horlacher, *Daniel Martin*); they are forms of knowledge which cannot be articulated or even conceived of outside the realm of art because this is exactly the space where – analogous to dreams – the borders of (self-)censorship are potentially lowered and the unthinkable, the liminal, the forbidden, and the experimental, in the sense of Raymond Ruyer’s utopian mode (*mode utopique*), can be articulated. The different forms of art analysed in this volume all have the potential to create a simultaneity of the unsimultaneous, of the clearly possible and the barely conceivable, of the officially sanctioned and the expressly forbidden. Their unique potential rests in their capacity to render the possible worlds or realities they create ‘real’ in the sense of liveable (that is able to be experienced, tested and criticized), so that they can be understood as a privileged space where the important work on a cultural imaginary takes place (cf. Fluck 7–29).

The Quixotic Interrelatedness of Humour, the Comic, and Laughter

While Mikhail Bakhtin argues that “[l]aughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth” that “cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils” (94), Georges Minois contends that “[l]e rire est une affaire trop sérieuse pour être laissée aux comiques” (9) (“[l]aughter is far too serious to be left to comedians”). These contradictory statements raise the question of how far it is possible, or even desirable, to write seriously (not to say dry-as-dust à la Sir Walter Scott) about laughter (cf. Kuschel 11), and how far it is reasonable to expect that “after having thoroughly *examined the structure of comic experience*” one can with a serious demeanour “declare to the world *what it is*” (Berger xv).

Laughter is evanescent, negates differences, and harbours paradoxical traits. The problems for analysis arising from this are well documented in scholarly literature: “How many jokes”, Peter L. Berger asks, “could survive treatment by philosophers?” (xiv). And if the comic experience is fragile and inherently fleeting, if laughter is volatile, “an ephemeral performance, not a lasting text or monument”, if laughter “vanishes with the situation that occasioned it” (Pfister vii), how can it be taken apart or held up for scrutiny? That there is no simple

answer becomes obvious if one takes a look at Minois's impressive *Histoire du rire et de la dérision* and his reference to Edmund Bergler's *Laughter and the Sense of Humour*, where already in 1956 Bergler listed more than 80 theories of laughter. Although philosophical theories of laughter may explain different and complimentary aspects of laughter, and despite this list having become much longer by now, none of these theories really manages to comprehensively explain the phenomenon of laughter. One of the reasons for this may well reside in the fact that the term "laughter" comprises many different and contradictory realities, that in analogy to Jacques Lacan's famous "THE woman does not exist" (*Il n'y a pas La femme*), THE laughter does not exist either: "*Le rire n'existe pas*" (Minois 484; cf. Pfister v). THE laughter is an illusion since there are always only endlessly proliferating forms of laughter, their only point in common being their physical manifestation; however, a physical manifestation that can stand for a whole variety of feelings, ideas, and intentions (Minois 484), that has a historically and culturally variable and instable significance, and therefore needs interpretation. Moreover,

[f]ür das Lachen ist [. . .] keine Wissenschaft zuständig; es entzieht sich jedem bestimmenden Zugriff. Die Vorstellung eines objektiv erkannten Lachens wäre lächerlich; sie verfehlt das Lachen, indem sie es zu einem Gegenstand der Erkenntnis macht. Das Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Lachen, Philosophie und Wissenschaft scheint unaufhebbar (Kamper and Wulf 9).

[there is n]o single academic discipline [. . .] expressly devoted to the study of laughter; it exceeds any attempt at precise definition. The idea of an objectively definable notion of laughter is risible; it misses the point of laughter by making laughter an object of knowledge. The relationship of tension between laughter, philosophy and science appears to be irresolvable.⁴

More recently, Renate Brosch has also argued that until "today no transhistorical cause for laughter, no transhistorical definition for a joke has been found" (158). If one of the main problems seems to be the 'nature' of the object of analysis itself, another problem is that in scholarly literature about humour, the comic, and laughter these terms are either used without clear definitions or the definitions given are contradictory. It seems that what one scholar calls humour, another defines as belonging to the comic. The problems arising from this for the "Gender – Laughter – Media" project as well as for this introduction are obvious: On the one hand, no serious survey of theories of humour, the comic, and laughter can work without defining these concepts or phenomena; on the other hand, it makes no sense to simply impose new definitions and – by

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. All emphases in citations are according to the original. I would like to thank Dr. Sigrun Meinig, Claudia Lainka MA, and Peter Stear MA for their editorial help and for the stimulating and rewarding discussions.

doing so – to create, in all likelihood, yet more artificial categories that cut across the multiplicity of notions and concepts already available to literary theorists, social scientists, and philosophers.

For this reason I shall not endeavour to (re-)structure or (re-)categorize the relevant theories of Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Baudelaire, Sigmund Freud, Mikhail Bakhtin, or Anton C. Zijderveld only to then ascertain that there is a mutual incompatibility between these theories since each of them works with slightly different internal differentiations between the terms in question so that sometimes the terms humour, the comic, and laughter even appear interchangeable (cf. Zijderveld, Trend Report 2; Titze et al. 201). I shall instead adhere to a primarily but not exclusively descriptive approach, in other words, a *tour d’horizon* of a selection of the most relevant studies on humour, the comic, and laughter as well as of the multifarious definitions – and problems – they advance.⁵

Mahadev L. Apte ascribes in his book on *Humor and Laughter* the following three attributes to humour: “1) sources that act as potential stimuli; 2) the cognitive and intellectual activity responsible for the perception and evaluation of these sources leading to humor experience; and 3) behavioral responses that are expressed as smiling or laughter or both” (13f). Apte has to concede, however, that the

term ‘humor’ and other expressions derived from it have been used to refer to all three phases or to any one of them. [. . .] Similarly, meanings of ‘humor’ include the behavioral responses of smiling or laughter. For many scholars the term ‘laughter’ is synonymous with the term ‘humor’ [. . .], and the phrase ‘theories of laughter’ often means theories of humor (14).

Bernhard Greiner argues along similar lines when he states that “[s]ystematischer Aufarbeitung hat sich die Komödie bisher verschlossen. Hierzu bedürfte es eines integrierenden Blickpunktes, an dem es offenbar gebricht” (Greiner 3) (“comedy has up to now evaded systematic research because no integrative perspective has yet been found”) and that the situation is even more problematic if one takes a look at theories of humour or of the comic:

Auch aus der Komik-Theorie wurde ein übergreifender Blickpunkt nicht gewonnen. Das mag in dem eigenartigen Mißverständnis gründen zwischen hochkomplizierten, zugleich autistischen Entwürfen auf der einen Seite, die frühere oder gleichzeitige Theoriebildung nur marginal zur Kenntnis nehmen, und einem letztlich doch nur

⁵ This approach accords with Georges Minois (11) who argues that it is always too early or too late to try to elaborate a synthesis of the major theories of humour, the comic, and laughter. Therefore I can only ask the reader not to take this essay for more than it is, namely a selective and necessarily incomplete introduction and not a rigorous synthesis or re-conceptualization.

verbrämten Fortschreiben der schon immer herausgehobenen Dichotomie zweier Grundformen des Komischen, einer Komik der Herabsetzung, des Ver-Lachens, als intellektuelles Phänomen und einer Komik der Heraufsetzung, des Bejahens von Unterdrücktem und Verdrängtem und damit der Anerkennung des Lustprinzips (3).

An overarching perspective could not be gleaned from comedy theory either. This may arise from the peculiar misunderstanding between, on the one hand, the highly complicated and at the same time autistic designs that refer to earlier or contemporary theory formations only marginally and, in the final analysis, a scarcely veiled continuation of an always already emphasized dichotomy of two basic forms of the comic: a comedy of denigration and exclusion, of laughing at, as an intellectual phenomenon, and a comedy of valorization and inclusion, of celebrating the oppressed and the repressed, and thereby of accepting the pleasure principle.

The pleasure principle takes us, of course, directly to Freud, who discusses the phenomena in question in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* as well as in a short article published in 1928 in *Imago*. Freud advances the following definition:

We are now at the end of our task, having reduced the mechanism of humorous pleasure to a formula analogous to those for comic pleasure and for jokes. The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy in expenditure upon ideation (upon cathexis) and the pleasure in humour from an economy in expenditure upon feeling. In all three modes of working of our mental apparatus the pleasure is derived from an economy. All three are agreed in representing methods of regaining from mental activity a pleasure which has in fact been lost through the development of that activity (Freud 293).⁶

Peter L. Berger, to continue our survey, defines humour as “the capacity to perceive something as being funny”. He calls humour universal and argues that “there has been no human culture without it” since humour is “a necessary constituent of humanity” (ibid. x; cf. Zijderfeld, Trend Report 37f.; Titze et al. 201). What we have to be aware of, however, is the fact that “what strikes people as funny and what they do in order to provoke a humorous response differs enormously from age to age, and from society to society” (Berger x). Thus, humour is both an anthropological constant and historically relative. “Yet, beyond or behind all the relativities, there is [. . .] something that humor”, understood as an inherent human trait or ability, “is believed to perceive” (ibid.). This “something” is, if we follow Berger, the phenomenon of the comic. Thus the comic would be “the objective correlate of humor”, and humour would be regarded as a “subjective capacity”. What Berger suggests is a hierarchical structure which consists 1) of the comic which – as he argues – is

⁶ Cf. Zijderfeld, Trend Report 39 and 27 for a commentary typical of research on the comic. Among other things, Zijderfeld calls Freud’s “distinction among what he called Witz, Humor and Komik [. . .] like most conceptual differentiations concerning humour, quite arbitrary and rather vague”.

beyond good and evil, 2) of humour, which can be used for good or evil purposes, and 3) of laughter as the expression of our finding something humorous.

For the sociologist Anton C. Zijderveld humour is “something living in something (institutionally) mechanical” (Trend Report 21) and can be considered as “an interaction in which people play with institutionalized meanings within a situation that ought to be defined as being humorous and funny through laughter. In defining the situation as humorous or not, values play a decisive role” (9). Why values are important becomes obvious if we consider that for Zijderveld (Jokes; Trend Report) humour can be defined as playing with the institutionalized, traditional, and differentiated values and norms of a given society. A humorist or a comedian is a *homo ludens* who engages in cultural juggling: He or she playfully reshuffles the components of the surrounding *nomos*, turns the established order of opposites such as masculinity and femininity or good and evil around, and inverts traditional hierarchies. By doing so, special attention is paid to the ambiguities and incongruities of the human condition since they form the essence of most verbal and practical jokes. Although the humorist is sometimes a *homo homini lupus*, stressing the aggressive and derisive dimension of laughter, humorous words, acts, and events normally tend to constitute a mirthful interlude, not a rebellion or revolution that aims at the fundamental change or destruction of the traditional order.⁷ Another important characteristic of humour for Zijderveld, one that it shares with literature or art in general, is its potential to anticipate knowledge, to create alternative worlds, and to bypass censorship because of its feigned lack of seriousness, because we are not “inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure” (Freud 162).

Humour carries an enigmatic quality: it is itself unrealistic and thereby able to demonstrate that reality as we know and live it could well be otherwise; that alternatives, as unreal and absurd as they may seem to be, are not unthinkable. Humour shares this with utopias, and it is up to the audience to decide, by a laughing response, whether a utopia is nothing but a joke (Zijderveld, Trend Report 58).

If humour “is viewed as an emergent property of human interaction”, emerging, as we have seen, “because of the defining work of laughter”, it follows that “[a] situation is defined as humorous by the laughing response that it elicits” (Coser 172). In accordance with this, Zijderveld argues that in a sociological sense laughter is the only appropriate language of humour and is a constitutive component of the humorous situation.⁸ This emphasis on the importance of laughter, however, leads to our next question, namely: How to define laughter?

⁷ As Zijderveld argues, destroying the cultural order would for the humorist or *homo ludens* be equivalent to a child destroying its toys.

⁸ “[L]aughter is more than a response: it is constitutive of the emerging symbolic interaction” which, if laughter arises, can “be called a humorous incident”. (Zijderveld, Trend Report 34).

Throughout history laughter has often been ‘forbidden’ and been regarded as dangerous; laughter is rather unpredictable and the intention to be humorous or funny is neither sufficient to make people laugh nor essential to humour or to the comic.⁹ Aristotle states in his *De Partibus Animalium* that man is the “only one of the animals that laughs” (69). In other words, humans are defined by their ability to laugh. Similar opinions are voiced by Rabelais – “Le rire est le propre de l’homme” (cf. Siguret 103) (“laughter is the property of man”) –, Baudelaire – “Laughter is satanic, and, therefore, profoundly human” (117)¹⁰ – and Nietzsche: “Das leidendste Tier auf Erden erfand sich – das *Lachen*” (Nietzsche, *Aus dem Nachlaß* 467) (“The earthly creature that suffered most discovered for itself – laughter”). According to Nietzsche, human beings suffer so intensely that they needed to create laughter in order to survive: “the anxious, crouching creature springs up, greatly expands – man laughs”.¹¹ From this one can conclude that laughter indeed appears to be an anthropological constant and “a human feature that has defined humanity as *homo ridens* or, at least, *homo risus capax*” (Pfister v; Zijderveld, Trend Report 6).

Moreover, laughter is certainly more than “a gesture or psychic mechanism. It is [. . .] a human expression, comparable and congenial to crying”, with these two expressions having in common “that they lie on the borderline of the conscious and meaningful on the one hand, and the unconscious and psychical on the other” (Zijderveld, Trend Report 28). For Helmuth Plessner laughter as well as crying reveal “the essence of the *conditio humana*, which consists in the fact that human beings not only *have* a body, but at the very same time also *are* a body” (Plessner; cf. Zijderveld, Trend Report 28), that they are both physically and psychically determined. This fundamental ‘ambivalence’ is regarded by Plessner as being unique in the cosmos and corroborates his notion of “man’s eccentric position in nature”. In this line of argument, both crying and laughing “are caused by circumstances to which people cannot respond readily and adequately” (Zijderveld, Trend Report 29), such as a sudden event or an unexpected word:

We lose our heads, we capitulate as persons, and the body-we-have takes the lead – through laughter, or tears. The body-we-have is now no longer an instrument of mind, language and behaviour. On the contrary, the crying or laughing body has

⁹ “A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear/ Of him that hears it, never in the tongue/ Of him that makes it” (Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* V.ii. 843–845). On the one hand, there are numerous acts, words and events that are not at all intended to be funny or humorous, and yet are experienced as being so by those who witness it; on the other hand, thinking of stand-up comedians, there are people who – often desperately – try to be funny, yet are perceived not to be so by others.

¹⁰ Cf. Siguret 103; Minois 489.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human* 89; cf. Minois 474–477; Greiner 106–108.

taken command of the mind and expresses what the body-we-are could not express. In this sense, crying and laughing are autonomous expressions, and thus not mere responses to stimuli (ibid.).

As both Bergson and Zijderveld among others have argued, “[l]aughter is always a *fait social*. This is as true of convivial laughter as of the lonely or even pathological laugh of an alienated individual. Each instance of laughter is inextricably tied up with social and power relations and framed within a social situation” (Pfister, vi) or constellation. Thus there is a triangular relationship between (1) “the ‘laughter-maker’” as the person “who incites laughter by making a joke or drawing attention to some absurdity, (2) the ‘butt of laughter’ as its target or victim, and (3) the ‘laugher(s),’ i.e. the laughing audience” (vi). This social triangle is “constructed along parameters of gender, class, race, age or other crucial differences operative in the respective culture” (Pfister vi; cf. Brosch, 158). Laughter, therefore, functions as an indicator of the tensions and contradictions existing in a given society and enables us to critically analyse social situations and mechanisms. As the bonding effects of laughter, to give but one example, tend to establish rhetorical or discursive communities (Hutcheon; Titze et al. 204), laughter can be seen as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, of valorisation on the one hand and of denigration on the other. Moreover, laughter is often caught up in the distinction between the centre and margin any given

society employs to establish and stabilise its identity: in one society, the predominant form of laughter can be that which aims from the site of the ideological or power centre at what is to be marginalised or excluded altogether; in another, the most significant form of laughter can arise from the margins, challenging and subverting the established orthodoxies, authorities and hierarchies (Pfister vi).

However, if many theorists tend to view laughter as a rather one-dimensional phenomenon, namely as a social corrective linked to power, one should mention that there are also other conceptions of laughter such as Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “full laughter” which is universal, liberating, and revitalizing. For Bakhtin laughter abolishes frontiers, is immune to death, spreads everywhere and covers all aspects of life. It is seen as a dynamic link between our body in the sense of its animal and biological aspects, and our culture in the sense of intellect. Moreover, for Bakhtin laughter entails plurality and ignores interdictions. It is the enemy of censorship and allows mankind to temporarily enter the utopian realm of universality, liberty, equality, and abundance.

Mechanisms of the Comic: Comparison/Exclusion/Denigration –
Identification/Inclusion/Valorization – Citationality/Performativity/Parody

In attempting to define what makes us laugh, scholars usually refer to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where the Greek philosopher states: “For the comic is constituted by a

fault and a mark of shame, but lacking in pain or destruction: to take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and misshapen, but does not express pain” (36). Thus, for Aristotle the phenomenon that something makes us laugh is characterized by flaws, distortion, and the absence of pain. This implies a transgression of norms which, however, is only experienced as funny if it does not cause real harm.

“[J]e nachdem ob das Komische der Herabsetzung eines heroischen Ideals in eine Gegenbildlichkeit oder ob es der Heraufsetzung des materiell Leiblichen der menschlichen Natur entspringt” (Jauß 104) (“Depending on whether the comedy is intended to denigrate an heroic ideal thereby turning it into its opposite or to celebrate and valorize the bodily of human nature”), Hans Robert Jauß differentiates between two fundamental aspects inherent to the comic; firstly denigration or exclusion (*Komik der Herabsetzung und des Ver-Lachens*), which works with the help of contrasts and incongruencies (*Inkongruenz- und Kontrastkomik*); and secondly, valorisation or inclusion (*Komik der Heraufsetzung und des Mit-Lachens*; cf. Andreas Böhn’s contribution in this volume), which is liberating and has recourse to the grotesque, thereby emphasizing the corporeal and the creaturely. In Greiner’s description:

Die Komik der Herabsetzung stellt einen Helden in seiner erwarteten Vollkommenheit, eine Norm in ihrer behaupteten Gültigkeit in Frage. Der komische Held ist dabei nicht an sich selbst komisch, sondern vor einem Horizont bestimmter Erwartungen oder Normen. So ist Komik der Herabsetzung eine der Gegenbildlichkeit, was Vergleichen voraussetzt. [. . .] Die kognitive Funktion der Komik der Gegenbildlichkeit bzw. der Herabsetzung kann so darin erkannt werden, Normen zur Debatte zu stellen, zu verspotten bzw. zu problematisieren, was in destruktiver wie affirmativer Hinsicht geschehen kann. Die Herabsetzung schließt ein, daß der Betrachter, der den komischen Helden an Normen mißt und an diesen als scheiternd erkennt, sich überlegen fühlt. Die Versetzung des Helden in eine komische Situation löst den Bann der admirativen Identifikation und läßt den lachenden Betrachter (als lachenden Dritten gegenüber Subjekt und Objekt der Komik) ein Moment der Überlegenheit und Unbetroffenheit gegenüber dem ihm sonst überlegenen und ihn betroffen machenden Helden genießen (97).

The comedy of exclusion or denigration questions the assumed perfection of a hero, the presumed validity of a norm. The comic hero is thus not funny in himself, rather he is so against a horizon of set expectations and norms. The comedy of exclusion or denigration is as such representation by contrast, which presupposes the act of comparison. [. . .] The cognitive function of comedy based on contrastive representation, i.e. denigration, can be ascertained in that it opens up norms to debate, mocks or problematizes them: an act that can be destructive or affirmative. Denigration includes the fact that the viewer, who judges the comic hero against norms and views him to have failed with regard to these, feels himself superior. By placing the hero in a comic situation, the spell of identification through admiration is broken and allows the laughing viewer (as the laughing third party in contrast to the subject and the object of comedy) to enjoy a moment of superiority and detachedness towards the otherwise superior and empathy-inducing hero.

As a matter of fact, most modern theories of laughter “revived the instrumental view of the Aristotle-, Hobbes-, Shaftesbury-tradition of laughing *at*” (Brosch 157). This tradition defines “laughter as an essentially malicious instinct” and justifies it “not only for its subjective and social functions but also through the ridiculous properties of the laughable object itself” (ibid.). Thus the blame for laughter is laid on its object, while the laugher is conceived of as “a discerning individual who exposes the defects of someone to justified and corrective ridicule” (ibid.). What has to be noted, however, is that the ‘laughing-*at*-position’ implies a ‘laughing-*with*-position’ insofar as laughing *at* someone who transgresses a norm always requires the implicit acceptance of and identification with the norm. Thus either we laugh *at* someone and therefore *with* the norm or, if the norm is felt to be absurd or obsolete, we laugh *at* the norm and *with* the transgressor. From this it follows that either the transgressor or the transgressed norm is being denigrated and consequently – at least as long as the notion of the comic referred to is based on comparison (which presupposes a contrastive image or a kind of disorder that creates a cognitive and moral dissonance) – that the widespread but simplistic differentiation between a ‘laughing-*at*-position’ and a ‘laughing-*with*-position’ is not a particularly pertinent one but much more one of perspective and hierarchy.

A slightly different notion of the comic is advanced by Emil Staiger in his *Basic Concepts of Poetics*, in which he argues that the comic “falls out of the framework of a world and exists naturally and unproblematically outside of this framework. [. . .] But the phallus and belly in Aristophanes, the huge red nose or ear that stands out like a spoon: these fall out of the framework, too. The framework is made up here of the network of relationships within an organic whole of the type we have in mind when we look at a human body” (170).

The key elements that for Staiger define the comic situation are a transgression of or a deviation from norms, the absence of suffering (cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*), and what he calls *Fraglosigkeit* or unquestionability. By this term he means a happy ignorance of the system of norms held up by the social frame. Thus he implicitly reduces the importance of norms and of the faculty of comparison and comes close to Jauß’s notion of a *Komik der Heraufsetzung und des Mit-Lachens*. In accordance with this position, many critics have argued that in direct contrast to the position of ‘laughing-*at*’ and the thereby implied position of ‘laughing-*with*’ offered by the comedy of denigration, an inclusive comedy of valorisation that exalts life offers a ‘laughing-*with*-position’ (*Mit-Lachen*) of a quite different quality. It is open to debate whether, as Greiner and others have reasoned, this notion of the comic really works entirely without an intellectual moment of comparison and differentiation. Also questionable is whether phenomena such as the proliferating body or the grotesque are really beyond norms or whether the norms are still there but simply less relevant since this form of the comic privileges identification over comparison and differentiation. One

could even ask whether the grotesque, just as with the aesthetics of deviation, has not in itself become a norm. What we can say, however, is that

[d]ie Komik der Heraufsetzung [. . .] den Abstand zwischen Rezipienten und Helden in einem lachenden Einvernehmen verschwinden [läßt], sei dies ein Einvernehmen über die Befreiung des Sinnlichen, über das Sich-Durchsetzen des Lustprinzips oder des Triumphes über die Gewalten der normativen Welt (Greiner 98).

[t]his inclusive, valorising and elevating notion of the comic [. . .] allows the distance between recipient and hero to dissolve into harmonious laughter, whether this is a harmony about the liberation of the senses, the acceptance of the pleasure principle or a triumph over the authorities in the normative world.

Jauß has called this notion of the comic, which will be discussed in more detail below, grotesque comedy (*groteske Komik*),

denn das Groteske kennzeichnet, was den Reiz dieser Art Komik ausmacht: das Aufheben aller Grenzen, das Mischen, Durcheinandergehen, unbekümmert um Gebote der ‘Sitte’ und Normen, damit auch eine verschmelzende, den einzelnen in seiner Besonderheit zum Verschwinden bringende Partizipation, das Entstehen und ordnungslose Sich-Ausbreiten von Lachgemeinden aus dem Einvernehmen im Freisetzen von Affekten. Daher hat die ‘groteske Komik’ einen elementar unbewußten Charakter, manifestiert sie sich wesentlich körperlich, an dem in Sitte nicht gebändigten Körper (Greiner 98).

because the grotesque typifies what constitutes the appeal of this form of comedy: the transcendence of all boundaries, an intermingling and muddling up with scant regard to the demands of morality and norms, concomitantly a dissolving of the individual’s singularity through participation, the creation and unstructured spreading of communities of laughter due to the harmonious freeing up of emotions. That is why ‘grotesque comedy’ has such a fundamentally unconscious character, manifests itself essentially through the bodily, through a body that is not subject to the norms of morality.

Another form of the comic which depends on the body and escapes the dichotomy of denigration versus valorisation is epitomized by Judith Butler’s notion of performativity. For Butler, performativity effectively links sexual identity, and foremost gender, via citationality to parody, subversion, and the comic.¹²

In analogy to Susan Sontag’s concept of “camp” – “To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre” (Sontag 280) – which allows for an interpretation of “camp” as a set of techniques of resignification in

¹² Since this nexus has already been alluded to in the introductory essay by Gaby Pailer, I will restrict myself to some additional remarks pertaining to notions of performativity, to the role of the body and to parody. For a more extended discussion of parody and camp cf. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*; Meyer and Meyer.

which irony, the burlesque, pastiche, and parody all converge (cf. Preciado), Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal call Butler's concept of gender "a kind of improvisational theatre" and stress "the possibilities opened up in *Gender Trouble* of being able to use transgressive performances such as drag to help decentre or destabilise gender categories". However, it should be kept in mind that based on Foucault, Lacan, and on Derrida's rewriting of Austin,¹³ Butler clearly transcends the notion of camp when she 1) argues that gender can be considered as "*a corporeal style, an 'act' [. . .] which is both intentional and performative*" (*Gender Trouble* 139), 2) identifies a "desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body", 3) locates the possibility for subversion of patriarchal power in subversive performances of gender, and 4) states that there "is no gender behind the expressions of gender", i.e. that gender identity "is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (ibid. 25). If performativity thus becomes "the vehicle through which ontological effects are established", and if to perform gender means that "acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means", it should be noted that this ultimately stresses the importance of the body. Bodies do matter since 1) cultural expressions such as discourse, speech, and language are determined by their embodiment (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 10f. and 141f.), 2) speech "is literally enacted because the body acts and is active when we speak" (Meinig 71), and 3) the relation between speech and the body can be regarded as scandalous (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 10) and ultimately takes the form of a chiasmus: "Speech is bodily, but the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation" (155f.).¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Butler, *Excitable Speech* 148–151; Lloyd 197: "Butler's theory of gender performativity echoes both Austin and Derrida in proposing that the performative 'enacts or produces that which it names' [. . .]. She differs from Austin, however, in rejecting the idea that there is an autonomous agent that authors performative utterances. Instead, she takes from Derrida the idea that intentionality is always limited by the iterability of the sign. Repetition is central to performativity. This means that performative utterances are not singular events but, rather, the effects of 'citational doubling' [. . .]. Performativity [. . .] thus operates through the 'reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' [. . .]. It is not in a single act of constitution or invention that the subject is brought into being, but through re-citation and repetition. This [. . .] has an important bearing on the capacity of parodic recitation to produce certain transgressive effects".

¹⁴ "The body doubles what we say when we use expressions which are saturated with social and historical meaning and thus opens up a realm beyond those already established expressions. Thus, new meaning and also self-determination become possible. It is this inherent opportunity for enactment and even self-conscious theatricality which Butler refers to as performativity" (Meinig 71; cf. Krämer 253–255).

If, as Meinig argues, “the embodied view of performativity alerts us to the agency and the opportunity for subversive acts that result from our embodied speaking”, it is (especially in Butler’s earlier work) above all drag which by “disclosing that there is no original to imitate” fulfils a denaturalizing function, “divulging the culturally fabricated nature of gender”, and revealing “all gender as only ever parody” and therefore as inherently subversive. However, if the fact that “the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 136), this entails in Butler’s reading a ‘radicalization’ of the notion of parody since gender parody can then of course not assume

that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original [. . .], so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself (138).

Referring to Fredric Jameson’s article *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, Butler concedes that “the imitation that mocks the notion of an original is characteristic of pastiche rather than parody” (ibid.; cf. Lloyd), that whereas pastiche is a “neutral practice of mimicry”, parody is characterized by having an ulterior motive, a satirical impulse, is geared towards laughter and haunted by “that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic” (Jameson 114). Nevertheless, already the “loss of the sense of ‘the normal’ [. . .] can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal,’ ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 138f.). Moreover, there is another point where the comic and laughter interpolate into Butler’s argument: Drawing on Lacan’s article *The Signification of the Phallus* and on the notion of *masquerade*, Butler argues that the supposedly original heterosexual – as well as any other – sexual position is intrinsically and fundamentally comic (46f.; Lacan 289) and becomes a constant parody of itself:

It’s not just the norm of heterosexuality that is tenuous. It’s all sexual norms. I think that every sexual position is fundamentally comic. If you say “I can only desire X” , what you’ve immediately done, in rendering desire exclusively, is created a whole set of positions which are unthinkable from the standpoint of your identity. Now, I

take it that one of the essential aspects of comedy emerges when you end up actually occupying a position that you have just announced to be unthinkable. That is funny. There's a terrible self-subversion in it (Butler qtd. in Osborne and Segal).

Sociological and Psychoanalytical Dimensions to Laughter: Henri Bergson, Anton C. Zijderveld, Sigmund Freud

While humour can be regarded as the subjective capacity to experience something as being comic or funny, a sociological perspective allows us to define humour as a matter of social interaction and communication. Indeed, humour and laughter are social “by nature”, and laughter is always a group phenomenon.¹⁵ For Henri Bergson, whose notion of humour derives from his philosophical concept of vitalism, laughter creates a kind of complicity among people since it is linked to the popular imagination. Life is a continuous stream of consciousness, of time-awareness, of *durée* which is characterized by a *souplesse intérieure*, a certain plasticity and elasticity. Deficiencies in these qualities lead to a mechanization of the individual, to illness, stiffness, and inadequacy. Comedy, then, arises from a mechanical repetition across time – from *la mécanisation de la vie* – in something living and vibrant, and can be considered as a process whereby a human being is turned into a thing, an object, a machine, a robot. “Society will therefore be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity” (Bergson 73). If an individual as part of an organically conceived society lacks elasticity, which Bergson considers characteristic of any evolving community, and if he or she threatens to transgress social norms, society uses laughter to re-socialize and to reintegrate him or her. And since laughter arises because the mechanical is unexpected, because *le mécanique plaqué sur du vivant* takes us by surprise, Bergson's theory is another example for a theory of the comic based on contrast and incongruity. In a positive sense laughter serves to revitalize and to de-mechanize the individual. It is less a sign of superiority on the part of those doing the laughing than it is a reaching out, an attempt to save the individual and to reconnect him or her to life. Pierre Siguret has called Bergson's definition of laughter

particulier en ce qu'il rend le mal pour le mal, mais en vue du bien. Il souligne l'insensibilité du spectateur indifférent, et il a pour fonction d'intimider en humiliant, car il possède un fond de malice et même de méchanceté. Par son biais, les excen- tricités sont réprimées, ce qui conduit à une amélioration, voire une perfection générale (Siguret 108; cf. Minois 481).

¹⁵ “Our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (Bergson 64).

special in so far as it fights evil with evil but with the intention towards good. It stresses the insensitivity of the indifferent onlooker, and its function is to intimidate by humiliating because it contains malice and even maliciousness. Thereby, eccentricities are censured, which leads to amelioration and even to general perfection.

The counter-position to Bergson is represented by Zijderveld. According to him, the systems of values, norms, and meanings which structure the lives of individuals in any given society possess three basic characteristics: They are institutionalized, traditional, and differentiated. Values and norms constitute a meaningful moral order or *nomos* intended to enable individuals to live meaningful, coherent lives and to interact accordingly. In order to participate in the moral order of one's society, it is necessary to connect to the chain of tradition and to its synchronic dimension, i.e. to the values prevalent at a given point in time. Institutionalization is paired with enculturation, and since human life is subject to institutions, patterns and structures, it can – at least from a sociological point of view – be called mechanical. Not Bergson's *durée*, not his vitalist individualism, but habitualization, routinization, and role-behaviour are the sociological characteristics of human life. Only because of this are, as many sociologists argue, our actions, thoughts and feelings predictable, understandable and accountable. Through humour, this sociological order is temporarily (until the laughter has ended) disrupted: Contingencies, surprises, and defamiliarizations occur during humorous interaction so that humour can be defined as a social game in which human beings play with the values, norms, and meanings of their society. From this it follows that, in contrast to Bergson's view, for Zijderveld humour or comedy cannot be interpreted as a mechanization of life, but rather as a vitalization of what happens to be socio-culturally mechanical. There is moreover an added dimension to Zijderveld's argument when he points out that in most cultures this humorous play with institutionalized values, norms, and meanings is itself organized and institutionalized, so that even a putative de-mechanization of life is subjugated to mechanical control.¹⁶

In a brief analysis of Freud's book on jokes, Tobias Döring argues that with the exception of Sarah Kofman's *Pourquoi rit-on? Freud et le mot d'esprit*, "most other recent studies in the field of humour research [. . .] rarely refer to Freud, let alone engage with his laughter theory in any sustained or even critical manner" (123). If, for obvious reasons, this introduction does not intend to offer the critical analysis asked for by Döring, it can at least attempt to counteract the

¹⁶ Even if, as the "societies of fools", court jesters, and feasts such as carnival prove, the play with traditional and sacred values seems to be an inherent human need, it is nevertheless viewed as threatening by those in power and is kept under control by means of institutionalization and organization.

neglect of Freudian thought in this area. In his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud states that in laughter

the conditions are present under which a sum of psychical energy which has hitherto been used for cathexis is allowed free discharge. And since laughter – not all laughter, it is true, but certainly laughter at a joke – is an indication of pleasure, we shall be inclined to relate this pleasure to the lifting of the cathexis which has previously been present. If we see that the hearer of a joke laughs but that its creator cannot laugh, this may amount to telling us that in the hearer a cathectic expenditure has been lifted and discharged, while in the construction of the joke there have been obstacles either to the lifting or to the possibility of discharge. The psychical process in the hearer, the joke's third person, can scarcely be more aptly described than by stressing the fact that he has bought the pleasure of the joke with very small expenditure on his own part. He might be said to have been presented with it (181f.).

Döring correctly argues that if “a joke only works for those who hear it and who, like a present, receive it free, their laughter signifies the working of a rather ambiguous relation between the joke-creator and the joke-hearer” (127). As has already been shown, this connection needs three agents to function properly, so that Freud's theory of laughter is based on a “triangular construction that cuts across the fundamental” and simplistic distinction of ‘laughing *at*’ versus ‘laughing *with*’. For Freud these two versions coincide since they are socially linked and functionally dependent, thus bearing some semblance to what has been described above as a comedy of denigration in the sense that by laughing *at* someone or something one always, and be it only implicitly, also laughs *with* someone or something. Döring summarizes the functioning of a tendentious joke as follows:

In his triangle of relations, Number One bribes Number Three into complicity to laugh *with* him *at* Number Two. In this way we can see how the social relationship established by joking emerges as an economy of exchanging substitutes, with laughter operating as the currency of payment. Number One tells the tendentious joke *instead of* satisfying his desire for Number Two directly; Number Three receives the satisfying joke for free *instead of* having to approach Number Two himself; so Number Three now has surplus pleasure which he pays off by laughing; his laughter, in turn, serves Number One, who is satisfied to receive at least this much pleasure *instead of* his own laughter (128).

From this we can conclude that

laughter results from a process not monitored by conscious knowledge. The mechanisms of its pleasure in the discharge of psychical energy largely operate in the unconscious and must effectively remain there to operate below the level of control. This is why Freud concludes that the symptom of laughter always hides as much as it reveals: it shields the whole economy of secret pleasures from

the censoring power of our consciousness and, instead, reveals them only in the substitute form of compressions or omission – as they become manifest in the linguistic form of jokes (128).¹⁷

What remains to be explained, however, are the “mechanisms” which “operate in the unconscious” and which “must effectively remain there” on the level of psychological or psychoanalytical deep structures: in other words, how are we to fathom 1) what laughter hides and 2) why, when laughing, we re-enter “the mood of our childhood” (Freud)?

Joachim Ritter has suggested that laughter is able to reconcile the ruling order with its excluded other. According to him, “[w]as das Komische ausmacht, ist dies, dass immer mittelbar und unmittelbar in den einen Bedeutungsbereich, der sich harmlos und einwandfrei zulässig gibt, der andere hineingespielt wird, der in jenem gerade ausgeschlossen und als nicht dazugehörig beiseite gebracht ist” (Ritter 73f.) (“[t]he comic can be defined by the fact that it indirectly as well as directly introduces into a seemingly harmless and acceptable semantic field a second semantic field that significantly was excluded from the first because it was viewed as being inappropriate”). Although the first semantic field excludes the second, evoking Jacques Derrida’s logic of the supplement, it can never do without the other and is therefore linked to, interspersed or intertwined with it.

Das Wesentliche ist immer die Bewegung, in der eine an sich nicht gemeinte und ferner in der anständigen Rede auch nicht zugelassene Sphäre in diese anständige Rede selbst derart eingewoben wird, dass sie selbst diese kundtun und aussprechen muss (Ritter 74).

What is essential is the tendency whereby what was unintended and as a sphere not even permitted in respectable speech becomes itself so interwoven into the fabric of respectable speech that the latter must reveal and express the former.

Thus the comic compels the excluding power, i.e. the realm of the morally acceptable, the symbolic order etc., to verbalize what it intends to exclude: the chaotic, the unreasonable, the outrageous, the semiotic (cf. Kristeva). Another important feature of the comic as envisaged here is that it consists of a triple movement, namely 1) a transcendence of the existing symbolic order, 2) a reaching out for the realm of the excluded, and 3) a manifestation of what has

¹⁷ For Freud’s topic model and its relation to humour cf. Pietzcker; cf. also Titze et al. 216f.; Döring 128: “While humour [. . .] offers a way to avoid or alleviate suffering, Freud’s account of its psychical working does not abandon the triangular construction established in his analysis of jokes. In the case of humour, though, the triangle appears internalized and seems to correspond to his topic model of id, ego and super-ego. Thus, humour functions within the individual and lies entirely in internal psychical dynamics, whereas jokes operate in a social setting and typically involve three people”.

hitherto been excluded in and through the symbolic itself, or, in other words, the manifestation of the excluded area in and by means of the excluding area itself (cf. Greiner 117).

Similarly to Ritter's line of reasoning, namely that seriousness excludes wishes and desires which nevertheless are an integral part of life, the symbolic order excludes – or at least endeavours to exclude – drives and semiotic interferences. But since the fact that these interferences are excluded does not mean that they no longer exist, one can assume that that which is negated is the product of the very system which negates it and that instead of being destroyed it is implicitly validated. Thus, in analogy to Michel Foucault's work on power, repression 'produces' the repressed and simultaneously verifies and attests to its belonging to the repressive system itself. Laughter, then, 1) demonstrates that the ostracized is and has always been a part of the very order that excludes it and 2) proves that there is an implicit and secret identity between the power of exclusion and that which is excluded. From this perspective laughter is simultaneously criticism and affirmation. It criticizes the 'serious' world and its order and is an expression of happiness and plenitude, accepting or even celebrating the right of the excluded. However, if the comic implies the presence of something excluded, i.e. the instinctual drives of the id, as part of the excluding power, that is the super-ego, this also recalls Freud's work on dreams. During sleep a lowered censorship allows our dreams to manifest our desires, albeit coded and transformed, among other things by condensation and displacement, by metaphor and metonymy. A joke, Freud argues, works analogously and partially reverses the work of repression imposed on us by culture.¹⁸ For obvious reasons, cracking a joke can be read as a re-entry into the Oedipal constellation. Given that the early Oedipal relationship characterizes the human ego by a basic structural negation – "Thou shall not!" – and that old fears are reawakened whenever the ego is confronted with an analogous constellation, it is possible to say that the person who laughs represents the excluding and censoring order. He is a negating listener who – just for the duration of the joke – takes a bribe and allows forbidden desire and pleasure while the object desired becomes the target of aggression and derision. Instead of attacking Lacan's "Name-of-the-Father"/"No-of-the-Father" (*nom/non du père*), i.e. the forbidding father and the castrating symbolic order he symbolizes, instead of attacking the super-ego and its representative(s), i.e. the listener(s), these 'authorities' are turned into allies against the original object of desire. Why this

¹⁸ Whereas we constantly have to invest psychic energy into inhibitions in order to keep up the barriers which a repressive culture erects in our minds, the "pleasure in jokes [. . .] arise[s] from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition" (Freud 293), so that we laugh because we have saved the energy needed to repress the repressed (cf. Minois 483f.; Brosch 158).

object is attacked becomes clear if one takes into consideration that what is desired in the Oedipal constellation is the mother, that this desire can never be granted and that this non-fulfilment entails aggression. A successful joke momentarily deprives the Oedipal structure of its power to intervene, and the listener, representing the symbolic order or the super-ego, conserves psychic energy and is free to laugh and to accept chaos. This only works, however, because even in a joke the incestuous desire to possess the mother is never fulfilled, because aggression takes the place of desire and because the person who laughs does not run the risk of being lost in a chaotic universe since they are always backed by the narrator of the joke, who does not laugh, and therefore remains solidly rooted in the symbolic order. While the audience is freed from its self-censorship and internalized structure of self-repression, it is never bereft of the support of the symbolic order so that although the power that excludes gives a voice to the excluded, it never loses control. In contrast, for example, to a ‘radical’ reading of Bakhtin (see below), Freud considers the culture of laughter as a part of the symbolic order which firmly stays in control (cf. Zijderfeld, Trend Report 9). From this it follows that his conception of the comic and of humour is rather conciliatory, integrating the repressed and thus disarming it (cf. Louis Ratisbonne qtd. in Minois 478).

Charles Baudelaire, Mikhail Bakhtin, and the Liberating Potential of “Full Laughter”

Not to lose control is, as Baudelaire writes in his essay “The Essence of Laughter”, a sign of the “Wise Man” who “does not laugh, does not abandon himself to laughter, without an accompanying tremor. The Wise Man trembles because he has laughed [. . .] [and he] pulls himself up on the brink of laughter as on the brink of temptation” (112).

For Baudelaire mankind is torn between good and bad. Laughter is fuelled by these two elements and characterized by its double nature, showing our unconscious pride as well as our fear of damnation: “It seems certain, if we adopt the orthodox view, that human laughter is intimately connected with the accident of an original fall, of a degradation both of the body and the mind” (ibid.). The angelic and the diabolic work together and are both present in a laughter which is essentially as human as it is contradictory, being proof of “infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness: of infinite wretchedness by comparison with the absolute Being who exists as an idea in Man’s mind; of an infinite grandeur by comparison with the animals. It is from the perpetual shock produced by these two infinities that laughter proceeds” (117; cf. Siguret 104).

Principally, Baudelaire distinguishes between (at least) two different kinds of laughter: The first form of laughter which he calls the “significantly comic” (*comique significatif*) is a comedy of superiority since it is characterized by

satanic aspects – “laughter is man’s way of biting” (113) – and since those who laugh mainly enjoy the fact that they are superior to those they laugh about, Satanic laughter is inexhaustible and completely free of compassion or pity, the only exception possible being the laughter of children, which Baudelaire links to the concept of joy.¹⁹ But even the laughter of children “is not wholly devoid of ambition” given that children are but “Satans in the bud” (120). Thus, in the last consequence, laughter really becomes diabolic; it serves as proof of the human feeling of superiority, of the desire to make other people suffer, and it is linked to madness.

Laughter, they say, comes of superiority. [. . .] A satanic idea if ever there was one! Pride and aberration! Now it is a notorious fact that patients in a madhouse are all of them suffering from the idea, developed beyond the normal, of their own superiority. [. . .] It should be noted that laughter is one of the most frequent symptoms of madness. [. . .] Indeed, what more obvious sign of debility can there be than the nervous convulsion, the involuntary spasm, comparable to a sneeze, provoked by somebody else’s misfortune? (115f.).

But Baudelaire’s theory is neither free of contradictions (cf. Greiner 105f.) nor limited to the “significantly comic”. As he argues, laughter out of superiority contains a moment of ridiculousness which can be regarded as a self-reflexive element: “It would not surprise me to find that [. . .] the physiologist himself bursts out laughing as he thinks of his own superiority” (cf. Baudelaire 115). Laughing-*at*, therefore, is always already undermined by its own ridiculousness. Moreover, Baudelaire introduces the notion of the “absolutely comic” as a kind of laughter in league with nature, as a laughter that casts a spell over people, causes frenzy or dizziness, and breaks down frontiers. The absolutely comic, “[l]aughter provoked by the grotesque”, is characterized by “something profound, axiomatic and primitive, which more closely relates it to innocence and to absolute joy than does the laughter occasioned by the comedy of manners” (121). Whereas the significantly comic “is an imitation, [. . .] the grotesque is a creation” (ibid.). It is “much closer to nature”, “has a *unity* which must be grasped by intuition” (122), and consists of “fabulous creations whose *raison d’être*, whose excuse, has nothing to do with common sense and arouses in us a wild and excessive hilarity translated into interminable fits of rending and uncontrollable mirth” (121). Nevertheless, “laughter caused by the grotesque still expresses the idea of superiority, *not* this time of man over man, but of man over nature” (ibid.). It is in this sense that Baudelaire gives due warning that when he uses “the words ‘absolutely comic’ [. . .] we must be very much upon our guard. From the point of view of the definitely absolute, there

¹⁹ “Joy is a *unity*, whereas laughter is the revelation of a double, not to say a self-contradictory, sentiment” (Baudelaire 120).

is joy and nothing else. The comic can be treated as absolute only in relation to fallen humanity” (122).

For Konrad Lorenz laughter is a mechanism preventing human beings from turning against their own species. It functions as a kind of sublimation of aggressive and/or sexual drives (cf. Minois 570f.). The fact that laughter is a good way to release pent-up aggression harbours the risk of it being conservative, as for example when laughter is sponsored and used by the ruling classes. In this case it functions as a kind of catharsis and as a prophylaxis for revolution, an often cited example being carnival: “Most politically thoughtful commentators wonder [. . .] whether the ‘licensed release’ of carnival is not simply a form of social control of the low by the high and therefore serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes” (Stallybrass and White 13). Yet such a spatially and temporally delimited envisaging of carnival, which is less a subversion of the ruling order than part and parcel of the conservative framework it ultimately reaffirms,²⁰ is indeed a very domesticated and pacified form of Bakhtin’s original notion of the carnivalesque. It is no surprise, therefore, that there is also another, more radical interpretation that links the carnivalesque to the positive elements attributed to the grotesque by Baudelaire and that views Bakhtin’s conception of laughter as part of the carnivalesque and of an aesthetics of the grotesque (also in the sense of “Renaissance realism”), which Wolfgang Kayser has interpreted as “a form expressing the *id*” (Kayser qtd. in Bakhtin 49).

If one emphasizes the revolutionary potential of Bakhtin’s theory one can argue that for the Russian cultural theorist carnival possesses not only a regenerative and transfigurative impulse but is also linked to the principle of transformation and to the future (Bakhtin 24f.). The carnivalesque is characterized by a positive, life-embracing, and elevating concept of the comic, which does not laugh with someone at something but supposedly functions without comparison, exclusion, or denigration.²¹ Instead of being marked by distance or difference, Bakhtinian laughter is characterized by a close identification between the spectator/reader and the actor/protagonist, whereby both are in a full agreement about the setting free of sensuality, bodily needs, and the pleasure principle. Bakhtinian carnival, just like “full laughter”, unites contrasts and

²⁰ Cf. Eagleton 148: “Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art”. Cf. Björk 89–92; Hutcheon, *Modern Parody and Bakhtin* 99.

²¹ As argued above, the following issues need consideration: 1) whether the grotesque has not already long ago become an aesthetics and a norm in itself and 2) whether even within this exaltative and inclusive model of the comic, which puts a premium on identification instead of differentiation, norms are still there but simply less relevant and less visible than within a model of the comic based on denigration.

oppositions, the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the insignificant (cf. Siguret 106). It calls for change and precipitates crises so that destruction and creation go hand in hand. Moreover, Bakhtinian laughter is ambivalent and linked to the body, especially to those functions which are officially tabooed and not allowed to manifest themselves:

The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes. [. . .] To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body [. . .]. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one (Bakhtin 20f.).

From a carnivalesque perspective, the realm of the body is valorised and the body itself is conceived of as decentred, grotesque, uncontrollable, and as metonymically coinciding with the people. Bakhtin's body is not a closed system subjugated and domesticated by culture, rather it is an open, living, proliferating, incorporating, and excorporating organism which interacts with other bodies and ignores fixed borders. Hence carnivalesque laughter is not intellectual or exterior to the body but springs from within: "Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. It unveils the material bodily principle in its true meaning" (94). Refusing any fixed identity, super-ego or censor, Bakhtin characterizes the carnivalesque body by profanation, multiplication, and the denial of death. This constant mutability and non-identity of the body is not considered to be menacing but liberating and hilarious. It coincides with and causes laughter as a kind of fusion of death and resurrection, change and renewal. What Bakhtin is calling for is a full laughter, strong enough to attack official ideology and to valorise popular culture; what he insists on is the social and even chorus-like dimension of laughter; of a laughter that aspires to community and universality and is in strict opposition to everything official, serious, and monosemic (cf. Siguret 108f.).

For the theological mainstream, this all-embracing, exaltative and life-affirming form of the comic, which works without comparison and negates hierarchies, has long been considered as the opposite of "God's gift of grace to mankind" and as "a result of its fall from grace – together with labour, disease and death one of the evil consequences of the Original Sin and the Fall from innocence into knowledge" (Pfister 181). If, as has been shown, Baudelaire links laughter to Satan and to madness, it is indeed no surprise that "the history of laughter is first and foremost a history of the attempts at disciplining it and bringing it to heel" (ibid.). A reference to Umberto Eco's blind Spaniard Jorge of Burgos for whom laughter

dehumanizes and even questions our humanity should suffice to make this point clear: “Laughter shakes the body, distorts the features of the face, makes man similar to the monkey” (Eco 131). In other words:

He who laughs does not believe in what he laughs at, but neither does he hate it. Therefore, laughing at evil means not preparing oneself to combat it, and laughing at good means denying the power through which good is self-propagating. [. . .] [T]ruth and good are not to be laughed at. This is why Christ did not laugh. Laughter foments doubt. [. . .] Certainly one who accepts dangerous ideas can also appreciate the jesting of the ignorant man who laughs at the sole truth one should know [. . .]. With his laughter the fool says in his heart, ‘Deus non est.’ (131f.).

Although Berger (x) argues that the “experience of the comic is [. . .] a promise of redemption” and that “[r]eligious faith is the intuition (some lucky people would say the conviction) that the promise will be kept”, a brief consideration of the discourses on laughter from classical antiquity and the Fathers of the Church to the present demonstrates that its critics easily outnumber its advocates, that laughter has often been regarded as a symptom of stupidity and heresy,²² and furthermore, that during the Renaissance and the Middle Ages “theologians and clergymen were the most vociferous critics of laughter” (Pfister 181). What fuels this kind of vituperative ‘theory’ is the fear that the transformation of values, the changes in society, the deceptions and playful games ensuing from laughter could make it impossible to distinguish good from bad or true from false. In the final analysis, the prevailing fear is that in and through laughter God and the Devil will coincide, that religion will disintegrate, that human beings will gain their freedom – and ultimately take responsibility for themselves.

If the art of laughing is the highest human fulfilment, if by and through laughing human beings gain control of their destiny, lose their fear and break all kinds of hierarchies, then death and damnation can no longer function as the final sanction and anchoring point (*point de caption*) from which religion erects the vast edifice of its power. Where laughter equals revolution, where there is no longer any need for redemption, and where psychological liberation goes hand in hand with political liberation, theologians are wont to consider these developments as leading to the abolition of any binding truth(s), thereby unleashing chaos and anarchy.²³ In Bakhtin’s view it is no accident that the frontiers between what causes fear and what causes laughter are erased in popular culture, that fear can be vanquished by laughter, and that laughter leads to justice. The reason for this is that laughter comes from within and is equated

²² For an extended discussion, cf. Loewenstein.

²³ Cf. Kuschel; cf. Sarrazin 19, who argues that there exists a believing kind of laughter (“un rire croyant”) and two religious logics, one that pretends to impose (one) sense, truth, dogma and lacks humour and another which is open to the incredible, to paradoxa, to nonsense and which embraces laughter.

with ‘truth’. Not, however, a theological, logocentric or even phallogocentric truth but a kind of truth which is inherent in all laughter and which cannot be transformed into seriousness or into the symbolic without suffering loss. It is a kind of truth which is liberating with regard to internal as well as external censorship, such as the fear of the sacred and other deeply rooted human fears. But if laughter enables mankind to leave behind the world of everyday compromises and mediocrity without having to cling to ‘one’ truth or to a metaphysical signified, this is exactly the reason why, in the public sphere at least, it has effectively been circumscribed and even forbidden. The demise of carnival since the 17th century provides just one example for the fact that

die Statthalter der Wahrheit auf Erden das Lachen nicht [lieben], denn es gefährdet ihre Ordnung, die früher die Ordnung Gottes war, über den zu lachen ein Sakrileg darstellte. Mit der Durchsetzung des Ideals einer nicht lachenden Öffentlichkeit in der Neuzeit wurde das Lachen ins Private vertrieben. [. . .] Dieser Ausschluss des Lachens aus der Öffentlichkeit ist Teil der neuzeitlichen Disziplinierung der körperlichen Expressivität, die durch zahllose kleine Verbote im Lebensalltag durchgesetzt worden ist (Kamper and Wulf 9).

the earthly powers that be who administer truth are not at all well predisposed towards laughter, the reason being is that it endangers their order; an order that was previously divine and about which it was considered a sacrilege to laugh. Once the ideal of a non-laughing public sphere was established in modernity, laughter was banished into the private sphere. [. . .] This exclusion of laughter from the public sphere is part of the modern disciplining of bodily expressivity and has been pushed through in everyday life by means of innumerable rules and regulations.

Let us conclude this introduction to theories of humour, the comic, and laughter by suggesting a further dimension to laughter that pursues and even perpetuates Bakhtin’s notion of “full laughter” and that similarly stresses the role of the body. As Kamper and Wulf argue, laughter is a bodily reaction directed as much against abstraction as against the intellect. Full laughter implies that the body takes over, that it expresses itself and counteracts the instrumentalization and subjugation it suffers in daily life:

Im lebenden Körper zeigt sich eine lange, verlorene, vielleicht nie wirklich gegebene Einheit. In seinen konvulsivischen Bewegungen schwinden die Sinne, die die Verbindung zur Außenwelt halten, mit ihnen der Sinn. Der Lachende braucht keinen Sinn, weder im Lachen noch anderswo (7).

The living body displays a long-lost, perhaps never really existing, unity. Amid its convulsive movements, the senses connecting the body to the outside world are diminished and any sense of meaning is lost. To those that laugh meaning is irrelevant, whether in the act of laughing or otherwise.

Moreover, laughter can have a self-reflexive quality. If self-reflexivity initially seems to presuppose distance and, with Baudelaire, a *dedoublement* of the

human subject, a psychoanalytic perspective reveals that this doubling is not necessary since human beings are always already not only double but multiple, fragmented, and decentred. The old humanist unified subject is not only for Lacanian psychoanalysis largely a fiction or ongoing narration (cf. Rusch 374; Moi 8): If for Freud laughter arises because for a short moment in time we do not have to suppress our desires or drives and can conserve this energy while we remain securely integrated in our culture, i.e. the symbolic order, one should also ask whether the liberating, elevating and redemptive effect of laughter can not be regarded as the result of the fact that human beings are for a short moment allowed to discard the cultural edifice and fiction of the unified and rational Cartesian self. Maybe the Rabelaisian and Bakhtinian notion of full laughter stems, among other things, from the fact that by retrieving and having recourse to the corporeal human beings are ‘freed from themselves’ since they do not have to uphold the construction of a single and unified self: “Im Lachen wird das Ich vom Ich befreit. Der rationale Mensch weicht dem lachenden; er zeigt sich von etwas überwältigt, das er, um als autonome Persönlichkeit zu gelten, kontrollieren muß” (Kamper and Wulf 8) (“During laughter the ego is freed from itself. The rational being gives itself over to laughter; it reveals itself as being overwhelmed by something which, in order to function as an autonomous personality, it must control”). From this perspective, laughter could be understood 1) as a bodily reflex that exceeds sense and can only be converted into meaning *a posteriori*, and 2) as harbouring the potential to free human beings from their cultural obligations by laying open their decentredness and eccentricity (Plessner) as well as by subverting rationality, objectivity, and distance. Thus the enormous relief which laughter grants us would not only be the result of a conservation of psychical energy but also of the acknowledgment of the never fully knowable or controllable foundation of human existence. It is precisely because laughter can negate the difference between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘true’ and ‘false’ that it has the power to attack and to expose the very basis of a culture founded on these presumably natural but ultimately constructed and culturally relative dichotomies. In this sense full laughter can be understood as the return of the body, the repressed, the abject, the semiotic (cf. Kristeva), the supplement, and the Other. Because full laughter is not subject to the principle of difference, it is beyond what founds the sign (cf. Greiner), and possesses the anonymous violence

eines [. . .] überwältigenden, die Abwehrstrukturen durchbrechenden Fremden. Einbruch des Anderen, Entmachtung des Vertrauten auf der einen Seite und eine momentane, die Grenzziehung aufhebende Versöhnung, ein Einverständnis mit dem Fremden auf der anderen Seite, beides sind Erfahrungen des Lachens (Kamper and Wulf 8).

of an [. . .] overwhelming Other that breaks through all defence mechanisms. On the one hand, there is the breaking in of the Other, the disempowerment of all that is

familiar, on the other hand, a reconciliation that momentarily suspends the boundary, a mutual agreement with the Other beyond, both being experiences of laughter.

In the final analysis full laughter implies the possible loss of balance, tears of laughter, the merging of laughing and crying, of pleasure and pain, and distantly evokes Lacan's notion of *jouissance*. But if laughing is a privileged means to make the horror of existence bearable (cf. Nietzsche), this does not signify that laughter loses its ambivalence or that in laughing human beings can abolish once and for all their sense or premonition of the ultimate precariousness of their existence. The traces of memory, be it of the fragmented body (*corps morcelé*), of an original lack (*manque*) or of "a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord" (Lacan, The mirror stage 4), will always continue to haunt us on a sub- or unconscious level. What is remarkable, however, is that if in a paradoxical turn it is exactly this 'other realm' which makes laughter possible, laughter simultaneously is still our best means to deal with it: If our intrinsic otherness founds laughter, laughter is also its best remedy. Or, to close with Kamper and Wulf:²⁴

Es gibt einen Taumel am Rande des Katastrophischen. Solange wir lachen, sind wir nicht in der Katastrophe, wir vermeiden es, besänftigen das drohende Schicksal. Die Erschütterung des Lachens birgt den Triumph über das Entkommen. Wenn nichts mehr geht, bietet das Lachen noch immer einen Ausweg, den man sich jedoch nicht suchen kann, der sich vielmehr von selbst ergibt oder verschließt (8).

There is a feeling of giddiness at the edge of the catastrophe. As long as we laugh, we are not in the catastrophe, we avoid it, have put off the inevitable. The shock of laughter contains a sense of triumph at escaping. When nothing else seems possible, laughter offers a way out, which cannot however be sought but either occurs of itself or not at all.

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²⁴ Cf. Baudelaire 121; Greiner 105; Minois 491: "Le grotesque engendre le rire [. . .] parce qu'il atteint l'essence des choses, dévoile la nature profonde de l'être. Le grotesque est une plongée violente à travers le monde des apparences, un trou dans le décor, qui révèle de façon fulgurante la dérisoire et satanique réalité" ("The grotesque engenders laughter because it reaches the essence of things, unveils the profound nature of being. The grotesque is a sudden hurtling through the world of appearances, a rent in the fabric fulgurantly exposing a derisive and satanic reality").

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