

Comedy Has Issues

Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai

Permanent Carnival

Comedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to dispel anxiety, as so many of its theoreticians have noted, but it doesn't simply do that.¹ As both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure. Comedy has issues.

One worry comedy engages is formal or technical in a way that leads to the social: the problem of figuring out distinctions between things, including people, whose relation is mutually disruptive of definition. Classic

We are grateful to have been funded by the Neubauer Collegium of the University of Chicago and to have worked with the Editorial Board and staff of *Critical Inquiry*—special thanks to the coeditors for reading the essays so rigorously and to Hank Scotch and Jay Williams for brainstorming about comedy and design. Our intro was cauterized and bandaged with much care by Jonathan Flatley, Roger Rouse, Tom Mitchell, and Richard Neer. Much gratitude too to the cover artist, David Leggett, for making such politically searching and funny art and bearing our repeated studio visits. Madeline McKiddy of the Neubauer Collegium graciously and imaginatively planned the conference, *Comedy, an Issue*, that allowed the authors and the wonderful, engaged, persistent audience to work through the essay drafts and comedic issues with such ardent spirit. None of this would have happened without the inspiration of Zachary Cahill and Catherine Sullivan, Lauren's collaborators in the ComLab project, *Infrastructures of the Comedic*.

1. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith and Nicholas Walker (Oxford, 2007), p. 161. William Hazlitt, "Lecture I—Introductory: On Wit and Humour," *Lectures on the Comic Writers, Etc. of Great Britain* (London, 1819); Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago, 1999); Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, vol. 8 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1905; New York, 1960); and John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America* (Durham, N.C., 2000).

comedy theory points to rapid frame breaking, including scalar shifts, as central to comedic pleasure. Scenes, bodies, and words dissolve into surprising component parts; objects violate physics or, worse, insist on its laws against all obstacles.

In this view comedy is always a pleasure-spectacle of form's self-violation. From Sigmund Freud's model of wit as transgression to Alenka Zupan i's definition of comedy as the expression of the universal in the concrete, comedic events take place with such rapidity or illogicity that we can't believe, for a moment, what's in front of us or what we've heard.² Henri Bergson's classic location of comic laughter at the spectacle of "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" is itself disrupted by Zupan i's revision, which is that the *question* of what's living, what's mechanical, and who needs to know is what really haunts the comedic and makes it an uncanny scene of aesthetic, moral, and political judgment.³

Comedy's propensity to get in trouble—sometimes greater even than genres like horror or porn—gets thrown into sharper relief when we think of it as a vernacular form. What we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts. It is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it. The contexts that incite these issues of how to manage disruptive difference do not just emerge through cultural comparisons, either: a laugh in one world causing sheer shame in another, say. The culture concept can presume too much homogeneity in any given locality even when there's agreement on antagonisms and norms, as Judith Farquhar's essay demonstrates. Consider, too, the ongoing debates in the US over rape and race jokes, new normative constraints that are inciting comedians to make sadface statements and avoid youthful audiences who used to seem to be in on the joke.⁴ It is as though in the current moment of social claims-making

2. See Alenka Zupan i, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, 2008).

3. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (1900; New York, 1911), p. 18; see Zupan i, *Odd One In*, pp. 113–20.

4. See Caitlin Flanagan, "That's Not Funny!" *Atlantic Monthly* (Sept. 2015): www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/thats-not-funny/399335/, and Anna Silman, "10 Famous Comedians on How Political Correctness Is Killing Comedy: 'We Are Addicted to the Rush of Being Offended,'" *Salon.com*, 10 June 2015, www.salon.com/2015/06/10/10_famous_comedians

LAUREN BERLANT is coeditor of *Critical Inquiry*, George M. Pullman Professor of English, and director of the Lesbian and Gay Studies Project of the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Chicago. SIANNNE NGAI is the author of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), winner of the MLA James Russell Lowell Prize, and *Ugly Feelings* (2005).

some comedians have become the butts of their own jokes, exiled to the outside of where they used to feel sovereign. It is as though comedy is freshly dangerous.

Thus comedy isn't just an anxiogenic tableau of objects disrupted by status shifting, collapse and persistence, the disruption by difference, or a veering between the tiny and the large.⁵ Nor is it just a field of narrative expectation punctuated by the surprise of laughter or vertiginous enjoyment. It is also epistemologically troubling, drawing insecure boundaries as though it were possible to secure confidence about object ontology or the value of an "us" versus all its others.⁶ Political cartoons, religious iconoclasm, matters of the risible are sometimes ordinary and, in some places, matters of life and death.⁷ Anthony Ashley-Cooper (the Earl of Shaftesbury) and Simon Critchley point to an analogy between the experience of humor and aesthetic judgment as such; both remind us of forms of intersubjectivity we usually don't think about but that we rediscover as presupposed by our very compulsion to make jokes and judgments in the first place.⁸ Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say "us." Always crossing lines, it helps us figure out what lines we desire or can bear.⁹ Precisely through the potential disagreement they inevitably pro-

_on_how_political_correctness_is_killing_comedy_we_are_addicted_to_the_rush_of_being_offended/

5. Scholars of comedy from many disciplines regularly fall down the rabbit hole of taxonomy, trying to control the bursting responses to, orientations toward, and effects of the comedic, often while attempting to justify specific claims about the universality of comic susceptibility. See the extensive charts and explanations of benign variation, incongruity, status shifting, nonsense pressure, aggressive aims, sexual anxiety, seriousness states, and trait cheerfulness as omnipresent social, aesthetic, psychological, and neurological phenomena, for example, in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin, 2008), esp. Willibald Ruch, "The Psychology of Comedy," pp. 17–100, and Amy Carrell, "Historical Views of Humor," pp. 303–32. More recently, Scott Weems, *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* (New York, 2014) articulates current neurological research on humor with social and aesthetic perspectives.

6. For example, producing spot mock-serious analyses of epistemological anxieties at the conjuncture of sexual, political, and economic desires is the rhetorical purpose of Slavoj Žižek, *Jokes: Did You Hear the One about Hegel and Negation?* ed. Žižek and Audun Mortensen (Cambridge, 2014).

7. Bergson claims additionally that laughter at comedy represents an amoral anesthetic response to the world; arguing against him generally but amplifying this point, Georges Bataille comments on how laughter at and beyond the comedic registers the pressure to know in the space of unknowing, which places the comedic near the sacred. See, for example, Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears," *October*, no. 36 (Spring 1986): 89–102. For an extended analysis of the implications of Bataille's view for comedy as a genre, see Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany, N.Y., 2007).

8. See Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York, 2002), p. 85; hereafter abbreviated *OH*.

9. The literature on humor as intragroup adhesive is extensive. We have learned much from Glenda Carpio's comprehensive *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*

voke, both aesthetic judgments and comedy “recall us to what is shared [and not shared] in our everyday practices.” And not “through the clumsiness of a theoretical description, but more quietly, practically and discreetly” (*OH*, p. 18).¹⁰

But maybe not so discreetly. In this era of proliferating social fractures the presence of comedy as weapon and shield, pedagogy and performance, saturates the most ordinary spaces. Arpad Szakolczai calls this a demand and laments the “commodification” of the public sphere.¹¹ While the Bakhtinian account of carnival’s permission for the grotesque to disrupt social hierarchy still obtains, the affective labor of the comedic as a socially lubricating mood commandeers comedy to enable the very contradictions and stresses to which it also points.¹² How should we understand comedy differently, and how does comedy stage its own anxiety-producing/alleviating, social-distance-gauging missions differently, if people are increasingly supposed to be funny all the time?

Both the world and comedy change when there’s a demand for permanent carnival. We do not share Szakolczai’s paranoia about the theatricalization of social life (against which he makes a plea for “more specific attention to belongingness in existential communities”) or his view of comedy as a maleficent virus, “infecting” Western Europe to this day, transforming politics into farce and the public sphere into a place of “permanent liminality.”¹³ But it is worth stressing the originality of putting *comedy*—as opposed to mass-mediated entertainment, capitalist commercialism, or

(Oxford, 2008); Joseph Litvak, *The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* (Durham, N.C., 2009); and Alexie Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J., 2005).

10. See also Elise Kramer’s rigorous analysis of rape jokes, taste, and social location, which argues that “disagreement becomes a necessary component of humor: those who find a joke funny and those who do not are mutually constitutive groups that cannot exist without each other” (Elise Kramer, “The Playful Is Political: The Metapragmatics of Internet Rape-Joke Arguments,” *Language in Society* 40, no. 2 [2011]: 163).

11. Arpad Szakolczai, *Comedy and the Public Sphere: The Rebirth of Theatre as Comedy and the Genealogy of the Modern Public Arena* (New York, 2013), p. 4. Szakolczai derives the term *commodification* from Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell’Arte and the Modern Imagination* (New York, 1986), a study of the diffusion of *commedia dell’arte*’s style of nonserious dissent into contemporary aesthetic culture, in part through avant-garde conduits ranging from Wagner to Diaghelev. For a recent study of comedy in/as the United States public sphere, and its influence on concepts of nationalism and citizenship, see Julie Webber, *The Cultural Setup of Comedy: Affective Politics in the United States Post 9/11* (Chicago, 2013).

12. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (1965; Bloomington, Ind., 1984).

13. Szakolczai, *Comedy and the Public Sphere*, pp. 2, 175.

the performance principle—at the heart and origin of the public sphere.¹⁴ This sets Szakolczai's argument apart from adjacent arguments in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), or Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001).¹⁵ To say that it is comedy that people increasingly come to expect in the kinds of social interaction that take place in all zones of modern life—politics, education, journalism, even religion—is something different from talking about a mode and mood of hyperenjoyment made by the culture industry, which runs on a great deal of high seriousness as well.

These operations of comedy as judgment about aesthetic and social form have also morphed into an overarching tone of late capitalist sociability, affecting how people self-consciously play as well as work together and the spaces where they do so (including Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube). This does not mean that all affective labor is comedic; affective labor is caring labor, and caring labor absorbs a range of moods. But the demand for play and fun as good and necessary for social membership is everywhere inflecting what was once called alienation.¹⁶

Often said to be a genre unusually sensitive to timing, comedy in the United States has arguably saturated the Just in Time (JIT), logistics-enabled workplace in particular, organizing and informing the informal affective cultures that lubricate production, circulation, and consumption. From *Cathy* and *Dilbert* to the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Taxi*, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, *The Office*, and *Silicon Valley*, comedy that appears in the workplace, as if designed explicitly for display or discussion there, tends to be *about* the workplace, reterritorializing it as a space of comedy. What

14. Szakolczai is talking about comedy as artistic form here, as opposed to comedy as an existential perspective or form of life. He specifically attributes the emergence of the modern public arena (and the rebirth of theatre in Europe) to the historical practice of Byzantium mimes (and sophists), who not only performed in stadiums and courts but also followed and mocked ordinary people on the street. Absorbed eventually into the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, mimes were therefore feared as well as enjoyed and in courts functioned as agents of political intimidation.

15. See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (1944; Stanford, Calif., 2002); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, 1985); and Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London, 2001).

16. See Leo Charney, "Television Sitcoms," for a summary of the tradition of workplace comedy, in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, ed. Maurice Charney, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn., 2005), 2:586–600. On affective labor and the pressures to be a "good sport" in the workplace, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, 2012); Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (New York, 2007); and Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, 2012).

results is a reflexive mirroring familiar to denizens of what Mark Seltzer calls “the official world,” where we find everything doubled by its own description.¹⁷ Timing and mimesis: these are of course internal features of comedy, and we will see them taken up more directly as both formal and political issues in virtually all of the essays to follow and especially those by Mladen Dolar and Roger Grant.

All of this is to say that comedic situations are not only in art but in the world. The questions are not only how do they get enmeshed but how does comedy, now referring specifically to the artistic form or practice, respond to that enmeshment in turn? Does it bear down harder on traditional markers—more slapstick, more sexual difference, more grotesque conventionality—as well as dissolving more dramatically into the unfunny? This volume not only attends to these matters at the personal scale of *schadenfreude* or mimicking, as in David Simon’s and Dolar’s essays, but also turns to the spaces of capital’s movement and demands to track the structural pervasiveness and impersonality of comedic situations. So, what’s machinic in the capitalist-comedic scene, what relies on relentless value-making mechanisms of repetition, insistence, and productivity appears not only in Joshua Clover’s analysis of the tragedy/farce problematic in capitalist reproduction but also in Anca Parvulescu’s analysis of the Laff Box as a figure for contemporary compelled subjectivity and in Sianne Ngai’s work on the gimmick, which at once standardizes labor-related subjectivity and produces spontaneous aesthetic judgments against standardization, as though we can ever be outside of it, now.

Related to this interpenetration of comedy as art and as life is a sense we have that it is no longer clear what the “opposite” of comedy is. The go-to foil used to be tragedy. Whether this is or ever was true or just a useful heuristic, the setting of comedy against tragedy has been undeniably generative for centuries of comedy theory, from ancient Greece onward, making a mountain of memorable sound bites: “The world is a comedy to those that think, and tragedy to those that feel” (Horace Walpole); “Tragedy is the image of Fate, as comedy is of Fortune” (Susanne Langer); “Take a tragedy, accelerate the movement, and you will have a comic play” (Eugene Ionesco); “Tragedy + time = comedy,” (attributed to Mark Twain), and so on. But is this still the case? Note how the next three sayings, and the final one in particular, suggest that the opposition between comedy and tragedy has itself come to seem theoretically mechanical and thus good fodder for joking. “Tragedy + time - comedy = German comedy” (Eric Jarosinski); “Napoleon, who was a psychologist when he wished to

17. See Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham, N.C., 2016).

be so, had noticed that the transition from tragedy to comedy is effected simply by sitting down" (Simon Critchley); "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die" (Mel Brooks).¹⁸

If it can sometimes be hard to tell if or how comedy is comedy, this might be because some people think a comedy without pleasure or laughter violates itself more extremely than, say, porn that does not produce a desired arousal or a weepie that doesn't make us cry. It might also be that contemporary comedy suffuses so many genres that are not comedy it is hard to draw lines: porn, horror, melodrama (the classic body genres identified by Linda Williams) along with westerns, kung fu, and, of course, romance.¹⁹ Glenda Carpio's essay here, "'Am I Dead?'" argues too that migrant suffering has newly developed a genre of gallows humor about the psycho-physiological consequences of capitalist modernity, geopolitical displacement, and varieties of social death.

Perhaps, in addition to its swarming effect or external action on other genres, there is something internal to comedy—maybe its capacity to hold together a greater variety of manifestly clashing or ambiguous affects—that makes its boundaries so uniquely ambiguous. This last proposition mirrors Mikhail Bakhtin's claims about the novel: its capacity to absorb other aesthetic forms into modes, representational and aesthetic logics. Funnily, Mark McGurl's argument, in this issue, is that the novel achieved this absorption at the cost of comedy, exiling whatever's out of scale and inconvenient to realist causality.

Norbert Elias's "Essay on Laughter"—published for the first time in this issue—takes up the scene of judgment comedy always calls into being about what it means to be out of control, more body than mind, more awkward than graceful, more ridiculous than sublime, and in a way that confuses desire and aggression. These concerns appear throughout *Comedy, an Issue*, which takes up the question of genre not just as an aesthetic topic but also as a scene of affective mediation and expectation. This set of collapses, clashes, and boundary disputes is exactly what enables us to have such spirited debates about comedy and in a way we don't feel as compelled to do for other genres.

18. Horace Walpole quoted in Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), p. 95; Eugene Ionesco quoted in Jan Kott, *The Theater of Essence* (Evanston, Ill., 1986), p. 99; Susanne Langer, "The Comic Feeling" in *Feeling and Form* (London, 1953), p. 333; Eric Jarosinski@NeinQuarterly, Twitter, 10 Nov. 2012; Napoleon Bonaparte quoted in *OH*, p. 61; and Mel Brooks quoted in Bevis, *Comedy*, p. 95. As Bevis notes, "Perhaps tragedy and comedy are more alike than they are supposed to be. Indeed, we might wonder why people have so often felt the need to keep them separate" (Bevis, *Comedy*, p. 96).

19. See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1991): 2–13.

Rising Humorlessness

But how do we stack up these observations about comedy's transformation from interruption into expectation, its infiltration of other genres, and the "commodification" of modern social life, against another claim that seems equally true, which is that humorlessness is on the rise? If the comedic is pervasive even in traditionally serious occupations like politics and law (see Peter Goodrich in this issue on the repeated assertion and disavowal of wit in legal judgment), why is comedy still always getting itself and its practitioners into trouble?

"Only comedy can still get to us," said postwar dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt ("Uns kommt nur noch die Komödie bei"); events like the Charlie Hebdo massacre prove him still right (but then who was the us there and what social fractures were revealed?).²⁰ So many recent events testify to an intensification of humorlessness that seems to run counter to, but may be actually compatible with, the becoming permanent of comedy.²¹ As Lauren Berlant's essay brings out in particular, humorlessness and humor are as inextricably linked as, well, inextricably and linked. The mirthless are an especial object of ridicule, even intolerable—but as such, essential for comedy to happen—and perhaps because, as Friedrich Nietzsche suggests, mirthlessness threatens to consume the world. "A single joyless person is enough to create constant discouragement and cloudy skies for an entire household. . . . Happiness is not nearly so contagious a disease. Why?"²²

Comedy's frequent failure to induce the pleasure that magnetizes us to it not only incites the policing of intimate others but also reveals philosophical and personal uncertainty about the implications of aesthetic judgment. One response, seen in critical theories of comedy, is to maintain and amplify distinctions between true and false comedy. This protects the desire for aesthetic experience of any kind to be elevating, self-developing, or worthy of idealization. It also often involves the mistaking of an aesthetic judgment for an ontological judgment about the artwork. The critic attributes her or his response entirely to the object, excluding her or his own investments in judgment's pleasures and elevations. The second response to comic failure involves bad feelings when comedy fails to be funny. This

20. Friedrich Dürrenmatt quoted in Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London, 2006), p. 54.

21. Szokolczai raises the same possibility as well, evoking anthropologist Gregory Bateson's theory of schismogenesis (a theory of conflict in which the behavior of each party involved elicits symmetrical behavior for the other). See Szokolczai, *Comedy and the Public Sphere*, pp. 77–78.

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1974), pp. 214–239.

points not just to the conventional thud after a bad pun, which is its own genre of fun, but an aggrieved sense of having been denied laughter or having had one's pleasures disrespected or devalued. This also explains some of the rage at feminism and other forms of subaltern political correctness that get into the wheelhouse of people's pleasures and spontaneity.

The move to overwrite the distinction between funny and not funny as a distinction between true and false comedy is especially interesting in the work of Critchley and Zupan *ii*. For in spite of the playful tone of their writing, here the true/false comedy distinction mirrors the genuine art/nonart distinction made in high seriousness by Adorno and Michael Fried, among others; what is clearly a distinction between art the critic admires and art he or she doesn't gets rewritten as a distinction between what is and what simply isn't art but rather entertainment or objecthood.²³

For Critchley, inauthenticity is precisely what makes humor humor and what makes it aesthetically and philosophically attractive in the first place: "I would argue that humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic acknowledgement, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity" (*OH*, p. 102). Still, for him, when comedy fails a moral test in the guise of an aesthetic failure (what he calls "reactionary" or derogatory humor) it is stripped of its status as comedy. It is said to not be "true" comedy (*OH*, p. 11).²⁴ Similarly, for Zupan *ii* the distinction between true and false comedy or, broadly, "subversive and conservative comedy" preserves a difference between comedy that undermines ego ideals and comedy that only purports to be anti-idealist by celebrating the embodied and particular, while actually preserving, in this very celebration, an "abstract idealism of the concrete and universal."²⁵ For the latter presumes a false separation of body and concepts when the truth is that they are contaminating each other all the time.

In both cases, Zupan *ii* and Critchley assert that what they think of as bad or unfunny, reactionary or conservative humor is not really humor at all. Pointing this out does not mean we disagree with Zupan *ii* or Critchley's preferences, but rather that we think that is what they are. What interests us is thus not the move's illogical conflation of taste with

23. See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1998), and Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998).

24. Critchley writes more explicitly about humor, not comedy, but often conflates them as we also do here.

25. Zupan *ii*, *The Odd One In*, pp. 33, 31. On the distinction between true and false comedies, see *ibid.*, pp. 30–35.

ontology as such but what might compel a philosopher of comedy, or anyone, to make it.

Other genres—tragedy, horror, melodrama—do not seem as likely to lead to the temptation to separate the true from the false instance of the genre, though to be sure they always can.²⁶ Take Todd Haynes's affectively ambiguous film *Safe* (1995); one can have an interesting debate about whether or not the film is a tragedy or a satire, especially if one has, say, no empathy for the white, upper middle-class female protagonist's failure to thrive. But we propose that debates about whether tragedies are tragedies or westerns westerns don't usually produce the same affective intensity, fierceness, or sense of urgency to determine correct identification of their borders. Specific, irreducibly subjective feelings are as defining and central to horror and melodrama as the feeling of the funny is to comedy. What is it about the finding of something *funny*, then, as opposed to scary or sad, that generates more conflict at a higher intensity?

This brings us to the second type of response mentioned above: people's attachment to their own pleasures, which may be different than their attachment to taste and judgment and intellectual sensibility as such. People seem to get more upset when their capacities for enjoyment are questioned or pressured by the comedic than when their capacities for empathy are tested. If we have conflicting views of what should produce empathy, if we don't finally feel it for the same things, we can find each other shallow and prefer ourselves—but it's different to disrespect what gives someone pleasure as funny. It's experienced as shaming; as condescending; as diminishing. It may be that we hold our pleasures closer than our ethics. Or it may be that we understand that, mirror neurons aside, empathy's objects are the effects of training whereas comedic pleasure involves surprise and spontaneity and therefore we take its contestation more personally, as an interference with a core freedom.

Enjoyment, as the psychoanalytic tradition has always told us, is a serious thing. This is why comedy creates critical rigidity in a way specific to comedy. But of course that very critical rigidity is great material for comedy, as we are about to see.

Take Our Wife, Please

We felt that we would be remiss if we didn't tell a joke or two. In part this is to test how jokes test us; in part to explore whether explaining a

26. Pornography is an exception to this general claim. Just as the very difficulty of discerning comedy seems to force critics to bear down on what's true and what's false comedy, so too the Supreme Court has been forced to judge what's porn and what's art, and what needs regulation.

joke does kill the pleasure in it, as so many people insist; and in part to ask some political questions about the pedagogies of comedic convention, especially in the confusion they reveal about what's personal about intention and what isn't.

Stewart Lee's comedy concert *Stand-up Comedian* (2005) provides the material for this analysis.²⁷ Lee emerged in the wake of the British alt-comedy scene of the late 1970s and is himself a great conceptualizer of the comedic.²⁸ He uses his whiteness, Britishness, heterosexuality, and cultural capital ambivalently, for and against political correctness. Stylizing extended narrative reflexivity into intimate audience repartee, he asks more from the audience than the usual fare of jokey bits or the hygienic distance of much observational stand-up comedy. *Stand-up Comedian* is an extended reflection on post-9/11 sociality and the rise of global racism, plus the potential for using the body's insistent bodiliness (farts) as a resource for bonding the world.

After narrating a few cases where the comedic delivers or points to justice and establishing the ordinary of contemporary political and social life as the obscenity against which comedic obscenity provides playful, acerbic realism, Lee tells a story on himself. "But it is easy, Glasgow, right, in the current climate of paranoia to make a kind of race-based error, right" (*H*, p. 88). Lee had been working as an arts journalist, the story goes. He was excited to interview the director Ang Lee because Ang Lee had just directed *The Hulk* (2003), and he, Stewart Lee, had since childhood followed the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby comic character. The Hulk is a monster into whom mild-mannered, black-haired scientist Bruce Banner automatically turns when he gets angry, often from being bullied by alpha-male jerks and of course by injustice in general.²⁹ In his act, Stewart Lee first establishes himself as a pedantic expert on the Hulk, knowing details about his color (usually green but sometimes grey) that only a true fan would know.

27. See Stewart Lee, *Stand-up Comedian: Live from the Stand*, Glasgow, Mar. 2005, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxN8PhKzZgY and *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-up Comedian* (London, 2011), pp. 41–109; hereafter abbreviated *H*.

28. Stewart Lee's conceptual work on comedy includes the 2013 lecture, "On Not Writing," www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrXVayvtJtQ and the commentary throughout *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*. The book includes documentation of this bit. It reveals the phone call to be a fiction whose fictionality was not announced in his recorded performance; see *H*, p. 88n. Both Stewart Lee, as he presents himself in the Hulk joke, and Ang Lee, as he is presented there, are characters. Lee comments that there was a real phone call, but it was staticky and uneventful.

29. On the new Asian Hulk or the recently announced, forthcoming Marvel Comics transfer of Hulk's character and powers from Bruce Banner to Banner's "former sidekick, Korean-American teenager Amadeus Cho," see www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/05/the-passion-of-asian-hulk-a-generation-of-keyboard-warriors-assumes-power-and-responsibility.html

To “put [an interviewee] at ease” at an interview’s start, Stewart Lee says, he often tells a joke (*H*, p. 91). On this occasion—a telephone call between the comedian in London and the director in New York—the joke is this: “And I said, ‘I said, Ang Lee . . . you have . . . you’ve directed the Hulk film. You must be very excited and proud. But, erm, don’t make me anglee. You wouldn’t like me when I’m anglee.’” Ang Lee’s response to this is: “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?” (*H*, p. 92). Multiple variations on this exchange—the comedian’s joke plus the director’s aggressively flat request for its repetition—reprise in this seven-minute bit. The awkward reluctance with which the Stewart Lee character is forced by Ang Lee to repeat the initial joke—a performance of foot-dragging shame that provides hilarious affective counterpoint to the repetition of the words “very excited and proud”—leads to demands for explanation that veer between Stewart Lee’s insistence that he’s punning on the Hulk’s tagline, “You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry” and Ang Lee’s insistence that his name doesn’t sound a bit like the word *angry*. Ang Lee tortures Stewart Lee by refusing to accept the alibi that “it was just a stupid joke” (*H*, p. 92).

But because of the toggle between *r* and *l* that English speakers parody as a stereotypical feature of East Asian English, when Ang Lee asserts his view in Stewart Lee’s monolog he demonstrates Stewart Lee’s claim, pronouncing *angry* as *Ang Lee*, which to Stewart Lee establishes the justness of his pun and also Lee’s racial innocence or cluelessness, take your pick: “My own surname is Lee, I’ve had thirty-six years of fun with that syllable” to which Ang Lee insists that, in collapsing *angry* onto *Ang Lee*, Stewart Lee is “anti-Taiwanese.”³⁰ “And then in the end he went, ‘Don’t make me anglee, you wouldn’t like me when I’m anglee!’ And I said, ‘You’ve proved my point, you fucking Taiwanese idiot!’” (*H*, p. 94).

It is as if the white Lee character’s repeated refusals to recognize anything racial or imperial in the joke, his repeated professions of being blind to difference, push the Asian Lee into enacting the stereotype the white Lee denies, in an echo of Bruce Banner’s anger-based transformation into the Hulk. One could say that in the performance, or according to its logic, it is exactly the white character’s denial of racialization, his claim to the innocence of his white obtuseness, that racializes/angers the director. The anger of the racialized person that turns him into this cartoon then immediately triggers and seems to license the explosive release of the racism-denier’s racially inflected expression of anger, “proving the point” in more ways than one.

30. On the *r/l* toggle, see the Dialect Blog, “An Accent Myth? The East Asian L/R Mix-Up,” dialectblog.com/2011/12/30/the-east-asian-l-r-mixup/

In this manner, we are tempted to describe what Stewart Lee ultimately creates here as an antiracist racist joke: one that collapses the difference between cathexis and catharsis, investment in the joke and the relief of release from it.³¹ The comedian seems to be suggesting that in a post-9/11 England whose claim to humor against PC humorlessness he is well known for mocking—complaining, in another concert, that “political correctness has gone mad” and now dourly prevents people from the fun of writing racist slurs in excrement on neighbors’ cars—anger about racialization is often itself racializing or coded racially, whether as group X’s pernicky oversensitivity or group Y’s hair-triggered rage (*H*, p. 296).³² In keeping with the exquisitely dialectical nature of racism and antiracism in the Hulk bit overall, it seems worth noting that Ang Lee also never explicitly calls Stewart Lee a racist. His refusal to name this, to actually make the hovering and implicit accusation explicit, interestingly mirrors, almost seems to play along or temporarily go along with the white Lee’s refusal to admit its presence as well.

After the outburst of “anglee” and the immediate, almost instantaneous rejoinder of “fucking Taiwanese idiot,” Stewart Lee’s bit expands, escalates, spirals, and intensifies further into political and rhetorical slapstick. Lawyers and agents are said to get involved on the phone call, and then six people are there debating the question and extending the dynamic repetition of Stewart Lee’s joke and Ang Lee’s refusal to be a compliant audience for the joke, and it all gets wilder and more ridiculous until Stewart Lee excitedly bursts out:

In the end, we argued for so long that Ang Lee missed his 2.30 dentist’s appointment. [getting faster and louder] That’s the time that he goes to the dentist, Glasgow! Don’t let him tell you any different! He doesn’t even need to write it down! [raises voice even louder]. They offer him an appointment card, he rejects it! [crowing] He says, ‘I’ll remember it by thinking about my own pain!’ [*H*, pp. 94–95]

The audience laugh at this starts small, then cascades. What does this cathartic closure entail? In his book *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, Stewart Lee points out that his concluding joke is a standard white British street pun about Chinese English: the homophone 2:30, “tooth-hurty” (*H*, p. 94n). Stewart Lee ends on a bad joke, an unoriginal joke, a political insider’s joke. He ends revenging Ang Lee’s refusal of his other joke by pasting onto the

31. See Weems, *Ha!* p. 64.

32. The concert is *41st Best Stand-up Ever*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=99s19HBs-6A and is also documented in *H*, pp. 251–308.

situation a joke that writes itself from the collective archive of supremacist pleasure, a revenant from white British memory that hangs in the air as a thing one might say while pretending it is just a thing “people” say.

Of course, as a narrative event, both racist jokes were there the whole time, despite the white Lee character’s initial profession of unawareness about the r/l toggle. The tension involved in maintaining its suppression creates the pressure that bursts through the culminating joke about time, memory, and bodily pain, releasing and revealing racism as exactly that which has gone without saying, which remains implied while revealed by the audience’s aroused hilarity as a thing collectively held.

Stewart Lee the comedian knows that some of the laughs at the end of his Hulk number might very well be, indeed probably are, straight-up laughs at the racist joke qua racist joke, not antiracist laughter at the met-asituation of the explosive release of racism that was in bad faith denied or unacknowledged with the alibi of white obliviousness. But he also knows, we think, that there is no way to make his antiracist humor at a safe distance from racist humor. Reenactment, whatever else it is, is reenactment.

Yet one of the things that makes this joke so formally satisfying is the way Stewart Lee ends up refuting the old saw that explaining comedy kills it not by proving it wrong but by proving it right. Instead of showing us that explanation is graceful, easy, funny, and enlightening he exaggerates explanation’s lumberousness by turning his explanation of the joke into something stretched out and painful. Live explanation is always unwieldy. And so is comedy.³³

In this sense Stewart Lee finally refuses what William Cheng refers to in his essay as the “comic alibi.” Borne out by the euphoric rush or gush that happens right after the turn to “tooth-hurty,” the comedy plays on the fact, and uses the arousal of audience laughter to reveal, that the racist joke cannot be unsaid, cannot be neutralized by individual intentions, because it is public property. Without actually unifying or bringing the different kinds of laughers together into a consensus about racism or political correctness, without even trying to do this or needing to, the unleashing of the racist joke ends up being enjoyed by the entire audience, including those who enjoy it exclusively because it destroys the white person’s alibi. In this manner, the comic event addresses what adds pleasure to privilege

33. We can’t help but think about pedagogy here. Just as explaining the joke doesn’t necessarily kill it, to attach concepts to pleasure through explanation does not necessarily diminish pleasure but can extend the benefits of intensified perception. At the same time knowing how things work can shake things up, threatening established and anchoring satisfactions. This is partly why teaching is so close to slapstick; language is always on the edge of fumbling, as real-time improvisation takes place in the land of the awkward.

while admitting something abstract to knowledge about how supremacies are reproduced, preserved in the aspic and aspect of pleasure.

Impersonal cultural comedic aggression is a thing. It is the material of truisms, clichés, and conventions. It is the material of stereotype; it represents group cohesion, here appearing as the pleasure of structural privilege at its most banal. It produces supremacist discomfort in the ordinary encounter. See, as another example, Claudia Rankine's meditation in *Citizen* on the joking lob of "nappy-headed ho" by a white friend. The narrative voice responds in disbelief to a friend's application of that phrase to her the way fictional Ang Lee did: "What did you say?"³⁴ Disbelief is a political emotion when it refuses to admit something in the world as real.³⁵ Rankine writes,

Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people language." Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her. Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language. You don't know. You don't know what she means. You don't know what response she expects from you nor do you care. For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture.³⁶

Here the anecdote is about a racist joke made by a person clearly not intending to make one but whose generic intentions are explicitly rejected as irrelevant to establishing the event as one of supremacist pleasure. In a way what is happening here is the opposite to what happens in the Ang Lee bit. There, what created the rupture was the white character's claim to unknowingness, his plea of cluelessness to legitimate his joke; here it is the white person's claim to knowingness, to being an insider or somehow close enough. But in both cases, what we might call "the claim to humor" reveals the copresence of the supremacist startle, the physicality of racialized pain, the enormous creativity-suck that speculation about other people's diminishing gestures involves, and the inutility of explanation in

34. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (New York, 2014), p. 42.

35. On disbelief as a political emotion, see Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), p. 211 and, with a greater emphasis on the Other's constitution as the guarantor of the Real, Zupan i , *Odd One In*, p. 85.

36. Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 42.

explaining away the delight in comedic aggression—all in response not just to violence that feels like violence but to pleasure that enjoys itself. It also points to the proximity of the painful and comic effects of disbelief.

But we want to emphasize that these kinds of processes operate even in the most reparative, therapeutic, spontaneous, and enlightening of comedic situations. There *is* such a thing as “light” comedy! Bodies run into each other, and the world runs into beings! Love happens and the objects become weird! The political unconscious extracts its pleasures, as does subjectivity expressed in practices! It’s just that no one can determine in advance how comedic freedom will travel.

We began by noting how comedies help us figure out distances and differences. Comedy theory has tended to foreground detachment, but we think proximity deserves particular attention. In the comedic scene things are always closer to each other than they appear. They are near each other in a way that prompts a disturbance in the air. People can enjoy that disturbance, and one thing they can enjoy in it is that it feels automatic, spontaneous, freed-up. Pressed a little, the enjoyment is not always, hardly ever, unmixed; but in the moment, the feeling of freedom exists with its costliness. There’s a relation between the grin and chagrin; there’s the fatigue from feeling vulnerable because pleasure’s bad objects are not always in one’s control.

Getting how comedy has the power to disturb without moralizing for or against it is key to getting the trouble of the comedic. It’s one thing to grin at a boss, a baby, a cat picture, or a shot of some drunk who might on another day be you, and it’s another thing to hit an unexpected edge in proximity to what felt innocuous. It’s not a spectrum; there’s no continuum between the cute and the intractable, between the unintended pleasure and the sudden appearance of an uncomfortable joke that seems to write itself, thanks to the autonomy of mind, the conventions of culture, or plain old aggression. Maybe the fantasy of a spectrum alleviates the anxiety at the boundary where comedy enmeshes with all its others. That’s an aesthetic judgment.

The essays to follow extend many of these issues of the comedic: cultural norms and aesthetic forms (Farquhar, Grant, Carpio, Elias, McGurl); vertiginous scalar movement as historical event (Clover, McGurl); capitalism and work (Ngai, Berlant, Clover, Farquhar, Parvulescu); unfunniness (Goodrich, Berlant, Parvulescu, Simon); the pleasures and dangers of spontaneity (Elias, Berlant, Parvulescu, Simon, Cheng); identification and self-doubt (Simon, Carpio); bodies in slapstick and political pain (Cheng,

Parvulescu, Carpio, Ngai, Berlant, Simon, Dolar, Farquhar); sexuality as symptom and goad (Goodrich, Ngai, Carpio); and mimesis and doubling (Dolar, Grant, Carpio, Simon). We especially encourage you to experience the performance of all of these toggles and breaches in the original comic by Gary Sullivan, "You, Again?" Sullivan's historical and tropological archive of comedic tropes absorbs so many registers of their pleasure-pain that as we read we can, in truth, barely take in what's in front of our eyes.

The Anatomy of Schadenfreude; or, Montaigne's Laughter

David Carroll Simon

Had *Democritus* beene present at the late civill warres in *France* . . . would this, thinke you, have enforced [him] to laughter, or rather made him turne his tune, alter his tone, and weep with *Heraclitus*, or rather howle, roare, and teare his haire in commiseration, stand amazed; or as the Poets faigne, that *Niobe* was for grieve quite stupified and turned to stone?

—ROBERT BURTON, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

Philosophers have often condemned schadenfreude, the pleasure someone takes in someone else's suffering, as proof of moral failure.¹ Meanwhile, witnesses for the defense go as far as to deny the guilt routinely

For their thoughtful responses to this essay, I thank Drew Daniel, Andrea Gadberry, Lily Gurton-Wachter, Timothy Hampton, Sianne Ngai, Julia Otis, Joshua Scodel, and Tristram Wolff. For challenging conversations about my theme, I thank Richard Strier and Zachary Samalin. I'm grateful for suggestions from the board of *Critical Inquiry* and from participants in two conference discussions: one in preparation for this special issue at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society (University of Chicago, 2015), the other during a seminar on "The Literature of Contempt" at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (Harvard University, 2016). I owe special thanks to Lauren Berlant for encouraging me to write this essay in the first place and for reading it in multiple drafts. I'm deeply grateful to Gerard Passannante, from whose insights I've benefited at every stage of writing and revision.

1. Aristotle describes schadenfreude as inherently blameworthy: "Not every action or emotion however admits of the observance of a due mean. Indeed, the very names of some directly imply evil, for instance malice ['delight at another's misfortune,' or schadenfreude], shamelessness, envy, and, of actions, adultery, theft, murder. All these similar actions and feelings are blamed as being bad in themselves; it is not the excess or deficiency of them that we blame" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham [Cambridge 1926], p. 97, 97 n). I borrow my gloss of *malice* from H. Rackham. Discussing this passage in Aristotle, John Portmann observes that "Aristotle neglects the reality that we sometimes approve of and even celebrate the suffering of others for reasons we take to be moral," but one of my interests is the failure to be persuaded by such self-justifications (John Portmann, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People* [New York, 2000], p. 42).

assigned to apparently malevolent enjoyment—by, for instance, identifying it with an appetite for justice that rightly takes satisfaction in the correction of vice.² This essay cuts against both accusatory and apologetic perspectives—but not by offering a competing moral evaluation. In what follows, I rest content with a description of *schadenfreude* and limit my inquiry to a single case. In his *Essais* (1572–1592), Michel de Montaigne anticipates modern conceptions of *schadenfreude* (and echoes ancient ones) when he savors the exultant pleasure of safety from another's misfortune. He proposes that the ground of this experience is awareness of danger: the perception of a threat from which he finds himself spared. What distinguishes his perspective on *schadenfreude* from that of other philosophers is his insistence that susceptibility to harm is a fundamental premise rather than simply an attribute of certain situations. Thus even his eager withdrawal from danger retains a feeling of tense anticipation. Like the contorted face that accompanies the body's wincing retreat from near-injury, the *Freude* (joy) in *schadenfreude* (harm-joy) is distorted by an ongoing sense of vulnerability. Yet such alertness to the possibility of harm, interrupted but not suppressed by the pleasure it enables, does not

2. Portmann presents a thoughtful, wide-ranging account from which I have benefited considerably; he raises a number of questions I accept as fundamental to understanding *schadenfreude*. Most significantly for the present discussion, he explores (1) the question of the randomness of suffering, and (2) the question of the spectator's identification with those who suffer ("There but for the grace of God go I"); see Portmann, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*, p. 91. Portmann is also a lucid guide to the place of *schadenfreude* in the German philosophical tradition. Ultimately, however, Michel de Montaigne points me in a different direction. Quoting the lines from Lucretius I discuss below, Portmann argues that "relief" is completely distinct from *schadenfreude* because it is "self-regarding" rather than directed toward the experience of others (p. 20). I describe an experience of self-regard inextricable from awareness of the other. Elsewhere, Portmann acknowledges that his view of the rationality of *schadenfreude* (as well as his related argument for its moral permissibility) "relies on the belief that someone else deserves to suffer" (p. 60). "If the randomness of suffering could be proven once and for all," he explains, "then no one could affirm the rationality of *schadenfreude*" (p. 60). Though I will not speak of proof, I share Montaigne's interest in misfortune's "randomness," which directs our attention away from Portmann's emphasis on the achievement of justice as explanation and moral defense. Portmann writes, "The challenge we face is to distinguish justice from revenge on the one hand and comedy from malice on the other. This can be extremely difficult" (p. 205). My focus is the case in which it's even more difficult than that—which is to say, in which it's impossible.

DAVID CARROLL SIMON is assistant professor of English and an affiliate of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at the University of Chicago. He is completing a book entitled *Light without Heat: The Observational Mood from Bacon to Milton*.

necessarily generate fear.³ Instead, Montaigne directs our attention to a physiological reaction we do not ordinarily associate with existential danger. We can listen for the alarmed elation of *schadenfreude*, he suggests, in rumbles of laughter.

Though most of this essay will attend closely to Montaigne's words, I have chosen to begin by translating his perspective into an anatomy of *schadenfreude*, extending and unfolding the account I just gave of the cognitive contents of the experience. In presenting a schematic description, my intention is to offer definitional clarity, not to universalize Montaigne's view. There are certainly other pleasures that have gone by the name of *schadenfreude*, just as there are other forms of laughter that have nothing to do with it.

Let's imagine the scenario from a first-person perspective. Perhaps in spite of myself, I enjoy your misfortune. What, precisely, do I feel, and what do my feelings imply about what I think? For Montaigne, *schadenfreude* is a visceral response to danger: a joyful if momentary reprieve. Yet the intensity of my pleasure offers evidence of my vulnerability to whatever has befallen you. If I did not believe, in other words, that I were subject to the same threat to which you have now fallen prey, relief wouldn't be as gratifying as it is. Nonetheless, my enjoyment confirms the starkness of the difference between us. It's proof that in at least one respect (this very sensation of satisfaction), I am nothing like you. *Schadenfreude*, then, is an experience of reversibility without equivalence. All of a sudden, I understand both how easily we could change places and how meaningful it is that we haven't.

To be sure, we are not all exposed to the same dangers. Even insofar as I believe that I'm threatened by whatever calamity has overtaken you, only rarely will it seem to me that I'm endangered to precisely the same degree. Even if I expect the worst, the very fact that you presently suffer shows that we must now speak of the certainty rather than the probability of your coming to harm. Thus *schadenfreude* implies insensibility to a question that will strike many of us as important: How is a given danger distributed

3. I here take my distance from Judith N. Shklar's well-known description of Montaigne as "the most notable among" those "skeptics" who respond to post-Reformation religious strife by "put[ting] cruelty and fanaticism at the very head of the human vices" (Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann [Chicago, 1998], p. 5). For Shklar, liberal theory "does not, to be sure, offer a *summum bonum* toward which all political agents should strive, but it certainly does begin with a *summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself" (pp. 10–11). Fear is certainly one possible response to a pervasive threat. As I discuss below, however, it isn't Montaigne's. See also her discussion of Montaigne throughout Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

across the population to which I belong? All *schadenfreude* can do, with respect to this line of inquiry, is manifest proximity to harm—irrespective of the fact that only some of us are routinely exposed to certain forms of it. The danger that animates *schadenfreude* is vague.

Indeed, the omission of the question of the likelihood of injury is not incidental. It's one of the defining features of the experience, permitting a loose but exhilarating identification. Yet *schadenfreude* draws power from imprecision. Were I simply afraid of the single affliction from which you already suffer, the prospect of harm would remain safely confined to my awareness of that specific danger. Instead, *schadenfreude* emerges from a sense of vulnerability from which I am never safe. In this sense, it conveys the forcefulness of a threat unmitigated by the generalized form it assumes. Because my sense of the real and alarming similarity between your (actual) misfortune and my (possible) unhappiness is undiminished by real differences in circumstance, my feeling of exultant relief can only follow from the most rudimentary of premises: the liability of my present situation to change. Yet *schadenfreude* does not so much turn away from the specific case as hold it together in the mind with a general sense of hazard. It casts my unspecified exposure to injury as a version of the misfortune I presently observe. Thus *contingency* names whatever sense of danger bleeds over the edges of a determinate threat. *Schadenfreude* translates susceptibility to chance into a physiological fact, buckling me over or sending me staggering. It embodies the accidental.⁴ Even if I attribute my fate to some underlying state of affairs (systemic injustice, say, or God's decree), my perspective is partial. I tremble in anticipation of what I can't predict.

Finally, *schadenfreude* is comic. Although it will not surprise us that comedy can be cruel, my point is less about genre than it is about what it feels like to laugh and to be caught off guard by feeling amused. When Montaigne describes his propensity for laughter, he sheds light on the experience I've outlined. Rather than the serene delectation of safety, mirthful *schadenfreude* is the affective recoil of the vulnerable. In someone else's misfortune, Montaigne discovers a portent, uncertain but nonetheless foreboding, of his eventual unhappiness.⁵ Because his own failure

4. For Montaigne's interest in the operation of chance on multiple scales see John D. Lyons, *The Phantom of Chance: From Fortune to Randomness in Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Edinburgh, 2012), pp. ix–x; see also his discussion of Montaigne at pp. 21–25.

5. Alenka Zupančič has located “reversibility” at the heart of comedy, but she does not refer (as I do) to an exchange of positions between the subject and object of ridicule (Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* [Cambridge, Mass., 2008], p. 113). It's exactly her treatment of this theme, however, that has proved most instructive to my analysis. Against

to uphold the moral good would be, as far as he is concerned, an especially terrible misfortune, his experience of unsympathetic laughter should itself be understood as a bitterly comedic foretaste of suffering: evidence that he can't quite trust himself to adhere to a standard of behavior to which he nonetheless remains attached.

With my sketch of schadenfreude in mind, we discover a perspective on "moral sentiment" (to borrow Adam Smith's phrase)⁶ that differs from the one we associate with sympathy, a paradigm that has long held pride of place in moral-philosophical reflection.⁷ The sheer diversity and complexity of the tradition precludes any simple opposition (we will find that Montaigne depicts schadenfreude as an interruption of, rather than an alternative to, compassion), but we can nonetheless observe the consequences of my proposed change of subject: a parallax view on the same problem of moral spectatorship. One influential exponent of sympathy is Luc Boltanski, who adapts Smith's account into a searching meditation on "distant suffering": the challenge, routinized by the rise of mass media, of gazing from afar on terrible hardship and calamity. As in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Boltanski's description of the situation depends on the clarity of the distinction between my security and your unhappi-

Henri Bergson's well-known description of the comic as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," Zupančič argues (giving Bergson some credit for implying as much) that the polarity between the rigid and the supple, the lively and the robotic, is reversible (p. 111). "All elements," she explains, "from the 'higher' of the two oppositional series (spirit, mind, ideals, and so on) can appear as elements of the 'lower' series, insofar as they appear as the rigidity that tries to frame the dynamic liveliness of the body, of needs, of reality, and so on. In fact, comedy is a constant reversing of the two series: now we laugh at a (physical) slip that undermines dignity, now we laugh at a dignity that strives to control such slips at all costs. We could even say that what is comical is this reversibility as such" (p. 113). It's easy to misread Montaigne as a straightforward defender of the ordinary against the ideal, but I suggest the *Essais* are "comical" in Zupančič's sense. Below, for instance, I will show that Montaigne defends untainted virtue against apparently realist pragmatism even as he narrates the collapse of the former under the latter's weight. Another illuminating theory of comedy that shares Zupančič's point of departure in G. W. F. Hegel is Erica Weitzman, *Irony's Antics: Walser, Kafka, Roth, and the German Comic Tradition* (Evanston, Ill., 2015). I especially value Erica Weitzman's description, following Hugo von Hofmannsthal, of a version of irony that "compares real with real with real in a chain of ironies *without* higher principle," which, to my mind, resonates powerfully with Montaigne's perspective (p. 4).

6. See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis, 1982).

7. Though I accept Seth Lobis's point that much can be gained from focused histories of the specific words constellated around the theme of sympathy, I have not imposed such terminological discipline on myself; see Seth Lobis, *The Virtue of Sympathy: Magic, Philosophy, and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn., 2015), p. 5. At least as contraries to Montaigne's conception of schadenfreude, I understand *compassion*, *sympathy*, and *pity* as roughly synonymous.

ness.⁸ “On the one hand,” he writes, “there is an unfortunate who suffers and on the other a spectator who views the suffering without undergoing the same fate and without being directly exposed to the same misfortune” (DS, p. 114). By contrast, I have been arguing for the surprising insignificance, as far as the person who feels *schadenfreude* is concerned, of the qualification conveyed by the word “directly.”⁹ As the experience unfolds, I tremble with awareness of danger, and so I understand even *indirect* “expos[ure]” to harm as a pressing concern. Whereas Boltanski casts *schadenfreude* as exactly the “selfish way of looking” from which an “altruistic” alternative must be distinguished, my view (and Montaigne’s) is that it *collapses* the position of the apparently “distant” spectator with that of the one who suffers (DS, p. 21). If we do not reject the intensity of vague identification out of hand (as a mystification of actual differ-

8. For Boltanski, indeed, overcloseness eliminates the possibility of sympathy. Citing Max Scheler, he observes: “We do not say that a father and mother who weep over the body of their child experience ‘pity’ for him or her precisely because they are themselves also suffering misfortune” (Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* [Cambridge, Mass., 1999], p. 33; hereafter abbreviated DS).

9. My point about the starkness of the difference between the subject and the object of sympathy is Smith’s: “Sympathy . . . does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not from the reality” (Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 12). In this very first chapter of his treatise, he goes on to discuss mismatched experience between self and other—for example, sympathy with the sick child who actually “feels only the uneasiness of the present instant” and sympathy with the dead (p. 12). On sympathy and its literary history, I have benefited from James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago, 2013). “Smith’s account of sympathy,” James Chandler explains, “explicitly banishes, from the outset, the idea that we can feel what others feel in favor of the notion that we feel according to how we imagine it would be to place ourselves in their situations” (p. 240). In the context of my developing portrait of *schadenfreude*, his next point is especially interesting: “Because we can view our own conduct from those same externalized situations, we develop an otherwise impossible sense of propriety about our moral judgments” (p. 240). *Schadenfreude* knows little of such abstracted self-examination; it’s the feeling of being *only* (perhaps *too much*) oneself, immersed in the specificity of the immediate situation. One does not imagine oneself—not with any detail—in the other’s place but rather finds oneself flinching away from something *like* the other’s suffering. Interestingly, theories of sympathy and comedy often converge on the question of reflexivity. Chandler shows that the “mixed feelings” of the sentimental mode “arise out of reflection”: “further reflection produces more mixed feelings, which elicit more reflection,” which helps account for the sentimental literary work that takes shape as a “hall of mirrors, a massive convolution of reflective performances and reflexive structures” (pp. 158–59). Theorizing comic irony, Weitzman speaks of “doubled consciousness of the self, the self watching itself watch itself ad infinitum” (Weitzman, *Irony’s Antics*, p. 22). If, for many scholars, both sympathy and comedy direct us beyond ourselves into endless metareflection, we might say that mirthful *schadenfreude* does the opposite. Even if it necessarily involves *some* self-awareness, it confirms our deep embeddedness within the specificity of the present situation—beyond the horizon of which we can make out very little.

ence), then we come to understand sympathy, rather than schadenfreude, as the name for an experience that assures me of my difference from you. When I sympathize with you, my imaginative projection of myself into your situation spans but preserves the distance between us. Though I can hardly deny the reality of experiences of compassion so powerful that they scramble the identities of subject and object, even these extreme cases, if we follow a Smithian line, produce that result by *bridging difference* rather than by *recognizing sameness*.¹⁰ When I understand your suffering as my reprieve, I conceive of the vast affective distinction between us as the closing gap between this moment and the next—as a question of mere timing.

Turning now to the sixteenth century, we should observe that Smith systematizes an ethico-political problem with a deep but fugitive history; the question of “distant suffering” had long troubled the minds of philosophers, statesmen, poets, and others without receiving the sustained attention of moral theory (see *DS*, p. 35). In Renaissance Europe, one familiar occasion for reflection on this theme (about which Montaigne has much to say) can be found in the *De rerum natura* (first century BCE) of Lucretius, where the great evangelist of Epicurean philosophy narrates a scene of disconcerting pleasure as a metaphor for the transcendence of worldly cares. Someone delightedly observes the aftermath of shipwreck, an image that lends expression to the contrast between serene wisdom and the tribulations of folly: “Pleasant it is, when on the great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze / from shore upon another’s great tribulation.”¹¹ Though Lucretius specifies that “man’s troubles” are *not* “a delectable joy” but that freedom from harm, an altogether different matter, is the source of the spectator’s pleasure, it’s easy to see why some interpreters doubt that distinction.¹² In *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer* (*Shipwreck with Spectator*) Hans Blumenberg discusses the wide chasm between the observer and the observed in the Lucretian image, which materializes the difference between pleasure and pain as the literal edge of a landmass. At such a remove, pleasure is likely to appear gratuitous, malevolent—no matter protestations like those of Lucretius. Blumenberg’s error is to associate that emphasis on

10. Because of its ongoing traction in philosophical debate, I take Smithian sympathy as my introductory point of comparison, but it’s worth noting that one illuminating study of sympathy in the early modern period adopts just this metaphor of spanned distances: “We need to think of sympathy less in narrowly sentimental terms and more in broadly spatial terms. Distance and difference are its preconditions, and it acts to attract and connect, to bridge spatial gaps” (Lobis, *The Virtue of Sympathy*, p. 4).

11. “Suave, mari magno, turbantibus aequora ventis, / E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem” (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse and Martin Ferguson Smith [Cambridge, Mass., 1982], pp. 94–95).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

distance with Montaigne's "skeptical anthropology."¹³ Indeed, the essayist inhabits an altogether different situation—the very opposite of this one. What, he wonders, if the spectator *isn't* only a spectator? What if he too clings to the debris of shipwreck, with better success than the drowned and drowning—but only, perhaps, for the moment?

1. A Propensity for Laughter

Both ancient and early modern descriptions of comic enjoyment acknowledge proximity to cruelty, but they usually stop short of admitting kinship.¹⁴ Although Aristotle's description of laughter as scorn implies hostility, for instance, he makes short work of the problem with an over-fine distinction: "The laughable comprises any fault or mark of shame," he says, "which involves no pain or destruction: most obviously, the laughable mask is something ugly or twisted, but not painfully."¹⁵ It's not that I doubt the seriousness with which Aristotle intends the distinction between distortedness and suffering but rather that I question the possibility of insulating comedy from *schadenfreude*.¹⁶ Is there such a thing

13. "Long before it divests itself of the security of its relationship to the world, skeptical anthropology defines as its property what it can allow as a substance that is not endangered and cannot be lost. To the outside that cannot be reached from the inside corresponds—and in this Montaigne already moves close to Descartes—the inside that cannot be reached from the outside" (Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm for a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall [1979; Cambridge, Mass., 1997], p. 14).

14. Quentin Skinner notes that the seventeenth century sees increasingly meticulous efforts to protect good humor from the taint of injustice: "A number of Renaissance writers began to express doubts about the governing assumption of the classical theory, the assumption that laughter is inevitably an expression of contempt for vice. . . . Surely some laughter—for example, the laughter of infants—is an expression of unalloyed delight" (Quentin Skinner, "Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter," in *Leviathan after 350 Years*, ed. Tom Sorell and Luc Foisneau [New York, 2004], p. 7). David Heyd offers a complementary account of connections between ancient theories of laughter and Renaissance philosophy, bringing the question of *schadenfreude* into focus. "In Plato's *Philebus*," he explains,

Hobbes could have found an explanation of laughter in terms of superiority. Socrates cites laughter as a typical example of "mixed feelings," i.e., experiences of simultaneous pleasure and pain. The object of laughter—the ridiculous or comic person—is inferior to the laugher in the epistemological sense of not knowing oneself. But such ignorance can, according to Socrates, be taken as ridiculous only if it is 'powerless' and harmless to others. Now, laughter itself is pleasant, but owing to its special kind of objects it is always accompanied by envy or *schadenfreude*, which is painful." [David Heyd, "The Place of Laughter in Hobbes's Theory of Emotions," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43 (Apr.–June 1982): 287–88]

15. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, 1995), p. 45.

16. For an efficient survey of classical theories of laughter and their Renaissance reception, see Skinner, "Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter." He is especially perceptive about an increasing emphasis on suddenness and surprise in the early modern period, identifying Baldassare Castiglione with both the traditional view that laughter expresses contempt

as “shame” devoid of “pain”? In the *Traité du ris* (*Treatise on Laughter*), which Montaigne seems to have known, the physician Laurent Joubert argues that actual unhappiness only entertains the reprobate: “Nor is it funny [*plaisant*] to mock a suffering and miserable man (unless in such a calamity he were evil [*mauvais*] and arrogant), but is of a great inhumanity [*inhumanité*] to make fun of the miserable on whom we should take pity.”¹⁷ Like Castiglione before him, Joubert cordons off permissible laughter from its malevolent double with criteria (“evil” and “arrogan[ce]”) it can only be difficult, if not impossible, to adjudicate—especially in the split-second between perception and affective response.¹⁸ “True enough it is,” he admits, “that often we cannot easily tell if one laughs simply from gaiety or in mocking another” (*TR*, p. 25).

In the final decades of the sixteenth century, Montaigne still belongs to a late humanist culture that takes for granted laughter’s adjacency to cruelty—notwithstanding an increasing awareness of exceptions to the rule. Yet he is unusual in taking up the question of mirthful *Shadenfreude*—as, that is, a bona fide question, deserving of exploration.¹⁹ What enables

and an elaboration of Cicero’s point in book 2 of *De oratore* (55 BCE) that the unexpected plays an important role in making people laugh; see Skinner, “Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter,” pp. 4–5. For a study of Christian laughter organized around the image of schadenfreude, see M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (New York, 1997).

17. Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, ed. and trans. Gregory de Rocher (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1990), p. 25; hereafter abbreviated *TR*. For the original French, see Laurent Joubert, *Traité du ris* (Paris, 1579), p. 34. For Montaigne’s debt to Joubert (as well as an account of literary and philosophical tributaries to the comedy of the *Essais*), see Bruno Roger-Vasselin, *Montaigne et l’art de sourire à la Renaissance* (Paris, 2003), pp. 273–88.

18. Castiglione’s description of the proper object of ridicule combines assertions about *what* will produce laughter with claims about *whether*, in a given case, we would be wise to laugh:

We must carefully consider the scope and the limits of provoking laughter by derision, and who it is that we deride; for laughter is not produced by poking fun at some poor unfortunate soul, nor at some rascal or open criminal, because these latter seem to deserve a punishment greater than ridicule; and we are not inclined to make sport of poor wretches unless they boast of their misfortune and are proud and presumptuous. One must also take care not to make fun of those who are universally favored and loved by all and who are powerful, because in doing so a man can sometimes call down dangerous enmities upon himself. Yet it is proper to ridicule and laugh at the vices of those who are neither so wretched as to excite compassion, nor so wicked as to seem to deserve capital punishment, nor of so great a station that their wrath could do us much harm. [Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (New York, 1959), p. 146]

19. Thomas Hobbes is unusually frank when he construes laughter as an effect of our delighted “apprehension of some deformed thing in another,” but exploratory he is not (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, ed. Richard Tuck [Cambridge, Mass., 1996], p. 43). He routes his observation about unsympathetic laughter into the book’s central argument, which imagines merciless competition as humankind’s default behavior in order then to discover an antidote in

this inquiry is an uncommon willingness to pay sustained attention to contingent feeling as an engine for action.²⁰ Unlike, say, David Hume, who will universalize the sentiment of approbation on which morals depend, Montaigne's similarly emotion-centered moral theory explores the consequences for human behavior of sheer affective accidents—of which unsympathetic laughter is an instance.²¹ The great theme of the *Essais* is moral crisis. Writing his three-volume experiment in digression during the Wars of Religion (1562–98), he describes the horror of civil strife, returning dependably to scenes of cruelty in order to caution us against courses of action that might lead to them. His loathing for violence is matched only by his contempt for the self-authorizing zeal that makes it possible. Yet he finds a conceptual resource for moral reflection in the figure of Democritus, the laughing philosopher, who mocks the world's misery.

When he plays the role of Democritus, whose apprehensive but gleeful *schadenfreude* conveys delirious contempt, his repulsion discloses his participation in the very scene from which he recoils. Laughter cuts through moral evaluation (the question of whether one deserves to suffer) to reveal both the starkness and the evanescence of interpersonal difference.²² Everyone has laughed guiltily at something tragic: “shipwreck with spectator.” Montaigne directs our attention instead to a scene in which laughter indicates the sheer factuality of a shared situation: “universal shipwreck” (“cet universel naufrage du monde”).²³ Perhaps nothing expresses the moral treacherousness of Montaigne's perspective so well as the joke he

the unchallenged power of the sovereign. Skinner suggests the usefulness of the classical theory of laughter for Hobbes's argument about human nature; see Skinner, “Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter,” p. 11.

20. As Heyd observes, “laughter was traditionally considered by most theoreticians as a typically involuntary response—not dissimilar to sneezing” (Heyd, “The Place of Laughter in Hobbes's Theory of Emotions,” p. 290).

21. The literature on Montaigne's relationship to humor, comedy, and laughter is small but rich; it never detects the moral darkness I suggest Montaigne's laughter evokes. For a thoughtful discussion of Montaigne's interest in the *comique* as the representation of private life (which does not necessarily induce laughter) and in philosophers whose writings convey intimacy, see Alison Calhoun, “Montaigne and the Comic: Exposing Private Life,” *Philosophy and Literature* 35, no. 2 (2011): 303–19. For a perceptive account of comic effects in the *Essais*, which is mainly a study of Montaigne's style and his habit of ironizing human pride, see Zoe Samaras, *The Comic Element of Montaigne's Style* (Paris, 1970).

22. I write in sympathy with Ann Hartle's observation that Montaigne “is closer to Democritus [than Heraclitus] because the fundamental ontological category for him is contingency, and laughter is the fundamental human response to contingency” (Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* [Cambridge, Mass., 2007], p. 172).

23. Michel de Montaigne, “De l'utile et de l'honneste,” *Essais*, ed. Alexandre Micha, 3 vols. (Paris, 1969), 3:8; trans. Donald Frame under the title “Of the Useful and the Honorable,” *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford, Calif., 1948), p. 601; hereafter abbreviated “U.”

adapts from François Rabelais, which he delivers in the midst of a reflection on the dangers of overcommitment to a cause: “I will follow the good side right to the fire, but not into it if I can help it” (“U,” p. 601; see also p. 601 n. 2).²⁴ What’s different about Montaigne’s version is his admission of incompetence: “if I can help it” suggests haplessness. Where Rabelais playfully looks out for number one, Montaigne shows himself incapable of self-protection; he’s less a coward or a rogue than a klutz.²⁵ If we’re not too disgusted by gallows humor, even in the deadliest of circumstances, what’s funny about the quip is Montaigne’s imagined tumble into flames. As he delivers the line, he assumes a position of apparent safety, and yet his mind races ahead, trips, and falls. When Montaigne wears the mask of Democritus, he casts light on exactly this willingness, which he shows throughout the *Essais*, to contemplate peril.

The affirmation of danger might sound like a poststructuralist piety, especially since I’ve translated it into the idiom of contingency. In Montaigne’s moment, however, sustained attention to fortune as a key determinant of moral action is harder to come by. Across all manner of early modern discourses, unhappiness is aligned with blameworthiness. To be sure, Joubert’s warning against laughter at the innocent but unhappy is one good example of an intention for clarity on this distinction, but it’s fair to observe the routineness with which the concepts overlap (we’ve seen that Joubert has trouble holding them apart). Think, for instance, of the “slavishness” of the slave or the interpretation of disaster as divine retribution.²⁶ The language of folly and error likewise deemphasizes suffering by assigning responsibility for it to those who suffer.²⁷ I am wary of stepping beyond the case of Montaigne to speculate about “modernity” as a whole, but it’s obvious enough that such confusions persist even as the

24. Timothy Hampton first called my attention to the history of this phrase.

25. Samaras observes that Montaigne’s images, “instead of beautifying,” “evoke the daily, the common aspects of our lives and create comic effects: the soul is described as tripping, our ears are compared to funnels” (Samaras, *The Comic Element of Montaigne’s Style*, p. 16).

26. For a searching investigation of slavery and its discursive life in early modernity, see Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death* (Chicago, 2013). I have benefited in particular from her discussion of Aristotle’s understanding of the “natural slave” (see pp. 43–49), as well as the contrast she draws between Cicero’s and Aristotle’s defenses of slavery: “That empire be extended over certain naturally slavish people is not unjust, Cicero argues, because to be ruled is beneficial for them. . . . [He] postulates dangerous transgressiveness or criminality, rather than, as Aristotle does, deficient humanity as a signifier of natural slavishness” (pp. 268–69).

27. Another way to create distance from suffering is to withdraw from specificity. “In comedy,” explains Aristotle, “this point has by now become obvious: the poets construct the plot on the basis of probability, and only then supply arbitrary names; they do not, like iambic poets, write about a particular person. But in tragedy they adhere to the actual names” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 61).

rise of a certain secular naturalism has authorized increasing emphasis on chance as an explanation for change. Perhaps the fraying of a providential frame for interpreting events has undermined our capacity to refer unselfconsciously to the deservingness of the unfortunate; perhaps, however, what this means is that we're more likely either to *argue* for the justice of someone's suffering or to take knowing pleasure in the brash mischief of *acting like* the unhappy deserve their unhappiness (and therefore refraining from making any argument at all). We might also think here of the recently ascendant ideology of "positive thinking" that implicitly equates our misfortunes with personal failures. In contrast to both early and late modern versions of this confusion, Montaigne's account of experience as the convergence of accidents clears away imputations of guilt and innocence that obscure the bare fact of anguish. In the *Essais*, laughter throws us headlong into a reality that knows little of justice.²⁸

Who is Montaigne's Democritus? In "De Democritus et Heraclitus," he cites the description of laughing Democritus and weeping Heraclitus in Juvenal's *Satire* 10 (second century CE), drawing on a long tradition that juxtaposes the two philosophers' states of feeling as contrary but symmetrical responses to the world's folly.²⁹ "Democritus and Heraclitus," Montaigne writes, "were two philosophers, of whom the first, finding the condition of man vain and ridiculous [ridicule], never went out in public but with a mocking and laughing face; whereas Heraclitus, having pity and compassion on this same condition of ours [*cette mesme condition nostre*], wore a face perpetually sad, and eyes filled with tears."³⁰ The inherited features of the scene themselves raise the question of *schadenfreude*. Because Democritus laughs at "this same condition of ours," the very situation that induces "pity" in Heraclitus, the image equates foolishness with genuine

28. K. C. Cameron suggests that Montaigne's laughter conveys optimism and a capacity to sustain faith in the face of violence, but this premise disregards Montaigne's sense of the vulnerability of his good character to change; see K. C. Cameron, *Montaigne et l'humour* (Paris, 1966), p. 2.

29. For the history of the figure of Democritus, including his juxtaposition with Heraclitus, from antiquity through the Renaissance, see Christopher Luthy, "The Fourfold Democritus on the Stage of Early Modern Science," *Isis* 91 (Sept. 2000): 443–79. Of special importance to the reputation of Democritus as a moralist, according to Christopher Luthy, is Rinuccio Aretino's translation in the fifteenth century of an ancient Greek epistolary novel about an encounter between the physician Hippocrates and the laughing philosopher, believed by the people of Abdera to have lost his mind; see p. 461. For a compelling reflection on this novel, see Adam Frank's *Some Mad Scientists* project, which includes a short paper and a thought-provoking radio-play (www.somemadscientists.com). I am sorry not to have discovered Frank's work on this subject before drafting this essay, especially given his resonant discussion of "mad science" as the closing of the gap between the observer and the observed.

30. Montaigne, "Of Democritus and Heraclitus," in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, 1: 220; hereafter abbreviated "D."

misfortune. Juvenal, like Desiderius Erasmus and Montaigne after him, is squarely on the side of laughter.³¹ As a stinging critic of social evils, he poses the same question Robert Burton will adopt centuries later as a rhapsodic refrain in the frenetic introduction to his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): What if Democritus could see us now?³² When Burton, who styles himself “Democritus Junior,” diagnoses the whole world with “melancholy,” which signifies nothing less than universal fallenness, he is only a late member of an ever-growing tribe of sneering “Democriti.”³³ No matter his derisiveness, many Renaissance humanists identify Democritus with philosophical detachment and even with properly Christian contemplativeness.³⁴ In this respect, Montaigne’s unabashed preference for laughter over tears is not unusual. The form his approval takes, on the other hand, is strange enough to merit our attention. “I prefer the first humor,” he writes, “not because it is pleasanter to laugh than to weep, but because it is more disdainful [*desdaigneuse*], and condemns us more than the other; and it seems to me that we can never be despised as much as we deserve [*assez mesprisez selon nostre merite*]” (“D,” p. 221).

Montaigne’s account of the Democritean “humor” resonates powerfully with his habitual self-portrait as casual, unpremeditated, peaceful, and “nonchalant”; indeed, it’s the proximity of these characterological descriptions that raises the question of laughter’s moral consequences. Once we recognize that Democritean “disdain” can be read as a near synonym for the “nonchalance” that pervades Montaigne’s most searching discussion of violence and horror, an essay entitled “De l’utile et de l’honneste” (“Of the Useful and the Honorable”), we can hardly avoid wondering about the virtues of scornful laughter, which sounds at first like sheer uncharitableness.³⁵ Montaigne’s striking interpolations to the Democritus essay (after 1588) belong to the same historical moment as the essay on honor, which helps explain their similarity. It’s as if Montaigne returns to the earlier essay in order to draw it into the moral crisis recorded and lamented by the later one, giving a new emphasis to skepticism and per-

31. See Luthy, “The Fourfold Democritus on the Stage of Early Modern Science,” pp. 457–58.

32. See Juvenal, “*Satire 10*,” in Juvenal and Persius, *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. and ed.

Susanna Morton Braund (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 368–69.

33. See Robert Burton, “Democritus Junior to the Reader,” *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1989), 1: 1–113.

34. For the humanist interpretation of Democritus, see Luthy, “The Fourfold Democritus on the Stage of Early Modern Science,” p. 457. “Democritus gradually lost his laughter,” he explains, “assuming instead the serious mien of the contemplative hermit” (p. 463).

35. I am aware that many readers with an interest in Montaigne’s ethics would privilege “De la cruauté” (“Of Cruelty”) over “De l’utile et de l’honneste,” but the case I make for the importance of disposition to morals in the *Essais* explains my focus.

sonal weakness. In my epigraph, Burton asks what Democritus would have done if he had “beene present at the late civill warres in France.”³⁶ My answer, which might have been Burton’s as well, is that Democritus *was* present at the Wars of Religion—in the person of Montaigne. My interpretation takes up Montaigne’s invitation to integrate the perspectives on display in each essay, tacking between his explicit remarks on laughter and his more sober, but suggestively wayward, reflections on war. Reconstructing Montaigne’s view by reading *between* these essays is an inherently speculative act, but I aim to stay close to the spirit of his moral inquiry. If we bear in mind the serious but slippery persona we meet in the essay on honor, we prepare ourselves to hear the bitterness, joy, and cruelty in Democritean laughter.

As the title makes plain, “De l’utile et de l’honneste” takes up a question from Cicero’s *De officiis* (*On Duties*, 44 BCE) about the competing claims of the pragmatic and the honorable. Where Cicero argues for the identity of those values, however contrary they seem (dishonorable action harms the perpetrator no less than the victim), Montaigne’s interest lies elsewhere.³⁷ Rather than deny the difference between virtue (*l’honneste*) and expediency (*l’utile*), he worries about what happens to the first under the pressure of the second. Thus the essay can be read as a critique of cynical (Machiavellian) realism. How am I to conduct myself virtuously, Montaigne asks, when the world demands that I be cruel? How can I lead a moral life when I am not my own master? Given the high stakes of Montaigne’s line of inquiry, we can only be surprised by the casualness,

36. Burton, “Democritus Junior to the Reader,” pp. 44–45. The ellipsis in my epigraph signals the omission of a lengthy litany of wars, atrocities, and social pathologies. Burton asks how Democritus would respond to a “mad world” overtaken by horror and calamity—of which civil strife in France is one instance (p. 45).

37. The indistinction between expediency and rectitude is one of the central themes of *De officiis*. Cicero writes: “The principle with which we are now dealing is that one which is called Expediency [utile]. The usage of this word has been corrupted and has gradually come to the point where, separating moral rectitude from expediency, it is accepted that a thing may be morally right without being expedient, and expedient without being morally right. No more pernicious doctrine than this could be introduced into human life” (Cicero, *On Duties*, trans. Walter Miller [Cambridge, Mass., 1913], pp. 177, 176). On immoral action as self-harm, Cicero has the following to say: “But if he [who wrongs his fellow men] believes that, while such a course should be avoided, the other alternatives are much worse—namely, death, poverty, pain—he is mistaken in thinking that any ills affecting either his person or his property are more serious than those affecting his soul” (p. 293). For interpretations of *honestum* in the Renaissance, including Montaigne’s, see Timothy Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2009), pp. 46–47, 63. See also his discussion of Montaigne’s “jaunt[iness]” in Hampton, “Difficult Engagements: Private Passion and Public Service in Montaigne’s *Essais*,” in *Politics and the Passions, 1500–1800*, ed. Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli (Princeton, N.J., 2006), p. 45.

even goofiness, of the essay's opening lines. He begins by telling us how haphazard and careless he is, acknowledging in advance how foolish his observations will be. "No one is exempt from saying silly things," he explains. "Mine escape me as nonchalantly [*nonchallamment*] as they deserve" ("U," p. 599). As if to ensure that we wonder about the misalignment of tone and purpose, he suggests that the remainder of the essay, one of the most wrenchingly violent sequences he ever composed, is evidence of unembarrassed clumsiness: "I speak to my paper as I speak to the first man I meet," he writes. "That this is true, here is proof [*Qu'il soit vray, voicy dequoy*]" ("U," p. 599).

The opening paragraphs compound our confusion by defending schadenfreude, even though Montaigne will do nothing so emphatically in this essay as wring his hands over cruelty. He plays the fool before he plays the villain, only to embark thereafter on a straight-faced appraisal of the moral and physical dangers of political action. Here, Montaigne unfolds a problem we recognize from the Lucretian scene of spectatorship, the first two lines of which he subsequently quotes (I will not reproduce them here):

There is nothing useless in nature, not even uselessness itself. . . . Our being is cemented with sickly qualities: ambition, jealousy, envy, vengeance, superstition, despair, dwell in us with a possession so natural that we recognize their image also in the beasts—even cruelty, so unnatural [*denaturé*] a vice. For in the midst of compassion we [*nous*] feel within us I know not what bittersweet pricking of malicious pleasure [*aigre-douce pointe de volupté maligne*] in seeing others suffer; even children feel it. ["U," p. 599]

Soon, Montaigne laments the pervasiveness of cruelty, cautioning us against any situation that might require it of us. In particular, putting oneself in the service of another might mean doing his unbearable dirty work. Yet one of the essay's first lessons is that malevolence is "natural." "Even children" savor the terrible voluptuousness of other people's suffering. We feel it "in the midst of compassion"; as we (*nous*) extend our sympathy, unwholesome pleasure interrupts and confuses our seemingly virtuous response. Soon, Montaigne dilates from the psyche to the polis; he delegates cruelty to "citizens" (*citoyens*) of greater mettle than he happens to have. "We who are weaker," he writes, "let us take parts that are both easier and less hazardous" ("U," p. 600). Yet the case of schadenfreude disallows self-exemption; if Montaigne the citizen can affirm the necessity of cruel expediency while refraining from such behavior himself, the delectable "natural[ness]" of inner "malice" suggests primordial malevolence. Irrespective of this or that moral decision, cruelty abides.

Twice over, then, the essay casts doubt on Montaigne's earnest plea for gentleness. Why "toss off" an essay on blood-curdling horror? And why, as a preface to a critique of violence, identify with cruelty itself? I suggest that these are not separate questions. Montaigne's easygoing humor explains his readiness for moral catastrophe. A closer look at Montaigne's description of his temperament will clarify the point. He foregrounds cheerful "nonchalance" because he blames overheated zeal for the *guerres civiles*, offering us an affective rather than politico-theological interpretation of war.³⁸ For the irenic author of the *Essais*, the absence of *chaleur* implied by the etymology of *nonchalance* promises an antidote to violence. Montaigne diagnoses his countrymen's bloodthirstiness as the barely concealed "heat" of dissimulated aggression: "Their propensity to malignity [*propension vers la malignité*] and violence they call zeal [*zele*]. It is not the cause that inflames them [*ce n'est pas la cause qui les eschauffe*], it is their self-interest [*interest*]. They kindle [*attisent*] war not because it is just, but because it is war" ("U," p. 602). Montaigne unmasks the justification for war as mere rationalization; "they kindle war . . . because it is war" construes false reasoning as tautology. The truth lies instead in intensity of passion; Montaigne speaks of mere "propensity" (*propension*) rather than ideology, and his verbs suggest the heat of personal "interest": *eschauffer* (to heat) and *attiser* (to kindle). Belief, he thinks, is more fuel than cause. By making a display of emotional cool, then, Montaigne withdraws from conflict. Thus we might translate his introductory remark, "I speak to my paper as I speak to the first man I meet," into a moral imperative: "I decline intensity of purpose." Montaigne's shrug is an alternative to the paradigm of Stoic self-mastery glorified and distorted by the French nobility, underwriting martial ferocity.³⁹

Since "nonchalance" describes a relaxed disposition, however, it stands little chance of protecting Montaigne from malice—his own or anyone else's. In French translations of *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*, 1528), "nonchalance" is a common rendering of *sprezzatura*, Castiglione's term for the quality of artlessness or effortlessness with which

38. I develop this argument in greater detail in the first chapter of David Carroll Simon, *Light without Heat: The Observational Mood from Bacon to Milton* (in progress).

39. Here and throughout this essay, I write in sympathy with David Quint's account of flexibility as one of the central moral values of the *Essais*. I have learned a great deal from his interpretation. Because I see nonchalance as susceptibility to cruelty, I am less willing than he is to translate Montaigne's gentleness into a precept like "Live and let live"; see David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), p. xv. For an analysis of the detachment characteristic of Montaigne's diplomatic activities, see Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy*, pp. 62–72.

the courtier secures personal advantage.⁴⁰ What's distinctive about Montaigne's version, however, is that he describes effortlessness as inhabitable experience rather than manufactured appearance. Equally surprising is his supposition that it offers a meaningful response to wartime violence. Recoiling from the tautology of dogmatic insistence, he embraces an ethos of pliable looseness. Like his late-modern cousin Bartleby the Scrivener, whose nonchalance likewise animates an oblique resistance that finds expression as "prefer[ence]" rather than disciplined refusal, Montaigne would rather slip easily away from his adversaries than perform an emphatic counterreaction.⁴¹ In "De la cruauté" ("Of Cruelty"), for instance, he doesn't insist on an unblemished freedom from the vice in question. "I cruelly hate cruelty,"⁴² he explains ("Je hay, entre autres vices, cruellement la cruauté"),⁴³ parrying wartime violence rather than blocking it. Defeating cruelty means acknowledging his own.⁴⁴

Returning now to the essay on Democritus, we find that jaunty Montaigne's awareness of suffering is muted (he speaks vaguely of folly—not violence), and yet it takes almost no interpretive imagination to identify him as the very same peaceful Rambler who shudders at the world's cruelty. "I take the first subject that chance [*la fortune*] offers," he writes, displaying the same detachment for which he soon relies on laughter,

They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely. . . . Scattering a word here, there another, samples separated from their context, dispersed, without a plan and without a promise, I am not bound to make something of them or to adhere to them myself without varying when I please and giving myself up

40. For Montaigne's nonchalance as an appropriation from Castiglione, mediated by French translations, see Felicity Green, *Montaigne and the Life of Freedom* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 141–83. See also Marcel Tetel, "The Humanistic Situation: Montaigne and Castiglione," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 10 (Autumn 1979): 69–84.

41. See Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener* (New York, 2004).

42. Montaigne, "Of Cruelty," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p. 313.

43. Montaigne, "De la cruauté," *Essais*, 2:98.

44. In "De l'utile et de l'honneste," extemporaneous thought actually serves as a model for action. "I aspire to no other fruit in acting than to act," he writes, "and do not attach to it long consequences and purposes. Each action plays its game [*jeu*] individually: let it strike home if it can" ("U," p. 601). Like his unpracticed style, his behavior lacks the directionality of commitment. Indeed, he lowers the stakes of political engagement by treating it like a "game" (*jeu*). Much of the essay describes Montaigne's experience as an ambassador, a mediating role that foregrounds his detachment from "consequences and purposes"—from anything other than the matter at hand (which he thus divests of ethical, political, and theological weight). The difficulty of Montaigne's perspective, then, is that nonchalance only cools the passions of strife by remaining susceptible to heat. He answers violence with a drifting languor that might lead anywhere at all.

to doubt and uncertainty and my ruling quality, which is ignorance.
[“D,” p. 219]

After my ellipsis, which marks the beginning of Montaigne’s post-1588 additions, his self-description is almost identical to the one in the other essay; he shrugs off any and every commitment his words might imply. When he identifies with the Democritean position by affirming that we can never be “despised [*mesprisez*] as much as we deserve,” we should notice that “mesprizon” (contempt) turns up alongside “nonchalance” as a rendering of *sprezzatura* in French translations of *Il libro del cortegiano*.⁴⁵ His observation that he prefers the Democritean “humeur,” with its habitual bursts of laughter, because it’s appropriately “desdaigneuse” likewise draws on the language of courtly sophistication—though here, as so often in the *Essais*, the effect is an impression of unembarrassed artlessness rather than its careful manufacture.⁴⁶ The late-modern Montaignian Henri Bergson describes laughter as a “momentary anesthesia of the heart.”⁴⁷ Though I don’t think Montaigne (for whom laughter itself is affectively intense) would agree, dispassion is a signature quality of his Democritean persona—but as a backdrop for bursts of laughter.⁴⁸ Most of the time, Democritus remains as free from *chaleur* as our gently flexible guide to wartime survival.

In Joubert’s treatise on the physiology of laughter, Montaigne would have found a striking precedent for the near-identity of Democritean joviality and his dispositional nonchalance. Joubert remarks that laughter

45. See Green, *Montaigne and the Life of Freedom*, p. 151.

46. Quint writes:

[Montaigne’s] claim to an easy native goodness as opposed to a virtue that requires struggle can thus be read as an expression of aristocratic hauteur and *sprezzatura* comparable to the disdain for pedants and professional writers against whose carefully structured and argued works he pointedly opposes the apparently—and one must, of course, emphasize “apparently”—impromptu and dilettantish jottings of the *Essais*. The very style of the essays that Montaigne describes with two adjectives that translate the idea of Castiglione’s *sprezzatura*—“desdaigneux” and “mesprisant”—mimes a kind of natural effortlessness that, in turn, proclaims the nobility of the writer. [Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy*, p. 60]

My own premise is that we should take effortlessness seriously (as an inhabitable experience) rather than recasting it as artifice or simulation.

47. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York, 1914), p. 5.

48. Elder Olson’s account of “the emotion conducive to laughter” as “a relaxation, or, as Aristotle would say, a *katastasis*, of concern due to a manifest absurdity of the grounds for concern” accords with my description of Democritean laughter as an expression of relief that someone else’s misfortune is not one’s own, though here the discovery of the “absurdity of the grounds for concern” would simply be the realization that worry, for the moment, properly belongs to someone else (Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* [Bloomington, Ind., 1968], p. 16).

“restores the mind overworked by cares [*traualhé de soucy*]”—a gift of rest from the body to the mind (*TR*, p. 16). He goes on to associate the good humor of adequate rest with sociability, facility in thinking, and rhetorical “ease” (*grace de parler*)—just the qualities Montaigne associates with nonchalance. “The pleasant and facetious man,” Joubert writes, “shows that he has a clever mind [*l’esprit habile*] with great advantages in civility and ease in speaking [*grace de parler*]” (*TR*, p. 17). The figure of affability links good spirits and a propensity for laughter. Like Montaigne, moreover, Joubert makes Democritus a beneficiary of laughter’s therapeutic effects; he was fortunate, we discover, to be “dissatisfied with nothing” (*TR*, p. 17). Like a perfect artifact of Montaigne’s ethico-political fantasy, laughter functions in Joubert’s treatise as an effortless mechanism for emotional calm.

Yet nonchalance, in Montaigne’s essay on honor, is not quite the solution it seems. As a state of susceptibility to circumstance, it opens the door to cruelty. The “malignité” Montaigne attributes to those who make war is exactly his term for the “pricking” of schadenfreude in the heart of humankind: “volupté maligne.” Indeed, the pleasure in cruel spectatorship Montaigne discovers in the Lucretian image can even be understood as a version of his own characteristic effortlessness; the shipwrecked do not vaguely suffer but struggle intensely for survival (Lucretius gives us the word *laborem*). Joubert raises this possibility when, echoing Aristotle, he defines “malice, made up of hate and joy,” for which a good illustration is the person who “rejoic[es] over evil coming to good people,” as the opposite of “zeal” (*zele*), which symmetrically combines “love and anger,” thereby “resembling jealousy” (*TR*, pp. 32, 52).⁴⁹ For Montaigne, as we’ve seen, “nonchalance” holds this very position as zeal’s contrary—and he gives us good reasons of his own to wonder about its proximity to cruelty.⁵⁰ Indeed, when he attributes utter “natural[ness]” to schadenfreude, he draws it into the orbit of his disposition.⁵¹ Since he tells us that even the

49. Aristotle characterizes righteous indignation as “the observance of a mean between Envy and Malice, and these qualities are concerned with pain and pleasure felt at the fortunes of one’s neighbours. The righteously indignant man is pained by undeserved good fortune; the jealous man exceeds him and is pained by all good fortune of others; while the malicious man so far falls short of being pained that he actually feels pleasure” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 105). For Aristotle, we might say, righteous indignation is an admissible (because just) cousin of schadenfreude.

50. For Montaigne, however, zeal is euphemized “malignity,” which seems to encompass all manner of “self-interest,” rather than envy in particular.

51. For an intriguing discussion of the adjacency of indifference and moral monstrosity in a later historical moment, see James A. Steintrager, *Cruel Delight: Enlightenment Culture and the Inhuman* (Bloomington, Ind., 2004), pp. 3–33. “The notion that inhuman creatures might enjoy watching suffering,” he writes of eighteenth-century moral philosophy, “would seem to

most “unnatural . . . vice” is “natural,” we need not worry (as is our habit in many quarters of the humanities) about the covert establishment of a moral hierarchy. On the contrary, nonchalance grants extreme elasticity to the realm of what goes without saying. What it doesn’t do and can’t do is protect the self from disaster. Montaigne sidesteps the vectors of aggression that might impel him to violent action, and yet he remains amenable to whatever flight of passion takes him by surprise. If we think now of the Democritus essay, translating Montaigne’s willingness to bend into the idiom of giddy spectatorship, we might imagine the suddenness of emotion as a burst of laughter that carries him recklessly away from his (emergent or settled) confidence of rectitude.

Just as every circumstance makes a trial of Montaigne, “De l’utile et de l’honneste” makes an experiment of readers. It narrates a sequence of episodes in which people are horribly punished for dishonorable behavior. In many cases, they perform acts of violence on behalf of the prince. Often, hapless villains doubly suffer when they are forced to betray their honor; they perpetrate heinous acts and are heinously punished for doing so. We might very well respond with sheer disgust, concluding simply that Montaigne is right about how terrible cruelty is. On the other hand, his proposal that sometimes we feel *schadenfreude* “in the midst of compassion” raises another possibility. Perhaps there is pleasure in exhibits of spectacular violence. Perhaps some of us discover the prurience of our interest in the horrible events on which he asks us to gaze. Because these episodes are imported from the past, they are conspicuously distant from the present-day experience of warfare. Notwithstanding thematic resonance (these are stories of misplaced duty), Montaigne invites aversive identification with victims of violence on the vague basis of a shared susceptibility to harm.

He began to feel such remorse and revulsion that he had his agent’s eyes put out and his tongue and private parts cut off. [“U,” p. 605]

He was thrown headlong from the Tarpeian rock. [“U,” p. 606]

They have them hanged with the purse of their payment around their neck. [“U,” p. 606]

She, in his presence, opened up the murderer’s stomach, and while it was warm, reaching with her hands for his heart and tearing it out, she threw it to the dogs to eat. [“U,” p. 606]

contradict the claim that the cruel are unfeeling,” but “indifference to the spectacle of suffering rather than enjoyment or pity . . . is an option that will be increasingly foreclosed as the century proceeds” (pp. 6–7).

Since Sejanus' daughter could not be punished with death in a certain type of judgment at Rome because she was a virgin, she was, to give way to the laws, violated by the executioner before he strangled her. ["U," p. 606]

Montaigne doesn't simply give us scenes of violence; he gives us lurid details. Though he recounts these episodes without much elaboration (and we can certainly find *more* lurid descriptions of violence in the period), the contents are enough to make us shudder. Because he argues against the horrors of realpolitik, his thesis can't possibly be that everyone is really cruel. What he does insist on is our susceptibility to circumstance—the impossibility of ruling out that soon we will no longer remain the people we know ourselves (or believe ourselves) to be.⁵² Perhaps, as our revulsion turns to interest, we discover this (dark, or perhaps simply de-idealized) truth about ourselves: not that we are evil but that the degree to which we are changeable reveals our susceptibility to evil. The more we remember Montaigne's devil-may-care attitude in the essay's opening lines, the less likely we are to take these disturbing images at face value. The Devil does care, and war is hell. No amount of unconcern can change that, but it can raise doubts about the resilience of honor.

The sensitive reader's self-examination as she or he responds in real time to representations of violence (ancient examples spring to terrifying life in Montaigne's vivid but matter-of-fact prose) is only the most disturbing of the essay's lessons in the ordinariness of (physical and moral) vulnerability. Even a literal-minded interpretation, one that sets aside the lingering implications of "natural" schadenfreude in order to follow the explicit line of his argument, will arrive at a disarmingly feeble conclusion. The essay defends virtue against expediency, and yet here Montaigne appeals to pragmatic self-interest in order to caution against it. Rather than narrate episodes in which people suffer from guilt and regret, he tells us stories in which people are punished because they abandon honor. He

52. My emphasis on contingency and changeability sets me on a different track from Richard Strier, who argues for the constancy of selfhood in Montaigne, but I agree with Strier's main point: Montaigne thinks the ambition to be other than you are is foolish. For Montaigne, such a transformation will not be an achievement of the self. Strier's unusual and suggestive claim that Montaigne approximates a Protestant position when he concedes that the self *is* subject to transformation (just not through force of will) actually allows for the most dramatic of alterations in character. Even if we conclude that the kind of self-betrayal I discuss in this essay is less a *change of* than a *deviation from* underlying character, my sense of Montaigne's moral quandary would remain the same. See Richard Strier, *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton* (Chicago, 2011), pp. 208–29.

might have defended the inherent value of undamaged virtue, but instead he subordinates the claims of conscience to the desire for self-preservation. If you embrace cruelty, he warns, people will hate you for what you have done and seek terrible revenge. Like a disillusioned answer to Cicero's claim that the honorable is useful because virtuous action protects goodness of character, Montaigne instead defends honor on the ground that dishonor exposes us to reprisal.⁵³ Thus he normalizes an unrelenting threat to bodily and moral integrity. What's most frightening about Montaigne's view, then, is that the best response to violence is a disposition defined by weakness.⁵⁴ Yet Montaigne himself isn't frightened. A disillusioned or realist definition of *nonchalance* might be an experience of fear so attenuated by an infinity of possible objects that nothing remains but vague readiness. You wait to find out in what specific respect you've been right to doubt the world's safety.

2. The Event of Laughter

For Joubert, the guffaw encompasses the sob, but the reverse is not the case. If all kinds of experiences can be understood as composite, in the loose sense that they are impure, laughter (unlike crying) incarnates ambivalence; Joubert calls it a "battle of two feelings" (*TR*, p. 44). The connection with *schadenfreude* is no surprise; German, with its facility for compound nouns, has lent English a word that captures the strange confrontation between pleasure and pain. Joubert gives enjoyment the edge without permitting victory, which would stop laughter dead.

For laughable matter gives us pleasure and sadness: pleasure in that we find it unworthy of pity, and that there is no harm done nor evil that we consider of consequence. The heart therefore rejoices in it,

53. Cicero writes:

It is the error of men who are not strictly upright to seize upon something that seems to be expedient [utile] and straightway to dissociate that from the question of moral right. To this error the assassin's dagger, the poisoned cup, the forged wills owe their origin; this gives rise to theft, embezzlement of public funds, exploitation and plundering of provincials and citizens; this engenders also the lust for excessive wealth, for despotic powers, and finally for making oneself king even in the midst of a free people; and anything more atrocious or repulsive than such a passion cannot be conceived. For with a false perspective they see the material rewards but not the punishment—I do not mean the penalty of the law, which they often escape, but the heaviest penalty of all, their own demoralization. [Cicero, *On Duties*, pp. 303–5].

54. I'm thinking here of Quint's "easygoing morality of yielding" (Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy*, p. x).

and expands just as it does in real joy. There is also sadness, because all laughable matter comes from ugliness and impropriety: the heart, upset over such unseemliness, and as if feeling pain, shrinks and tightens. This displeasure is very light, for we are hardly upset over what happens to others when the occasion is slight. The joy that we have knowing that there is nothing to pity (other than a false appearance) has more effect on the heart than does the light sadness. If such a thing were in the smallest way to happen to us we would be much more upset, and because of that we would not be able to laugh (for it is necessary in laughter that the pleasure be greater than the sadness); but for another we are less worried. [TR, p. 44]

Physiologically, then, laughter is a contest between the dilation and contraction of the heart. It expands with “joy” (or something like it) and shrinks with “displeasure” (if not with actual “pain”). We shake in the grip of competing passions, neither of which achieves a decisive victory. Our “joy” is somewhat more intense than our “sadness,” and yet the “battle” rages on. Joubert’s description, with its emphasis on the “ugliness” or misfortune that occasions such contrary motions, raises a question of *schadenfreude* for which (with a gesture we now recognize) he offers an overhasty answer. On the face of it, that is, he rules cruelty out, explaining that the pleasure of the laughing body is “the joy that we have knowing there is nothing to pity.” Yet Joubert admits that “we would be much more upset” if we underwent the unhappy experience ourselves; “for another we are less worried.” The suffering, then, is real; it’s just that we are less affected by it.

Elsewhere in the *Traité*, Joubert’s patently incoherent confidence that “there is nothing to pity” in laughter continues to create disturbances. Consider, for instance, his description of Hannibal’s inappropriate laughter at the defeat of Carthage, which occasions an awkward effort to distinguish sympathy from its failure.

When the Carthaginians petitioned for peace, and it was difficult to raise the money they needed to pay, having exhausted their finances through the long war, and while the court was full of sadness and mourning, they say that Hannibal laughed. Hasdrubal reprimanded him sharply for having laughed during this public misery and calamity, particularly as he was the cause of this mourning and lamentation. To which Hannibal replied that if one could see the demeanor of his heart as one sees with the eyes the demeanor of the face, it would be clear to him that this laughter he reprimanded did not come from a joyful heart, but one nearly broken by the pain it feels. [TR, p. 109]

Thus Hasdrubal, Hannibal's brother, explicitly raises the charge of *schadenfreude*, from which Hannibal defends himself by denying that "joy" accounts for his laughter. Only in a counterfactual world in which we "could see the demeanor of his heart," however, would we know for sure that his laughter is innocent of cruelty. Though Joubert's response shies away from *schadenfreude*, it actually underscores the lingering possibility of cruelty and the difficulty of putting the fear of sympathy's failure to rest. Indeed, Joubert makes his confusion plain when he offers mutually exclusive explanations as if they were nicely complementary.

Since, then, hope dilates and sadness with compression squeezes the heart, these two passions mixed together could have moved the laughter in Hannibal. We can add to this the reason that depends on Hannibal's confession: they say that he replied that his laughter came not from a joyous heart, but a nearly broken one, which is very plausible. For we demonstrated a little earlier that, of madmen, maniacs, and furious people, some weep and others laugh; and it happens sometimes that, because of a grave sadness and a rage, the heart will be greatly troubled by it on account of the melancholic vapors and mists that trouble it, not assiduously but at intervals. [*TR*, p. 110]

Thus Joubert "add[s]" a theory of near-pathological agitation (a state of "grave sadness and rage" that recalls his account, earlier in the treatise, of "madmen, maniacs, and furious people") to his basic theory of dynamic ambivalence (in which "hope and sadness" palpitate the heart). The dilation and contraction theory would seem to confirm the charge that Hannibal lacks adequate compassion; if his "hope" outweighs his "sadness"—and, indeed, his "displeasure is very light"—then his laughter really does convey a failure to "pity" the suffering of his people (or to do so sufficiently). However, if "grave sadness and rage" engulf him with violent intensity, the opposite is true: he fails to hold himself back from something like *over*-participation in "public misery and calamity." The extremity of his performance of brokenness shows that he overshoots public suffering. Thus Joubert, in his very confusion, anticipates my (Montaignian) description of *schadenfreude*; the alternative to pitilessness (Hasdrubal's initial charge) is somehow both a version of that same pitilessness (positive emotion outweighs negative emotion) and a form of identification (a mad or imprecise *over*identification) with the one who suffers.

When Montaigne adopts the persona of Democritus, confusion is less the embarrassment of laughter's theory than the very thing that grants it value. Montaigne's achievement is to show at every moment that he remains embedded in the ridiculous world he scorns. On its own, the

observation is simple enough: an expression of modesty, one might conclude. Yet when read alongside “De l’utile et de l’honneste,” the essay invites us into a space of dangerous reversibility. In this respect, Montaigne is strikingly original; identification on the narrow ground of shared contingency creates a situation of moral urgency premised on sympathy’s failure. The Democritus essay’s final sentence reads: “Our own peculiar condition is that we are as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh” (“D,” p. 221). Refashioning Aristotle’s observation that human beings are distinguished by their capacity to laugh, Montaigne makes us just as laughable as the world. Edwin M. Duval explains that Montaigne’s revisions of the essay deliberately confuse the “object of judgment” with the “faculty of judgment”—transforming, for instance, an observation about the difficulty of judging the “soul” (*âme*) of Caesar into a reflection on the capacity of Caesar himself to make proper judgments.⁵⁵ Duval goes on to show that the final line of “De Democritus et Heraclitus” similarly represents the person who laughs as both subject and object of disdain. In the original French, what Montaigne says is: “Nostre propre et peculièr condition est autant ridicule que risible.”⁵⁶ “‘Ridicule,’” Duval explains, “meaning ‘worthy of laughter or derision,’ applies to *objects of judgment*, while ‘risible,’ meaning ‘inclined to laugh or deride,’ applies to the *judges* themselves.”⁵⁷ Frame’s translation, which I quoted above, successfully elaborates the original phrase in order to preserve this dimension of Montaigne’s meaning: Democritean laughter embraces what it repels.⁵⁸

The essay’s final sentence seems to deliver the truth of our foolishness like a punch line, but it repeats one of Montaigne’s recurrent rhetorical gestures. Recall that *ridicule* was the adjective applied to humankind in Montaigne’s very first formulation of Democritean laughter; the conclusion takes us back to where we started by making our fitness to be laughed at identical to the world’s. Indeed, the foolishness Montaigne originally described as a “condition nostre” is here mirrored back to us as chiasmus: “nostre . . . condition.” Montaigne foregrounds the brokenness of social belonging by adopting a position of sneering detachment while reminding us how worthless he is. Returning now to a passage I quoted above, where he is especially emphatic about Democritean “disdain,” we might observe

55. Edwin M. Duval, “Montaigne’s Conversions: Compositional Strategies in the *Essais*,” *French Forum* 7 (Jan. 1982): 14.

56. Montaigne, “De Democritus et Heraclitus,” *Essais*, 1:360.

57. Duval, “Montaigne’s Conversions,” p. 14.

58. For a discussion of laughter that takes everything as its object (including the one who laughs), see Stephen Halliwell, “Greek Laughter and the Problem of the Absurd,” *Arion* 13 (Fall 2005): 121–46.

that he is equally insistent on the pronoun “nous”; alienation reminds him of the plurality of his first person.⁵⁹ “I prefer the first [Democritean] humor,” he writes, “not because it is pleasanter to laugh than to weep, but because it is more disdainful, and condemns *us* [*nous*] more than the other; and it seems to me that *we* [*nous*] can never be despised as much as *we* deserve [*assez mesprisez selon nostre merite*]” (“D,” p. 221; my emphasis). By the time we arrive at the neat inversion that brings the essay to a close, then, we are well prepared to notice that Montaigne frames his universalizing aphorism with the vocabulary of detachment, seeming at first to withdraw from what, in the event, he embraces: disgusted embeddedness. “Our own peculiar condition,” he writes, is to belong to a species that merits scorn.

Indeed, Montaigne’s laughter implies a sweeping onto-epistemological claim (a thesis about what we can know and thus about what kinds of beings we are), unseating us when we ride most high. When he draws a contrast between Timon, who “hate[ed]” people rather than properly scorning them, and Diogenes, who more closely resembled Democritus insofar as he “esteemed us [all of humankind] so little that contact with us could neither disturb him nor affect him,” we can’t help but notice that his account of the unworthiness of the world to “affect” the properly “disdainful” person rehearses a skeptical argument he makes earlier in the essay (“D,” p. 221):

Things in themselves may have their own weights and measures and qualities; but once inside, within us, she [the soul, *l’âme*] allots them their qualities as she sees fit. Death is frightful to Cicero, desirable to Cato, a matter of indifference to Socrates. Health, conscience, authority, knowledge, riches, beauty, and their opposites—all are stripped on entry and receive from the soul new clothing, and the coloring that she chooses—brown, green, bright, dark, bitter, sweet, deep, superficial—and which each individual soul chooses; for they have not agreed together on their styles, rules, and forms; each one is queen in her realm. [“D,” p. 220]

In this light, Montaigne’s Democritean refusal to take the world seriously is not just one attitude among many; it responds to an unequivocal fact. We simply *can’t* take the world seriously; epistemologically speaking, it’s

59. Samaras beats me to a version of this point: “What is revealing in this chapter is the repetition of *nous* and *nostre*. In little more than one page, *nous* is repeated twelve times, *nostre* seven.” Responding to the essay’s final line, he argues that Montaigne’s irony includes “everyone and everything, including antiquity, which he admires, and including himself” (Samaras, *The Comic Element of Montaigne’s Style*, pp. 10, 11).

never ours to take. To be sure, we can try, but to do so is to grasp ahold of an illusion. Laughter conveys the knowing clumsiness of the failed attempt to get a firm purchase on the world. “Brown, green, bright, dark, bitter, sweet, deep, superficial”: here passes the pageant of private experience, the old skeptical scene of the mind at solitary play. In his “Apologie de Raimond Sebond,” Montaigne aligns this perspective with the philosophy of none other than Democritus:

From the same foundation that Heraclitus had, and that maxim of his that all things had in them the aspects that were found in them, Democritus derived a wholly opposite conclusion, that things had in them nothing at all of what we found in them; and from the fact that honey was sweet to one and bitter to another, he argued that it was neither sweet nor bitter.⁶⁰

In the laughter essay, the emotional “coloring” of things is similarly a measure of our distance from them. Our disillusioned laughter shows that we get the joke that emotions and phenomena are themselves forms of concealment. We dress things up in “new clothing,” taking garments for bodies. In the absence of understanding, then, what binds us together is the hectic happenstance of the present situation, including the very shape of our characters. If we can’t quite get a handle on the world, we do not doubt that it touches us and that we touch it back: “Of a hundred members and faces [*visages*] that each thing has,” Montaigne explains in the Democritus essay, “I take one, sometimes only to lick it, sometimes to brush the surface, sometimes to pinch it to the bone” (“D,” p. 219). What’s more, *our own* “faces” receive such treatment in turn. This is not the right place to address the problem of skepticism, but it’s worth noting how far we’ve traveled from the familiar view that locates the skeptic at some decisive remove from the dangerous world.⁶¹ As far as Montaigne is concerned, no one is better sensitized to contingency than the doubter, who belongs to an alien world in which dependable laws cannot be discerned. If he manages to feel at home and at rest (by suspending judgment on anxiogenic questions), he nonetheless accepts the vastness of his weakness; his equanimity (*ataraxia*) is nothing other than surrender to contingency.

In an essay entitled “Comme nous pleurons et rions d’une meme chose” (“How We Cry and Laugh for the Same Thing”), Montaigne emphasizes the disorienting discontinuity of our experiences. “We are wrong,” he writes, “to try to compose a continuous body out of all this

60. Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p. 443.

61. See the earlier note on Blumenberg for a representative example.

succession of feelings.”⁶² In the Democritus essay, he seems to say the opposite. “Let us offer our offerings and vows to ourselves,” he writes, “not to Fortune; she has no power over our character; on the contrary, it drags her in its train and molds her in its own form” (“D,” p. 220). Yet “character” turns out to be a card we get dealt. We can’t escape our personalities, but “offer[ing] . . . vows to ourselves” implies subjection to exactly the kind of external agency for which “Fortune” is shorthand. If character were truly “yours,” you wouldn’t find yourself at its mercy. Unlike the turns of “Fortune,” to be sure, Montaigne expects character to have staying power, but the difference is only a matter of duration. Being someone isn’t a ground for confidence in firsthand experience. The overlong interval of a contingent fact only proves the forcefulness of accident, which is also, come to think of it, exactly the principle that guides the composition of the *Essais*—and the Democritus essay in particular (“I take the first subject that chance [*la fortune*] offers”). Accordingly, the essay’s central images of character, the faces of Democritus and Heraclitus, are more like masks than expressions of inner qualities. Both philosophers “wear” their faces rather than simply having them; Heraclitus “wore a face perpetually sad” (*portoit le visage continuellement atristé*), and Democritus goes out in public “with a mocking and laughing face” (*avec un visage moqueur et riant*). A mirthful or lachrymose expression, then, is not so different from the “new clothing” in which the soul dresses up whatever it seeks to understand. The “visage” of laughter or tears echoes the “hundred members and faces [*visages*] that each thing has” (“D,” p. 219). As with the surfaces of things, the thoroughness of our understanding of our characters fails to assure us that they will never violate our trust.

Montaigne frames his discussion of Democritean laughter by acknowledging exactly this propensity of the soul to change course—as if the swerving mind epitomized the folly at which he laughs. Just before he presents us with the image of the laughing philosopher, he writes, “Each particle [*parcelle*], each occupation, of a man betrays him and reveals him just as well as any other” (“D,” p. 220). Earlier, he looks at the way Alexander the Great plays chess in order to understand his character—as if the ordinariness of the activity confirmed its value as evidence. “And perhaps,” he writes, “she [the soul] is best observed when she goes at her simple pace. The winds of passion seize her more strongly on her lofty flights” (“D,” p. 220). Yet the expression Frame translates as “perhaps” is actually “à l’aventure,” which indicates the considerable force of Montaigne’s

62. Montaigne, “How We Cry and Laugh for the Same Thing,” *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p. 174; hereafter abbreviated “H.”

“maybe.” (We tend not to notice the “hap” in “perhaps.”) We might learn more about Alexander by observing his everyday life, but this is only a “chance” possibility. Indeed, the implication of Montaigne’s attention to ordinariness is not that it reveals the truth of Alexander but that its truth is no less genuine than whatever we discover in famous acts of heroism. Both kinds of appearance tell us something about what *is* but much less about what *was* or *will be soon*.

I have painted a picture of generalized danger that includes both the threat of physical violence and the risk of transformation; Montaigne anticipates the possibility of his own otherness as much as the swing of the sword. If danger, as I have suggested, is the cause of Democritean laughter, it’s also the thing laughter reveals. When we laugh, Montaigne suggests, we can hardly avoid the perception that fortune gets the upper hand. (Recall that Joubert associates laughter with the “vapors” of mania and madness.) In “Comme nous pleurons et rions d’une meme chose,” Montaigne uses laughter as an illustration of the soul’s aptitude for “spontaneous” deviation.

Just as in our body they say there is an assemblage of diverse humors, of which that one is master which most ordinarily rules within us, according to our constitution [*complexions*]; so in our soul, though various impulses stir it, there must be one that remains master of the field. Its advantage is not complete, however; because of the volatility [*volubilité*] and pliancy [*souplesse*] of our soul, the weaker ones on occasion regain the lost ground and make a brief attack in their turn. Hence we see children, who quite spontaneously follow nature, often cry and laugh at the same thing. [“H,” p. 173].

Just as he remarks in “De l’utile et de l’honneste” that “children” quite “naturally” feel the “bittersweet pricking of malicious pleasure” he locates in the scene of Lucretian schadenfreude, here he observes that they “spontaneously follow nature,” thereby revealing the strange proximity of pleasure and pain (another occasion for “bittersweet”-ness). An event produces emotional effects that diverge to the point of polarity: laughter and tears. Although the essay offers a series of brief narratives in which people cry when we expect them to laugh, it doesn’t give even a single example of the converse. The reason, I suspect, is the resistance of laughter to the essay’s rhetorical purpose. Montaigne argues against suspicious interpretations of human behavior that recast unlikely emotional responses as simulations. His point, once again, is that we can’t know ahead of time how, in a given situation, we’re going to feel—or how we’re going to act. When Caesar receives the head of his rival, Pompey,

he weeps, and Montaigne refutes the easy assumption that his reaction is “counterfeit” (*contrefaite*) (“H,” p. 172). What look like crocodile tears, he explains, might just as well be genuine. Laughter, however, doesn’t call for the same benefit of the doubt. To be sure, artificial laughter might sustain politeness or an appearance of good humor, yet the confusion it conveys, in Montaigne’s estimation, makes it less suitable as a mask and thus less easy to mistake for one. Laughter and tears are asymmetrical and not only because, as Joubert explains, laughter includes the cardiac (and, according to other physiological accounts, cerebral) contractions of sadness.⁶³ While tears can straightforwardly express loss, the confusions of laughter fail to express sheer gain. For that purpose, an easy smile is more effective.⁶⁴

I began this essay by suspending the standard view of *schadenfreude* in the history of moral thought: the smug satisfaction of the eminently safe. We might, however, have continued to wonder about it. Along with Boltanski, perhaps, we remain uneasy about the possibility of the complacent delectation of suffering, which knows nothing of the identification I have called pitiless or the awareness of danger it entails. Indeed, an initial reading of Montaigne’s Democritus essay might encourage exactly that interpretation; his remark that “we are not as wretched as we are worthless” seems not only to issue from on high but also to explain away real suffering by converting it to harmless folly (“D,” p. 221). Isolated from the larger context of the *Essais*, Montaigne here seems to inhabit the cruel stillness of the unmoved observer. Yet the trick of this essay, as we’ve seen, is to insist, against the evidence of its own contemptuous voice, on the impossibility of detachment. Our knowledge of Montaigne’s irenic but ironic (because self-escaping) nonchalance reframes this seeming paradox as a persuasive depiction of his typical affective response to contingency: a knowingly temporary embrace of emotional quiet.

We might conclude by noting the reader’s similar situation. On its own, the essay doesn’t seem especially interested in describing or inducing the experience of affective tumult inherent to *schadenfreude*. If we sever our alliance with sneering Montaigne, we are more likely to do so with nose-wrinkling distaste than with the shudder of satisfying but painfully

63. Francis Bacon writes: “Tears are caused by a contraction of the spirits of the brain; which contraction by consequence astringeth the moisture of the brain, and thereby sendeth tears into the eyes” (Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath, 14 vols. [London, 1861–1874], 2:568).

64. In a wide-ranging study (from which I have drawn inspiration) that distinguishes the “passion” of laughter from the history of comedy, Anca Parvulescu writes: “Laughter is a threat to the expressive order of the smile” (Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* [Cambridge, Mass., 2010], p. 58).

incomplete disidentification. Nor does it seem likely that Montaigne's readers will *laugh* at his derision—neither with the specific resonances I have sought to make audible nor with innocent mirth. In my view, laughter is an unlikely response to *any* of the essays; a wry smile or silent mental chuckle is a more predictable response to the subtle wit of Montaigne's digressive musings. However, the better we understand his conviction that the comfort of an apparently safe distance can only be delusive, the more likely we are to get the joke that what he turns his nose up at is his own capacity for foolishness and that even his talk of foolishness is an equally ill-fated (indeed, knowingly artificial) evasion of the suffering with which the world confronts him. For the reader, exactly what emotional reaction attends this realization can only remain an open question. We might find, after all, that we *do* find ourselves laughing at Montaigne's pseudowithdrawal from the world, but we would be wrong to assume that he aims at any specific reaction. As Sextus Empiricus says, a Pyrrhonian skeptic is someone who is "still investigating";⁶⁵ what Montaigne requests of us is an exploratory breadth of interest like his own, directed at our own emotional lives no less than the exterior world. Perhaps we should conclude that the relative calm Montaigne displays in the Democritus essay is only the stillness of the pregnant moment before something happens.

65. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, trans. and ed. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (New York, 2000), p. 3.

Essay on Laughter

Norbert Elias

Edited by Anca Parvulescu

We all smile and laugh occasionally. To do so is as much part of a normal human existence as to eat or drink. But while one can invariably understand the part played in our life by eating and drinking, it is much more difficult to grasp that of smiling and of laughing. Many other living things eat and drink; few of them can smile or laugh.

Norbert Elias started working on “Essay on Laughter” in 1956. He wrote drafts for parts of this essay, in English, while on the sociology faculty at University of Leicester. There are ninety-one manuscript pages in the “Laughter” folder at Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar. The manuscript consists of three plans for the essay, drafts of a few sections, handwritten notebooks, a lecture, and newspaper clippings. We are publishing this essay with permission of the copyright holder, Norbert Elias Stichting, Amsterdam.

Elias often wrote multiple versions of the same paragraphs. The manuscript is typed, but there are numerous handwritten edits, additions, and notes. In the editing process, when possible, I chose the version that seems to be the last Elias completed. In a few instances, in an attempt to recuperate the complexity of Elias’s thinking across his multiple drafts, I created composite paragraphs out of the various versions. Editing included eliminating typos and other errors, adding punctuation, condensing some sections (marked in footnotes), eliminating repetitions, and bringing together sections on the same theme. Elias’s footnotes are unmarked, while editorial notes are marked as such. We formatted the essay with a view to retaining the unfinished, fragmentary nature of the manuscript. While the essay has a beginning and while its incomplete middle fragments can be retraced in Elias’s various plans, it does not have a conclusion. Elias did not propose a solution to the “riddle of laughter.” In his autobiographical *Notes on a Lifetime* he foregrounded the importance of this project to his intellectual trajectory; see Norbert Elias, *Notes on a Lifetime*, in *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Stephen Mennell et al., 18 vols. (Dublin, 2014), 17:3–70.

The range of smiling and laughing is truly astonishing.¹ Both the situations and the manner in which we smile or laugh vary so much that it is hard to say what they all have in common. Smiles may be light-hearted and playful or sad and melancholy; they may be spontaneous, deliberate, or forced. They may express the gladness of one's heart, affection and love, or affectation, polite attention, nervous hesitation or social embarrassment. Laughter may be the laughter of exultation and triumph or that of derision and gloating, the laughter of irony or romping and teasing; it may be the side-splitting laughter of merriment, the hilarious laughter of rejoicing and good cheer; the spontaneous and uproarious laughter of children or the near restraint of polite adults; the controlled and thoughtful laughter of the sophisticated or, gay and soft, the laughter of young lovers. It may have the form of a horse laugh or a hollow laugh, a pleasant peal of laughter or a shout and a burst. One may chuckle, chortle, giggle, cackle, burble, snigger and titter, or even smirk, simper, guffaw, and cachinnate.

There seems to be no end to these variations. Perhaps the most perplexing quality of laughter is its use in connection with seemingly incompatible and antagonistic attitudes. Laughter may be a sign of love or a sign of hatred. We may laugh affectionately with someone and cruelly at someone. And sometimes a laugh may express, rolled in one, affection as well as hostility. Laughter, although certainly part of man's natural inheritance, is obviously a more complex mental phenomenon than hunger and thirst, though perhaps not more complex than love, which is exceedingly variable in its manifestations and, I am told, may sometimes turn into hostility and hatred.

Do these various shades and forms of laughter have anything in common? Is it possible to detect a unitary basic function for the whole genus of laughter? One cannot answer this question, if one can answer it at all,

1. Elias prefaced his exploration of the spectrum of human laughing and smiling with an observation of the limited facial expressivity of animals.—ED.

NORBERT ELIAS (1897–1990) was one of the most prominent sociologists of the twentieth century. His work (not including this essay) has recently been published as *Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Stephen Mennell et al., 18 vols. (Dublin, 2006–14). ANCA PARVULESCU is professor of English at Washington University. She is the author of *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (2010) and *The Traffic in Women's Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe* (2014).

without considering the most obvious characteristics of laughter. Variable as laughter may be, elusive as a subject of thought, there are certain characteristics that all kinds of laughter seem to have in common.

Laughter is usually an immediate, unpremeditated reaction. Normally, the explosion follows whatever it is that makes us laugh as promptly, or even more promptly, as the sneeze follows the snuff. And it is almost as short-lived. It is wholly bound up with the present moment. While we laugh, all thoughts of what lies behind and before us fade into the background. Provided the fit is free and hearty enough, we are defenseless. Laughter does not agree with any strenuous exercise. We are not ready for physical combat as long as we laugh. The serious long-term business of life recedes from our mind; and attention is focused on what goes on here and now. All energies are absorbed in the enjoyment of the present. All other activities are interrupted; we do nothing else; we laugh.

The quiet rhythm of our normal breathing, which we hardly notice, is suddenly broken. There is a short sharp intake of breath. Then we let off steam. In a series of rhythmical jerks and jolts, we expel more air than we inhale until, in the case of a hearty laugh, we are out of breath and are perhaps flushed; for the blood runs more freely and copiously through our head. By pushing air from the lungs through the vocal cords, which are partly compressed, we let them vibrate in a particular manner; we make odd noises like ha, ha, ha or haw, haw, haw or, more gently, tse, tse, tse. The surge of laughter may be brief, a mere interlude in a running conversation, a slight respectable eruption of people who keep a firm hold of themselves. It may be half stifled and squashed before it attains its vigor and pops out like a damp squid with a squelch and a gurgle. Once on its way, the impulse to laugh is powerful; to battle against it often produces strained noises odder than laughter itself. Untrammelled, the waves of laughter rise steadily, reach a climax, and then die down like breakers at sea, wiped out by a sudden gust of wind. It may be that the first wave is followed by a second and a third. We allow ourselves to be overcome by laughter. Then it is over. Refreshed, with the aftertaste of the pleasurable experience still on our tongue, we return to the business at hand.

Smiling and laughing slide easily into each other. Except for the sound, the facial expressions characteristic of a gentle laugh and a broad smile are not very different. There is, as Charles Darwin, James Sully, and others have pointed out, a series of gradations leading from the faintest and

most civilized smile or chuckle to the horse laugh.² A full laugh, it is true, runs through the whole person, as the smile does not. It may involve movements of the arms and the trunk. If produced by tickling, people may wriggle and writhe. Laughing children often throw their arms about. Grown-ups may hold their sides and slap their thighs or poke their elbows in their neighbor's ribs. Thomas Carlyle's Baron Teufelsdröckh could still laugh from head to heel.³ In Victorian England, polite society condemned a full-throated, sidesplitting laugh as indecorous and vulgar. The civilizing process has pruned laughter increasingly to a moderate size, as it had done before in the East.⁴ Whenever such a process goes far enough, the more ebullient, boisterous forms of laughter tend to disappear. Only children and the poorer classes are left to laugh boisterously with their whole body, and, with the retreat of poverty, perhaps only children and vagabonds.

Even so, laughter is always a change in the whole person. Whatever the social conventions, laughter involves movements of the muscles of the abdomen, chest, and throat not utilized in the production of a smile. And the pivotal element of both, that by which we recognize a smile as a smile and without which a laugh would not be a laugh, is a rather complex and highly specific pattern of change in our face.

The mouth broadens. As long as one smiles faintly, it may still remain closed. The mouth opens more and more as we pass from a small to a broad smile and from a good to a rich laugh. The lips, relaxed, are pulled outward and upward by a force that appears to come from the corners of the mouth; drawn out, they become a trifle thinner. The upper lip is pressed against the upper row of teeth, which become partly visible. This is one of the most characteristic features of laughter: the teeth are shown, though not threateningly; they are kept in check by the tightly drawn upper lip, like a weapon playfully shown in a state in which it cannot be used. The lower jaw drops; it may even tremble a little. While the mouth opens and broadens, the lower lip forms a wider arch around the upper lip. As they are both drawn towards the side of the face, they join there, tapering off to a rather sharp angle. Near their point of juncture, small, hardly

2. See James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter: Its Forms, Its Causes, Its Development, and Its Value* (New York, 1902), and Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London, 1872).—ED.

3. See Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (Boston, 1836).—ED.

4. The description of one of the chapters in one of Elias's plans for the essay reads: "the civilizing of laughter as part of the civilizing process generally."—ED.

visible muscular nodes are slightly raised; beneath them, the corners of the mouth form little shadowy hollows. As the corners of the mouth are pulled back and slightly lifted, the soft tissues of the cheeks are raised. Dimples may form at the side of the face where looser portions of the skin are dragged against portions that are less mobile. The furrows that run from the wings of the nose down to the corners of the mouth, the naso-labial folds, curve, deepen, and become more visible.

If people laugh, their lower lids are raised, the eyes recede a little; they are often half closed and not focused on anything in particular. Like the laughing mouth, the eyes in laughter become more oblong; the angles at which the eyelids meet at their outer corners, like that of the lips at the outer corners of the mouth, become more pointed; the wider arches formed by the upper lids of laughing eyes seem to match that formed by the lower lip of the laughing mouth, only here it is usually the upper lid that forms the wider arch matching that of the lower lip. Below the eyes, shaded furrows and creases underline these changes—so do, radiating from the outer corners of the eyes, the well-known crow's-feet.

Not all changes in the face are of equal significance. The general pattern of a laughing face leaves a wide margin for variations. Not only individuals, not only social groups differ in their manner of smiling and laughing, but also natural groupings, such as men and women and people of different ages.

The changes that come over the round wrinkled faces of the very young when they smile or laugh are as rudimentary as they are transient. The mouth broadens rather clumsily. When it opens, there are hardly any teeth to show. The corners of the mouth are rather shapeless, perhaps a little wet, and still unaffected by any constraint, their movements still wholly spontaneous and rather slight; only the lightest of shadows nestles in these corners when they are pulled outward and upward. When the cheeks are raised, there is hardly any trace of the furrows that will later run between them and the wings of the nose towards the angles of the mouth. The skin of the cheeks passes smoothly, without folds and creases, into that of the lower eyelids. And little, if anything, is to be seen of the crow's-feet.

By contrast, in the faces of older people, creases and folds have come to stay. Movements made over the years, again and again, whether in grief or amusement, constraint or desire, or while thinking or reading or watching attentively, have left their traces in the modeling of the skin, which has lost its resilience. The eyes have sunk a little deeper into their orbits.

Around them, as elsewhere, the skin has shrunk. And among the crannies and wrinkles that are always there, the signs of smiling and laughing seem to be less vivid and less clearly marked; the shadows change and deepen in folds and furrows, which are permanent.

The picture is quite unmistakable. It may vary from individual to individual. Learning different social conventions may modify it to some extent, but on the whole the modifications are relatively slight. The broadening of the mouth, the dragging of the corners of the mouth backward and upward, the lifting of the cheeks, the crow's-feet in the corners of the eyes are common property of mankind. However varied the signs, our recognition of smiling and laughter, when we encounter them, is instantaneous. Except perhaps in the case of very small children, who seem sometimes to hover uneasily between crying and smiling, one can rarely misread the signs in the face of a living person, though it is not always equally easy to distinguish these signs in photographs, where their three dimensional aspects are only shown by proxy.

The picture is quite unmistakable. Hand in hand with it goes an equally varied yet essentially equally simple and specific sound pattern. Both are somewhat difficult to describe. Our fount of words, our conceptual schemas are not well developed for such a task. One is often groping for words. It might be different if we could sell smiles and laughs, some fetching higher, some lower prices, according to quality. How quickly would a highly differentiated vocabulary develop to mark such distinctions! Or if smiling and laughing had other social functions, which made verbalization useful. As it is, the visual and audible pattern of laughter is so familiar to us, it is so much taken for granted, this curious constellation of features and sounds, that it seems to present no problem.

Have we learned to move our muscles in this particular fashion simply by imitating our elders and betters when we were children? Have in the past some clever ancestors of ours invented this kind of facial gymnastics in order to show their neighbors that they were amused and, if so, what put it in their head to indicate their amusement just in this particular way, by drawing back the corners of the mouth, by half closing their eyes and by producing crow's-feet? Why choose as a signal this expression in the face? Why express it at all?

On the other hand, if laughing and smiling are not simply learned expressions, if underlying all these varieties of laughter by social convention

and individual experience there is some common human reaction pattern that is not learned, what is its function? If there is such an inherited and innate or endogenous basis for smiling and laughing, how did it come about that this not easily describable feeling tone, which we try to catch by means of words like *amusement*, *delight*, or *pleasure*, is so solidly coupled with this specific change of features? Is there an affinity among crow's-feet, upwards and backwards movements of the corners of the mouth, rhythmical sounds like ha ha and ho ho, and the inner state that they are said to express? Do we learn to associate the two, the facial movement and the supposed inner state, through experience? It is certainly extremely difficult to imagine that one could, by training or social convention, change the significance of these facial movements and that one could establish a social convention according to which crying and weeping would be established as a manifestation of amusement and merriment and smiling and laughing as an expression of dejection and sorrow.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the problem of laughter is so often misconstrued.⁵ We take it for granted, for instance, that the peculiar configuration of movements in our face, which forms an essential part of smiling and laughter, is merely the outward expression of an inner feeling state and that this inner state is, as it were, the essence, that which we have to explain, while the facial expression, as we call it, is merely regarded as something secondary, a consequence for which this inner state is the pivotal cause.⁶ The very term *expression* suggests as much. We rarely ask

5. The plans Elias wrote for the essay include a section titled "The Problem." In one, Elias described the stakes in identifying the problem: "What is disconcerting in studies of laughter is that there is, compared to the physical sciences, little continuity in research. Still, I shall give a brief outline of the way in which the problem has been formulated and in which it has been tentatively answered in selected cases. For the formulation of problems is often a feather in one's cap, if it is concise, even if the proposed solution goes astray. Alternatively, you have people who give excellent answers to the problem which they have set themselves to solve, while unfortunately the problem they try to solve is badly thought out or misconceived."—ED.

6. In *Notes on a Lifetime* Elias foregrounded the importance of his early training in medicine and philosophy before his turn to sociology:

Later, I worked at one time on problems to do with laughing and smiling. They show in paradigmatic form, it seemed to me, how people are biologically attuned to each other, in a way that should not be overlooked even when one is primarily concerned with attunement acquired by learning—that is, social adaptation. Thanks to the knowledge I acquired during my years studying medicine, it seemed to me entirely natural not to separate the social aspects of human smiling and laughing from what might perhaps be called their biological aspects.

In this context, Elias returned to his critique of expression: "it is an example of the *homo clausus* [the closed man] mentality, which inclines us to think that anything directed outwardly, that is, especially towards other people—in this case the signal board of a face—is a kind of accidental

why what we call or rather what we experience as an inner state and its visible expression on the face are so closely linked together. Why is our makeup such that the feeling, the emotional tone—or however you would like to call it—that accompanies smiling and laughing is bound up with this particular facial configuration or, for that matter, with any movement of muscles in the face or elsewhere at all? Can it be that because, subjectively, according to the present form of experiencing ourselves—our inner state—the individual feeling appears to us as more important and relevant than the changing patterning of our face, which we show to others, we tend to regard the former as causing agent and the aspects of laughter that are visible and audible to others as mere expression, of lesser significance?

If we, for a moment, abandon the priority assigned in our experience to feeling states, if we regard the emotional tone and the facial configuration as equivalent and inseparable aspects of a momentary change in a person as a whole, the picture and the problem transform themselves. In that case, the fact that the unmistakable change of a person is part of a very ancient, common heritage of man assumes a new significance. Everywhere this quaint contraction of certain muscle groups in our face and, in the case of laughter, in our throat, is recognized by others as a sign—as a sign of what?

It indicates, you might say, simply that the person who laughs is amused, whatever that might mean. But it also indicates something else, which one understands, though as a rule not consciously and articulately, as one understands the meaning of linguistic communication, if one speaks the same language.

Laughter, even though it might be hostile and aggressive, indicates to the beholder that the person who laughs is not in a state ready for physical attack. If you are in danger of being physically assaulted, make the attacker laugh (if you can). For the time being, he will be unfit to go on with his assault. Momentarily, laughter paralyses or inhibits man's faculty to use physical force.⁷ And, although this peculiar aspect of laughter may not be

accompaniment to the solitude of that person's inner existence. In reality the communicative signalling of feelings to other people is a primary feature of the human constitution." Elias concluded: "No doubt all this only became clear to me much later, but then it became one of the main pillars of my theory of civilisation and of my sociological thinking in general" (Elias, *Notes on a Lifetime*, 17:9–10).—ED.

7. This is the part of Elias's manuscript that Michael Schröter foregrounded in the German-language article in which he described Elias's project; see Michael Schröter, "Wer lacht, kann

recognized in an articulate manner, it is understood well enough without verbalization, implicitly, in the practice of life the world over. This aspect may appear irrelevant today because those who think about such problems live in societies where the danger of being physically assaulted by others is normally very slight. There is so much else to be said about laughter that this aspect, though perhaps recognizable, seems not of very great relevance. But if one sets out to discover the more elementary function of this human phenomenon, can it be that this more primitive aspect helps us see at least the problem with which we are confronted in better perspective?

For if indeed underlying all the various social modifications of laughter, which can be acquired as language can be acquired, there is an unlearned archaic movement pattern, part of the biological makeup of man, then we have to go back in order to understand it to a state of mankind where physical violence played quite a different part in the life of man than it plays today.

* * *

Let us see what the learned have to say.⁸ Enough solutions to the riddle of laughter have been put forward to fill a library. All I would like to do here is to put before you some sample solutions, to let you see how people throughout the centuries, again and again, had a go at this riddle, though some were obviously more convincing and nearer the mark than others, and to gain a clearer picture of the main lines of approach to the problem. Brief and selective as such an assembly of samples must be, it may help us see at least what the main difficulties are; and seeing the difficulties is often half the battle.

Let me begin with an explanation of laughter I particularly like. In 1615, an Italian doctor, Basilio Paravicino, published a little *Discorso del riso*.⁹ His main proposition is this: laughter has been given to man so that he can restore his soul weakened and fatigued by the meditations of the intellect. If he would go on thinking, using his intellect continuously, he would impair the acuteness of his mind. In the end, he might no longer be able

nicht beißen: Ein unveröffentlichter 'Essay on Laughter' von Norbert Elias," *Merkur* 56 (Sept. 2002): 860–73.—ED.

8. Elias wrote versions of a section of the essay reviewing existing theories of laughter.—ED.

9. See M. Basilio Paravicino, *Discorso del riso* (Como, 1615). On the margins of the notes he took on Paravicino, Elias wrote, in capital letters: "DID IN FORMER DAYS THE WHOLE BODY LAUGH?"—ED.

to sustain his usual meditations. One can understand why man alone has been given laughter; man alone has intellect and is capable of reflection. What sleep is to the body, the exhilaration of laughter is to the mind. One may wonder a little what Paravicino made of the laughter of people who, unlike himself, were not given very much to meditation, but one cannot help feeling a good deal of sympathy with his explanation of laughter. Of course, it presupposes the belief in the dual nature of man as a body and a mind; and it implies that the ultimate answer to problems such as this can be found by trying to guess what went on in the council of the deity, when laughter was given to man.

Gradually, the kind of problem that one tried to solve changed in a way that appeared, in principle, susceptible to verification; the problem of laughter became, as we say, more scientific. Instead of asking what went on in the creator's mind when he gave man laughter, one began to ask what goes on in man's mind when he laughs and what makes him laugh. This was, and still is for most people, the core of the riddle that his own laughter seems to present to man.

To make intelligent guesses in an attempt to solve this riddle has been for a long time the job of philosophers. Gradually, during the nineteenth century, biologists, psychologists, and sociologists began to do some spadework in this field. Today we have, on the one hand, a great mass of fairly accurate but unconnected observations about limited aspects of laughter, without any coordinating framework, a map showing how these disjointed bits of knowledge link up with each other. And we have, on the other hand, a great many overall theories about smiling and laughing in general, none of which fit more than part of the facts that are known. The connection between these two strands of knowledge is still rather slender.

Reflections on laughter, you may rightly think, focus attention on a very limited and not particularly significant manifestation of man. Yet, what one regards as significant, and as the problem, in laughter and therefore the solution one proffers is in most cases one-sidedly determined by and shows off very neatly the wider system of experiences, ideas, and values that is held incommunicado and is never really put to the test.¹⁰ And,

10. Elias wrote an extended note on the treatment of dead writers and thinkers. Ideally, he proposed, instead of "reproducing a dry sentence and holding it out to ridicule by showing how wrong it was," we would "reconstitute for one's own and others' enjoyment, as far as one can, the experiences and conditions which made people think of laughter in this or that manner."—Ed.

although even in the mainly philosophical theories of laughter, sound and often very detailed observations abound, they are almost invariably made in such a way that they lead towards an explanation of laughter that fits the already existing systems of assumption about man and nature in general. There is never any reciprocity. The manner of observing details is attuned to already existing general ideas. But the latter are not exposed to the test of detailed observation and, if necessary, attuned to them and revised. The perplexing proliferation of theories of laughter and the almost complete lack of steadiness and continuity in the development of these ideas is in no small degree due to this lack of equilibrium in the relationship between general hypotheses and specific observation, the continued preeminence of the former in relation to the latter.

Although at first sight these solutions may seem very different and perhaps irreconcilable, on closer inspection one can discern some central themes that in various guises return. Of these central themes, around which most theories cluster, I should like to choose three, which may help us on our way.¹¹ Each seems to cover part, but none all the various forms of laughter that one can actually observe. This variability of what is after all one and the same movement pattern is precisely the difficulty that one encounters if one studies this problem.

Let us take as examples the ideas about laughter of the two great philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant, one the defender of a strong and unlimited monarchical régime, the other, in his heart's heart, its opponent, even though, in the Prussian kingdom where he lived as a state-paid professor at Königsberg University, he was hardly able to express his opinions in these matters.

For Hobbes, the staunch defender of royal prerogative and autocracy, the state of nature is a state of war.¹² All men, according to him, are moved either by pride or by fear. Only by submitting to a strong sovereign can there be peace; society exists, as he puts it, "either for gain or for glory; that is, not so much for love of our fellows as for love of ourselves."¹³ It is curious to see how this bend of mind, this specific system of general ideas and values, illuminates one aspect of laughter in such a way that Hobbes's

11. Elias's three clusters are superiority, incongruity, and play.—ED.

12. See Richard Peters, *Hobbes* (Harmondsworth, 1956), p. 168.—ED.

13. Hobbes, *Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*; quoted in Peters, *Hobbes*, p. 168.—ED.

explanation, defended or attacked, has remained alive throughout the centuries, and, even today, it can hardly be dismissed with a shrug of one's shoulders simply as wrong, however insufficient it might be. Laughter, for Hobbes, is the expression of a passion that is joyful but for which we have no proper name. It is always caused by something new and unexpected, which produces a "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves; by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."¹⁴ What happens, if one laughs at someone, is that one triumphs over him. We do not laugh when we or our friends are the subject of jests; anticipating many modern methods of making people laugh, Hobbes adds that, in order for laughter to be without offence it must be about absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons.

Hobbes focuses attention on the element of aggressiveness, on the note of triumph over others, which one may discern in an outburst of laughter. His explanation has been at the center of the controversy around laughter ever since. On hearing this formula, one certainly has the impression that Hobbes has got something there. If one were to express his thesis in today's language, one might say: We laugh if we experience a sudden pleasant access to a feeling of superiority, derived from the awareness of an inferiority in others, or, as Hobbes is careful to add, in ourselves in the past.

Is that enough? One can hardly say that laughter is provoked only by a sudden awareness of inferiority in others nor does such an awareness of inferiority in others necessarily make us laugh.

In the following centuries, this explanation of laughter, the idea that it always has a sting in its tail, its relation to the pleasure aroused by the sudden access to a feeling of superiority, found favor and expression in a variety of forms. Joseph Addison, in a slightly attenuated form, took it up in the *Spectator*.¹⁵ Even George Eliot suggested that the "wonderful and delicious mixture of fun, fancy, philosophy, and feeling, which constitutes modern humor," probably stems from "the cruel mockery of a savage at the writhings of a suffering enemy," and she adduced this as an example of humanity's progress.¹⁶ And, in a recent article, someone has actually ventured to suggest that in times past laughter may have been the noise

14. Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. William Molesworth, 11 vols. (London, 1839), 4:46.—Ed.

15. See Joseph Addison, "Laughter and Ridicule," *Addison's Essays from the Spectator* (London, 1870), pp. 305–7.—Ed.

16. George Eliot, "German Wit: Heinrich Heine," *Westminster Review* 65 (Jan. 1856): 2.—Ed.

made by the victor and crying that of the defeated. We do not have any proof of that. We are on safer ground with observations of children who, if they are not broken in rather early, often laugh quite unashamedly in triumph over others and at other people's misfortunes. A study of children who were asked to tell a funny story or experience that has made them laugh showed, according to C. W. Kimmins, that the misfortunes of others are often the cause of laughter and form the basis of many funny stories.¹⁷ With seven-year-old children, about 25 percent of the boys' stories and 16 percent of the girls' are of this nature. As adults, we no longer laugh so often on occasions like these in actual life, not at people we know personally or whom we actually see humiliated or in distress. Instead, we have developed a great many special institutions where we can go and be entertained by professional laughter makers, specialists whose repertoire is filled, at least in part, with minor degradations and misfortunes of others and at whom or with whom we can laugh in a rather impersonal way.

Shall we say, then, that Hobbes, with his "sudden glory" theory, has really got hold of the key to the problem of laughter? There can be little doubt that in his time the people among whom he moved did laugh aggressively at others whom they knew, with undisguised triumph and far more openly and, as we might feel, cruelly than we do. In Hobbes's circles, laughter often had an edge and a point, sharp like those of a dagger, and it was meant to hurt, wound, and humiliate. Think of Buckingham writing a bitter farce in the manner of John Dryden and having it performed with one of the actors dressed up like Dryden and imitating his hesitant speech and other mannerisms, and inviting Dryden to the performance, sitting with him in a box to enjoy his discomfort at the outbursts of laughter all around him.¹⁸

Or think of Thomas Killigrew's satire of an elderly and unskillful gamester, whom he called Lady Love-all: "I peeped once to see what she did before she went to bed; by this light, her maids were dissecting her; and when they had done, they brought some of her to bed, and the rest they either pin'd or hung up, and so she lay dismembered like an Anatomy school."¹⁹ To us, this is slightly distasteful but completely impersonal. But the circles

17. See C. W. Kimmins, *The Springs of Laughter* (London, 1928), p. 95. I condensed Elias's notes on Kimmins.—Ed.

18. See George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, *The Rehearsal* (London, 1671). Elias wrote after a few pages: "Years later, in 1683, when Buckingham fell from power, Dryden got his own back. His portrait of the Duke in 'Absalom and Achitophel' is still there for all to read." See John Dryden, "Absalom and Achitophel" (London, 1681).—Ed.

19. Thomas Killigrew, *The Parson's Wedding* (London, 1663).—Ed.

for whom the pieces we now call Restoration comedies were written were very small. Author and audience belonged to them. For all we know, a lady to whom common gossip attributed this form of adornment and disguise may have been in the audience, and everybody was aware of it.²⁰

Hobbes's explanation of laughter has been attacked and criticized on many grounds—sometimes as utterly wrong, at other times as one-sided or as missing the main point. “If we observe an object in pain,” wrote Francis Hutcheson, “while we are at ease, we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing and yet there is occasion for Hobbes's sudden joy. It must be a very merry state in which a fine gentleman is, when well dressed, in his coach, he passes our streets, where he will see so many ragged beggars, and porters and chairmen sweating at their labour, on every side of him. It is a great pity that we had not an infirmary or a lazaret-house to retire to in cloudy weather to get an afternoon of laughter at these inferior objects.”²¹ Hutcheson saw in laughter a reaction to the contrast between dignity and meanness. There is nothing like it, he thought, for deflating false grandeur and bringing our imagination or the violence of our passion to a conformity with the real importance of our affairs. Thus, if Hobbes saw laughter as an expression of the triumphant individual's pleasantly inflated ego, Hutcheson, who was a professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University, saw in it an instrument of social control, which might help correct such unrealistic and socially undesirable qualities as the illusion of self-aggrandizement. He already saw, though perhaps not as clearly as others after him, the discrepancy between two layers of experience: one the product of our imagination, the other real. His conception of laughter, far more representative than that of Hobbes of middle-class groups without much political power, had a strong moral undertone. His explanation belongs to a long line of theories, by no means all with a moral undertone, that lays stress on incongruities as a stimulus of laughter. They cluster around the idea that it is the sudden awareness of being whisked from the expected into an unexpected and discrepant context that makes us laugh. As another writer of the eighteenth century, Mark Akenside, put it:

Where'er the power of Ridicule displays
Her quaint-ey'd visage, some incongruous form,
Some stubborn dissonance of things combin'd,
Strikes on the quick observer.²²

20. Elias's handwritten notes focused on Restoration comedy and raised the question of the emergence of English humor.—ED.

21. Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter* (Glasgow, 1750), p. 11.—ED.

22. Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination: A Poem in Three Books* (London, 1744).—ED.

Kant's conception of laughter, like that of Hutcheson, is part not only of a philosophical but also a social polemic, directed in the first place against those who give themselves airs: aristocrats, courtiers, and members of the ruling circles who suffer illusions of grandeur. His often quoted definition, "laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing," although a very characteristic example of incongruity theory, unfolds its meaning only if one also reads his comments and explanations.²³ He insists that it does not in the least provoke laughter if an expectation reveals itself as untrue. It is literally the reduction to nothing or, in our language, perhaps to nonsense that arouses laughter. "The bubble of our expectation was extended to the full," as he puts it, and suddenly bursts into nothingness. What is it that one expects to hear?

One expects the usual manner of utterance guardedly veering towards artificiality and fine pretense and, lo and behold, there is nature unspoilt and innocent, which one did not in the least expect to encounter and which he who discloses it did not mean to reveal. . . . Take the case of the heir of a wealthy relative trying to make preparations for his relative's funeral on a most imposing scale, but complaining that things would not go right for him because (as he said), 'the more money I give the mourners to look sad, the more pleased they look.' At this we laugh outright and the reason is that we had an expectation which is suddenly reduced to nothing.²⁴

One cannot help thinking how much there is in Kant that foreshadows Sigmund Freud's theories of slips of the tongue, mistaken actions, and wit; some idea, which is ordinarily repressed, breaks out momentarily and unintentionally lifts, without our conscious intentions, the curtain of our controls. But the faint similarity of approach brings out more clearly the differences in the implied evaluations. Both Freud and Kant envisage a connection between laughter and the sudden revelation of an otherwise hidden layer of man. As Kant puts it, appearance, which usually assumes such an importance in our judgment, is suddenly turned to nothing. The rogue in us stands revealed. Yet something infinitely better than any accepted code of manners, namely, the innocent purity of mind (or at least the tendency towards it) is after all not completely extinguished in human nature and infuses seriousness and reverence in this play of judgment.

23. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilkraft* (1790), *Werke*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, 11 vols. (Berlin, 1912–23), 5:199; trans. J. C. Meredith under the title *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Oxford, 1911), p. 199.

24. *Ibid.*, 5:200; *ibid.*, p. 200.

Since, however, the phenomenon lasts only a short while, since the cover of our art of dissimulation is drawn again soon enough, there is a touch of affectionate compassion, playful in its ways, in all of this.

Kant very much enjoyed good cheer and he liked to laugh. Yet laughter certainly is not a rational act. There was his problem. Kant describes how the sudden fall of an expectation into nothingness makes the mind oscillate. It goes, as it were, backward and forward over the situation, as if to say: Now, what has happened? Where did I go wrong? This oscillation of the mind communicates itself to the intestines. It causes a corresponding shaking of the intestines. One can almost see how Kant shook with laughter and, afterwards, thinking over what had happened to him, formed it into a theory. The shaking of the intestines is what gives us pleasure. This is an attempt to link what we call physical and mental aspects of laughter, one of the earliest I have come across.

We know that Kant liked to laugh. But how different was his company and the type of laughter that he saw and liked from that of Hobbes! Herr Professor was often enough an honored guest at weddings, confirmed bachelor that he was. One of his favorite “jokes” was to sing at a wedding, perhaps with his companions, a song that proved, by means of sharp and irrefutable syllogisms, that the best thing was to remain unmarried. He always added, “Of course, excepting such a nice, worthy couple as this.” If one of his companions said “always excepting such a worthy couple,” he repeated, to the amusement of all, “such a worthy couple.” This is a homely form of humor, *altväterlich*, as one of his biographers says. This is exactly the thing we have to see; how in this provincial atmosphere, far removed from the living centers of the present civilization, Kant found, pondered, and developed ideas that, dressed in *altväterliche* language, delved deeply enough into the sea to be still topical today.

In one form or another, a second group of writers on laughter cluster around the idea that it is the sudden awareness of something being whisked from the expected into an unexpected and discrepant context that makes us laugh.²⁵ For Kant, it was the sudden reappearance of nature under the mask of social conventions and artificialities that provides one major reason for laughter. Alexander Bain spoke of the relief and the uproarious delight that we feel if a forced and, in essence, unreal form of seriousness and solemnity suddenly comes in contact with triviality and

25. Elias wrote a few pages drawing out the contrast between Kant, Freud, and Bergson.—Ed.

vulgarity.²⁶ Herbert Spencer, for whom the laughter that follows certain perceptions of incongruity was only one of several varieties of laughter, referred to the mirth that ensues when the short silence between the *andante* and *allegro* in one of Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies is broken by a loud sneeze, as an illustration of his often quoted thesis that "laughter results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small—only when there is what we may call a *descending* incongruity."²⁷ For Henri Bergson, the two contexts whose encounter and clash produces laughter were those of life as contrasted to something purely mechanical. You probably know his famous formulas: "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," or "rigidity clashes with the inner suppleness of life."²⁸ There remains a family similarity in the various incongruity theories. They differ only in relation to *the two contexts or planes whose sudden and unexpected association in the experience of the perceiver is held to produce laughter.*

There is a considerable tendency to explain laughter as a concomitant or a derivative of an inclination to play. Many just and stimulating observations and ideas have been put forward to prove the relationship between the nature of play and the nature of laughter. Kant already conceived of laughter as a play of ideas. Boris Sidis contended that the play instinct, as he called it, was dominant in laughter.²⁹ We laugh in play. . . . The energy spent in laughter should be felt as not tending to any useful purpose. It must be spent for its own sake, for the love of it.

How just is it to say, as Sully did, in one of the most suggestive and comprehensive books on this subject, wrongly neglected today, that laughter, like the play impulse, frees us from external restraint, from the sense of compulsion, of a must in the ear, whether embodied in the voice of a master or in that of a higher self? "I shall hope," Sully wrote, "to show later that laughter has a like value, not only as a source of physiological benefit to the individual, but as helping us to become fit members of society."³⁰ Sully followed a track that takes us closer to the heart of the riddle. At the same time, he states explicitly one of the ideas that runs implicitly

26. See Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (London, 1859).—Ed.

27. Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (New York, 1864), 2:460.—Ed.

28. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London, 1911), p. 44.

29. See Boris Sidis, *The Psychology of Laughter* (New York, 1913).—Ed.

30. Sully, *An Essay on Laughter*, p. 146.

through most theories of laughter and that is in fact characteristic of the whole level of thinking of which these specific theories are merely some representatives. He starts from the assumption that one has to explain two separate aspects and functions of laughter: *the function laughter has for the individual, often identified with its physiological function, and, derived from it, the function laughter has for society*. This dichotomy is often intertwined with or based on two sets of seemingly contradictory observations, which leads us to the last of the central themes I wish to mention: the social function of laughter. For many discourses on laughter, the central problem remains the nature of the stimulus for the laughter of an individual and the nature of the feeling aroused in the individual by this stimulus. But some authors, while starting from the individual, include in their considerations what one might call the social aspects of laughter.

Many observations have suggested that laughter is a means of freeing us from external and, with it, social constraint, that it represents a slight revolt, to repeat Sully's words, against the voice of a master or that of a higher self, which we may call conscience. Those who stress the faculty of laughter as an expression of relief from social restraints could look to G. K. Chesterton, who, in his *Defense of Nonsense*, sums it up most neatly when he speaks of the "escape into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness."³¹ You would think that this aspect would have appealed to Bergson particularly: the need for social conformity, the dead hand of bureaucracy, and many other social institutions encrusted (to use Bergson's words) on the living. And yet Bergson was the most outspoken representative of the thesis, put forward before him, that laughter is one of the means by which a group enforces conformity and compels its members to toe the line. He writes towards the end of his book, not entirely unaffected by the ideas of his contemporary, Émile Durkheim: "Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken within it." In the end, Bergson comes to a startling and, in a way, paradoxical conclusion that has been often overlooked: *laughter itself is a mechanism*. One cannot be quite sure whether this conclusion was intended or whether Bergson has fallen here, not quite voluntarily, into a trap of his own ratiocinations. Laughter, he says rather sadly, is simply the result of a mechanism set up by nature or, what is almost the same thing, by our long acquaintance with social life. It goes off spontaneously and returns tit for tat. It has no time to

31. G. K. Chesterton, *A Defense of Nonsense and Other Essays* (New York, 1911), p. 5.—Ed.

look where it hits. Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and some who are guilty. . . . In this sense, laughter cannot be absolutely just. Its function is to intimidate by humiliating. . . . Here, as elsewhere, nature has utilized evil with a view to good. He concludes: "Laughter . . . is a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find the substance scanty and the aftertaste bitter."³²

What, then, are we to believe? Is laughter an expression of our revolt and a relief from social constraint? Or is it a social corrective, punishing us if we do not conform? Are there not examples of both these functions? The riddle deepens.³³

* * *

Can it be that we seem not much nearer to a more satisfactory solution to the question of laughter because the question itself was and still is in some ways inadequate and misconceived?³⁴

The few samples of the main theme around which theories of laughter are grouped do not exhaust the field. But, varied and often enough contradictory as they are, the majority of these explanations of laughter have something in common: the heart of the problem that they are intended to solve is the same. As a rule, the specific changes directly accessible to observation, above all the characteristic changes of the face around the mouth and the eyes, tend to be regarded as effects or, as it is usually put, the expression of a hidden change, as we say, inside the person who laughs. Many theories of laughter are, therefore, mainly intelligent guesses about these changes inside a person (a feeling state, an emotion or an affect) and their causes. Their aim is to explain one of two things and very often both together in a variety of combinations: *They try to determine the inner state or event of which the expression, all that strikes our senses when a person laughs, is thought to be the upshot; and they try to determine the stimulus outside the person who laughs, which is thought to be the causal factor of this inner state or event.*

32. Bergson, *Laughter*, pp. 197, 200.

33. Elias's manuscript goes through a few pages of notes on William Blatz and William McDougal; see William E. Blatz, Kathleen Drew Allin, and Dorothy A. Millichamp, *A Study of Laughter in the Nursery School Child* (Toronto, 1936), and William McDougal, *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Boston, 1926).—Ed.

34. Elias wrote a short section of the essay under the subtitle "A Change of Problem."

It is along these lines that most theories of laughter are constructed. Some writers try to define the inner event that they think finds expression in laughter more in psychological terms, some more in physiological terms, and some concentrate, in the first instance, on the properties of the external stimulus. But they all seem agreed on the fact that the change in our physiognomy, the characteristic face and countenance of the person who laughs, is merely an accessory of an internal event and that the latter, together with the stimulus that produces it, is the actual clue to the riddle of laughter. In defining it, so it appears, one has solved the riddle.

There are many reasons why this is the kind of question so many people ask about laughter and this is the kind of answer that satisfies their curiosity and brings their questioning to an end. It is representative of an old and powerful tradition of thinking. It may have become blurred or merely disguised by various devices in scientific thinking, but it becomes manifest if not in the content at least in the manner of thinking over a wider area than it may appear.

Thus, as you can see, in these approaches to laughter, there lingers an almost unchallenged type of explanation. The activities of our muscles, the movements we make in our faces and our throat when we laugh, are more or less treated as if they were the movements of a puppet; in order to explain them, one wants to get, as it were, at the puppet player. The explanatory model used in these theories is still reminiscent of that used by John Donne when he spoke of man in his "poor Inn," of "souls in their first built cells . . . packed up in two yards of skin."³⁵ Here we have an idea that, in a faded and emasculated form, still seems to determine the direction of a good many philosophical and psychological inquiries, among them some of those on laughter.

This does not mean that writers whose explanations of laughter took this form necessarily shared Donne's convictions. Hobbes certainly would have repudiated any suggestion of this kind and so, no doubt, would have Freud. It is not the substance of their explanations but the general model of explanation they used that shows the characteristics of this residual animism. It is a tradition of thinking fossilized in a thousand and one familiar verbal usages. What could sound more right than phrases like *laughter is due to* or *is an expression of* joy, malice, superiority-feeling,

35. John Donne, "The Second Anniversary: Of the Progress of the Soul," *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Roger E. Bennett (Chicago, 1942), ll. 172, 175–76.—ED.

inner conflicts, saving of psychological energy, or relief of tension? And, yet, what exactly do we mean when we use phrases like these? Do we mean that the inner events to which we refer are immaterial motive forces and the laughter pattern on our faces their corporeal effect? Do we envisage the former pulling the strings that move our mimetic muscles more or less in the same way in which Donne once envisaged the brain as the "soul's bedchamber" from whence "those sinewy strings which do our bodies tie / Are ravelled out."³⁶

My difficulty, at this moment, is that I believe familiar phrases like these to be far more questionable and ambiguous than they appear; the same is true of the explanations that proceed along similar lines. Implied in both is an evaluation that makes it appear that the change in the countenance of a person who laughs is a mere adjunct and appendage of some other, more substantive and important changes inside the organism. Yet there is little in the factual evidence that has been brought to light so far that encourages us to think so. Can one set out the problem in a way less affected by the implied evaluations of our animistic heritage, which have become so deeply engrained in our language?

We know that laughter involves changes at various levels in the person who laughs. There are changes, to mention some, in the blood circulation and the intestines, changes of feeling, of the awareness of others and ourselves, and, of course, changes in our respiration and our face. One can say that the whole organism is involved when a person laughs and that changes of different parts and at different levels form an ensemble. But, of this ensemble, the hub, that which is specific of laughter and nothing else, is a specific facial and respiratory pattern. It is here, it appears, that one has to start, if one sets out to explore laughter.

Laughter surely is more than an individual phenomenon. It is a universal human behavior pattern surpassing ethnic and racial boundaries. Can it be that we have not been able to develop a more fitting and adequate working hypothesis because we start our quest at the wrong end? Instead of asking about the individual feeling that produces laughter and the stimulus to this individual feeling, a difficult question because its answer varies from case to case, might it not be more illuminating if one could start from the function laughter has as part of the natural equipment of

36. Donne, "Metempsychosis: The Progress of the Soul," *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ll. 393, 503–4.—Ed.

man and proceed from there to the diversity of laughter in different social groups and different individual people? How would one set out to answer such a question?

One would have to go on a voyage of detection that would lead through many different fields and disciplines and would have to try to join together the seemingly unconnected pieces of the puzzle. That is what I intend to do. I invite you on a voyage of detection. Of course, it will be an abbreviated journey, for we have not much time.³⁷ We will have to draw on the resources of many academic disciplines; for laughter has many facets; it is biological as well as psychological and sociological.³⁸ One of the most obvious and most easily accessible facets of the phenomenon of laughter is the configuration of patterns on our face. One cannot get at the problem of laughter without giving some thought to the problem of the human face.

It is the momentary change of a whole person that one has to consider. One can take laughter, so to say, at face value and can simply ask: what actually is the function of this specific change in the face and respiration of a person, which may extend to the arms and the trunk and the legs, in the life of the person who laughs and of the species that has evolved with this peculiar endowment as one of its characteristics? It may be that from this starting point one can find a better thread through the maze of fact than if one starts at the other end, by dismissing the obvious as an accessory of a hidden essence. It may well be that starting from the vantage point of the laughing face and its function one may, in the end, get a clearer idea of the more intangible changes in mood and feeling that form another facet of the change in the laughing person.

The problem is simpler than it appeared. It is not to explain the peculiar configuration of man's face, which is characteristic of laughter, by reference to some other aspect of the organism, of which it is the expression or the effect. The problem of laughter, in other words, is inextricably bound up with the problem of the human face. How is it that, of all animals, man alone has developed a face so mobile, so infinitely variable, and,

37. Elias further explained his focus on laughter: "There will be no time to consider such late forms in the development of that which makes us laugh as, for instance, what we call 'humour.' I had a choice between talking about this late form of laughter or starting at the beginning; for various reasons, I have decided for laughter pure and simple, leaving the problem of humour and wit perhaps to another occasion." Elias worked on a separate "Lecture on Humour and Wit."—Ed.

38. I condensed Elias's description of the interdisciplinarity of the project.—Ed.

as we say, expressive that those of all other organisms appear by comparison masklike? Although the faces of apes are more mobile than those of cats and dogs, and those of cats and dogs more mobile than, for instance, of crocodiles and carps, measured by human standards even the expressions on the faces of gorillas and chimpanzees have a small range; they are rather repetitive, fairly gross, and often wearisome, like a twice-told tale.

It is understandable that in a society like ours, where people are forced to dissimulate and restrain and often conceal their true feelings, the question foremost in the mind of people is, what goes on behind the façade? What goes on inside? We constantly try to read faces to see what they, as the nice phrase goes, betray of the so-called inside. But scientific questions cannot be fashioned to cater to the needs of a transient society. If the prevailing focus is on the intentions, feelings, traits, characteristics, and properties expressed on a face, the wider question is why man, of all creatures, has developed a face capable of so many different expressions. How did it come that man is an organism in which something can be expressed in the face? Why should it be necessary for what goes on inside, as we say, to be expressed at all?

* * *

About the human face.³⁹ We all are, of course, very familiar with faces; and familiarity is apt to breed contempt or, if not contempt, at least lack of surprise. We are not lost in wonder at the sight of human faces, although in many respects they are quite different from those of all other creatures; we take them very much for granted. But if one stands back for a moment and looks at human faces as if one saw them for the first time, simply as a piece of nature, surprising enough things seem to happen to our perception.

There is, first, the dawning awareness of one's helplessness to express adequately in words what one perceives. One might do it with a brush and colors on canvas. But if one works, as I have to, with words, one soon becomes aware, in the presence of a face in action, of the relative poverty of the linguistic tools at hand. The variability of the human face is so great, the possible configuration of features so diverse, and the continuous changes in the landscape even of a single living face so manifold that our verbal equipment often falls short of our requirements if one tries, in words, to do justice to what one perceives. Liberally provided as it is, our

39. Elias wrote a brief section of the manuscript under the title "The face." He wrote reading notes in a notebook under the title "Laughter (Face)."—ED.

fund of classifying adjectives and substantives is not differentiated enough to allow for more than a few adjectival and substantival characterizations of laughs and smiles. In order to convey to others the exact shades of such attitudes, in most cases we have to describe the whole situation in which these attitudes occur. Of course, watching the face of a person who is not actively communicating with others, whose features are momentarily frozen and relatively still, one may find words to describe it. It is the face in action that is difficult to catch.

Preoccupied, as one usually is, with the distinguishing characteristics of different faces, one often fails to perceive the strangeness of the human face as such, which is, in fact, merely one aspect (though a very central aspect) of the strangeness of man. Is there any other part of the universe where it is possible to find in so small a space such an immense variability of features and so many delicately shaded changes of scenery, swift and at the same time smooth? The range of shades in smiling and laughing alone is wide enough. Yet this is only one small class of scenic changes that may be seen on the face in action.

Whatever else it might be, laughter is a specific configuration of the human face. Can one say what is the natural equipment by means of which man can produce in his face the multitude of finely grained changes of which laughter is one? Can one say what the wherewithals of laughter and of the other changes in the landscape of the human face are?⁴⁰

I am using here, as I hope you will see, the subject of laughter as a limited and therefore more easily manageable key-problem for the opening of a wider problem area that concerns man as a whole.

After all this, you will probably say, with a pang of disappointment, that I seem to treat laughing rather as a serious matter.

40. Elias followed up with four manuscript pages in which he described the evolution of facial muscles in reptiles and primates, largely notes from William K. Gregory, *Our Face from Fish to Man* (New York, 1929), p. 42. Elias also took notes and wrote a few pages of observations on G.-B. Duchenne de Boulogne, whose 1876 study of expression he admired: "Apart from his obsession with single causes, he was often well aware of the fact that expressions are due to a highly varied, combined or, as we would call it today, synergistic activity of many muscles, though he was prevented by his mono-causal thinking and perhaps by his method of experimentation, of stimulating single spots, to come to grips with that part of the face where the interwovenness of muscle fibres and the integration of muscles has gone further than anywhere else, the region of the mouth" (G.-B. Duchenne de Boulogne, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, trans. R. Andrew Cuthbertson [Cambridge, 1990]).—ED.

Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)

Lauren Berlant

The inaugural shot of *American Hustle* (dir. David O. Russell, 2013) streams an all-news-all-the-time radio broadcast announcing the onset of neoliberalism. Alliances painstakingly forged in the US postwar period are being abandoned, it reports. New York City is bankrupt and losing ground; a child's been deserted by its mother; and police and fire unions threaten strikes against the city, which claims it's too broke to pay decent wages for protecting property and keeping the law. As this is a film about risking property and breaking the law, we are set up to sense that we're observing the end of many collective systems and dreams.

It is 1979, and Atlantic City too seeks to stay afloat by becoming a gambling capital. *American Hustle* narrates the moment when a few people with power there scrambled to extend the city's archaic promise to float all boats by selling off its resources to the highest bidder. Older practices of white crony capitalism and patronage, ritually cleansed by show trial exceptions decrying corruption, became what is now the ordinary of mass austerity and the privatization of publicly held wealth. As of 1979 the surface of postwar city life remained constant, until it didn't.

The radio's aural tableau of the unraveling of the postwar alliance between the state and the aspirational working class fades to noise as the camera moves toward a pasty, big-bellied white man who is approaching,

Thanks so much to my *Critical Inquiry* coeditors, the participants in the *Comedy, an Issue* conference, and, especially, Hank Scotch, Jonathan Flatley, Sianne Ngai, Chicu Reddy, and Roger Rouse.

FIGURE 1. *American Hustle* (2013).

open-shirted, a large gilt mirror (Christian Bale, as Irving Rosenfeld) (fig. 1). In this mirror he assembles a massive and architecturally intricate comb-over coiffure. Uneven strands of pitch-black hair move in multiple directions, shooting out and bending across his balding pate. A Brillo-y toupee is glued toward the front with spirit gum, and the rest involves arranging and lacquering the remaining hair on it with aerosol spray, just so. All the while the white man's face is pure gravitas, utterly serious and focused. He is at one with his ambition, honed in on his action. Behind him the room's ornate curtains and furniture look like faded conceptions of what royalty would enjoy in its ordinary life, and the man wears a notably bulbous ring. The atmosphere, in other words, suggests a space where one tries on sovereignty for size.

In the action of the comb-over the world lines up, and everything comes together. It is hard to believe that the project will work; the vast expanse of baldness needs to be filled in and naturalized. But none of that prospect distracts from the intensity of focus around the assembly of hair. The patting, the gluing, the spraying, the interminable forehead, and the man's blank expressionlessness come off at first as comic because he does not appear to get the joke that his idealizing action is a useless fantasy. And, as we know, the person who doesn't get the joke becomes a joke.

But what makes this comedy?

LAUREN BERLANT, a coeditor of *Critical Inquiry*, teaches English at the University of Chicago. She is the author, most recently, of *Cruel Optimism* (2011), *Sex, or the Unbearable* (with Lee Edelman, 2013), and *Desire/Love* (2012).

John Limon would suggest abjection.¹ If so, the abjection that haunts this scene does not point to anyone's radical dissolution, as the term *abjection* would suggest. It doesn't even represent a wretched feeling or posture, necessarily.² What abjects this combed-over subject is his refusal to adapt to anything but his own style of adapting to his own fantasy; what makes his appearance comic, when it is, is his insistence on form and, in particular, on inhabiting the form of comedy that, in his view, will allow his imperfect life to appear as a victory over existing.

Motivating this maladjustment thus involves more than the vanity that Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson propose as a key motivating gotcha of the comedic.³ What makes this opening scene *comedy* is the appearance of a life-glitch plus the tableau of repair it offers that's always teetering on reversal, exposure, and a collapse back into raveling and unraveling at once. This comedy involves not only the incessancy of the protagonist's commitment to his abject striving but also a stark display of the way ambition opens up the ridiculousness of fantasy to a multiplicity of speculative causes and futures.

What makes it *humorless* comedy in an exemplary way is both the person's aspirational thingness and an aesthetics that plays out the searing incongruities of his desire to move toward and away from himself and the world. The painstaking display of reifying ambition and the proliferating microadjustments that preserve his attachment to life—the American hustle—provide a study in an ambivalent style that insists that it is not one.

1. The intention to cover the character's ordinary nakedness, dissembling to delay both his own disintegration and the disassembling of the American Dream, broadcasts "the mimetic degradation" of "the ought" by "the is" that Lisa Trahair sees in the comic (Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* [Albany, N.Y., 2007], p. 11). Reading with and against Julia Kristeva, Limon writes, "When you feel abject, you feel as if there were something mirroring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed, some role . . . that has become your only character. Abjection is self-typecasting" (John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* [Durham, N.C., 2000], p. 4).

2. See Joseph Litvak's analysis of the "fatal humorlessness" of white nationalism in postwar US politics, for example, as it was wielded against the frivolous-abject transgressivity of Jewish-American comedy (Joseph Litvak, *The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* [Durham, N. C., 2009], p. 18). His rendition of "American seriousness" and its fear of an abject undoing from "outsiders" provides crucial terms for tracking some affective-aesthetic protocols of American racism; see *ibid.* Zero Mostel's combover could be a relevant shared object.

3. See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, (1900; New York, 1914), pp. 172–77, and Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–54), 8:25, 195–97. Freud and Bergson have different foci. Freud is most interested in the nonsense joke event and the skewering wit event more than longer narrative forms; Bergson is all over the place in his focus, from laughter, to humor, to particular genres, to kind of object, to kind of subject.

We are all combover subjects; let us put this image at the heart of humorlessness. In its conventional appearance, humorlessness involves the encounter with a fundamental intractability in oneself or in others. In affective terms, it is typically associated with a bracing contraction of relation. Sovereignty is a fantasy of self-ratifying control over a situation or space—a stance that might or might not be sanctioned by norm or law. The sense of relational rigor mortis involved in sovereign-style humorlessness might take on any form representationally, but it is often associated with a tone drained of whatever passes for warmth or openness. This is why humorlessness is associated both with political correctness *and* with the privilege that reproduces inequality as a casual, natural order of things. Humorlessness wedges an encounter in order to control it, creating a buttress of immobility and impasse.

But humorlessness as such is much trickier in its mode of expression than its ordinary American association with one-sided woodenness, flat affect, or severity would predict. Structured by his commitment to a certain mien, the aspirational sovereign can express his humorlessness in many ways: as affectlessness, passive aggression, seriousness, bitter mirth, or any kind of warm emotion, even a smile. What constitutes humorlessness is someone's insistence that *their* version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic; but no particular way of being and sounding confirms its social presence.⁴

In this essay my larger claim is that, whatever else structures it, the comic is motivated by the pressure of humorlessness, with its radical cramping of mobility at the heart of the encounter, whether the encounter is with oneself or with another person, object, or world. The "straight man" of comedy embodies this reduced capacity, but it would be wishful to think that humorlessness is always contained *over there*, in the other person's intractability.⁵ Sometimes the straight man is more knowing and capacious than the comic partner, who is caught up and unstable in the machine of his compulsion. Sometimes the straight man is a dope or a fool. Who knows for sure? Humorless comedy depends on the uncertainty of the event's solidity. If comedy always involves a revelation of the mechanistic of being, as Bergson suggests, humorless comedy threatens to expose the ordinariness of a desperately desired, feared, and failed sovereignty machine. But, more than that, humorless comedy is also a

4. On distinguishing between the structure and affective experience of an aesthetic event or encounter, see Lauren Berlant, "Thinking about Feeling Historical," *Emotion, Space, and Society* 1 (Oct. 2008): 4–9.

5. Thanks to Sianne Ngai for inciting this consideration of the straight man's humorlessness.

comedy of confusion about what and where sovereignty is, such that its location and the relation between its inflation and reduction are in crisis and unknowable.

This condisjuncture is a scene where an ambition to be causal without interference meets a radical insecurity about being lonely. It is a scene where the subject experiences a disturbing ambivalence about being known, recognized, attended to, and mattering, an experience of self-incoherence that does not defeat the subject but forever demands microadjustments in the scene of encounter. Humorless comedy offers and threatens the fun of witnessing all that, mixing the pleasure of encountering the awkward, slapstick, incongruous experience of someone else's pathos with the specter of a world-collapse that ropes the spectator into it, a spectator then constituted by the draw of aversion, empathy, identification, disidentification, seasickness, kindness, and a failed kind of numbness, the kind a person feels being jostled in a crowd that's been willingly entered. In this way the comic encounter with the comb-over effect splits from the range of pity-rage affects and cathartic abreaction that might be induced by being pressured to bear someone else's aggressive need; this kind of comedy promises a cushion for identification, the cushion of overdetermination.⁶

These works pull back from being melodramas and tragedies because they conscript identification with *the desire for comedy* that structures the protagonist's action. This might look like an ironic structure, in which the audience discovers before the agent in question does that the fantasy of self-completion is just that, nothing but a wish.⁷ Condescension is always in the air in these things—the sour comedy of the *risible*. Yet this comic structure is different from the Hobbesian emperor's-new-clothes paradigm. The emperor's audience can take sheer pleasure in the sovereign's lack of knowledge that he is merely naked, an ordinary wizard.⁸ They are

6. Thanks to Chicu Reddy for suggesting attention to the work of noncathartic pleasure and laughter in humorless comedy.

7. Alenka Zupančič explains that central to the comic scene are both the grandiosity of denying one's ordinariness and the spectacle of not admitting the totality of what is in front of one's own eyes, although eyes are not the half of it. This is also where the self-dissociation of subjective disturbance can take on a moral and political charge; see Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), pp. 32, 21. See also Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), and Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004), on the ironic activity of affective discernment in its social contexts.

8. See also the countless discussions of Bertrand Russell's phrase, "The present King of France is bald" (Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14 [Oct. 1905]: 485). Jacques-Alain Miller's analysis of Russell and Jacques Lacan on the bald king proposes a distinction between humor (which comes from the Other) and irony (which comes from the subject); see Jacques-Alain Miller, "A Contribution of the Schizophrenic to the Psychoanalytic Clinic," trans. and ed. Ellie Ragland and Anne Pulis, *The Symptom* 2 (2002): www.lacan.com/contributionf.htm.

knowing, and he is not; they feel “eminency” in themselves and “infirmity” in him because he is not in on the joke that he is one.⁹ He does not know that he has already been humiliated definitively.

In contrast, the combover subject, by revealing to the world some consciousness of the fragility of his power, pushes his spectators to have a morally encumbered relation to him, to see the failed effort in his unfinished success, and to sense the vulnerable and aggressive affect and urges that went into this labor, which is now exposed as failing to be up to code—his own code, which might or might not be theirs. When people choose to protect from shared revelation the tableau of another person’s nonsovereignty they may cycle ambivalently among a cluster of affects, such as distancing, snickering, reluctant feelings of superiority, disgust at physical incongruity, rage at being taken affective hostage (and by a fool), the self-threatening, melting overcloseness of pity or identification, and the tragicomic burden of being forced to lie, whether out of aggression, defense, or care, reluctant or genuine. Usually all of this microadjustment diffuses across the surface of experience, and usually it does not achieve the status of event.

This points to another key set of paradoxes in the scene of humorlessness. The self-amplifying personal style of mimetic sovereignty associated not just with the humorlessness of commitment but with the commitment to humorlessness *requires* a social concession to its claim on the conditions of relation. And like all affects the implications of its appearance are not just singular, defined within a given encounter, but also political, insofar as the privilege to be humorless, to withhold the cushion of generosity, wit, or mutually hashed-out terms of relation is unequally distributed across fields of power, inducing diverse effects and consequences—especially for those identified as bearing threatening or grotesque bodies (women, the sexual, the appetitive, the racialized, proletarians, all associated with “low” comedy, unsurprisingly).¹⁰ As scholars of the Hegelian slave-master dialectic have long argued, the aspirational master’s political location will greatly affect how he is protected from having to suffer the consequences of his sovereign occupation of others’ performance of being knowing. But in all cases the humorless sovereign is

9. Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, in *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic. Part I: Human Nature; Part II: De Corpore Politico, with Three Lives*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (New York, 2008), p. 54. On the different durations of knowing humiliation, I have learned much from Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (New York, 2011).

10. On humorlessness and inequality, see Berlant, “Showing up to Withhold: Pope.L’s Deadpan Aesthetic,” in *Pope.L.: Showing up to Withhold*, ed. Karen Reimer and William Pope.L (Chicago, 2014), pp. 107–114.

unsovereign because he depends on the world and others to expedite his sense of the achievement of his fantasy.

In short, the combover is a medium that implies an affectively mixed mode. It redistributes to the scene of encounter the affective pressure of its organizing need, communicating the demand for a shared atmosphere that protects a protagonist from whatever anxiety, insecurity, and drives push him to assemble himself as a thing without holes. This redistribution of humorlessness is no doubt a potential feature of all encounters, insofar as every instance requires managing everyone's aggression—their commitment to a way of appearing and their desire to move a situation in a way that is more bearable and cannot be achieved alone, by will.¹¹ Additionally, as John Steiner has argued, every encounter with *any* object provides evidence of one's lack of omnipotence in the world, such that one experiences one's very receptivity as a threat *because* one needs the world.¹² (The experience of this structure varies wildly, of course.) There is no getting outside of the situation of managing and testing what to do with one's inevitable, technical openness. This is another way to phrase the concept of defenses.

The point here is that the scene of unyielding self-commitment is humorless. It may or may not be funny ha-ha to the audience for the combover subject to be covering what can't be covered; it may or may not be enjoyable for the audience to feel more knowing than the protagonist; the protagonist's own self-encounter in the scene of organizing his fixities can take on any affect or many, since flooding with shame can be joined by aesthetic pleasure, satisfaction, fantasy and speculation about alternative outcomes, rage at the body or the world, and so on. But as long as the tortured situation of being asked to hold someone's secret and be knowing about it without saying that one induces more gestural adjustment and tact than drama, the modality is comic. The relation between comic and tortured life is bound up in the incessant pressure to defend the combover subject in the scene of survival so as to seem to more than survive it.

For it is not just altruism and the fear of being exposed as cruel in an encounter between subject and subject that motivates keeping the secret of someone else's failed aesthetic or personhood project. There is the need for reciprocity as well. No one wants to deserve to be revealed as too much

11. On the relation among love, aggression, and the ordinary of plotting, see Adam Phillips, "Plotting for Kisses," in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 93–100.

12. See John Steiner, *Psychic Retreats: Pathological Organizations in Psychotic, Neurotic, and Borderline Patients* (New York, 1993) and *Seeing and Being Seen: Emerging from a Psychic Retreat* (New York, 2011).

of, or the wrong kind of, an event, and that recommends compliance with the injunction to help everyone feel okay in ordinary situations, which is to say, to assist with their not having to *be seen* facing the exposure of humiliation for being unevenly adequate to some norm or other or barred from ever deserving idealization. A fear of countershaming also encourages support for the open secret. In short, the desire to not be in the spotlight of an unavoidably diminishing grotesque amplification usually argues strongly for an immediate, but emotionally complex, concession to the form of good manners. The alternative is an open war of insults (which, indeed, happens in the opening scene of *American Hustle*, when the protagonist meets an enemy who messes up his hair).

Even inauthentic generosity, after all, gives the combover subject a chance to escape with his fantasy of life, which is why some spectators even consider themselves kind and considerate for performing fake inattention to the spectacle of someone else's failed show of adequacy. The affective event of the combover will often be a significantly different thing, therefore, than the aesthetic enjoyment of suffering we call *schadenfreude*.¹³ They're distinct when one cannot fully enjoy and support someone else's failed defenses.

Then there is the pressure on speech not to fail. *Schadenfreude* is often accompanied by explicit bodily pleasure, laughter, and taunting—often at the other's loss of humor. But in the combover genre of this kind of encounter, pressure builds from neither telling the truth nor telling the joke about not telling it, which is why people will leak or spray affectively all over the place while they're holding onto such a secret.¹⁴ We have all seen the public pleasure that takes place when what had been an awkward open secret becomes explicit and available for pitiless mirth (see Donald Trump's hair). Usually, though, the mien of the spectators encountering the open zipper or the failed hairstyle of being is pretty solemn.

These very oscillations within the humorless space can also be found in the classic archive of comedy theory and are on offer as the very conditions of the comic, according to the brace of writers from Cicero and Freud to Alenka Zupančič, Joseph Litvak, and Simon Critchley.¹⁵ However, virtually

13. See David Simon, "An Apology for *Schadenfreude*; or, Montaigne's Laughter," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 250–80.

14. Eve Sedgwick discusses this phenomenon of pressured truth telling to the person deemed overweight (who must not know that she is); see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, in Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little Understood Emotion," in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1994), pp. 215–51.

15. I write here of Bergson's organic/mechanical toggle; Zupančič's shortcut between the comic process and the real; Simon Critchley's belief in the flip between finitude and infinitude; Freud's sense of repression and what escapes it; and Georges Bataille's shift between the

all comedy theorists are structuralists. To them, the comic encounter is defined by who is up and who is down; what's repressed and expressed; known and disavowed; hidden and surprising; free and unfree; functioning and malfunctioning. The comedy door hits you on the way in and on the way out; it collapses distances; it laughs at impasses and other failures of movement; it forces displays of resilience (sometimes positively, as repair—sometimes against better judgment, as in satire). It merges cruelty and the genuine pleasure of being in unison with something—a person, people, or a world.¹⁶

What makes this essay's opening scenario a specific contribution to comedy theory generally is its location of comedy in the *copresence* of structuration and collapse, and its attention to the multiplier effect of comic disturbance. My interest is in flooding: the way a scene of disturbance lets into the room multiple logics of frame switching, temporal manipulation, status scale shifting, identification, and norm-agitating gestural events. If *only* the world were *x* and its other. If only causes led to effects. If only life produced flow, then blockage, then flow. The combover exemplifies the comedy of unbinding that happens in the face of rigidity but locates the comic in its proliferation of complications, threats, potentials, constraints, and consequences that are never definitively ordered.¹⁷

American Hustle's opening tableau, which figures an economic and social crisis in a balding man's anxiety to be taken in as a successful arrangement of ill-fitting parts, thus represents an exemplary moment of comic humorlessness. You will note that the preceding description does not judge his or anyone's affective overfocus on being a thing that would take down itself and the world rather than give up some ground within the encounter. As it involves the world, humorlessness points to individual pathology and the self-reproductive drive of power, norm, and law. But humorlessness is not all bad. It involves a commitment to principles, after all, to a world and to being reliable, which is to say, to some repetitions. It

general and the restricted economy, especially as Lisa Trahair applies it; see Trahair, *Comedy of Philosophy*, and Simon Critchley, "Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," *Constellations* 6 (Mar. 1999): 108–22. Stanley Cavell's work on romantic comedy is a slight exception because of his interest in the binding of lovers to a scene of demonstration; romantic-comic love is a test of the conditions of freedom in relation. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

16. On the longer history of comedy as an account of structural power's control over the collective sensorium, see Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, 2014).

17. I learned this final point, about comedy's insistence on a beyond of finitude, from Critchley's "Comedy and Finitude."

props up the arrangement of personhood we call identity or personality; it is central to any kind of fidelity or obedience in love, politics, and religion; and it can cathect us to habit. It is sneaky and often occupies a space of self-unknowing in people who understand themselves to be responsive, engaged, open, and kind.

So, although having good humor is often considered a virtue and a relief, we would not always want the state of humorlessness to be replaced by whatever appears as the generosity of humor—such as being able to take a joke, or to shrug, to play with words, or to let something pass. The moral question is also an aesthetic question about the genre that communicates rigidified relationality and what proceeds from it. When we encounter the aesthetics of the intractable, how do we know how to distinguish satirical deflation from the melodrama of stuckness and the comedy of it? How do we, how can we, distinguish foolish righteousness from principled commitment? Context is everything. Perspectives vary. So much depends on the style of the subject's or the artwork's *investment* in humorlessness. So much depends on the resources spectators have to process certain styles of defense, their costs and their failures.

Valerie Cherish, the protagonist of Lisa Kudrow's *The Comeback*, calls this variant on the comic a "dramedy": "You know, and that's a um that's a comedy without the laughs."¹⁸ Elsewhere I have called this "um" a "situation tragedy," where the very compulsion of a protagonist or a world to appear to be on an arc of a comic triumph over life reveals them to be a thin membrane away from suffering life as a complete disaster of ordinariness.¹⁹ Often this kind of humorless aesthetic finds its way into catalogues of satirical dark amplification, as in gallows humor or what André Breton names "black humor," glossed elsewhere as "*a superior revolt of the mind*" that's facing "a SENSE . . . of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything."²⁰

But humorless comedy, as I'll lay out in the three monologues below (Colson Whitehead's "The Comedian," Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* [1982], and Kudrow's *The Comeback* [2005, 2015]), is not just an orientation toward noise-cancelling amplification.²¹ It has specific aesthetic features that are worth attending to. Its exempla are not only

18. "Valerie Makes a Pilot," 9 Nov. 2014, *The Comeback*.

19. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), pp. 176–77, 290.

20. André Breton, "Lightning Rod" and "Jacques Vaché," in *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco, 1977), pp. xvi, 297.

21. See Colson Whitehead, "The Comedian," 2009, www.colsonwhitehead.com/Site/The_Comedian.html; hereafter abbreviated "C."

about the work of humorlessness but also about the humorlessness of work, anatomizing specifically the intense physicality of exposure to even the most minor ambitions.²² Ambition is desire in the lifeworld of capitalism. This mode gives love a makeover, too.²³ Crucially defining what's comic about its "operational aesthetic"²⁴ is the conventional interrogative toggle between comedy and misery—between the inevitable "where does the comedy come from?" question that is posed to all comedians, and the "where does the misery come from?" question about personhood first posed by Wilhelm Reich to Freud and repurposed for feminism by Jacqueline Rose.²⁵ Typically, the hope is that comedy repairs misery. In humorless comedy "where does the comedy come from?" and "where does the misery come from?" are the same question: a question about *being humored*, with no repair in sight.

Monologue 1: "The Comedian"

By its very title, Whitehead's "The Comedian" narrates a person's reduction of himself to a kind of thing; it's in order to save his attachment to life. The narrator contributes to his character's "thingification" by using

22. Humorless characters abound in the history of comedy. The humorless comedy animated by the fixations of protagonist desire has a close association with workplace comedies, from the failed task plot of so much early slapstick to the US and UK contemporary moment. For example, workplace television series from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s (including military, police, tavern, and small business spaces from *Barney Miller* [1974–82], *WKRP in Cincinnati* [1978–82], and *Sanford and Son* [1972–77] to the longer-running *Night Court* [1984–92] and *Cheers* [1982–93]) tended to address the work situation that arises as a prompt for the mechanistic of character to express itself as usual. In contrast, contemporary humorless comedy series like *The Thick of It* (2005–12), *Veep* (2012–), *Enlightened* (2011–13), *The Office* (2005–13), and *Baskets* (2016–) foreground the expressive fragility of personhood in work situations that are saturated by the pressures of structural contingency, management anxiety, and the significant uptick in affective labor demands organized by new modes of workplace collaboration and unstable intimacies elsewhere. There is much more to say about this.

23. The humorlessness of love is the matter of the chapter that follows this one in the longer project. It's worth noting that, in "The Comedian," the couple form appears and fades eventlessly as career comedy absorbs ordinary life; in *The King of Comedy* love is represented by two stalking plots; in *The Comeback* a celebrity stalks a plot, sacrificing her resolutely "normal" and loving homelife to the bitter slapstick of reality TV. As Gilles Deleuze predicts in "Postscript on Control Societies," the enmeshing of work with all of contemporary life produces a 24/7 sensorium stubbornly on the make for value, which is to say, for comedy; see Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," *Negotiations 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, 1995), pp. 177–82.

24. Quoted in Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York, 1995), p. 88.

25. Jacqueline Rose, "Where Does the Misery Come From? Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Event," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), pp. 25–39.

free indirect discourse to get at him; he is an object to the reader and self-reflexively to himself. His only name in the story is “the comedian,” which obliterates the name of the father, the family, the genealogy, and even the generic casualness of a first name that could be anybody’s. Whitehead even refers to him only in the lower case. The celebrity profession he assumes tries to substitute for all that erasure, but the story plays with the both/and of misery/comedy in its examination of professional comedy’s promise to provide relief from the pressures of ordinariness. Whitehead’s strategy is to wield the dogged literalism one expects to find in proximity to humorless comedy. The story opens with the comedian on a talk show late in his career being asked “why he started telling jokes.” His response is that “he just wanted some attention.”

As a child he’d felt unseen. He was a handsome baby (photographs confirm) but his impression was that no one cooed at him or went cross-eyed to make him smile. Common expressions of affection, such as loving glances, approving grins, and hearty that-a-boys, eluded him. His mother told him “Hush, now,” when he came to her with his needs or questions and he frowned and padded off quietly. He received a measly portion of affirmation from grandparents, elderly neighbors, and wizened aunts who never married, folks who were practically in the affirmation-of-children business. [“C”]

He goes on to say that it was not just the family; the comedian was not even enough of an irritant to be bullied by the more alpha boys. He wanted surplus, more attention than he needed; he did not want to be a nonevent.

So, spontaneously one day at a family affair, he experimented with comedy from below—fart jokes in particular, which become the origin of the revelation of his power. Farts are the essential confirmation that no one is a bodily sovereign and that decay suffuses the ordinary of life. The comedian’s first joke says as much: his cousin Roger’s farts smelled like the “dead rat” whose odor was suffusing the family room (“C”). This riffs on the opening pages of *Native Son*, perhaps, with its tragic slapstick chase of the rat around Bigger Thomas’s family flat;²⁶ and perhaps on the stinky anality that opens Eddie Murphy’s *Raw* (dir. Robert Townsend, 1987), which locates Murphy’s comic genius in a childhood origin story of entertaining the family with monkey fart comedy. Whitehead’s story may imply African-American racial and working-class location. That any likely structural referents are basically tacit suggests an experiment on Whitehead’s

26. See Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1940), pp. 8–12.

part to see what happens when what goes without saying remains unsaid on behalf of hastening the reparative possibility. This principle of reticence becomes explicit later on in the story and is, of course, central to combover logic.

Whitehead narrates a set of phases the comedian goes through next—stations of the comic, if you will. The story provides a brilliant condensation of the major comedy theories. At first, he

made unlikely connections between seemingly dissimilar objects and phenomena. . . . [Later] he experimented with metaphor and figurative language . . . A familiar situation disrupted by an unexpected and forbidden element produced laughter. The smell of the decomposing mouse was not one Roger fart, but a hundred. Exaggeration was key. Exaggeration was a kind of truth telling and it made people laugh. . . . Looking at it one way, it was a kind of commentary on the comedian's lot—to translate between the world as it is and the world as people perceive it. ["C"]

He practices in front of the mirror. "His bits eventually become routines" ("C"). He learns to imitate others, to steal their jokes while annexing a little supplement of his singularity to hide his unoriginality. On top of this he becomes a character comic, a person in the form of a cartoon, which is to say at once feral, inhuman, injured, and immortal, the combination of a fool and a god. His character called Danny the Dentist spends his bits conversing with patients while fisting their mouths, contrasting his sadistic eloquence to their grunting good manners. His character called the Limo Driver doesn't know he has bad boundaries while in inappropriate conversation with his captive passengers.

In other words, in both personae the comedian's combover medium is at first the conversation in which his persona takes both sides. Inconvenient talkback can never happen in his art; a person can't heckle themselves. This stand-up strategy allows an internal monologue in the form of dialogue to give the audience the feel of participating in his observations without actually being able to impact them. His comedy thus involves both imitating nonrelationality in his personae's actions and miming genuine relationality through insider knowledge shared with his audience. Avoiding and strangling any openness or intimacy as such, he casts stand-up comedy as a game of domination and negation from which the audience is asked to take pleasure. The narrator observes that this mode of comic hostage taking produced a mildly successful career.

But then one day the comedian's body rebels against the machinery of its own compensations. He is in the middle of performing Danny the Dentist interacting with a German tourist. Then:

No one else seemed to notice it, and he thought for a minute that it was another one of his mysterious physical or mental symptoms, but quickly understood that it was more than that. He stopped speaking (his mouth had continued the routine, such was his professionalism) and looked into the audience. They were a hive of faces before him, still and attentive, arranged like hexagonal tile in a bathroom. The comedian said the words that popped into his head: "If I had known what little came from talking to other people, I never would have learned how to speak." The microphone dispatched these words into the sound system and into the void of the auditorium. And then they laughed. They laughed for a nice comfortable while. The comedian resumed his act (poor Danny, poor German tourist), but he knew something had changed. ["C"]

No one notices the comedian's bodily nonsovereignty and the autonomy of his voice; no one notices that his unconscious is playing karaoke with him, as it will. But the comedian survives the shame of his public dissociation and takes on as method the dignity of the kind of simplicity it offers. The comedian becomes eventually "unadorned by the traditional flourishes of comedy. . . . The tools of the trade [such as]—the crooked eyebrows, head wagging, and shrugs. . . . fell away" ("C"). His gestures, the props that urge on laughter, fall away passively; he becomes a thing without his combover character to shield his tenderness from the world.²⁷

As a result of its forfeiture, he has room to take the audience into what he calls "his confidence" ("C"). To take beings into your confidence is to release yourself from the humorless isolation of your internal monologue. It collapses the intimate into intimating in a way that subtends the loneliness of carrying a secret that the world might not be able to bear—at least as long as one's interlocutors continue enjoying holding the secret of one's particular truths. For being trusted to bear the secret that was combed over makes the interlocutors feel powerful and special along with being, in some cases, less free from the knowledge. His audience eats it up.

27. In the comedian's shedding of his combover defenses he is the exact opposite of the protagonist of Rick Alverson's astonishing *Entertainment* (2015), who in ordinary life moves recessively through scenes but on stage assumes a deliberately grotesque combover and grating voice, which gives him permission to express honestly his rage and aggression *as* rage and aggression and to insist that people should appreciate his labor in the fields of "folly." His physical combover is his prop, but his lack of access to its protections is his tragedy.

The secret of the secret the comedian tells his public in confidence builds from two observations: “people are disappointing” and “everything is terrible” (“C”). All the sex and pleasures, he tells them, are mere noise to keep away these truths. There is a third principle, too, which he keeps to himself and metabolizes privately over many years. It turns out that there was nothing special about him, either, no singularizing trauma; it turns out that no one receives enough attention; everyone is neglected. The secreting of this stark truth means that the other hard facts he offers his public are themselves combover protections from bearing the unbearable ordinariness of aloneness.

The audience, says the narrator, comes to see the comedian as the “perfect older brother or sister or parent they’d always been waiting for, the ones who set them straight, told them how to do it, reserving all the mistakes for themselves, sparing us” (“C”). Comedians often talk about dying onstage, which means being there with their jokes and tales hanging in the air with no cushion of laughter to confirm that the comedian and the audience are in it together. (Audience laughter is like the lover’s obligatory “I love you, too.”) But in mid-career the comedian thrives professionally by stripping away a layer of defense in unoriginality and imitative personhood that compensated for feeling nonexistent as a child. He instead distributes the news of the miserable universality of misery; but he preserves comic reparativity by changing the terms of reciprocity, delaminating it from the joke’s surprise and distraction and locating it in the small shock of the mutual confidence that grows from sharing difficult truths.

Taking an audience into his confidence like this creates a singular, intimate public whose terms of reciprocity are also freeing because they’re impersonal, nonmimetic, and nonobligatory. He no longer has to pretend to be in conversation or to imitate listening onstage. By refunctioning the humorless truth into a state of knowing together, the comedian and his public live on jointly enjoying the stripping away of fantasy. “Let’s stop pretending,” he says, defiantly (“C”).

At first there’s a thrill to the comfort of performing peace with the unbearable. It is said that the comedian becomes the only comedian who’s inimitable and the only one never heckled. The implication is that this is because what he says involves no shtick and no reparative gestures while building reasons for trust. But how can comedy be about trust, when it’s also about surprise, an unequal distribution of being knowing and a sucker? His truth telling is comic as long as it’s busting the open secrets that maintain the terrible, ridiculous world.

Even when the comedian’s observations are no longer delightful and new, his public comes to see his live performances out of fidelity to his

fidelity to disenchant sociality. Then slowly, unintentionally, he fades from the professional scene. He adapts to a form of nonpresence in relation, discovering that he's gotten his hoard of misery/comedy off of his chest. So he dwindles as a kind of thing. He becomes okay with the ordinary. At the end of the story he moves into private life in a small town with a woman he likes just fine, among people he'd met in his early career who came to see him because "what we need at the end of a long day, most of all, is a good laugh" ("C").

You can handle the truth, but you don't always need to be handling it, whereas you always need a good laugh. What is "a good laugh," anyway, given that in this final phrase the story's tone fires off both bitterness and sweetness? The narrator picks up comic truth telling where the comedian leaves off.

The end of this story evokes the close of *Sullivan's Travels* (dir. Preston Sturges, 1941), another classic humorless comedy. Here a group of documentary filmmakers dedicated to telling the hard truth about the suffering of inequality encounters inmates at the end of the day having "a good laugh" at a Mickey Mouse cartoon. As Jerry Lewis has said, "you can get most anybody to forget their problems with a good laugh."²⁸ In this Lewis approximates Bergson's observation that laughter induces "a momentary anesthesia of the heart."²⁹ He may also resonate with Zupančič's observation that the comic points to the life in the machinic and not just the machinic in life.³⁰ The freedom from consciousness they all point to is framed as somewhere between a need and a wish under the discipline of life's ontological constraints. If comedy is a genre allowing something of the truth's revelation, it also creates a crisis in genres of the truth by tickling the relation between being knowing and unknowing. In that vision of a nonplace the good laugh is a noninstrumental shakeup that allows for a little coasting relief from the pressure of production ("at the end of a long day") and the scene of judgment, making a space where rest in peace meets rest in life and a brief vacation from the always potential shame at being seen, misrecognized, assessed for value, and ordinary in disgust and desire. The good laugh is thus a generous genre of relief from the humorlessness with which one eats the effects of ordinary absurdity and injury. The story's denouement also confirms that the stripping away of one's gestures can itself become a combover style of authenticity, behind

28. "KING OF COMEDY: JERRY LEWIS," 2 June 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm9C2_BwVC4

29. Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 5. Quite a few comedy theorists associate comedy with nonemotional eruptions followed by the flooding of meaning.

30. See Zupančič, *Odd One In*, pp. 113–19.

which any subject can fade into a nonpresence without anyone much noticing. This is the proposition of ordinary personality, of course; for a performer's relation to its audience, being reliable is something like the affective contract that people pay to trust. The truth teller's observation about misery/comedy's origins in the banality of loneliness blacks out in laughter's brief disinhibiting moment.

Monologue 2: *The King of Comedy*

I have suggested that Whitehead's comedian heals himself by finding an audience attached to his ironic version of the hard truth that life and other people will let you down, which is the lite way of affirming that there is no sovereign exception to ordinary not mattering. The disturbance of failed relationality is replaced by an insider knowledge that can be shared with spectator strangers, who in turn derive benefit from the celebrity's way of modeling and enjoying the discomfort of such knowing. Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* is the mirror inversion of Whitehead's work. In the *King of Comedy* knowledge protects no one from anything, ever. Nor does sharing the open secret of life. In this film that open secret is that one is always starting from the bottom even when one has ascended. Every encounter is a new test.

Maybe this is why virtually every man in *The King of Comedy* jokes sadistically to enjoy freedom at the other's expense, for the present they share isn't merely a dead space anticipating later outcomes, or a space of mutual exchange, but a staging ground for ambition. Women in the film are humorless on the outside and the inside. But among the men, comedy is contagious, and everyone in this work is a comedian—professionals, people on the street, lawyers, the police; they can't help but attempt to extract bondage from others as the price of their momentary verbal freedom. If fandom's genuine relief in truth in "The Comedian" refutes the sticky bindings of the combover dynamic as the *necessary* cost of social admission, Scorsese's film is a capitalist parable of mutually insured destruction. It suggests that the postwar social contract that tethered fantasy to an upward mobility verified by proximity to success *requires* complicity in the psychic costs of entrepreneurial subjectivity, resulting in a mass democracy committed to aspirational sociopathy. No one can care about the experience of the other if that caring inconveniences their freedom. The experience economy of comic sociality requires performing a game, a shtick, or a compulsion that might keep one from losing status and face, and might lead to something else. Stand-up stands in for all this. The film takes a morally humorless position with respect to the desperation of the quicksand of the present, but it pities celebrities more than just folks.

The King of Comedy is Rupert Pupkin's (Robert De Niro) heroic self-epithet. The sobriquet is a riff on the phrase *the king of late night*, which is attached to the Johnny Carson-like Jerry Langford, played by Jerry Lewis as a humorless stand-up comedian whose routines involve, whatever else they involve, dryly satiric commentary on the routine of his routines.³¹ ("I'm sorry I woke you," he says to his sidekick, Ed Hurlihy, in the opening monologue.) As with Whitehead's comedian early on, for Langford to go through the motions is not to go through the emotions but to be freed from disturbance by them.

This freedom from emotion through routine actually feeds Langford's public and private life into the sovereignty machine; there's no boundary between the dissociation of acting and the aversion to association that organizes his off-stage life. *The King of Comedy* generalizes this synthetic desire (*not* compulsion) to repeat. Late in the film Tony Randall—the actor plays himself—substitutes for Langford, who is Jerry Lewis playing Johnny Carson, but also a version of himself, as Lewis was a famous comedian turned master of ceremonies on the annual muscular dystrophy telethon and various variety shows. Pupkin recounts studying and copying Langford as well, meanwhile trying to dispatch his own body into an absolute predictability—no psychosomatics and no interruption of his intentions on the way to leaping into the lineage.³² The ambition is to be so predictable aesthetically *in every encounter* that it doesn't matter who stands in the place of the master; at the same time, achieving proximity to the generic singularity of the name King of Comedy promises the gratification of public confirmation.

Pupkin does achieve the status of a bad copy—not so much of Langford, though, but of his own fantasy. In the basement of the house where Pupkin lives with his mother, a talk show replica set dominates the space. Two bigger-than-life black-and-white cardboard cutouts sit in silhouette on each side of an ordinary upholstered wine-red host's chair, a diminished throne from which Pupkin makes pseudoconversation. A cardboard Langford smiles in one guest chair, and Liza Minnelli in the other faces in; once, as his mother yells from upstairs, Pupkin talks to the cutouts and even hugs and kisses them in a predictable stream of flattering and teasing noise, jostling affection, and tender violence.

Later, in a stunning hallucinatory insert, Scorsese shoots Pupkin from behind in the same space playing to a massively blown up black-and-

31. This and all subsequent quotations from the film are from *The King of Comedy*, dir. Martin Scorsese (1982).

32. See Mladen Dolar, "The Comic Mimesis," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 570–89.

white image of an audience clapping and laughing overlaid by a recorded soundtrack of clapping and laughter on top of which Pupkin lays a track of his own monologue; but the metaphor of layering is inapposite here, as these are interpenetrating zones of projection and sensual saturation. It is the movement of a body intending to become a machine so perfect that it would be clear whose body is the sovereign king's and whose belongs to the nonsovereign laughers, incited into spontaneity by his jokes.

Comedy karaoke in an echo chamber is the good life reduced to perfection. Scorsese is fittingly heavy-handed here and throughout; the luscious color of the film's everyday scenes contrasts with the black-and-white fantasy world; a slow chamber music soundtrack interpenetrates the tacky crime film style that registers impaired subjectivity through ominous slow motion. This slowed style also marks the film's opening, when Pupkin sees Langford and walks toward him. This style, designating *too much intensity but too little subjectivity*, identifies Pupkin as a stalker and later a sociopath.

But when Langford finally allows Rupert a brief audience—pressed too close into the back seat of a car—Rupert's machine fails, and he gets anxious and overgestural, his arms actually running like pistons as he tries to spit out his rehearsed lines. ("Do you know how many times I've had this conversation in my head, this is beautiful," asks Rupert. "Did it always turn out this way?" asks Langford. "Yeah, it did," says Rupert, snorting.) But that's a lie. In fantasy Pupkin is ready for his big break; in the moment he makes for it, his comportment does not hold him in check, as his affective and bodily disorganization shows.

After a series of humiliating and placating rejections by Langford and his staff, Pupkin joins league with Masha (Sandra Bernhard), another stalker of Langford, who aspires not to replace him professionally but to be his lover. After trying to bond with the star to no avail, the comrades kidnap him. They threaten to kill Langford, but Masha's real desire is to still him enough to animate him with desire.³³ This enables Masha to have a sexy evening with him—Langford wrapped in duct tape, Masha in lingerie—while Pupkin "breaks in" to show business (which involves literally many trespasses).

The film then trots out a panoply of ridiculous authoritarian styles. The stalkers and the stars are not the only humorless pleasure aesthetes. The police too exemplify the law's self-amplifying humorlessness in a register that now reads uncannily; the pair is suspected of being "terrorists" and of "hijacking" the situation. But, like everyone else at the beginning of the

33. On the aspiration to immobilize love's situation, see Renata Salecl, "Love Anxieties," *On Anxiety* (New York, 2004), pp. 72–83.

ascendancy of stand-up as a US way of life, the cops also adopt a seventies style comic hyperbole, compulsively joking, punning, and riffing. Joking is what keeps things going under the pressure of a threatened loss of control over life that everyone seems to feel one way or another.

The feckless aspiration to be an automaton, then, *to become* the “mechanical encrusted on the living,” is everywhere in this film’s image of life.³⁴ Abjection is not so much what breaks down subjectivity but what pressures the subject to defeat the display of desire’s disturbance, which is another way of talking about the combover. In *The King of Comedy* this relation involves not just mental projections and verbal exchanges. The insistent physicality of De Niro’s performance of Pupkin’s comedic but humorless sociopath—its reliance on paralanguage, the audible flow of speech, gesture and tic—is key to maintaining his sovereign fantasy. Pupkin is always resisting hearing what he has heard, touching his tie, cocking his head, verbally processing bothersome things without changing from their incorporation, and never sympathizing or empathizing with other people’s genres of appearing, treating all resistance as a form of heckling. This exposure to the physically ridiculous keeps him close to the comic; life as pratfall and resilience connects him to the mood-twisted clown exemplified by Lewis’s comedic career, here ghosting his own performance as the stiffened Langford. Their scenes catalog the ways they defend against blockages to their fantasy of the will: Langford by living at a distance from the world, Pupkin by processing everything aloud, denying, agreeing, rephrasing in self-serving ways, admitting he’s lost the battle, refusing to admit it, deciding the other’s right and then insisting on a new version of the bargain as though by being in conversation with him the other person has an obligation to him beyond the dynamic of manners. His bullying intensities embody the extreme need for control we now call microaggression.

So too *The King of Comedy* records the experience of *microadjustment* that sucks up so much of our best creative energy. If microaggression communicates structural privilege through the encounter and the gesture, microadjustment is the cost such sociality extracts. The bodily, verbal, and affective flurries of microadjustment get people through every proximate moment; the percentage of these that involve insults, aggressions, arrogations of privilege, and diminutions of pleasure is a political number. Funneled in the film into what Erving Goffman calls conversational “footing,” Pupkin’s “big break” is the effect of a series of microadjustments

34. Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 37.

in panic and desire.³⁵ In the absence of the big break flowing from reciprocal action there is the energy of a humorless commitment not to be defeated. In the presence of the big break artificially induced microadjustment tries out different mixes of grandiosity and abjection.

Partly, then, what's comic and painful is the film's painstaking documentation of how Pupkin responds to other people's resistance to him. Every so often—for example, as the police take him to jail on the night of his big break—Pupkin blurts an admission that he can be a lot to handle or even wrong in his expectations about how an encounter will go. Langford's kidnapping is also a sign that something can get through to Pupkin; it happens only after Pupkin recognizes, finally, that they will never have a relationship on his own terms. But disbelief accompanies belief, acceptance, and refusal. During the kidnapping he keeps asking Langford why couldn't he have done *x*, why couldn't he not have done *x*, and whether or not that would have been so hard? Again, in the repetition and variation of this question, Pupkin is not exceptional; that is his problem. The humorless comedy of *The King of Comedy* is a painful slapstick of the demonstration of any subject's desire to be a machine that absorbs difference without becoming different in response to its impact. The force of his humorlessness, its aggressive desperation, just amplifies the ordinary of getting others to line up with one's aim. Nothing in the film better demonstrates this than Pupkin's monologue (fig. 2):

PUPKIN: Good evening ladies and gentleman. Let me introduce myself. My name is Rupert Pupkin. I was born in Clifton, New Jersey, which was not at that time a federal offense. (*Laughter.*) Is there anyone here from Clifton? (*Silence.*) Oh Good. We can all relax now. Now, I'd like to begin by saying that my parents were too poor to afford me a childhood in Clifton. But the fact is you know that nobody is allowed to be really too poor in Clifton because once you fall below a certain level they exile you to Passaic. (*Laughter and clapping.*)

But you know my parents did put down the first two payments on my childhood, don't get me wrong. (*Laughter.*) But they did also return me to the hospital as defective. (*Laughter.*) But, like everyone else I grew up in large part thanks to my mother. If she were only here today I'd say, "Hey, mom. What are you doing here? You've been dead for nine years!" (*Laughter and clapping.*)

But seriously, you should have seen my mother. She was wonderful—blonde, beautiful, intelligent: alcoholic. (*Laughter.*) We used

35. See Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 124–57.

FIGURE 2. *The King of Comedy* (1982).

to drink milk together after school. Mine was homogenized, hers was loaded. (*Laughter.*) Once they picked her up for speeding, they clocked her doing fifty—all right, but in our garage? (*Clapping.*) And you know when they tested her they found that her alcohol had two percent blood! (*Laughter and clapping.*)

Ah, but we used to joke together Mom and me, until the tears would stroll down her face and she would throw up. (*Laughter.*) Yeah! And who would clean it up? Heh, not Dad. He was too busy down at O’Grady’s throwing up on his own. Yeah! In fact, ’til I was sixteen, I thought throwing up was a sign of maturity. (*Laughter.*) You know, while the other kids were off in the woods sneaking cigarettes, heh, I was hiding behind the house with my fingers down my throat. (*Laughter and clapping.*) The only problem was I never *got anywhere*. Until one day my father caught me. And you know just as he was giving me a final kick in the stomach for luck, I managed to *heave* all over his new shoes. “That’s it,” I thought. “I’ve made it. I’m finally a man!” (*Laughter and clapping.*)

But as it turned out, I was wrong. That was the only attention my father ever gave me. (*Awww.*) Yeah, he was usually too busy out in the park playing ball with my sister, Rose. But today, I must say thanks to those many hours of practice, my sister Rose has grown into a fine man. (*Laughter, clapping, and whistling.*)

Now me, I wasn’t especially interested in athletics, the only exercise I ever got was when the other kids picked on me. Yeah, they used

to beat me up once a week, usually Tuesday. (*Laughter.*) And after a while, the school worked it into the curriculum. And if you knocked me out, you got extra credit. (*Laughter.*) Except there was this one kid, poor kid, who was afraid of me, and I used to tell him, "Hit me! Hit me! What's the matter with you? Don't you want to graduate?" (*Laughter, clapping, and whistling.*) As for me, hey I was the youngest kid in the history of the school to graduate in traction. (*Laughter.*)

But you know my only real interest, right from the beginning, was show business. Even as a young man, I began at the very top, collecting autographs. (*Scattered laughter.*)

Now a lot of you are probably wondering why Jerry isn't with us tonight. Well, I'll tell you, the fact is he's tied up—and I'm the one who tied him. (*Laughter and clapping.*) I know you think I'm joking, but that's the only way I could break into show business—by hijacking Jerry Langford. (*Laughter.*) Right now, Jerry is strapped to a chair somewhere in the middle of this city. (*Extended laughter, clapping, and whistling.*) Go ahead laugh, thank you, I appreciate it. But the fact is—I'm here. Now tomorrow you'll know that I wasn't kidding and you'll think I was crazy. But look, I think of it this way: better to be King for a Night than Schmuck for a Lifetime! (*Laughter, clapping, and whistling.*)

As he delivers this monologue, Pupkin's arm movements are mechanical, hinged like a marionette's. As he has practiced his shtick incessantly during the film, this rigidity must itself be practiced. His shoulders are wedged as though he's wearing the suit hanger with the suit. His elbows hinge enough to allow for the laughter-encouraging gestures that, in "The Comedian," we see relinquished; there is no inefficiency in Pupkin's comportment, the inefficiency that allows for genuine relation. So this is not Chaplinesque repetition. Pupkin is not moving through space, juggling time, or establishing pathos and anxiety through the elaboration of difference, including self-difference.³⁶ In his fantasy segments about how life after stardom will go, Pupkin does enjoy elegance, a flowing bodily grace, but in the liveness of performance he rejects it. He is wearing a red-and-white pattern. He aspires to the regularity of his fabric.

36. On Chaplin's bodily articulation of the vulgar with the mechanical, see Gunning, "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8 (Aug. 2010): 237–45. Tom Gunning writes of the "body in process, in transformation, an incomplete body able to merge with other bodies—or other things—and create new bodies, grotesques that are part human part something else, exceeding our categories of knowledge and extending our experience. And yet . . . this new body, for all its composite weirdness, strikes us as immediately recognizable rather than entirely alien" (p. 243).

In a previous fantasy scene, Rupert has told Jerry: "I think about my life, see, mainly about the worst parts, all the awful things, and I just try to see them in a funny light. That's all." This explains the collapse of sociopathic will and reparative fantasy through which comedy allows its accomplices to misrecognize sovereign relationality as sociability. The filmgoer knows that Pupkin's version of the misery/comedy toggle hasn't happened; Mom is not dead; there's no evident sister Rose. The filmgoer and the television audience know that the performative utterance of the Bar Mitzvah, "Today I am a man!" is laughable because had Pupkin achieved sovereign solidity through abjection or religion he would not be on the stage this very night. But this is not a betrayal. Everyone knows that the monologue doesn't have to be factually true, just affectively, through bits that tap into the personal without being verifiably the case. The discourse is, again, of confidence, of a shared experience of a risky insight.³⁷ The stand-up story solicits pity and identification with the observational mind's disturbance by something in the world, and what Nina Baym long ago called the "melodrama of beset manhood" becomes a *comedy of the survivor who has to keep surviving*.³⁸ Better the "King for a Night than Shmuck for a Lifetime!" As Jane Gallop once wrote, "phallus/penis: same difference."³⁹ This is not a self-cancelling failure, though. It is a comic both/and, and, and. . . .

At the end of the monologue Pupkin does admit that his comedic sovereignty is momentary, an episode. Why does he admit this? One is often forced, in humorless comedy, to keep insisting that one has already achieved the resolution that one is clearly still pursuing. And a core feature of the big-break genre, after all—being discovered in love or in talent—is that life might be relieved of contingency and decision, unfolding instead on a plane of material fantasy in which there would be no negativity, no unremitting trials of self-integratedness or questions about the world's solidity. This is the wish in *Raging Bull* (dir. Scorsese, 1980), too, the film

37. For a history of the transformation of stand-up from sharable jokes to performative "personal" voicing, see Dotan Oliar and Christopher Jon Sprigman, "There's No Free Laugh (Anymore): The Emergence of Intellectual Property Norms and the Transformation of Stand-up Comedy," *Virginia Law Review* 94 (Dec. 2008): 1767–867, and, more anecdotally, Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York, 2009).

38. See Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," *American Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1981): 123–39. It's worth noting that the mother is associated with tears, milk, and vomit, classic abject materials, whereas the father's relation to alcohol and vomit is associated with the violence of discipline and the work of defense against intimacy, and that's the formalism of sexual difference to which Rupert aspires.

39. See Jane Gallop, "Phallus/Penis: Same Difference," in *Men by Women*, ed. Janet Todd (New York 1982), pp. 243–51.

De Niro and Scorsese made right before *The King of Comedy*. In many ways they're the same film. In *The King of Comedy*, the monologue cuts past the tuck and roll of conversation. The five-minute exposure allows the stand-up performer to deliver all his punches, whether or not the audience delivers the laughter-verdict to confirm the fantasy as the real. His admission of his criminality proves to them that once he's reorganized the world and ascended to the throne, he's once and always the king *at some level*. They can laugh or not, but they cannot deny the sovereign event.

Not that they want to! In the film's final shot Pupkin, released from prison, is standing on a wine-red stage wearing a slightly brighter red, as though the red-white pattern in his original performance suit has finally achieved pure consistency. He is waiting to perform without uttering a word, taking in the final moment of self-identity as a pleasure and achievement. An announcer blazons his return grandiosely, much as Randall did, only now the voice is bodiless—Pupkin shares the stage with no one. He takes his time to appear and stands there basking in the audience's clapping and laughing response; he does everything he can to preserve a little longer the hermetic seal on his sovereign deal. At the same time, he is rocking a little, mechanically turning his head this way and that, in the agitation of anticipatory physical microadjustment to the real time dynamics of the stand-up's exposure to an audience that has expectations. The camera pulls in on a close-up and cuts to black as Rupert nods in confirmation of—something.

Pupkin has been sentenced for life to comedy, which is to say to the slapstick of an unpredictable and barely tolerable openness to life. As in the case of "The Comedian," whether or not there's room in this world for Pupkin's humorless attachment to his comedic will depends on whether the audience will seek pleasure in this next phase of his combover fantasy, knowing what it knows. In contrast, in Lisa Kudrow's *The Comeback* audience matters less than in either of the two previous cases. Repeatedly, the very force of life against the comedian's ambitious will, her humorless insistence to appear a certain way, cracks her very self-relation.

Monologue 3: *The Comeback*

We begin with the penultimate episode of season one of Lisa Kudrow's HBO series *The Comeback* (2005). A slapstick tableau, with its impact and falter, stands at this episode's peak: a redheaded woman ensconced in a papier-mâché cupcake costume turns swiftly to gut punch the abominable man who has written this role for her. He vomits from the impact; she vomits in counterpoint. Her garish outfit is silver and pink, complete

FIGURE 3. *The Comeback* (2014).

with a large red cherry atop a pink icing hat (fig. 3). The writer has been slouchingly watching her act while wolfing down cheesy pepperoni pizza. The camera cuts to their vomit.

All of this happens before a sitcom's live cameras and is caught additionally by the hand-held lens of the reality TV show *The Comeback*, whose "raw footage" production constitutes the primary show-within-a-show of Kudrow's HBO series of the same name.⁴⁰ When the fictive-reality *Comeback* premieres at the episode's end, the punch-and-puke incident is splayed on a loop that just won't stop regurgitating the image. At first, the actress feels humiliated and plots revenge on the network. Then Jay Leno, playing himself on a fictive reenactment of his own talk show, calls the spectacular incident a "rare double vomit" and replays it for comedy,

40. The original title of *The Comeback* HBO series was *Raw Footage*, and every episode's title card places the phrase under the title as though it is the title's postcolonial joke. Adding to the irony is that the toggle between the phrases *raw footage* and *raw sewage* seeps throughout the series as the pipes in Valerie Cherish's house keep bursting and spewing fecal matter all over and at the most inopportune times, which, in reality TV, are all opportune times, insofar as the purpose of the genre is to track the many ways life's infrastructures are always failing, which is the only way one becomes aware of the infrastructure's function, to manage the overwhelming pressures of world making. See Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (Nov.-Dec.1999): 377-91.

distributing to his audience barf bags with the actress's picture on them and staging a mock boxing match in which she dons the same clown gloves she'd been wearing as the cupcake pugilist.⁴¹ This escalation shows respect for her tenacity in the face of comedy's leakage into ordinary life and returns her to bask in a public's welcoming response. Leno shows her how a clown takes a joke—resiliently, by wobbling and righting.

Her punch is the punchline of a “last straw” insult flung by the writer, Paulie G., at Kudrow's character, Valerie Cherish: “What? Does that rod in your back go all the way up your ass?” Cherish had been worried about becoming disabled by a pratfall she had been asked to take while costumed in the cumbersome cupcake because of a scoliosis rod in her back. The fall was to take place during a hallucinatory diet-pill dream sequence in the *other* show within the show, a terrible sitcom called *Room and Bored*. Here, Cherish has been relegated to play Aunt Sassy, an anerotic joke figure whose screechy tagline is, “I don't need to *see that!*”

By season two of *The Comeback* (HBO) Cherish spontaneously utters “I don't need to *see that!*” in response to unscripted life events. While written originally for a cartoonish figure, the line speaks the truth of her own wish to become cartoon, to live through the bruising encounters of life and desire as though nothing dies, wears out, or shows permanent marks; her great resource, after all, is to have been a sitcom heroine, to fail, double take, and dust herself off in an awkward recombinant flourish. *Seeing that* is what's inconvenient about rolling with the punches of life. The double vomit just literalizes the hurdle of surviving the ordinary; it's not exceptional. The fear of disability is a fear of *what has already happened*. The diet-pill story is a bare allegory of the gargantuan appetite she cultivates and represses. (Cherish has her food delivered to her, presumably for portion control purposes, but eats an entire cake while rehearsing the phrase “I don't need to *see that!*” in season 1, episode 1).⁴² In life and in art, Cherish plays the multiple rigidities and abjections of desire with tight smiles, fretful speculations, double takes, and brief laughs. So this is more than a sad clown story.

Kudrow's series returns to the contemporary scene of thankless work, suggesting humorlessness as an effect of a structural condition.⁴³ Cherish

41. This and all subsequent quotations from the episode are from “Valerie Shines under Stress,” 28 Aug. 2005, *The Comeback*.

42. “Pilot,” 5 June 2005, *The Comeback*.

43. During the period between the two seasons of Kudrow's *The Comeback* (HBO)—2005 and 2014—she developed *Web Therapy* (2011–2015), an internet show picked up for four seasons by Showtime. *Web Therapy* offers another humorless workplace comedy focusing on the destructive will of a protagonist insisting that life be the version of comedy she wants—a

is cast as one more self-exploiting victim desiring to achieve traction in fame and by way of a cluster of waning genres (the situation comedy), declining media (film and video, network television), and diminishing sexual attractiveness (ageing). Aspiring pathetically to be a player in the Hollywood system's decline, she is willing to control almost nothing in pursuit of it; her control impulses are always belated, trying to stem bad leakage. Contrast this to Whitehead's comedian, who organizes the live attention of an intimate public, and Scorsese's Pupkin, who seeks that, too, but more than that—mechanical sovereignty over his body, the world, and causality. Her preoccupied fine-tuning contrasts abjectly with Pupkin's commentary flow, whose purpose is to dominate situations. Cherish's will to the comedic involves a sprightly, miserable dedication to a humorless existence in comic drag, like the contestants in RuPaul's "Lip Sync for Your Life!" competition, trying to stay in the game.⁴⁴

Cherish has no fantasy of a big break, of making it, being the best, and then coasting in fame. Instead, her calculative optimism is staged as relentless self-pursuit through the trials of professional and domestic life. Being game shows up as aspirational rigidity in a number of ways, in her fabricated back and her repetitive phrases ("Lesson learned!" "I need to know I'm being heard." "I took myself too seriously."), but the series most diligently focuses on her drive to show up for her face, with its overelastic yet unyielding mouth and smile. Her face is her combover but assembled and assemblaged in real time, on screen, and in the *mise-en-scène*. She lives the double vomit, for example, as a loss of face that follows its becoming object in public: "How am I going to show my face on Leno, how am I going to show my face anywhere?"

Episode after episode, her expression is not permitted to rest in frustration or defeat; her face is like a body suspended midair, distressed and adjusting but to no relief. You have a sense of a person checking, cheering, and choking herself. Thank goodness, then, for the feature of comedy that is famously

victory over life that isn't death but a hermetically sealed invulnerability to humiliation that nonetheless permits risk and experiment. Kudrow plays Fiona Wallace, a psychotherapist tired of the therapeutic hour who works from home and markets herself as a three-minute internet counselor who just cuts through the noise and gets to the point, which, because this is a comedy, is always a perverse and very wrong point. Wallace brands what she does not a psychoanalytic method but her *modality*, her new way of doing things. Deleuze's "Postscript on Control Societies" uses "modulation" (*modalization*) to describe the demands on the sensorium under neoliberalism, modulation signifies the rise and fall of the subject's response to the doing of the world on the subject, an endless forced receptivity that induces a reencounter with the life worker's ever unfinished contingency; see Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," pp. 178–79.

44. See *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–2016), www.logotv.com/shows/rupauls-drag-race /episode-guide. RuPaul actually appears in season 2, episode 1, having lunch with the head of Bravo, Andy Cohen; see "Valerie Makes a Pilot."

tragedy plus time. Lips and mouth keep returning to speak, to reason aloud, to discipline her desire, to comment on her actions as they appear, and to create phrase cushions that try to push bad incidents into the past by a sheer volume of soliloquy that reshapes events into the mood she wants to be in and wants a world for. Lesley Stern argues, via Aby Warburg, that cinema creates “a primeval vocabulary of passionate gesticulation.”⁴⁵ Here, in the domain of reality TV, seriality transforms gesticulation into a desperate verbal grasping for an event to become an episode, the lower-bar promise of nextness.

“I never thought I wouldn’t work again,” Cherish says, after the network makes her record a promo in which she says the opposite. “I’m a survivor.” Indeed, one of the dark humor highpoints of the series is her discovery of “I Will Survive,” which Mickey, her gay sidekick/hairdresser, has suggested to her as the other *Comeback*’s theme song.⁴⁶ Cherish has clearly never heard of Gloria Gaynor’s gay disco anthem. She asks Mickey to forward it to “the part I like”—the refrain, “I will survive, for as long as I know how to love I know I’ll stay alive.” But while rerecording it, her sweet cheer and mechanical dancing suddenly lose to the harsh unhappy will behind them that makes her choke up, stop singing, and comment grim-smilingly that “anger hurts my throat.”

But even then what looks like emergent authenticity wasn’t exactly an affective tapping into anything. The director of the commercial had encouraged Cherish to dramatize the pop song’s anger rather than to make it bland, as is her custom. Imitation method acting, as I have argued elsewhere, is the means by which contemporary service providers gain skills for their affective labor—first fake it, then make it real, make it yours.⁴⁷ This desperate attempt to share a skin with the social makes Cherish both singular in her style of pain management and exemplary in her will to collapse all aspects of the reproduction of life into a comic mien.

45. Quoted in Lesley Stern, “Ghosting: The Performance and Migration of Cinematic Gesture, Focusing on Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Good Men, Good Women*,” in *Migrations of Gesture*, ed. Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (Minneapolis, 2008), p. 201.

46. Mickey’s plot in season one of *The Comeback* is itself a classic combover comedy. Valerie Cherish’s number one loyalist, Mickey hairstyles the actress into a “natural” iconicity at every moment; he is *her* primary combover enabler. Then, across the arc of season one, he comes out of a closet on reality TV that no one could have thought he was in. In season two, the gay “I Will Survive” tone of season one turns into an “I’m a Survivor” ringtone on Mickey’s phone; he’s in cancer treatment throughout the season, and Cherish’s alternating care of and carelessness with him is one of the show’s active tensions. In the final episode all broken intimacies resolve when she chooses to be with Mickey rather than at the Emmys. Reconciling there with her estranged husband, Mark, she nonetheless leaves Mickey’s hospital room for post-E Emmy parties once she’s sure he’s stable.

47. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 215–18 and *The Female Complaint* (Durham, N.C., 2008), p. 226.

Cherish's upbeat life, in short, performs the bruxism of the neoliberal soul.⁴⁸ Scene after scene of such aspirational action remains comic to the brink of torture, like a sadistic episode of self-tickling. She will do anything to demonstrate that she has never left the scene, that she'll take a fall for a scene, that she deserves dignity as an actress of indignity, and that she's open to receive the next insult if it allows her to sustain an image of a world for herself to move in.

The monologue that condenses all of this, and more, takes place in the first episode of season two of *The Comeback*, which, like the show itself, takes place nine years after the first season.⁴⁹ The second season begins with Cherish staging yet another comeback, this time in a self-financed reality TV pilot she's making for a pitch to the Bravo network. We understand how precarious her relation to the profession now is, as she claims to have a personal relation to Andy Cohen, the network's CEO, just because they have exchanged some phrases on Twitter. We learn too that she and her husband are alienated because he walks in on the video-selfie filming and is surprised. The audience and the crew watch a mediocrity montage that catches up to Cherish's life since 2005. Clips from the decade log her failures, bit parts, and troubled marriage. The story is that although the network picked up *The Comeback* reality TV show in 2005, it was dropped when *Room and Bored* was not extended for another season. Cherish then moves inauspiciously to acting in seven student films (she calls them "independents"); becoming a *Real Housewife of Beverly Hills* until quitting in an on-air tantrum; and appearing as a fake-breasted flop on *Dancing with the Stars*. She also shoots infomercials for a red hair color "naturally" derived from a French cantaloupe: but she "can't give them away." Her "home movies" could be titled *A Star Isn't Born*, as they document the life of an increasingly minor celebrity trying to stave off acknowledging that few want her to show up for "the life" or notice when she does.

Watching her montage, Cherish jokes, "I don't want to *see that!*" But literally she does not know how to stop the streaming image or indeed how to work any computer, camera, telephone, or machine. Yet she does not know how to start them either, in the sense of achieving a self-extending career. She keeps telling the student cameramen to adjust how her body appears on camera to make it seem as though she hasn't aged; she keeps redirecting the shots and second-guessing her own direction, changing

48. *Soul* is a technical term in the contemporary Marxist discussion of alienation and its subjective form; see Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Guisepina Mecchia (Los Angeles, 2009).

49. The following quotations from the episode are from "Valerie Makes a Pilot."

the lighting, multiplying takes, all the while reperforming for her own camera the fresh-faced frankness she associates with her sitcom popularity. Kudrow and King shoot Cherish exactly as she instructs. The fear and the reality are that she may be her only agent, director, and audience, too.

Still, there are accidents. Phones ring in the middle of scenes. Pipes in the walls of her family home keep bursting at the seams, and shit literally flows everywhere. All figures close in on the literal. Cherish tries to deflect all this and risk more exposure to humiliation because she thinks she needs to learn not to take herself “too seriously.” But even that is a combover gesture. She comments that her problem was that she was not comedic *enough* in the face of the hits her fantasies take, as though she had stood up for her dignity. If she could only take more mocking and derision; if only she could stop defending herself. The camera frames Cherish unforgivingly not forgiving, then forgiving, herself. It is as though Kudrow has written a character whose will to appear as a comedy heroine is so powerful that even the metashow cannot break away from the circuit of abasement and inflation; its reflexivity is that tight.

Cherish actually does shift towards a little more emotional openness during the 2014 season, becoming harsher and kinder in real time as the fictive and the actual world become more enmeshed. But by this second season’s first episode she has not achieved any moral transition. While filming her reality reel Cherish’s former publicist comes over to tell her that HBO is now casting *Seeing Red*, written by Paulie G. His new series confesses his drug addictions during that period but also heaps blame on the ageing actress who’s in denial about her lack of talent, power, and people skills: Valerie Cherish, here written as Mallory Church. When Cherish hears of this or any career prospect, she becomes overwhelmed by multiple incoherent intentions. If she says no to something the scene cuts inevitably to yes. He’s “free to write whatever he wants to write and I’m free to not react, you know?” turns into staying up late commenting on the script; let “the lawyers” handle it and “cease and desist” becomes going straight to HBO and, finally, reading for the part based on herself.

As Cherish shows up at HBO, they are auditioning other actors to play her as Mallory Church. The comedian Chelsea Handler is seen on a monitor playing herself playing Cherish playing Church, declaring, “I don’t want to *see* that!” The suits in the audience receive Handler’s video audition impassively. When Cherish walks into the room they offer her a shot at reading for herself; they say they had always wanted to give her a shot but never heard back from her agent, whose name she doesn’t even know, so far has she fallen below the radar of market desire. Although scolding them and proclaiming “cease and desist!” the offer to play herself, to get

back into the game, is too seductive. She worries aloud that she's terrible at cold readings; they point out that since she's playing a version of herself her reading couldn't possibly be cold.

Valerie puts on her glasses, because she has to, to read. She even jokes that in the future, if she has one on HBO, she can memorize her lines and therefore avoid showing her vision problems. This apology is an admission that she's aged like a human, not an icon. But her glasses are bright blue, as though mere decoration, a prop. They match her outfit's suburban-esque muddle of turquoise-related synthetics and tchotchkes. Meanwhile her face is pursed and wrinkle-focused. Cherish speaks before the audience of HBO suits and Paulie G., her own reality TV crew filming off to one side. It is an understatement to say that the professional and the personal blur in the scene's staging. Here is Cherish's monologue, starting in a harsh close-up:

Okay, okay. (*Clears throat.*) "You think I'm this dried up, middle-aged woman. Look at the jokes you write, look at this tracksuit you make me wear. All saying the same thing; 'I'm old, I'm annoying, I'm unfuckable.' Well, I'm not the joke, okay? You are, Mitch. And instead of spending all your time trying to make *me* the joke, why don't you do your job and *write* me one, huh? A real joke, Mitch. Not you and your boys off in a room making fun of an old woman's pussy. Yeah, I heard you. I heard what you think of me. I heard it. Well, maybe you and everyone in television."

Oh, said it wrong. Okay.

"Well, maybe you and everyone in the television business can't see me as desirable, but there are plenty of men out there who . . . but there are plenty of men out there who would still want to fuck an old lady like me. So fuck you, Mitch. Just fuck you. And *fuck* you."

During Cherish's performance of Paulie G.'s version of her the HBO auditors discharge the broad side-glances, expressionless glares, seat shifting, and fist biting usually associated with comedy or irony. But this scene is more like the ticking down of a bomb; the world they've made is suspended, as they sense that something beyond genre has come to pass. "I don't know what that was," one woman is overheard whispering, "but I've got to have more of it."

The inhale waiting for the laugh to express itself in the scene of comic suspense is replaced by a question about the possibility of breathing. What's left when comedy leaves the comedy room? The humorlessness of the sovereign monologue; the encounter with truths everyone can otherwise disavow; the unmetabolized rage turning against the speaker

and the writer; the confusions about entertainment. Then there's the humorlessness of the sovereign monologue conveyed as the collapse of the difference between being "unfuckable" and the "fuck you." These sound like a repetition, but the curse is the nonreparative partner to the epithet it echoes. The way they hang there together as so many perversities of the possibility of desire stages overdetermination in its raw proliferation. This is the multiplication and copresence of being in control and out of control—of response not as the undoing of prior acts but as the dilution, redirection, and remediation of effects. The abjections and aggressions in the monologue's phrase gestures crowd out for a moment the utility of manners, whose function is to keep things moving in the scene of gate-keeping that is, after all, the audition. The audition stands here as a figure for being in the game of gender and of labor, paid and unpaid, affective and material. It points to what's deeply personal, conventional, and structurally mediated about one's nonsovereignty in any encounter, including with oneself. The combover, one might say, is the everyday ambivalent acknowledgement of the ongoing audition for life. Appearing without it makes it possible for Cherish to be desired as an actor.

Yet she immediately critiques her performance as too "up there" and, using the *namaste* hands she wields to hide the internal whirl of her violence, *thanks* HBO for the opportunity to audition for the part of herself. On leaving the room, she says, "Why'd I do that? So stupid. Cold reading? So stupid!" She understates what was so wrong about the situation, scrolling manically through phrases like a mad animal, looking for an anchor in form to induce her control over what's becoming event.

Comic monologues involve managing frame switches and glitches in expectation while tragedy's plane of overwhelming consistency allows monologues to delay fatality by way of the combover of inflated performance. Both are present in the atmosphere here, which is to say that both become smudged. She can't tell that she's done well, played herself well, and she can't admit or maybe even register that Paulie G. spoke a truth that she possesses but would never have known to say where it could matter. She can't read the scene of reading the scene because, in a stupor of emotion, compulsion, and "momentary anesthesia," she has lost track of who she is in the situation.

What did just happen, though? Paulie G.'s script was a lifeline and an X-ray. Cherish has just thrown herself once again into a dangerous scene out of a desire to be wanted and to make an impact, and to do this she has left herself behind, as usual. To be present to the desire to have been better than competent at playing a version of herself who can be angry in real time, who can say things without fearing losing a world, she has no choice

but to throw herself out there into the cold reading, scoliosis rod or no. The cold reading authorizes for her a new public tone of fearless realism, by way of the combover alibi that it's all a fiction.

"The comedian" in Whitehead's story substitutes observational truths for their aesthetic displacements and obtains a nice cushion from the world through it because people respond hungrily to disappointment in small doses if it's cast as comedy, and he fades from the scene when he's ready, a little detached but intact. Rupert Pupkin is dedicated to some truth, too, but he can only tell it mixed with fabulation within the space of the miniature perfect sovereignty that constitutes getting the big break in America, the break from abjection, accommodation, and managing, which is what the monologue is, an opportunity to master the forces of chance including when and how the law bears down. In these work narratives, celebrity labor makes relational worlds, taste publics in which generosity is defined by a collective provision of space in which to enjoy failures of relation elsewhere.

Cherish's aspirational fictionality is a little different, expressing a humorless intensity around the need not for a live audience of strangers but for a *self*-encounter—"Note to self!"—that doesn't end up anywhere in particular on the success ladder because to arrive would be to end, and that's failure. She doesn't have a fixed image of an achieved life; her comb-over is the activity of combing over life itself—reality acting for the stretched-out present, in contrast to the method acting that taps into the survival of prior intensities. The world is much for her and in her, and her face always turns toward the next public or private encounter with a willful openness to the possibility of being found, taken up, appreciated, and gracious, before moving to the next proving ground.

It would be reductive therefore to see Cherish as truest only when a fiction allows her to say what a confident version of her would think because that would locate truth in the explosive expression of repressed rage, as though anger doesn't carry its own conventions and elisions—as though niceness is artificiality. We should remember that the combover is not a false front over a true one but an expression of an inconvenient complexity that would still be there generating figurations and social dynamics in the event of developments in relational style. Brutality is not the real; drama that *sounds* like drama isn't more true than drama that sounds rational, detached, or jokey. Her monologue is a set of inconvenient views from within a dynamic relation that also involves desire, ambivalence, and gestural incoherence. Thinking of it as the curtain drawn back requires an aggressive disavowal of what she wants, which is, one might say, aggression plus pillows. (Her bedroom is a bed-and-breakfast fantasy.)

Instead, like Pupkin, Cherish wants what she wants, to mount a good defense when she steps on people while executing her desire to be enjoyable. Her styles of execution derive from the American story of heterofemininity, as her urge to embody normativity on the make collapses the cutting edge of ideal selfhood onto the fear of sticking out as *too much*. Our other two humorless male comedians saw themselves as exceptional, but she, like so many women, is fighting to be just a little extraordinary. *The Comeback* is an exemplary American story of whiteness and wealth as well, insofar as Cherish can imagine any scene as a potentially welcoming world for her body rather than envisioning scenarios in which she is a problem or stain on the sovereign fantasies of others.⁵⁰ This will to make and join worlds is evident in her countless trespassing episodes, whose difficulties fluster but never stop her. It takes a lot of will to fuel that imagination machine.

The figural work of humorlessness at the heart of the comic appears here as well. In humorless comedy one experiences the ordinary as at once too much, not enough, and an infinite middle in which any minute could compel a cold reading or other kinds of exhausting microadjustment. The comedian tries to structure within life's ongoing disturbance a monologic being that pretends at relation and distributes surplus contingency, surprise, and troublesome knowledge to the audience who must enjoy it, out of pity, empathy, rage, and/or love.

We have seen that the monologue is the subject's best shot at the comb-over effect's achievement, a sovereign performance that looks like a conversation that is utterly, though never entirely, controlled by the will of the monologist (the predictable humorlessness of contemporary performance art amplifies this structure; the heckler defeats it). We see in the virtuosity of the solo star turn that our case study subjects seek out that even controlling the world by delegating to it the responsibility to hold the secret of one's embarrassment does not solve the problem of the will's puny

50. See, in contrast, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's rendition of universities, to "glimpse the hole in the fence" through which to see historically subordinated fugitive subjects in a world they can never rest in or trust but only use as a base for new lived imaginaries (Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses," *Social Text*, no. 79 [Summer 2004]: 102). In episode 8 of season 2 of *The Comeback*, Cherish barges into her Middle Eastern neighbor's home to ask for emergency hospitality; she needs to shower before the Emmys (because her home again has become a literal shit show). He forces her to know his name, to have manners. She doesn't care; she imitates interest so she can get what she wants, which is for him to loan her his shower. She won't take no; she's a bully. While her neglect is not specifically racist (she treats everyone instrumentally), it exemplifies a will to unknowing as an unneighborliness that protects the brittle bubble of the white dominant class, which is continually bursting, smearing, being cleaned and patched up by white and brown servants. See "Valerie Gets What She Really Wants," 28 Dec. 2014, *The Comeback*.

effectivity, however forceful its drive.⁵¹ But the fact that all of these careers involve converting grotesque somatic displays—of stubborn baldness, irrepressible farting, hypochondria, vomiting, and neurotic smiling—into positive social relations also points to what's comic in the reparative sense about the desire for the appearance of everything at once: the experience of a pure liveness that is never quite disciplined by prior intention. There is something terribly tender in the desire for the combover's appearance as failure. Humorless comedy holds its breath, and ours, as it lays out the many possible fates of mistaking control over form for a form of life.

51. The longer version of this essay includes reflections on Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street," as a classic humorless comedy. Bartleby's radical brevity and the narrator's prolixity are mirrors of personality as monologic comic form gone mad, and mad in the guise of rationality at work. In its humorless resolution—the revelation of Bartleby's death and the narrator's sentencing to the indefinite servitude to literary apostrophe—the risible task compulsions of the juridical workplace produce life as death in multiple ways, with Bartleby's literal jailhouse demise displaced from the pseudolife of the law's managerial and political protocols (both protagonists are appointed to and discarded by the patronage system). The narrator's insistent comic reparativity is a classic combover, handed over to us as the law of labor, literature, and sociality itself: Bartleby's withdrawal from socializing his submission to form that way leaches life as such from comedy's torturous ellipsis. This suggests that the combover *is* life. See Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener* (New York, 2004).

“Am I Dead?”: Slapstick Antics and Dark Humor in Contemporary Immigrant Fiction

Glenda R. Carpio

The famous mirror scene in the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (dir. Leo McCarey; 1933) starts with a loud crash. Harpo runs smack into a large mirror and destroys it, revealing an additional room identical to the one the mirror reflected. What follows is an elaborate mime scene. All three brothers are already wearing Groucho's signature eyebrows, moustache, and glasses, plus identical nightshirts and nightcaps. When Groucho hears the crash, he runs to see what has caused it but finds no evidence of the destroyed mirror. Instead, he finds Harpo facing him through the now empty mirror frame. Because Harpo is dressed like him and copies each of his gestures, even the most absurd, nearly to perfection, Groucho appears to see a double of his image in the form of (a fake) reflection. Puzzled, Groucho initially looks into the “mirror” with curiosity—is that really me? he seems to ask. After the original crash, the scene plays out in silence, giving it a dreamlike quality that enhances Groucho's ontological crisis. To test his “double,” Groucho introduces a series of gestures ranging from the simple (he lowers his glasses) to the zany (he jumps sideways, kangaroo style). But Harpo matches his every move even when the two figures cross the frame's threshold, exchange places, and introduce new props (two different colored hats). The scene ends only when Chico enters the frame (as the third Groucho), thus breaking up the illusion of doubling and, for a

For comments on previous drafts of this essay, my deep thanks go to David Alworth, Vincent Brown, Roger Grant, Julian Lucas, Namwali Serpell, Ajantha Subramanian, and the editors of this collection.

Critical Inquiry 43 (Winter 2017)

© 2017 by The University of Chicago. 00093-1896/17/4302-0003\$10.00. All rights reserved.

few seconds, suggesting not a mere doubling but a rampant multiplication of Groucho's image.

Brilliant as physical comedy, the scene dramatizes a central visual and verbal trope in the film: Groucho marveling at his redistributed self with an "insouciant, unconcerned, merely curious" tone.¹ "I wonder whatever become of me?" he muses at another point in the film. Mostly known as a satire of political tyranny and the dirty business of warfare,² *Duck Soup* also exemplifies the Brothers' maverick use of slapstick to explore the malleability of identity and the arbitrary nature of signs, an abiding interest that Mark Winokur traces to the Brothers' immigrant background. As second-generation immigrants, the Brothers play out in their comic sequences "fantasy versions of the new immigrant predicament in the United States"; that is, "having to choose between the parent culture and the adoptive culture."³ But they also explore the alienation that immigration entails as it is experienced internally *and* physically. The mirror scene is striking precisely for how it represents alienation as both a physical experience and a cognitive conundrum. We, as viewers, know that the doubling is Harpo's trick, but Groucho, at least at first, does not. And yet he quickly adapts to an absurd situation, facing his double by elegantly *playing* with the instability it presents. Harpo's mimicking taunts Groucho, but the scene makes this a physical as well as an abstract battle as Groucho resists the mockery and tries to expose Harpo as a fake replica. If the play of doubles suggests an ontological crisis, the slapstick keeps the scene light and comic. Groucho shakes his behind, twirls, and hops on one foot to see if his double will match him. The angst and pathos that doubling might produce are decidedly absent.⁴

1. Mark Winokur, "Smile, Stranger: Aspects of Immigrant Humor in the Marx Brothers' Humor," *Literature Film Quarterly* 13 (Sept. 1985): 166.

2. While popular, this description is not entirely accurate. As Alan Dale argues, *Duck Soup* is not a satire because it, and the "Marx Brothers' movies" in general, "lack satire's concentrated, utilitarian purpose"; instead the brothers unleash an anarchic energy that "isn't so much aimed at a target as released and left free to radiate in all directions, even back on the [brothers] themselves." See Alan Dale, *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis, 2000), p. 132.

3. Winokur, "Smile, Stranger," p. 161.

4. See "The Mirror Scene – Duck Soup (7/10) Movie CLIP (1933)," www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKTT-syoaLg/

GLEND A R. C A R P I O is professor of English and professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. She is the author of *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008) and is currently writing a book on contemporary American immigrant fiction, tentatively titled *Migrant Aesthetics*.

Nearly a century later, Aleksandar Hemon's fiction, particularly his novella *Blind Jozef Pronek and the Dead Souls*, in the collection *The Question of Bruno* (2000), and his novel *The Lazarus Project* (2008) reinvents the mirror scene. Hemon transforms the physical comedy of the Marx Brothers into a form of slapstick capacious enough to include pathos in order to dramatize the threat and reality of death in immigrant lives. Like Junot Díaz, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Teju Cole, Dinaw Mengestu, Edwidge Danticat, among others, Hemon is part of a new wave of immigrant writers that, while working in the US, nevertheless rejects the predominant trajectory of its immigrant narratives—"stories of upward mobility tinged with nostalgia for the motherland and animated by the character's struggle to balance individual desires and the demands of the family or community."⁵ Instead, Hemon narrates the lives of those who barely survive displacement and eulogizes those who perish altogether. The immigrant figure has been represented, at least in American fiction, as a Whitmanesque character that can contain if not multitudes at least two or more cultural traditions of response to events in the world. Hemon explores the possibility of the immigrant as a figure of stasis struggling with reinvention, turning his attention to the dark loneliness and comic absurdity of individuals who often fail to contain disparate realities.

In *The Lazarus Project* he intertwines two narratives: one is a fictional account of the life of a historical persona, Lazarus Averbuch, a young man who survived the 1903 Kishinev pogrom in what is now Moldova only to be shot and killed in Chicago by the police, who wrongly suspected him of anarchist activities. The other is that of Vladimir Brik, who writes Lazarus's story and who is also an immigrant. "I am a reasonably loyal citizen of a couple of countries," he tells us, invoking the trope of doubling so common to immigrant literature. But then he adds, "In America—that somber land—I waste my vote, pay taxes grudgingly, share my life with a native wife, and try hard to not wish painful death to the idiot president. But I also have a Bosnian passport I seldom use; I go to Bosnia for heartbreaking vacations and funerals."⁶ Gone is the inflated rhetoric of salvation and transcendence in a promised land and the nostalgia for home. Instead we get hints of satire, parody, and pathos. Brik's account of Lazarus's life begins in a much more somber tone: "The time and place

5. Parul Sehgal, "New Ways of Being," review of *A Life Apart* by Neel Mukherjee, and *The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota, *New York Times*, 10 Mar. 2016, mobile.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/books/review/new-ways-of-being.html?_r=0&referer. In this excellent article, Sehgal writes that both novels "recount the stories of Indians making a miserable transition to life in England." The shift I trace in this article is by no means particular to the United States.

6. Aleksandar Hemon, *The Lazarus Project* (New York, 2008), p. 11; hereafter abbreviated *LP*.

are the only things I am certain of: March 2, 1908, Chicago. Beyond that is the haze of history and pain, and now I plunge" (*LP*, p. 1). And yet Brik deploys a dark form of slapstick to bring into focus that history and pain. He creates a version of the mirror scene in which the living simulate the dead, and corpses are made to appear alive in an effort to both disguise acts of murder against immigrants and display the power of those who are culpable. In *Blind Jozef Pronek and the Dead Souls*, Hemon's use of slapstick is even more intense. Here he signifies on Nicolai Gogol to portray Pronek, its main character, in the process of becoming a dead soul in a live body, split between his reluctant physical presence in the United States and his deep emotional investment in his native but war-torn Bosnia. If the Marx Brothers physicalize immigrant alienation through aggressive play between different bodies, in Pronek's case the struggle happens within and against his own body; it insists on survival, well beyond Pronek's will, thus producing a perversely comic struggle.

Given such gravitas, why slapstick? How can it dramatize alienation, incapacity, and even death? Readers of modernist fiction might not find the association surprising. In a review of Michael North's *Machine-Age Comedy*, Lisa Colletta rightly observes that, "the characteristics that define the modern aesthetic—fragmentation, incongruity, paradox, repetition—are the very characteristics of the comic, and as a result many modern works are inherently comedic even as they explore disturbing experiences such as alienation, loss of identity, and violence on a grand scale."⁷

The comic also shares those characteristics with immigrant literature, which "participated in the development of an American literary modernism" precisely because of its concerns with fragmentation and alienation.⁸ But those connections have not been evident because immigrant literature, with a few notable exceptions, has been considered either in too narrow or too broad terms—as pertaining only to the ethnic groups it represents or as treating universal topics and thus becoming a questionable, isolated category. "Aren't the themes of immigrant literature—estrangement, homelessness, fractured identities—the stuff of all modern literature, if not life?" Parul Sehgal muses in a recent article.⁹ What, then, distinguishes the experience of alienation in an immigrant context? To put it somewhat bluntly: the immigrant does not have the luxury of experiencing alienation abstractly. For him or her, alienation is not a metaphor;

7. Lisa Colletta, review of *Machine-Age Comedy* by Michael North, *Modernism/Modernity* 17 (Apr. 2010): 450.

8. Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), p. 12.

9. Sehgal, "New Ways of Being."

it is a material experience often manifested at the level of the nervous body. Migration exposes the fiction of the self as a cohesive unit attached to one identity, language, family, nation, and so on. Its literary form intensifies and stages its instability, thus *exteriorizing* the crisis of subjectivity so central to modernist fiction.¹⁰

Falls and blows are at the core of what makes physical comedy slapstick, which is generally based on absurd and silly circumstances that nonetheless include extreme forms of violence against the body. (Slapstick derives its name from the two thin slats of wood used by actors of *commedia dell'arte* in sixteenth-century Italy to slap one another for comedic effect.) The longer tradition of immigrant humor in the United States has certainly included slapstick, predominantly on stage and in film, as the Marx Brothers antics demonstrate. But that tradition has focused on social relationships, on the formation and reinforcement of group solidarity, on challenging social boundaries, and on staging the trials and tribulations of assimilation.¹¹ By contrast, Hemon turns to the solitary figure, bereft of family and often subsisting in isolation, as he struggles with and against the will to survive. The central conflict is internal and is not focused on acculturation. While internal focus would seem to follow the self-ethnographic and testimonial imperatives of the predominant literary genre of immigration, that of autobiography and its fictional version *bildungsroman*, in Hemon that internal focus loops it back into a radically different and exteriorized shape.

1. Lazarus

Immigrant autobiographies have conventionally emphasized redemption through suffering as the narrative analogue to acculturation. Mary Antin's classic immigrant autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912), for instance, figures her transculturation as necessitating a kind of death that leads to a rebirth. She begins with the declaration: "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. . . . I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell."¹² As the title of her text indicates, Antin represents her transfor-

10. Stephanie Foote examines the "resemblances" between immigrant fragmentation and "the process of reification in a capitalist economy," arguing that the former constitutes an "exteriorization of a deep crisis of subjectivity more generally." See Foote, "Marvels of Memory: Citizenship and Ethnic Identity in Abraham Cahan's 'The Imported Bridegroom,'" *Melus* 25 (Spring 2000): 34, 36.

11. See John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 439–60. See also Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880–1920* (Minneapolis, 2008).

12. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912; New York, 1997), p. 1; hereafter abbreviated PL.

mation from Polish immigrant to American citizen through a typology, established from the Puritans onward, that includes images of exodus and deliverance to a promised land, as well as Lazarus-like resurrections.¹³ For Antin, the purpose of presenting the self as an entity so malleable that it could be fully transformed was political. Antin sought “to offset a growing sense of American nativist hostility to immigration by presenting the inwardness of a consciousness that underwent the transformation from foreign immigrant to American citizen successfully.”¹⁴ This political goal forced Antin to relegate to the margins the intense forms of suffering that her successful acculturation necessitated. But what of Antin’s stunning declaration that her assimilation narrative is also that of a *posthumous* existence? Contemporary immigrant literature like Hemon’s asks us to read against the grain of her account of success to explore the implications of that claim¹⁵ and to search through archives for the narratives of those for whom migration has meant destruction and death.

In Hemon’s fiction those undercurrents take center stage. *The Lazarus Project* opens the moment Lazarus is shot and killed, but his decaying body haunts the novel. Because he is not properly buried (he is dumped in a potter’s field by the police), his corpse becomes an extended part of the plot, especially when his bereaved sister Olga insists on retrieving it for a proper burial. Unable to produce the entire body (parts of it have been stolen), the police dig up the body of another immigrant, Isaac, who has been beaten to death because he is suspected of being Lazarus’s accomplice. When Olga finds out, she is outraged and distraught, but she uses the tragedy to help Isador, another immigrant and friend of Lazarus who is being hunted on similar charges and must escape both the police and the anarchist circles that want to make him a cause célèbre.

Isador is in the shit—literally. “As the most wanted anarchist in Chicago,” he is forced to hide and ends up *inside* the shithole of an outhouse, where Olga finds him. She gets him out of the hole but has to leave him in the outhouse until she can formulate a plan (*LP*, p. 93). He is left “beshit-ten on the absurd throne, wrapped in a flimsy blanket, thinking of free worlds in which everybody has indoor plumbing” (*LP*, p. 95). “I just hope

13. See Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), pp. 6–7. See also Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, Conn., 1975).

14. Sollors, “Introduction,” in *PL*, p. xiii.

15. Sollors’s introduction has a similar goal. See also Betty Bergland, “Rereading Photographs and Narratives in Ethnic Autobiography: Memory and Subjectivity in Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*,” in *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*, ed. Amrijit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan (Boston, 1994), pp. 45–88.

I don't have to relieve myself," he tells Olga, "but she [doesn't] laugh" (*LP*, p. 95). Olga eventually strikes a deal with the police: they will help Isador escape to Canada in exchange for her silence about their crimes against her brother. To do so, they hide Isador under Isaac's corpse, which serves as the replacement for Lazarus's now-fragmented body in a ceremony meant to quell protests against police brutality in the city of Chicago. When Isador is freed from the coffin (shortly after the ceremony but just before the full burial), Isaac's body is lifted from his body, upon which he asks, "'Am I dead?'" Those nearby "laugh at him, then help him hatch out" (*LP*, p. 271).

While the account of Lazarus's missing body and Olga's fight to get it back is largely faithful to the historical record,¹⁶ Hemon invents the doubled burial, the substitution of bodies, and the story of Isador's near interment and escape, using his absurd condition to set in motion something like *Duck Soup*'s mirror scene but transformed as black humor and corpse slapstick. Hemon balances his intense focus on the abject—shit and corpses; the physicality of Isador's live body as it, again literally, rubs shoulders with death; and Lazarus's decaying, cut-up corpse—with a game of doubling (in Isaac's and Isador's echoing names), substitution (Isaac for Lazarus), and simulation (Isaac must act like a corpse when he is alive). Even Lazarus plays the game, for he looks eerily alive in photographs the police used to display his death:¹⁷ the novel includes several photographs from the Chicago Historical Society; two are of Averbuch's corpse, and in both he seems to be sitting for a formal portrait because he is dressed and propped up on a chair. If the Marx Brothers' mirror scene shows the self *as if* literally doubling and multiplying, Hemon's version of that scene trades in corpses that literally double and multiply.

For Henri Bergson "the humor apparently intrinsic in human doubles" springs from "the automatism of repetition, the spectacle of human beings duplicated as if by machine," while for Samuel Beckett human doubling "is a joke" that results when "a human being insists on acting like a human being. . . . when it is quite clear that most people are actually little more than machines."¹⁸ The pretension to uniqueness and integrity is

16. For an account of the life of the historical Lazarus Averbuch and the differences between it and Hemon's novel, see Geoffrey Johnson, "The Lost Boy," *Chicago*, 19 May 2009, www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/May-2009/Lost-Boy/

17. Lazarus's corpse was also exposed to the public and examined because his "violent nature was supposed to be manifest in his face and the shape of his head: The public marveled over his 'low forehead,' 'large mouth,' and 'simian ears,' all presumably markers of his anarchist proclivities" (Hemon, "The Lazarus Project: One Writer's Research," *Paris Review* 173 [Mar. 2005]: 115–16).

18. North, "Beckett's Machinations," *Machine-Age Comedy* (New York, 2009), pp. 155–56; hereafter abbreviated *MAC*.

what gives birth to the comedy. But Hemon's immigrant characters don't even get to pretend. Nor can they lay claim to the humanity that Bergson sees as "encrusted" by the mechanical. For, in Hemon, what gets duplicated and multiplied are corpses, which are produced and reproduced as if by a death machine driven by xenophobia and operated by the police and state. Hemon overlays the tragic implications of this vision with the energy of repetition and simulation that Bergson, Beckett, and others have identified as being central to the humor of human doubles.¹⁹ The result is a black comedy that intensifies, via images of abjection, the physicality of alienation and fragmentation of an immigrant ontology. When Isador asks, "Am I dead?" he echoes Groucho's implicit question, "is that really me?" but in a much darker key.

The fact that Hemon's dark comedy indexes history gives it punch. Averbuch's murder became part of an anarchist scare in 1908, which not only resulted in anti-immigrant violence and deportation laws but also in racialized views of immigrants' purported threat.²⁰ Published in 2008, *The Lazarus Project*, in its intertwining of time frames, stresses not only that the physicality of alienation for immigrants has meant falls, blows, and murder but also suggests analogies between the xenophobic fear of anarchism and the increased persecution of immigrants in a post-9/11 context.²¹ Thus, while *Duck Soup's* mirror scene plays out as an absurd but funny dream, Hemon's version of it has a testimonial weight; it performs history as a never-ending nightmare.

In this respect, Hemon's project casts a new light back on Antin's and other immigrant works of life writing that take up the political work of speaking for the voiceless. "My life has been unusual, but by no means unique," writes Antin; "it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives" (*PL*, p. 2). Yet Hemon refuses the self-ethnographic, identitarian trappings of autobiography. Instead, his fiction springs from what he calls his "antibiographical" impulse. As he told an interviewer, he "compulsively" imagines "scenarios alternative to what happens to [him]." "To my mind," he added, "my stories are not autobiographical; they are *antibiographical*, they are the antimatter to the matter of my life. They contain what did not happen to me."²² Thus, while his fiction refracts his personal trajectory—his

19. For another view of doubling in comedy, see Alenka Zupan i , *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), particularly "Another Turn of the Bergsonian Screw," pp. 110–27.

20. See Hemon, "The Lazarus Project," p. 116. See also Robert J. Goldstein, "The Anarchist Scare of 1908: A Sign of Tensions in the Progressive Era," *American Studies* 15 (Fall 1974): 55–78.

21. For a reading of the novel along these lines see Georgiana Banita, *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11* (Lincoln, Neb., 2012).

22. Hemon, interview by Menachem Kaiser, *The New Yorker*, 8 June 2009, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-exchange-aleksandar-hemon

life in his native Sarajevo and, later, as an immigrant in Chicago—it does not reproduce the trajectory of Hemon’s successful acculturation and triumph as an immigrant publishing successfully in English. Rather, by creating doubles and multiple “antimatter” versions of himself, Hemon makes room for those immigrants who do *not* make it, either spiritually or physically. At the same time, he produces a metafictional comedy in which doubling and multiplication manifest textually among author, character, and narrator, and among characters as well.

Hemon’s games with form keep the anarchic energy of the Marx Brothers’ humor in the novel’s vibrant metafictional structure. If, as Brik succinctly puts it, the neat narrative trajectory typical of immigrant narratives is “displacement, redemption, success,” Hemon takes pleasure in breaking that arc into bits (*LP*, p. 32). *The Lazarus Project* refers both to the novel Hemon published and the one that, in the sections devoted to Brik, we see in the process of its making. Those sections are largely devoted to a trip that Brik takes to Eastern Europe to retrace Lazarus’s steps, traveling with his friend Rora who takes the photographs that, along with those from the Chicago Historical Society, become part of the novel (they are placed at the beginning of each alternating section). The journey includes Brik’s return to Sarajevo, his reflections on his life as an immigrant in the United States, Rora’s stories about the Bosnian war, his murder during their trip, and Brik’s decision to stay in Sarajevo “for a while” as he writes Lazarus’s story and grieves Rora, whose murder reflects Lazarus’s in reverse; he survives the war, flees to America, only to be killed on a return trip “home” (*LP*, p. 292). Brik’s story mirrors Hemon’s because he too traveled to Eastern Europe with his friend Velibor Božovič, who took the photographs attributed to Rora, to research the book we hold in our hands. Hemon thus constructs a world that doubles on itself, multiplying connections across diverse geographies and temporalities through immigrant and return narratives, as these signify on one another. This play with form would seem to subsume but in fact intensifies what is arguably Hemon’s most significant contribution: the dark form of slapstick he creates to represent Averbuch’s murder and the persecution of immigrants that followed.

2. Jozef P.

Blind Jozef Pronek and the Dead Souls is a more direct representation of Hemon’s preoccupation with alienation in an immigrant context. It remains focused on its titular figure who, as did Hemon, arrives in the United States on a sponsored trip for writers and is unable to go back home when the war breaks out in Bosnia. Stranded, stripped of his identity, and almost paralyzed by survivor’s guilt, he is split in multiple ways.

Hemon zeroes in on Pronek stuck at an impasse: deprived of the moorings that held his sense of self together but without the force or the means to invent anew. In the process, Hemon offers a strikingly different representation of self-fragmentation than that of the modernism exemplified by Beckett's work.

As Michael North argues, in Beckett's "first five novels" and "in the five considered as a single work," getting rid of autobiographical personhood is the ardently sought out but impossible goal. The narrative quest Beckett repeatedly stages involves characters in pursuit of "flight from self," with that flight shown to be made difficult not only "by the eyes and voices of others but [also] by all of those eyes and voices multiplied and preserved by modern machinery." Photographs, for instance, powerfully augment the process by which "a self is implanted in its unsuspecting host" (MAC, pp. 153, 154). In Hemon by contrast, the force of displacement is such that the fiction of the self as cohesive unit is ripped away, leaving characters in a liminal state between the no longer and the not yet, experiencing the surrendering of identity as an agonizing canceling out, a giving up of the roles that "every human being must play . . . in order to live at all" (MAC, p. 155).

In turning to the physicality of even the psychological experience of self-alienation, Hemon shifts into a comic register different from that of *The Lazarus Project*. Whereas the novel's dark humor is one of overabundance both in the macabre doubling of immigrant corpses and, at the metafictional level, in the almost excessive replication and multiplication of characters across diverse geographies and temporalities, the novella features an absurdist comedy of insularity. The humor does not rely on the replication of figures, for fragmentation occurs *within* Pronek. Gilles Deleuze calls this kind of phenomenon "inclusive disjunction" (MAC, p. 152), in which self-division produces another but without "increasing the range of possibilities" (MAC, p. 152). There is something inherently absurd and paradoxical about this condition, for it entails both an increase (a doubling that can double on itself possibly endlessly) and a negation of scope; it occurs within a closed system. Pronek is a figure split and yet trapped in singularity as if Groucho facing an actual mirror saw himself but his image didn't follow his gestures.

As in *The Lazarus Project*, Hemon highlights the physically and emotionally intense work of staying in survival. He makes Pronek's contingency, his alienation, and even his guilt the subjects of a physical comedy with elements of Kafkaesque absurdism and Gogolian social satire. He figures Pronek's transformation from traveler to reluctant immigrant through a fever that Pronek suffers almost as soon as he realizes he has

to stay in the United States “possibly for the rest of his life” and that gives him “listless,” intermittent dreams about Sarajevo.²³ These highly symbolic dreams become increasingly disturbing so that toward the end of his fever Pronek dreams of seeing “his body *as someone else’s body*. His toes were miles away; his knees were two round dunes. He looked at his hands and they raised their heads to look back at him with hostility.” By the end, “he didn’t know *what* he was” (QB, p. 171; emphasis added). Not only does his body seem alien, his body parts seem autonomous, as if they were separate beings (his hands have heads, eyes, and attitude). Gregor Samsa’s transformation into a giant insect in Franz Kafka’s novella echoes here, for Pronek’s body seems grotesquely autonomous and not even fully human. The suspicion that Pronek might have metamorphosed comes back later in the story when he starts to speak to the cockroaches in his apartment.

When Pronek resurjects from his feverish dreams, he comes back as kitchen help at the Boudin French Sourdough restaurant, filling up “styrofoam bowls with reduced-sodium, fat-free Cajun gumbo soup” — a rebirth that hardly constitutes deliverance into a promised land (QB, p. 181). Pronek sees numerous “dead souls” eating large servings of supposedly “healthy” food and reading books titled *Seven Spiritual Laws of Growth* (QB, p. 183). Hemon has some fun satirizing American eating habits and their consequences; among the customers Pronek observes is “an obese four-member family, with the same pumpkin heads, round girths and oblong calves, as if they belonged to a species that reproduced by fission” (QB, p. 183).

But he interlaces these satirical portraits of fat America with images that invoke the real hell from which Pronek has been spared. Here, for instance, is Hemon’s language for garbage duty: Pronek, working alongside another immigrant, a Dominican named Hemon, feeds a “supreme garbage bin” as if it were a giant god in need of “daily oblations,” with garbage bags full of “hollowed-out loaves, mauled croissants, desiccated bowls;” they drag out the bags “like corpses” (QB, p. 182). As he does throughout the novella, Hemon superimposes two distinct fields of reference. He piles up uncanny adjectives (“hollowed,” “mauled,” “desiccated”) and transforms mundane objects into macabre evocations of the war in Bosnia, images of which Pronek sees on news coverage. The fact that these associations are indirect, and intertwined with ordinary description, makes them even more sinister. When Pronek eats dinner, for instance, Hemon describes him as picking up “two limpid asparagus corpses” and sipping and spilling red wine that another character compares to blood (QB, p. 149).

23. Hemon, *The Question of Bruno* (New York, 2000), p. 168; hereafter abbreviated QB.

The emphasis on food and appetites, particularly on ingestion, figures Pronek's turmoil as an intensely internal and physical process. It highlights his guilt and what he takes to be the absurdity of his survival. At the restaurant, he is required to "cut off the top of a sourdough loaf, and then disembowel it, throwing the soft yeast-smelling viscera into a garbage can . . . [then] fill up the hollow with reduced-fat chili." On his first day, "dreadfully guilty for some reason, . . . he ate a lot of [the disemboweled viscera and] received gut-wrenching cramps as a punishment" (*QB*, pp. 180–81). Pronek seems to be murdering the bread he then ingests, the penitent's guilty eating serving as counterpoint to the gluttony of the customers he serves. The scene recalls Mary Antin's first meal in an American household where she makes herself eat a strange kind of meat she realizes is ham, the forbidden, "unjewish meat." Forcing herself to eat more of "the pink piece of pig's flesh" than anyone else, she suffers so much guilt that she imagines the beast devouring *her* entrails (*PL*, pp. 196–97).²⁴ If in Antin this scene of abjection as ingestion has as much to do with religious as with cultural differences, in Hemon's scene Pronek ingests not a forbidden food but compelled waste—and his survivor's guilt.

Whereas previous immigrant fiction would have amalgamated the kind of self-fragmentation Pronek experiences into a story of eventual healing and, possibly, of success, Hemon keeps us focused on the isolation and pathos of survival but in an absurdist mode. Pronek eventually gets fired for not knowing the difference between romaine and iceberg lettuce. He makes this mistake the day he sees "a picture, framed with the red edges of the *Time* magazine front page, of a man in a Serbian concentration camp: the man stood behind three thin lines of barbed wire, skin tautly stretched across his rib cage, *facial hair eating his face away*" (*QB*, p. 185; emphasis mine). When an irate customer complains about his food and demands that Pronek clarify just what kind of lettuce he is eating, Pronek cannot take the absurdity, refuses to be submissive, and gets the boot. He subsequently falls down a rabbit hole of despair and detachment. The grotesque imagery of food and eating thus registers Pronek's disgust at the excess he sees because it contrasts so perversely with his inner turmoil. His body must hold two drastically disparate worlds: one is emblemized by a fast food chain brimming with surplus (where people can be particular about their lettuce), the other by a starved man in a concentration camp created by a raging war. How can these realities be so disconnected and yet be part of the same world? Pronek is split between them. He emerges from

24. She thinks of "the story of the Spartan boy who let a stolen fox 'consume his vitals' rather than let it be detected in his bosom" (Sollors, "Introduction," p. xiv).

feverish dreams where his body becomes alien to him, only to tend to the appetites of other bodies—those of the customers and the giant garbage bin turned god—while his mind holds onto the image of a man so starved that his beard seems to be eating his face.

This striking image of self-cannibalization is only a more grotesque version of what happens to Pronek as he descends into deep isolation. Yet Hemon portrays his fall comically by emphasizing Pronek's physical inelasticity. Early in the story we are told that, "Pronek hated his neck, because it always got stiff and became a knot of thick sinews. He would keep pressing them, which would just produce more and more pain, while the sinews would wiggle under his fingers, as hard as steel cables" (*QB*, p. 141). His physical stiffness is both emblematic of his will to survive and what makes him comic. The description of his stiff neck goes on in this startling way: "If he were to be decapitated, he thought, the executioner would be in danger, for the ax would probably bounce back and split the poor fellow's head like a watermelon. They would have to soak his neck in acid for a week or so, in order to soften the steely sinews, and then cut off his head" (*QB*, p. 141). This literal gallows humor, which echoes in Pronek's name, takes Bergson's concept of the comic as a mechanical encrustation on life to the point of absurdity. Through a series of substitutions and uncanny reversals, what is living goes stiff (dead) *before* it is killed. What is organic comes to seem mechanical, as the neck becomes a steely weapon and the executioner the victim of his own ax. And, while the ax bounces back when it is supposed to drop, the executioner's head is compared to a fleshy fruit that can explode as if it were a bomb. The deeper Pronek descends into self-alienation, the more absurdist Hemon's humor gets. The phrase "split my head like a watermelon" comes back to Pronek's mind inexplicably and appears, without quotation marks, reemphasizing the fact he is under threat of death. Astonishingly, the sentence, "if he were to be decapitated" unexpectedly turns *him* into the possible executioner.

Part of the absurdity has to do with the individuality of Pronek's isolation, which becomes darkly comical in contrast to the gravity and en masse experience of the war in Bosnia.²⁵ Like so many immigrants who flee war-torn countries only to lead lonely, desperate lives, Pronek goes through the motions of being in America—present only physically while his mind is engrossed in the war. Images of home grip him, but they signal destruction and death, not nostalgia, which earlier immigrant literature might produce. When Pronek loses his job and becomes nearly homeless, Hemon presents a series of declarative sentences (all beginning similarly:

25. I thank Sianne Ngai for making this observation.

"He stopped," "He couldn't") that chronicle Pronek's deepening alienation. Rather than ratcheting up the tragedy, though, Hemon offers a catalogue of blockages that turn up the dark humor:

He enjoyed a series of interminable sinus infections, which produced a host of splitting headaches and stuffed his ears with thick earwax, whereby all the sounds around him were transformed into a continuous shushing hum, while he himself started mumbling. He couldn't understand anything people were saying to him, as he murmured incomprehensibly back at them. Accordingly, he started mumbling to himself, giggling, grimacing, and growling in response to his own inaudible discourse. [*QB*, p. 190]

Pronek's deafness physicalizes his alienation, sharpening the materiality of his emotional pain, while also making him a sad clown that mumbles, giggles, and grimaces to no one but himself. Meanwhile, the war in Bosnia shadows his every move.

For all of the suffering Pronek undergoes, he retains an obstinate will to survive. This will is mostly present in his body (recall the stiff neck), for, inwardly, Pronek's soul is ever more gripped by images of death: "he would watch CNN footage of people with familiar faces crawling in their own blood, begging the unflinching camera for help; people who were trying to help them dropping like an imploded building" (*QB*, pp. 188–89). Hemon links these images of catastrophe and suffering to an absurdist comedy of survival. The war levels Pronek's desire to live so that "he began hating himself, because he was selfish, whatever he happened to be doing, just by being alive" and thus contemplates escape. "He began thinking of himself as someone else—a cartoon character, a dog, a detective, a madman—and began fantasizing about abandoning his body altogether and becoming nothing, switching it off like the TV" (*QB*, p. 191). But Pronek's body *won't* transform or switch off; instead, it insists on its needs, stubbornly prodding him forward with its call for food, for shelter, for sex (he is moved to masturbate but does so "detachedly, not even fantasizing") (*QB*, p. 191).

He takes a series of jobs but fails to keep even one of them until someone takes pity on him and finds him a job cleaning houses. "Oh, what a lucky break for our immigrant," notes the narrator with barely understated sarcasm (*QB*, pp. 191, 193). He starts off as "the shit boy," cleaning bathrooms where he mercilessly attacks all that is abject—shit, urine, pubic hair, soiled toilet paper—thus abandoning "all thoughts of himself and everything outside" and turning himself into a "transcendental cleaning force" (*QB*, pp. 194–95). In this mock moment of deliverance,

“our immigrant” is hardly reborn; he barely survives and, it seems, only because the abjection he feels is mirrored in the “shit” job he lands.

Blind Jozef Pronek and the Dead Souls is both the title of Hemon’s novella and the name of a “well known and liked blues band” that Pronek led in Sarajevo before he becomes a reluctant American immigrant (*QB*, p. 154). As an index for the blues, it calls to mind Ralph Ellison’s often-quoted because elegant definition of that genre as an “impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”²⁶ While his aesthetic resonates with this blues sensibility, Hemon offers no transcendence. Once the war is over, Pronek returns home only to realize that return is no longer possible. The war has destroyed the world he’d known, and the close of the novella finds him walking through airport security, on his way back to the United States, “as if warily aware that once through the gate there would be no way back” (*QB*, p. 210). Pronek’s walking echoes both the parable at the end of Kafka’s *The Trial* and the novella’s epigraph, which is from the last paragraph of Bruno Schulz’s short story, “Mr. Charles”:

And, finally, when after sneaking from dresser to closet, he had found piece by piece all he needed and had finished his dressing among the furniture which bore with him in silence, and was ready at last, he stood, hat in hand, feeling rather embarrassed that even at the last moment he could not find a word which would dispel that hostile silence; he then walked toward the door slowly, resignedly, hanging his head, while someone else, someone forever turning his back, walked at the same pace in the opposite direction into the depths of the mirror, through the row of empty rooms which did not exist. [*QB*, p. 135]

In this somber mirror scene the self splits in two to be sundered with finality (“forever turning his back”) in a mournful atmosphere that implies death (the unbreakable, “hostile silence”). As the framing image of Pronek’s story, it foreshadows his walk through the gate at the airport upon his return from Sarajevo to the United States. It suggests that Pronek’s life after he walks through that door will be, like Antin’s, a posthumous existence. Hemon narrates that posthumous life by transforming the humor of the Brothers’ mirror scene, making us “finger [the] jagged edge” of Pronek’s pain by intensifying the physicality of his self-fragmentation

26. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1995), p. 131.

and, stylistically, by keeping an almost relentless focus on a singular figure in the process of splitting. Read next to *The Lazarus Project* and in the context of the broader archive of immigrant fiction, Pronek's particular story takes on added dimensions; he is but one of the many immigrants who, fragmented and haunted, barely survives. In rendering his story Hemon creates an immigrant black humor that represents suffering without the trappings of identitarian discourses while inventing new aesthetic forms for narrating migration.

3. Conclusion

Much has changed socially and politically in the shift from Antin's necessary embrace of an assimilationist rhetoric to its rejection by Hemon and others. This shift registers many factors: challenges to a melting-pot view of acculturation, spearheaded by ethnic social movements in the 1960s; the end of the "American century"; the turn to transnational, cosmopolitan conceptions of belonging (or, at least, the challenge to strictly nationalist ideologies); and developments in technologies of travel and communication.²⁷ I have suggested that reading Antin's *The Promised Land* through Hemon's fiction draws out the darkness that is latent in her autobiography. Hemon's steady focus on that darkness, on abjection and violence in an immigrant context, isn't due to a morbid sensibility. Rather, it constitutes his challenge to the rhetoric of transcendence in previous immigrant fiction. It also engages with the xenophobia and related forms of persecution that have been part of American immigration history and that have risen with renewed force with the war on terror and, before it, with the massive waves of US immigration since the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act became law.²⁸ Through an immigrant black humor, Hemon figures both the violence of that xenophobia and the physicality of alienation that individuals continue to experience. Immigrant literature has tended to revolve around the family and ethnic groups, but there are millions of immigrants who migrate, live, and struggle alone, often facing death. A recent ethnography of undocumented migrants on the

27. Even more particular differences between Antin and Hemon might factor in: Hemon was a published author before he migrated and trained himself to write in English whereas Antin became an author largely in the process narrating her assimilation.

28. The act abolished a national quota system set in place by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. Since then, millions of immigrants have entered the United States, mostly from countries in Asia and Latin America. "By 2000, there were over 30 million foreign-born persons in the United States, almost one third of whom arrived in the prior decade" (*New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*, ed. Douglas S. Massey [New York, 2008], p. 2).

US-Mexican border is tellingly titled, *The Land of Open Graves*.²⁹ It is to their kind of stories that Hemon turns.

Contemporary writers like Hemon are inspired by master stylists to break free of the constraints of autobiography and of the upward mobility ideologies that have been central to immigrant literature. Hence, the fiction of V. S. Naipaul, particularly *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *A Bend in the River* (1998), is central to the work of Dinaw Mengestu just as W. G. Sebald, in particular *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), is key for Teju Cole; Toni Morrison is a model for Junot Díaz, as is Jamaica Kincaid for Edwidge Danticat. The younger writers in this partial list borrow from the aesthetic vision of the older generation in order to maintain their artistic freedom to play with form as a way of responding to the political call of representing “scores of unwritten [immigrant] lives” (*PL*, p. 2).

In Hemon we see Gogol’s social satire, Kafka’s absurdism, and Schulz’s peculiarity of vision, particularly his attention to inner life. But it is Vladimir Nabokov with whom Hemon has the greatest affinity. Politically the authors differ strikingly. Nabokov styled himself as a Russian émigré who loved the United States, his adopted country for several decades, and hated Communism. Hemon belongs to a postsocialist diaspora, lives in but is more critical of America, and embraces his status as an immigrant. But Hemon claims that he not only learned English by reading Nabokov but also that it was Nabokov’s example against which he measured his efforts to become a writer in English as a new immigrant in America.³⁰ And from Nabokov Hemon learned how to focus on the physicality of alienation, to do so in a comic form—specifically through images of doubling and multiplication—while constructing metafictional planes that keep aesthetic play at the center of artistic production *as a way to* narrate suffering and death.

Though Nabokov repeatedly objected to reading novels in terms of autobiography, politics, and history,³¹ he constructed fictive worlds in which exile and immigration figure prominently and that bear the imprint of the historical circumstances that shaped his life. *Pnin* (1957), for example, offers a version of the split self in an antagonistic battle—the cruel narrator who mocks a less glamorous, previous version of himself, sometimes with

29. See Jason de León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, Calif., 2015).

30. See Hemon, “Fiction Podcast: Aleksandar Hemon Reads Vladimir Nabokov,” *The New Yorker*, 1 Dec. 2014, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-podcast-aleksandar-hemon-reads-vladimir-nabokov/

31. In one of the infamously inflammatory interviews in *Strong Opinions*, he claimed to hate “the earnest case histories of minority groups, the sorrows of homosexuals, the anti-American Sovietnam sermon, the picaresque yarn larded with juvenile obscenities” (Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* [New York, 1990], p. 116).

pity, but mostly with patronizing comedy or cruel humor. What is more, the narrator has a predatory relationship towards Pnin, ultimately becoming part of the plot as the usurper of Pnin's teaching post. Throughout the novel, he seeks to frame Pnin as a clown, a "figure of fun, drolly exotic for all his desire [and failure] to blend in with American ways . . . absurd in appearance (ideally bald, potato nose, massive torso atop spindly legs) . . . grotesquely foiled by the English language," and so "warily determined to avoid mistakes that he ensures they always occur."³² "Poor Pnin," he frequently exclaims, "poor albino porcupine!"³³ When Pnin shares "nostalgic excursions in broken English" with his students about his past and immigrant present, the narrator describes him as a "jack-in-the-box" figure that seemingly springs out to show "not only his shocking teeth but also an astonishing amount of pink upper-gum tissue."³⁴ Although Pnin's laughter transitions into a sort of mourning ("pear-shaped tears" begin to trickle down his cheeks), the narrator mocks him by making him a grotesque figure with huge gums. Doubling thus takes cruel, aggressive forms, as if in the mirror scene Harpo were out to destroy Groucho.

Critics see both Pnin and the narrator as fictive parodies of Nabokov's public self. Pnin echoes "an old one from the forties," that of Nabokov, newly arrived in America, whose life could have been described as that "of an obscure and seemingly eccentric Russian lecturer with a hard-to-pronounce name teaching an odd language in a small women's college" while the narrator suggests "a newer" version of Nabokov (in the fifties), that "of a respected Cornell professor, a polished intellectual, and a successful author to boot."³⁵ Of course, literary alter egos are the very stuff of literature. Philip Roth, whose dark version of ethnic humor, especially as related to the body, bears some similarities to Hemon's, re-created himself in Nathan Zuckerman. Saul Bellow, whose *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) offers Hemon a precedent for figuring war and terror as shadows that hover over an immigrant's life, has several doubles. Henry Roth's magisterial *Call It Sleep* (1934), with its focus on the interiority of displacement and loss, is largely based on his early life as an immigrant.

But in Nabokov Hemon finds the prototypes for the immigrant black humor he creates in his characters and for the oddly violent metafictional structures of his art. *Pale Fire* (1962), for instance, registers the deep

32. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), p. 271.

33. Nabokov, *Pnin* (1953; New York, 1989), p. 44.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

35. Galya Diment, *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* (Seattle, 2013), p. 50. See also Mary Besemer, "Self-Translation in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*," *The Russian Review* 59 (July 2000): 390, 394.

sense of loss and grief that leads its main figure, Charles Kinbote, to self-fragmentation (Kinbote is Charles Xavier is Botkin). Yet Kinbote is also Nabokov's stylized self-mockery as an émigré with an aristocratic background. Zembla, that kingdom near "a dim iridescence which some say is Russia," is Kinbote's wildly elaborate, improbable fantasy, constructed against the background of the marginal life of an émigré who is liked by no one, who is "regularly forgotten, always outside, always too late, the person the poem does not reflect or record."³⁶ The fact that it is obviously fictional matters less than what it signifies: a heartbreaking loss, a longed-for world from which he is forever banished. Yet, as Alfred Appel, Jr., has noted, the comedy in the zany Zembla sections of *Pale Fire* also resembles the work of the Marx Brothers:

Pale Fire's kingdom of Zembla recalls the funhouse palace of *Duck Soup* (1933), with its ludicrous functionaries, uniformed guards and mirror walls, as well as the sequence in *A Night at the Opera* in which, managed by Groucho, the others disguise themselves as the three identically bearded Russian aviators, Chicowski, Harpotski, and Baronoff. Witness Kinbote . . . making his escape from Zembla, abetted by a hundred loyalists who, in a brilliant diversionary ploy, don red caps and sweaters identical to the King's, in their apprehension packing the local prison which is 'much too small for more kings' (shades of *A Night at the Opera's* crowded cabin!)³⁷

Nabokov invented Kinbote as he was working on his controversial translation of Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin* (1825), a four-volume, literalist translation that includes a foreword, a scholarly introduction, a lengthy commentary, an index, and the edition of the Russian text that he trusted most. *Pale Fire* consists of a poem in four cantos also called "Pale Fire" (by a poet named John Shade), with a foreword, extensive commentary, and an index on the poem all written by Kinbote. Thus, like *The Lazarus Project*, *Pale Fire* doubles on itself, multiplying connections and even instantiating a form of textual fragmentation; one must follow clues and cross-references and move across all of the novel's sections in order to reassemble it. In this sense, Kinbote's story is Nabokov's experimental antibiography, its dark antimatter.

Hemon is more forthright about his political commitments than Nabokov. But the force of their immigrant black humor shows the specific experiences that migration entails—the loneliness, alienation, and

36. Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), p. 197.

37. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 165.

fragmentation—and how these exteriorize a crisis of subjectivity experienced more broadly. Thus, far from rehearsing pathological images of immigrants in their doubled or split selves—there are those who see the “impasse of hyphenation” as producing a kind of schizophrenia³⁸—Hemon illuminates how immigrants bear the brunt of modernity at a more intense—because material, physical, and ontological—level. They may be driven mad by it (witness Kinbote), but that madness is an expression of deep pathos and a source, ironically, of freedom. Those unfortunate victims of migration are yet unfettered from the fiction of the self as a stable category, from belonging to only one language, one literary tradition. Broken open, the immigrant black humorist can break form, too, and, like Groucho facing his fake double, play with it.

38. Cyrus R. K. Patell, *Emergent U.S. Literatures: From Multiculturalism to Cosmopolitanism in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York, 2014), pp. 13–14.

Proboscations: Excavations in Comedy and Law

Peter Goodrich

There is a kind of madness that does not take away the whole mind, but affects one part only in such an extraordinary degree that the victims believe they. . . are burdened with long noses (*naso praelongo onusti*).¹

—ERASMUS, *Ciceronianus*

The genius of the law is in its nose. Time, then, long overdue, to take a promenade down the promontory of proboscises. The question in issue is that of the *gnosis* of the nose in the nostrilated space of law. Judges, attorneys, advocates, notaries and scriveners, need to learn to proboscate, which is to say to exercise the combination of wit and judgment that historically marks the pince-nez of legal reason. This is, I realize, a far cry, a call for recognition of *la comédie humaine* in the jurisdiction of the lawyer, and so first a brief warning, a contemporary instance of saturnine dirge in the aid of dispersing the opacular and thus engaging your lectoral interests and interpretative opinations.

In February 2014, the publishing organ of the American Association of Law Schools, the *Journal of Legal Education* carried an article of a page and a half in length, by Marvin Chirelstein, professor of law, emeritus, at Columbia University. It bears the succinct title “Teaching Contracts”; it is an envoi, a brief gesticulation of farewell to the profession of professing. It proffers a *summa* of the lesson that the author has derived from a life expended inculcating and writing upon the rules of contracts.² Emeritus is author of a hornbook, *Concepts and Case Analysis in the Law of Contracts*,

1. Desiderius Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, trans. Izora Scott (New York, 1991), p. 20.

2. See Marvin Chirelstein, “Teaching Contracts,” *Journal of Legal Education* 63 (Feb. 2014): 429.

which is currently in its seventh edition and much used, sometimes upon my recommendation, by law students. I am not, however, inclined to be out horned by Chirelstein and so immediately to my point. His melancholic elucidation is that the pedagogic texts, the casebooks on contracts, are inordinately long—"in one case over 1,600!" pages—and stuffed overfull of cases, at an average of 170 per volume: "How well this meets the interests of first-year law students I am not sure."³ Then the crunch, the *mise à l'acte*, the *punctum*, and punctilio. Students, even by their second year, remember only a very small number of the decisions taught, and these because of their prominence in the casebook and "the outright silliness of many of the cases themselves." Why then, he queries, do we teach them? A rhetorical question to which he gives the circumbended answer: "as one leading scholar has suggested to me . . . the cases, or at least a fair number of them, are actually selected for their amusing narrative value rather than as illustrations of something more serious."⁴

It may seem surprising that the merchants of last wills and testaments, of plea rolls, tables and fines, the *sacerdotes* and other rhinoceros-nosed practitioners of the solemnity of law should find their initiation into the discipline through humor and, specifically, the comedy of cases.⁵ But such would seem to be the irrefragable kernel of Emeritus's observations. As lawyers are often wont, he frowns with gravamen upon *rem levem*, by which we mean, of course, not trifles but the oddities, particularities, rites, and other eccentric modalities and methods that make up the commonalities of common law.⁶ It seems it will not do to *play* the law too visibly. The comic and the nomic are to be separated and subject strictly to a rule of nonrecognition. But there is also a countertext lurking in this brief

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. The "naso molto grande del Rinocerote" is taken from Giambattista della Porta, *De humana physiognomia* (Vico Equense, 1586), s.v. "Angelo Politiano."

6. The venerable expression, *rem levem*, as a descriptor of law, can be traced to the Renaissance legal antiquary Henry Spelman, though our guide and exemplar in such matters is Thomas Blount, *Fragmenta antiquitatis: Antient Tenures of Land and Some Jocular Customs of Some Mannors* (London, 1679) who makes that attribution.

PETER GOODRICH is professor of law, Cardozo School of Law, New York, and visiting professor, School of Social Science, New York University, Abu Dhabi. His work spans the semiotic gamut from *Reading the Law* (1986) to *Oedipus Lex* (1995) to *Legal Emblems and the Art of Law* (2014). Current projects include a study of sanity and law focusing on the transitional judge Daniel Paul Schreber.

instantiation, a contingent satirical possibility present in the very denial of a tradition of comedic jurisprudence and its pedagogy of the impressed. The neophyte lawyer, the acolyte, the devil's advocate (the Scottish term), and the intern are induced and lured into the oldest social science through a comedic didacticism, through jocular cases, absurd scenarios, strange disputes, and perverse outcomes. The indisputable symptom, the potential *gnosis*, lies in the repetition of humor as medium and mnemonic of juristic knowing. The agelastic and diffusely dyspeptic dismissal of legal comedy, "chirelish" denial, negation of humor, all operate as attempts to disguise and deflect the presence and persistence of the ludic in the legal, of comedy in case law. This humor bears nonetheless a funny weight, an uncanny allure, because it is the portal and entry, the first impression, the medium of initial transmission. Shunning punning and denying comedy, is too easy, too thoughtless, and, worse still, it is humorless.

It will be my contention that when genuinely witty, comedy interferes productively with judgment. The whetstone of wit sharpens deliberation. In its acme, comedy overturns precedent by upending the stability of assumptions and by subverting the complacency of repetition. The advent of wit marks a moment of invention. Humor has an inaugural function that in changing mood transforms motives and facilitates the irruption of novel reasons. On the best of occasions, comedy effects a *détournement* and directs decision to jocastic judgment, to the rhythm of the real or what were classically termed the fictive figures of truth.

Time then to turn to the ludic in legal method and address the contemporary in comedy. In the year 1760, Lawrence Sterne published his doctrine of noses and his rebuttal of the chop logic of juridical theology in favor of proboscation, reasoning by the nose. A good beak is needed, indeed is the making of the judge, and essential for the casuist; otherwise there is simply argument and judgment, pro and contra, without direction or purpose, theme or trajectory over time. To set judgment in action, to bend and move, requires both propulsion and prognosis of novelty, a leap amongst the uncircumscribed, the advancement of the facial prow in a probiscodological direction. The nose is certainly no accident but rather, in Sterne's system, a sign of the excess of meaning over expression and thus a mark of the other scene of determination, the sign of the play and passage of judgment over time.

The Rhythm Method

Conceived, in his own surmise, by virtue of the accidental striking of the clock, *coitus perpetratus*, it seems appropriate enough to coin Sterne's method of elocution—his fragmentary, interruptive, and divagatory

style—a species of reasoning by rhythm.⁷ Whether by sublimation, metaphor, or indirection, his encounter with law occurs in his parabolic treatise on the theology, both fiction and law, of long noses. Recollect how *De nasis* begins, that the preface, the *prae-ludium* or foreplay, is a case in which the coalition of the gown, the *rabulae forenses*, litigate the point as to whether “*John O’Nokes* his nose, could stand in *Tom O’Siles* his face, without a trespass, or not—”⁸ Uncharacteristically, the disputed point is kicked out—rashly determined no less—in five and twenty minutes, “which with the cautious pros and cons required in so intricate a proceeding, might have taken up as many months” (*TS*, p. 179).⁹ This is an introduction, be it noted, of the political wheel being turned the wrong way around “against the stream of corruption—by heaven!—instead of with it” (*TS*, p. 178). Hold that thought, that complexity, that image.

The incunctable issue, the instant cause, is close to Erasmus’s stricture referenced epigraphically, a question of the ownership of the nose, of identification with our face and our reason, a matter of belonging and recognizing the body. Sterne is concerned both with the proboscatory symbol and with its place in a critique that mixes wit with judgment, humor with decision. At the level of the symbolic, for the humanist, the nose is classically a sign of wisdom, of wit in judgment. Thus Piero Valeriano in his highly influential *Hieroglyphica* begins his chapter *De naso* under the heading *Sagacitas* (keenness of wit) and postulates immediately that the proboscis, whether large or small a matter of indifference, is the instrument of wisdom and the guide to higher things.¹⁰ A clean nose—*emunctae naris*—is a mark of great prudential skill, and to this he adds, drawing on the early discipline of *oneirocriticism*, that when someone appears in a dream with a large nose (*magno naso*) it signals a promise of ingenuity and dexterity in decision making. For Sterne then, following in this good

7. By way of distant salute, I should mention here that this conceptual moment is also adverted to in Helge Dedek, “*De Iure Hominis et Homunculi*: Rights, Tristram Shandy, and the Language of Isolation,” *Rechtsanalyse als Kulturforschung II*, ed. Werner Gephart and Jan Christoph Suntrup (Frankfurt am Main, 2015), pp. 58–78.

8. Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767; London, 1978), p. 179; hereafter abbreviated *TS*.

9. I am much indebted, let me just announce it here, to the fine and scholarly account of this cause, provided by Laurent de Sutter, “Legal Shandeism: The Law in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*,” *Law and Literature* 23 (Summer 2011): 224.

10. See Piero Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica sive de sacris Aegyptiorum literis commentarii* (Basle, 1556), p. 237 recto. (“Eius autem hieroglyphicum praeceptum est, sagacitatem indicare.”) Even greater detail is provided in Ottavio Scarlattini, *Homo et eius partes figuratus et symbolicus* (Augsburg, 1695), pp. 99–101, col. 1, where the nose is deemed the first and principal sign, and in mystical terms the mark of divine inspiration and intelligence (“cujus spiritus est in naribus ejus”: their spirit is in their noses).

humor and well versed in the trajectories of the hieroglyphic tradition, the nose has to be saved, the proboscis inhabited, and hence the reference to this symbol is a mode of addressing and critiquing those lapses in judgment occasioned by the greatest lacunae of direction, the absence of sagacity, the paucity of wit. It is precisely the contrast antinomy of humor and decision that Shandy is concerned to deconstruct:

I hasten . . . to the main and principal point I have undertaken to clear up,—and that is, How it comes to pass, that your men of least *wit* are reported to be men of most *judgment*.—But mark,—I say, *reported to be*,—for it is no more, my dear Sirs, than a report, which like twenty others taken up every day upon trust, I maintain to be a vile and malicious report into the bargain. [TS, pp. 179–80]

Wit should accompany judgment, and grave decisions likewise must carry their proper share of levity and play, their appropriateness to their occasion and instantiation. The distinction returns to Immanuel Kant and Enlightenment conceptions of cognition in which wit is ludic, a species of *genius loci*, while judgment is all business, both serious and prosaic.¹¹ Sterne's referent, to be sure, is John Locke on the same distinction, and his immediate conclusion is that absence of wit, reliance only upon judgment, one "knobb" and not two in his apposite metaphor, results in singular solecisms: "great wigs, grave faces, and other implements of deceit" lead to "a *Magna Charta* of stupidity," to witlessness and imposture. At which point the argument takes a left turn into the question of door hinges, a hobbyhysical digression if ever there was, unless one is armed with the knowledge that hinges and doors are the province of Janus, the emblem of our Lady Common Law, whose two faces look both forward and back, to what time has erased and towards what is yet to come (TS, p. 182).¹²

The hobbyhorse is the mark of the miscellaneous, the signatory of dogmatic and legal particulars, as Shaftesbury noted in his discussion of wit and enthusiasm pitched against the montones of the church and the chanted dirges of theologians (fig. 1). The image shows, top right, the hobbyhorses of the humorous, but top left, in the position of crowning site, of looking down, is Janus, law, the hinge. *Hinge* (a moment of pedantry seems necessary) is an old English word for that from which something hangs—a gate, for example, or a screen—and it should be transmissive

11. For admirable and insightful discussion of this theme, see Erica Weitzman, *Irony's Antics: Walser, Kafka, Roth, and the German Comic Tradition* (Evanston, Ill., 2014), pp. 23–34.

12. On the hinge and portal, as also Janus, as emblems in law, see John Selden, *Jani Anglorum facies altera* (1610; London, 1686).



FIGURE 1

and unheard. Shandy senior's obsessive concern with the hinge relates precisely to its noise, its interruptive and interpellative squeaking, and so to its distraction either from the passage or event that takes place through the door or from the concatenation of cogitations that form the temporary and mutable occasion of his deliberations. In being unheard, invisible, the ideal of hinging is to unify, to transpose and conflate humor and dogma, wit and judgment or, as will be framed most shortly, in *détournement*. There is a process by which the hinge marks the conjoint yet separate, the very juncture and precise articulation of exterior and interior, past and future, which in legal decision making is the moment of judgment, the *arbitrium* of precedence, where the incalculable emerges, the invented appears given, the fiction and play become the symbolic, the law. The hinge, in other words, joins the satire directed at legal prolixity and irrelevance, the imposture of *gravitas*, to the nasological theory of how the author had been veritably "*tristram'd*" by Dr. Slop's manhandling of the forceps at birth. The sorry comedy of practice here meets the revolutionary force of literature. The doctor had crushed his nose, "as flat as pancake to his face," and after much discussion of drawbridge, doors, and other jointures, we move to Dr. Slop in the kitchen endeavoring, from cotton and whalebone, "to make a bridge for master's nose" (*TS*, p. 193). There has to be a hinge,

a bridge for the nostrils and knobbs. Thence, after some citation to Bruscamille's prefatory essay on noses, we come to Sterne's crucial address to the judges on the proper mode and medium of reasoning:

The gift of ratiocination and making syllogisms,—I mean in man,—for in superior classes of beings, such as angels and spirits,—'tis all done, may it please your Worships, as they tell me, by INTUITION;—and beings inferior, as your Worships all know,—syllogize by their noses: though there is an island swimming in the sea, (though not altogether at its ease) whose inhabitants, if my intelligence deceives me not, are so wonderfully gifted, as to syllogize after the same fashion, and oft-times to make very well out too:—but that's neither here nor there—[TS, p. 214]¹³

The pedants will hurry to point out the various sources of Sterne's invocation of proboscation, of the following of the gubernative reason of the nose and its opificers of judgment. I will not collude in that pedagogy, the references will follow in their proper course, and for now I will simply observe that the reasoning of law implicit in the nosarian syllogism is one which is fitted to cases, to the determination of present and unique circumstances under general and prior rules.

It is in being humorous, in the puns that unsettle the foundations of language, in the well-attested, thoroughly Russian, folkloric, double entendres, as also in its physicality, its placement of reason on the body and in sex that the olfactory organ plays its crucial part.¹⁴ Karl Marx, to borrow from Keston Sutherland's excoriation of the theory of the fetishism of commodities, has been misinterpreted by humorless critics who have entirely missed the literary and satirical force of his argument.¹⁵ In comparable though inverse fashion, Sterne has been abused by interpreters who see only the satirical, the wit, and not the judgment in his laminations and lucubrations, and so miss the philosophical power of his critique of law. This lies—we will now move to expose, expatiate and expound—in

13. The reference to Bruscamille is to *Prologues tant sérieux que facétieux avec plusieurs galimatias* (Paris, 1610), to which text I will turn in due course, if at all.

14. Sterne's own views on the point, long or short, are to be found in his correspondence of 1760 with Stephen Croft. See Marcus Walsh, "Goodness Nose: Sterne's Slawkenbergius, the Real Presence, and the Shapeable Text," *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies* 17 (Mar. 1994): 55.

15. Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London, 2011), p. 66: "Marx did not displace a notion. He wrote a stylish and satirical *détournement*, not simply of the word *fétichisme* or of the concept of *fétichisme* in De Brosses but of the whole drama of literary astonishment and sympathetic theoretical disciplining in which the figure of the absolutely stupefied individual in De Brosses is conjured. Unlike Zizek, Marx read De Brosses as literature."

the radical unsettling and reorienting of analysis inward, looking not to abstraction as the explanation of action but to the body and the act, horizontal or vertical, as the all-too-human moment of inscription of decision in the text. The body becomes the *corpus*, the *corpus* becomes the *corpus iuris* in a process both magical and mirthless unless we spot the nose that writes, that parts the air and having writ remains as text, as precedential proboscis, as wit enlivening the possibility of judgment, but we will come to that, loquacious lecturers, in good time enough. Do we need to be reminded meanwhile of Sterne's principal of horizontality? The constancy of the recumbent, the judicious shift from sedentary to striated: "I won't go about to argue the point with you,—'tis so,—and I am persuaded of it, madam, as much as can be, 'That both man and woman bear pain or sorrow, (and, for aught I know, pleasure too) best in a horizontal position'" (TS, p. 194). Therein the inscription, the play, the dreaming body, the hypnopompic judgment, the reverie between the lines, variably the foul stench and perfumed prose of precedent. What, to use the old language of common law, is their rhythm, their mode, their *nomos* and method of sensuous apprehension? What marker or hood, what latrine or other *beau* will provide the clue as to how the inhabitants of the island, the heterotopia of law, arrive at decisions?

Procedere ad naso

Hand on the tiller, to steady my course, to think by stroking my Anglican Jewish nose, but what unthinkable stupidity lies in the demographics of prow and profile, the *faux* chorographies of our nostrilated dance. A physiognomy of proboscises is a preposterousness that merits momentary and melancholic elucubration because, lamentable to behold, it has been tried by a variety of undersnouted intellects.¹⁶ That historical chain of prognoses merits mostly a summary snubbing. I mean that it looks backwards upon what ought to be addressed forwards. It offers, *vere dicat*, judgment with absolutely no wit, law without love. I will come back to it because it will come back to me, but for now, may it please, it is my plan to stay with the question of the law of the nose, *ius nasi*, a Roman affair is it not, with just a hint of the Greek, as George Jabet remarked, while making notes on noses, of the fondly Hellenic lyre.¹⁷ The aim, then, is not

16. Consider Francisco de Quevedo's poem from the 1620s, "A un nariz," starting: "He was a man pegged to a nose" and then mentions in anti-Semitic fashion "the twelve tribes of noses" in a later stanza, and there are earlier instances to be sure. Hence the present essay, in laudation of the reason of the proboscis, for the extension of noses, against rhinoplasty as surgical dementia. I am much in debt to Susan Byrne for providing this invaluable reference.

17. George Jabet, *Notes on Noses* (London, 1852), p. 105.

to deface but to praise proboscation, not to diminish but to expand, to enjoy the bifurcated “knobb” of the visage, that point of insufflation and tonal exhalation, that bell and moistness that we caressingly stroke and smuttily rub. It is a question of character, of turning around, of lifting up, of making one’s way, poorly shaven swordfish though I may be, towards the fluidity and humor of thought.¹⁸

It is melancholegalism that needs to be candidly confronted. The lack of humor, the humorless, as coined and expounded through its unthought twists, turns, twitches, and other temerities by Lauren Berlant that must be most thoroughly addressed.¹⁹ An exemplum may help. An instance of the hairpiece, a judicial wiggling. Just down from Oxford University, Stephen Balogh, a newly appointed solicitor’s clerk, was tasked with attending and helping the defense in an inordinately lengthy and soporiphically technical pornography trial in the Crown Court of St. Albans in England. The case dragged on, and he succumbed to the doldrums of boredom. He decided to enliven the proceedings by putting a canister of laughing gas into the air conditioning system and so relieve the tedium of trial. The night prior, he inspected the roof of the courthouse for the best point of entry for the gas. The next day, he brought a canister of nitrous oxide in his briefcase and left said bag on a chair in an adjoining court while waiting for an opportune moment to carry out his scheme. That was as far as he got. Court officers, who had witnessed his reconnaissance of the roof the previous night, opened his briefcase and confronted him.

Balogh was arrested and brought before the senior Crown Court judge, Sir Aubrey Melford Steed Stevenson, presiding in the forensic forum next to the one in which the pornography trial was taking place.²⁰ Balogh admitted everything and said it was “a joke. A practical joke.” He was charged summarily, meaning on the spot, in the late afternoon, and without counsel or other representation. As the judge put it: “I am exercising the jurisdiction to deal with the contempt . . . which has been vested in this court for hundreds of years. That is the basis on which . . . you will now go to prison for six months.” To this tyrannical vagary of reasoning, the young clerk responded, “you are a humorless automaton.” It is an instance of an extraordinary intransigence that evidences a symptomatic juridical panic in the face of levity. The loss of wit, the demise of judgment, is exhibited in the mode of a humorless reaction—an exorbitant failure to

18. The referent to the swordfish is taken again from Francisco de Quevedo, “A un hombre de gran nariz” and the immortal “érase un peje espada mal barbado.”

19. See Lauren Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 305–40.

20. *Balogh v. Crown Court at St Albans* (1974) 3 All E.R. 283.

proboscate—in the form of an excessive reaction to an imagined affront to the melancholic dignity and morose sanctity of law. The borders of the jurisdiction were threatened and retaliation was sudden and without reason or consideration. Let's review the legal points at issue.

First, nothing had happened. No canister had been placed in the air ducts leading to the courtroom. No laughing gas had been released. There was in law no *actus reus* for which the accused could be condemned. This simply means that the law does not punish you for thinking of committing an offence. Acts preparatory to a crime or misdemeanor are not punished. One can, if one so wishes, carry a canister of laughing gas, upon one's person, or in a brief case. It is hard to predict when laughing gas may be needed. Second, the clerk was in any event attempting something impossible. Making the law laugh is implausible enough, but releasing nitrous oxide into air vents would have no discernible effects; the gas would dissipate, and the temper, tone, and tedium of the proceedings, the *pornographos* of the trial, would continue unabated. Third, the summary procedure used for trying the clerk on the spot, without time to prepare a defense, without access to legal counsel, and by means of simple confrontation offends the rules of natural justice. Sir Aubrey Melford Steed Stevenson, to give you the full nominal sense of the man, this particular ill-functioning digestive apparatus, was enraged by the intimation of comedy, infuriated by the lack of seriousness, by the irreverence and sheer irrelevance of the preparatory reconnaissance, and seemingly acts as judge in his own cause. Law, however, has long recognized the principle that no one should be judge in matters in which they have a direct interest. He should have recused himself rather than deliver sentence in anger. A matter of decorum, a maxim of law. Fourth, there is a palpable need for reason and explanation of the decision. There is very little actual law on how the judiciary can claim a power of summary judgment for "contempt in the face of the court." According to Blackstone's *Commentaries*, the basis for this jurisdiction and procedure is that "contempts against the king's *palaces* or *courts of justice* have always been looked upon as high misprisions: and by the ancient law, before the conquest, fighting in the king's palace, or before the king's judges, was punished with death."²¹ While one could argue on this basis that Balogh got off lightly, if it is threat to the person of the king that is the justification for the power, it is surely overstated in relation to a judge in a newly established court, even if Sir Steed can on occasion (cross-)dress up in rather regal attire (fig. 2). Fifth, the actual

21. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (New York, 1854), p. 124. Continuing that the courts are due a greater reverence (*major reverentia*) and are sacred spaces.



FIGURE 2

justification that is proffered is that “it is a necessary power. It is given so as to maintain the dignity and authority of the judge,” and thus contempt in the face of the court, in *presencia curie*, is punished summarily, in the heat of the moment, on the spot, in flagrante. Here, however, the clerk had not even planned to release the gas into the air ducts of the court in which Sir Steed was presiding. Neither had he done anything in that judge’s face nor had he tried to make him laugh. And yet, without reasons, without didactic or deliberative discourse, lacking utterly in any discussion of humor or boredom, exhibiting an excess of judgment and a complete absence of wit, in decisionist manner, the judge remitted the clerk to six months in prison.

The decision in *Balogh* is a near complete confrontation of the serious and the ludic, of the interior face to face with the exterior, of law revealed by an alien affect within. Anger abrogates the arbiter. It turns the subject against itself and pitches fury against equity, the body, humor and play. Justice is the act of giving time, of hearing the other side, but no such equilibrium is witnessed here. The judge is all judgment and no wit, while Balogh offers a plenitude of wit without an iota of judgment. He pays the price of an intransigent, humorless law, and a melancholegalistic execution. *Sic transit ludo*, thus does laughter die. And with it, thought.

The issue, our reference, lies in the unthought implications of the black letter of legal style and the rigor mortis of humorlessness. The judge is appalled by the incursion of humor, the threat of farce, the appearance of comedy in the confines of the court. This sudden apparition of eros, the figure of the histrion, the playing of the fool, the animadversion of laughter threatens the jurisdiction, the carapace of solemnity whose root is in the ceremonial foundations of the legal, in the spectacle of seriousness. It is the choral liturgy of legality, the tenuous tenor of juridical ritual, the sacerdotal sombrero of juristic effects, in sum, the theology of law that experiences the comic as threat, as dissolution, as a striptease that will unveil the panoplies and paraphernalia of judicial appearances. The juridical is enunciated and yet remains, and remains to be said. It repeats. It claims that it is law and so does not change. In one suitably symptomatic formulation from the court of appeals, discussing again the power to imprison for contempt of court: "The object throughout has been to keep the stream of justice pure and clear. It must not be disturbed by stones or polluted with mud."²² Humorlessness is the state of inertia, the unthought flow, the tranquil stream and purity, the lack of disruption, the absence of the mud of thought that allows for the appearance of clarity. This is judgment without wit, mere decision, *arbitrium* that has not even a whiff of invention, not a glimpse of the occasion, without feel for the event. And yet in the very extremity of the judge's response, as also in the amorphous indefinition of the historical offence—the calumny of regality—we may suspect a hidden affect; the ghost of something else, a specter living on. There is room here for the beginnings of a *détournement*.

Return for a moment to Guy Debord, the author of the concept and practitioner of humorous unsettling and surprise situationist interventions in thought, in practice, in film. He notes a distinction between a minor *détournement* and a more significant reappropriation and alteration of path and meaning, termed deceptive *détournement*. The latter prizes the concept captured out of its discursive system and normal use and, like the futurist metagraph, instills it into a novel relay and within a different form and purpose. This movement towards novelty Debord also terms the strategy of "premonitory-proposition *détournement*," the reinscription of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context and complementarity of forms that it now joins.²³ As metagraphic act—in transmitting the concept to its new place and trajec-

22. *Attorney-General v. British Broadcasting Corp* (1981) AC 303.

23. Guy Debord, "A User's Guide to *Détournement*," in *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb (2006), www.bopsecrets.org/SI/

tory, the alteration of formal context and corresponding concatenation of thoughts—the *détournement* operates a *morphosis*, a comedic change, an ideational shift, a *petit mort*.

What then of laughter in law, of comedy in legal reason? My intuition is that it signals a possibility, an instance of potential for change. The banned joke in law, the comedic slip, the oxbow event when a humorless law encounters an external occasion of play, of parody or satire, is correctly designated by Debord as premonitory, as signaling ahead, as a proleptic moment. The future is glimpsed, and the shape of change previewed in the iteration occasioned by the coincidence of law and laughter, the clash and corresponding fissure generated by the intercession of humor in the humorless, of the ludic in the legal. At one level it is an immediate symptom and effect. The simple physicality of laughter, the disintegration or breaking up that the smile insinuates and that the guffaw produces portends a shift, a change of place, of tenor and mood of thought.²⁴ Laughter instigates a falling apart, a loosening up, and so propels a recomposition, new thought, the metagraphic agency of prolepsis and transformation. That indeed is the ontological drive of humor, and in front of it lies a fork in the road of history. Humor either prompts fear and reaction, a recursive and conservative shrinking back, a diminution of both the object of laughter and of the process of thinking, in sum, a lack of judgment; or it propels invention, an epistemic opening up, the fabrication of an unseen connection, a way forward, together, in the dissipation of a humorless gloom through the invention of wit. The choice, when faced with humor, is between *hypostasis* and *ecstasis*, entrenchment and *détournement*. In the latter—because we all, we lively ones, love wit—there is always the coming together, precisely in the metagraph or discombobulation, of the caressing touch of humor and judgment. Where it is law that is in issuance, finally, we have the advent and instance of comedic justice in the rendering of decision, the hobbyhorsical hinging of judgment.

At the level of law (though in truth the notion of a plane or tier of legality as somehow above some other entity or enterprise is slightly distracting) wit conflicts with judgment, humor with the saturnine and melancholegalist tone of juridical temper. Back then to my cause. For the jurist, for the judge, there is wit, and there is judgment, and they are separate. Judgment must excise wit, and wit, for lawyers, has to exclude judgment. When they intersect they conflict, and this constitutes an opposition, a necessary antinomy, one which Emeritus Professor Chirelstein captures with con-

24. Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter* (1560; Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1980), p. 73 provides a classic statement of the agitation, impetuosity, and shaking up that laughter physically occasions.

ventional accuracy by arguing succinctly that there is silliness, and there are cases, there is humor and there are rules, there is comedy and there is policy, and it is in all instances only the latter that matter. Legal method exists to sever wit from rule and the jocular from the decisional. It operates the castration of the humorous, and the joke paradoxically becomes the eunuch, the nonproducer, the lack of desire intrinsic to the law.

Transport and Morphosis

There is an important point of interpretation that needs to be made. I am now in a didactic mood, and it needs to be said. Sterne relies on Rabelais and also to a lesser extent on Montaigne and Erasmus. The relevant passage comes from chapter 38 of *Gargantua*: "Why Everyone avoids monks: and why some men have noses that are bigger than others." The crux of the discussion of why Frère Jean has such a handsome nose concludes: "According to true monastic philosophy it's because my nurse had soft tits. When I sucked, my nose sank in butter, and it expanded and rose like dough in a bowl. But hey, nonny, nonny: from the shape of a nose you can judge a man's *ad te levavi* (I lift up unto thee)."²⁵ I have taken M. A. Screech's translation here as the most explicit, his commentary reading that the incipit of Psalm 122 is here applied "to the erect penis (which many believed to be proportionate to a man's nose)."²⁶

The references are unimpugnable, but the gesture at an interpretation is screechingly incomplete. The exhaustively established sexual connotations of the nose, as also the linking of length to wit, are but a reconnaissance.²⁷ The reference to the *incipit*, to the beginning, to embarkation, and to birth is much more important. Psalm 122 comes immediately after the song sung by pilgrims, obedient to the law, on their way to Jerusalem. *Levavi* in this context, first person past tense, is active: I got up, I arose, I lifted myself, and so starts a journey, and, in our case, a potential *détournement*. The psalm refers to lifting up the eyes to the heavens ("ad te levavi oculos meos qui habitas in caelo"). Here, the nose is the pointer, a celes-

25. Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech (London, 2006), p. 331. The full expression is "Ad formam nasi cognoscitur ad te levavi."

26. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

27. On the former, my preferred reference is Joubert, *Popular Errors* (1578; Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1989). On length and wit, the sources are numerous, though Bruscambille's *Prologues* is as good a source as any, stating: "when one wishes to misunderstand something one makes use of the Proverb 'here is someone with no nose' (*voilà qui n'a point de nez*)." According to Wilhelm Fleiss's remarkable book *The Relations between the Nose and the Female Genital Organs*, it is actually the coincidence of female genital membrane in the nose that determines its various reflexive and diagnostic possibilities. I have used the French edition, *Les Relations entre le nez et les organes génitaux féminins* (Paris, 1977).

tial proboscis no less, the tiller that turns the face towards its chimerical object. Thus the erection may certainly signal a lifting up, but it is much more significantly an election and generative of a flood of possibilities, changed states, connections and consequences. *I lifted my nose* means that I embarked, I moved, I began and that is precisely the power of humor, as imago, as transport and transformation. One can acknowledge that all creativity is modeled on sex, the generation of the genitive, the *potentia* of thought, but where it is a question of a change of direction engendered by humor, the comedy of decision, then it is to the tiller of the face, the gubernative protuberance, weathercock, and napost—the nasal signpost—that attention should be directed. The lifting up of the nose is an indication of *morphosis* and theologically, of transubstantiation, the opening of the subject, of the body, to the machinations of the spirit, the transformative power of thought as the *deus ex machina*, the device that pulls the nose upward and onward, the spirit becomes the body, and the body thereby transforms, expands, evaporates, becomes no more one, more than one.

There is a certain rhetorical history to this opening up that our exemplar wit will engender. For the Christians it was a question of putting something into your mouth, the visible word—the *sacra* . . . (wait for it) . . . *mentum*. You eat the transfigured body of your lover, the bread, the wine, while the prelate, he who dances at the front, administers this hilarity. You come to belong through sharing a body, a histrionic act, an erotic commonality, the transubstantiation of the one into the many, through ingestion, digestion, and collection, the continuity and commonality of the act. Quintilian and the early rhetoricians recognized, if timidly, that comedic and jocastic interventions and styles were equally necessary to legal community and thus also to juristic audience and argument. Lawyers too needed their *hilaritas*, their ordered excitations. The judge's attention could wander, the bench could sleep, and humor was recommended as a means of arousing, raising the nose and activating the *delegatus maiestatis* somnolent on his throne.²⁸ According to the forensic rhetoricians something is turned by humor, and the path and power of doing justice flows therefrom. Take an early instance. A rather surprising one. A legal text on signs of law, *De notitia dignitatum* (1610) (fig. 3).²⁹ The textual figure comes at the beginning, as the *incipit* of chapter 14, and shows a cowed jurist pointing with the index finger of the right hand towards the text, which concerns the office of notary and scribe to the court. *Ab actis*,

28. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 6.3.1, and Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1560; Oxford, 1921).

29. See Guido Pancirolus, *De Notitia utraque iuris* (Lyons, 1610), p. 12.



FIGURE 3

means “of clerks,” although more literally its meaning is “from actions,” referring here to the deeds and instruments of legal transactions. Pancirolus remarks early on that failure to inscribe deeds can have disastrous consequences and that the first thing the magistrate must do is navigate the documents. So I had always viewed the image, while racing through the text, as a fingerpost, a gentle visual and emblematic reminder of the importance of the text, the injunctions on inscribing, noting, archiving, and finding the documentation, the tables, and rolls of law.

Look more closely or askew, and in fact it is only the fool who focuses on the finger, whose tip, whose grape is not even shown. The lawyer depicted, after all, is not looking at the index digit, so why should we? His nose is pointed elsewhere, towards the top right, dexter chief in the heraldic argot to which the interpretation of the law of images classically belongs. The crucial site and import of the image is indicated not by the finger but by the nose, which is precisely *ad te levavi*, lifted up to you, the superior, the *hieros*. The curtain or canopy that almost touches the jurist’s proboscis is the mark of sovereign presence, of the legislator’s throne, and then, by extension, the sign of the juristic theatre of the divine origin and source of law and of all normative validity. The beard signals a certain

radicalism; it is *lango-bard*, meaning “long,” and so both humorous and sagacious, rebellious and recondite, while the lines in the background are the *ratio scripta*, the written reason of law, the mark of the legislator to whom the nose is lifted, the moving hand that writ, the lines that cannot be erased, the law of nature that for jurists dictates *nulla dies sine linea*: each day, your lines, your written reasons. The inscription of contracts, the record of litigations, the faithful subscription and witnessing of legal acts that the text relays are all thoroughly secondary to the power and mobility of the motive force of judgment, the thought that the *prefecti*, those in charge of the offices and *scriptoria* of law, must exercise and imbue.

It is time then for another exemplum. Rabelais, today. The issue is that of a contemporary judicial comedy. It is not pretty, but it does instance again the antinomy of wit and judgment, of humor and law, while equally marking, through *ecstasis*, through the movement of thought, the intimation of *morphosis*, the instance of the metagraph as premonitory of the potential for subversion of the precedents. A case forsooth and one concerning contemporary histrionics. In 35 *Bar and Grille v City of San Antonio*, the city required the 35 Bar and Grille, an exotic dance establishment, to clothe its dancers in more than a G-string, and pasties covering the areolae of the breasts.³⁰ The bar objected on First Amendment grounds of freedom of expression. The city justified its intervention on the basis of zoning regulations pertinent to Sexually Oriented Businesses (SOBs). If the adverse secondary effects of the SOBs’ lack of attire can justify the requirement of more clothes, then an exception can be made to the freedom of expression. The decision in favor of the city was handed down by the appositely named Chief Judge Fred Biery.

The subject matter of the case, the facts, *nudum actum*, has an immediate and inventive impact upon the judgment. The relevant prohibition on human display, deriving from, because lawyers write like this, ordinance 2012-12-06-0934, amending chapter 21 of a 2005 ordinance, defines seminudity as “a state of dress that fails to completely and opaquely cover (a) human genitals, pubic region, pubic hair or (b) crevice of buttocks or anus, or (c) *any portion of the female breast that is situated below a point immediately above the top of the areola*, or (d) any combination of (a), (b) or (c).” The matter of nudity or, to quote CJFB, “to bare or not to bare, that is the question” (*BG*, p. 712), triggers a sexualized rhetoric and histrionic form to the judgment handed down. The chief judge begins in a style in which he intends to continue: “An ordinance dealing with

30. See 35 *Bar and Grille v. City of San Antonio* 943 F.Supp. 2d 706 (2013); hereafter abbreviated *BG*.

semi-nude dancers has once again fallen into the Court's lap. . . . The age old question before the Court, now with constitutional implications, is: Does size matter?" (BG, p. 708). The judgment then proceeds upon fairly predictable rhetorical lines of erotic innuendo and double entendre. This is not entirely uncommon in the case law, where rhetoric will on occasion mirror the subject matter, though seldom with the high spirits, the perseverance, and dubious élan of CJ Biery.³¹ Here, we are informed, the plaintiffs aim to clothe themselves in the First Amendment, "seeking to provide cover against another alleged naked grab of unconstitutional power". The court then goes on to infer that "Plaintiffs fear enforcement of the ordinance would strip them of their profits, adversely impacting their bottom line," while the city believes that these businesses "need to be girdled more tightly" (BG, p. 709). Reaching an early climax, the judge then expostulates that the "Plaintiffs, and by extension their customers, seek an erection of a constitutional wall separating them from the regulatory power of City government" (BG, p. 709). After denying judgment to the plaintiffs, CJFB offers the envoi that "should the parties choose to string this case out to trial on the merits, the Court encourages reasonable discovery intercourse as they navigate the peaks and valleys of litigation, perhaps to reach a happy ending" (BG, pp. 712–13).

Much as Emeritus and now, sad to say, deceased Professor Chirelstein would disapprove of the facts of this decision, let alone their representation, it has to be acknowledged that humor has here played a significant part in the transport, the medium and rhetoric, though, because wit is separate in law from judgment, not upon the decision. The puns, the jocularly erotic tone, the histrionic header to the decision, which reads "*The Case of the Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Bikini Top v. The (More) Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Pastie*" all indicate both condensation of motives and displacement of reasons, in sum the transport of invention, the topos of potential decision, to novel ground. The facts should determine the judgment, poetics should generate justice, and this is what the setup suggests, a possibility of wit leading to an appropriate conclusion, but none arrives. There is a moment along the way, an instance of prolepsis, a premonitory *détournement*, in which the excision of wit from the judgment is signaled and that deserves a moment of cautious reconstruction. The erotic metaphors signal a shift, a *morphosis* in the reasoning, the advent of Sterne's INTU-

31. See *Textile Unlimited v. ABMH & Co.* 240 F.3d 781 (2001) for another example. The case involved purchase and sale of textiles and is saturated with metaphors of weaving and wool, warp and woof. On the appropriateness of style, see Goodrich, "Legal Enigmas: Antonio de Nebrija, *The Da Vinci Code*, and the Emendation of Law," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 30 (Spring 2010): 71.

ITION, your worships, in the trajectory and chain of the precedent. There is, however, one further visual clue that seals the argument and, in a sudden turn, a volte-face, no less, in the subordination of wit to humorlessness, legitimates a contrary conclusion.

It is the adverse secondary effects of the dance club that justify the exception to the First Amendment. Judge Biery opines that while “the Court finds these businesses to be nefarious magnets of mischief, the Court doubts several square inches of fabric will staunch the flow of violence and other secondary effects emanating.” He, which is to say the synecdoche in the form of the collective noun the court, then admits that “alcohol, drugs, testosterone, guns and knives” are the more likely cause of harm than female breasts. If such is the case, the argument for the imposition of clothes is weak. Wit has here propelled the judge towards a radical and libertarian conclusion. Let them be naked. There are worse things. Our distant forebears were unclothed. So at least the Bible says. His humor would seem to have set him free. Alas, however, for as so often in law, it is an instance of wit that will suddenly be separated from judgment and the humor transpires then, and tragically, to be unrelated to the eventual decision.

The mark of humorlessness arrives early in the decision. On page 2 of the judgment, in setting out the initial facts, before even arriving at the section headed “Background,” where the course and cause of litigation is delineated, Judge B. remarks, seemingly quite impromptu, as if it just slipped out, an ironic aside, that visitors to the location “would have enjoyed far more the sight of Miss Wiggles, truly an exotic artist of self expression even into her eighties” (*BG*, p. 709) (fig. 4). Then follows an image of said Miss Wiggles standing on her head on a chair and gyrating. The picture is taken from the 1995 edition of *Our Texas Magazine*. A search of YouTube will uncover a clip of Miss Wiggles performing in the Fourth Annual Useless Talent Competition. All of which covertly signals the irrelevance of the humor to the judgment, the separation, just to repeat (we have been together for some time now, and Sterne is taking a nap) of wit and decision.

The desire that escapes repression in the form of an image is the *imago decidendi*, the reason for deciding. Here the humorous invocation and depiction of Miss Wiggles, fully clad, wearing a cogitative nose, as far as can be discerned, and swiveling on her head provides the appropriate key to intendment. As the harm of the club’s erotic activities seemingly does not lie in adverse secondary effects, the issue must be closer to home and primary effects. The judicial selection of imagery explains, where words have simply skirted, that it is the aesthetic of seminudity, the palpable lack

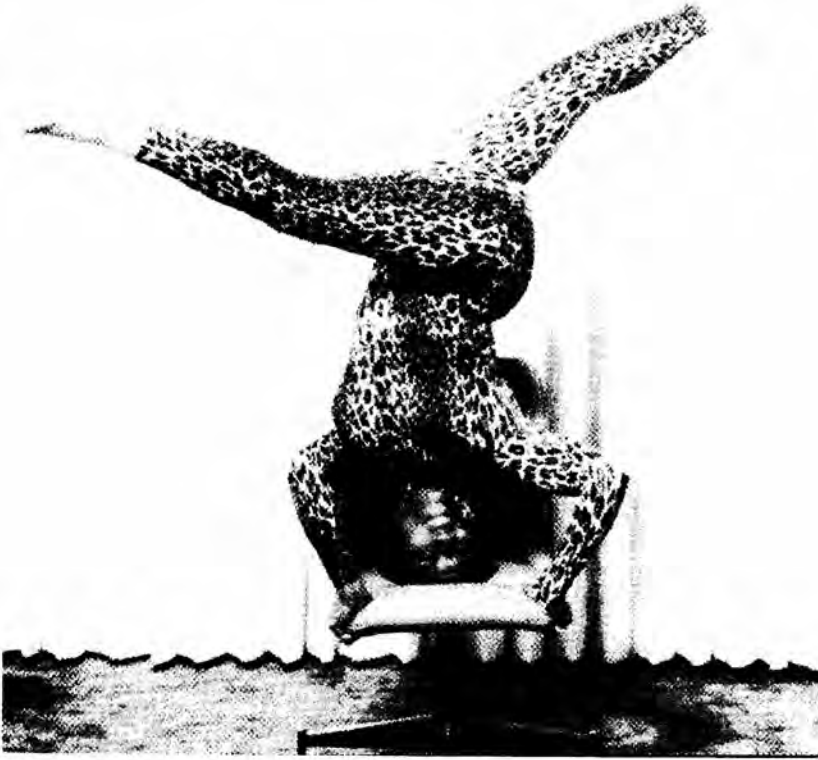


FIGURE 4

of art, the obviousness of being bare that has offended. The club offers nothing beyond brute bodies. Miss Wiggles, he suggests, provides both spectacle and propriety. The fact that she is dressed and that she dances on her head also provides a superlative image of *détournement*, of humor taking up and changing how we think an issue or decide a case. It is precisely a useless talent, the pointless interruption of humor, the cataclysm of laughing, that lands us in the mire, stands us on our head, changes what we see, and alters our intendments. And thus, I will dare to argue, is wit banished from the Biery judgment, just as our friend Emeritus Chirelstein would excise it from pedagogy.

We can borrow from Bruscambille, who offers a pertinent addition to the elaboration of Biery's deliberations, insofar as he notes that "one hides the ass because it is a face with no nose, and to the contrary the face is

always uncovered because of the nose.”³² Times change. Veils are an exception of sorts. But, in any event, Bruscambille’s analysis rather wanders at that point, so we need to pick up this thematic in the image of Miss Wiggles whose posterior, her haunch, her hunch, is directed towards the divinity, *ad te levavi*, as it were. Bruscambille’s cultural point, namely, that the lower portions of the body be clothed, *areola resartus*, is not without its own moral genealogy. It has long roots and hairy tendrils. The referent, of course, is ultimately biblical, and it is less wit and aesthetics that will set the dancers free to earn their living than dogma and scripture that determine that 35 Bar and Grille have exposed too much. The dancers have forgotten the root of sin in the Garden of Eden; they have ignored the expulsion from the terrain of primordial innocence. It is in their oblivion to sin that they have sinned. More simply, in depicting a dancer on her head, the judge has invoked a heathen world, a globe upside down, topsy-turvy times, in which evil is confused for good, harm for benefit, crudity for art. The *détournement* is here, in this instance, in its legal and humorless overdetermination, reactionary and conservative. The wit is excised from the judgment. The comedy transpires to be outside the law. Humor is the sign only of what could have been, of premonition frustrated.

In a more melancholy and critical mode, we can note that the role and specifically the recognition of humor in law is to open up the object of analysis and pass into what is viewed or read. We can undo Judge Biery in his humor. We have to endeavor to access and own his invention of text, interpretation, and transmission. Humor is not pretty, by which Steve Martin means that it is not easy; it can as likely have reactionary goals and conservative force as it can successfully liberate or free up thought to its own inherent *détournement*. Take the case and judgment just discussed. The humor is on the surface dismissive, sexist, and objectifying. It transpires to bear no direct relation to the judgment. Even so, it also acts as a fissure, a fault line, as a point of diffraction of discourses in which both are potentially changed because unable to coexist so explicitly. The uneasiness of Judge Biery’s suffering an appropriately inebriate name, lies in subtly exposing the sources of his judgment, while at the same time masking his juristic indisposition by trivializing his use of humor and so covering its significance. The image of Miss Wiggles is a crucial case in point. It is of resolutely poor quality, in black and white, and is passed over with great rapidity and little discussion. A simple assertion is all she warrants. She is art, 35 Bar and Grille is farce. All of which signals the puta-

32. Bruscambille, *Prologues*, 18v. Octavio Paz, *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, trans. Helen Lane (New York, 1982) provides a useful account of the other face in comparative perspective.

tive insignificance of humor and of imagery in the very act of introducing them into the legal decision and founding the determination, the restrictive metagraph, upon them. The judge is remaining resolutely clothed, his professional mask more or less still in place, his corporeal excitations and inventions, his aesthetic apprehensions and sensuous perceptions, his proboscations, and his flight from their implications hidden from scrutiny. Such, at least, seems to be his scriptural hope and precedential intendment. Hence the value of nasology in coming to grips with judges and jurists, with those whom the erudite Scottish antiquary of humor, David Murray LL.D., F.S.A., terms the “the *Fawkses*’ in the legerdmain of law,” who abound wherever law abounds.³³

The Romans feared foreign theatre, the Greek *histrion*, the threat of the erotic coming too close in the social spheres of public presence.³⁴ The players, the thespian *ad te levavi* was dangerous in that she could unleash an unmasking of the body, of purpose and invention, at the same time as she performed a public role that competed with the unannounced theatre of law. Recollect, if you will, that lawyers are by professional designation actors and narrators—*actores* in the Latin, *narratores* in the Law French—and the first division of the law, *ius personarum*, the law of persons, establishes a thespian introduction, the mask through which law will speak. The replication of the theatrical led to the banning of theatre, right before the banning of brothel keeping, both designated *infamia*, the worst of crimes, grounds for loss of citizenship, civil death, the internal exile of those whom the humorless deem to walk on the dark side of immoralism, lust, and the general disorder of the senses. It is a theme that occurs again, in Jeremy Collier, in Bossuet, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s letter to Jean le Rond d’Alembert, and then again in Reinhart Kosellek and is further tracked in the somewhat more esoteric and encyclopedic Arpad Szakolczai.³⁵ Re-

33. David Murray, *Lawyers Merriments* (Glasgow, 1912), p. 177.

34. See Florence Dupont, *L’Orateur sans visage: Essai sur l’acteur romain et son masque* (Paris, 2000), pp. 51–85. Chapter 2, “L’Histrion ou l’Autre absolu,” is the most expansive discussion of these themes. See also Goodrich, “Law,” in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Tom Sloane (Oxford, 2001), pp. 417–26.

35. See Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaness of the English Stage* (London, 1699); Bossuet, “Maximes et réflexions sur la comédie” (Paris, 1694); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Letter to d’Alembert on the Theatre,” *Politics and the Arts*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York, 1968), pp. 23–128; Reinhart Kosellek, *Critique and Crisis* (Oxford, 1988); and Arpad Szakolczai, *Comedy and the Public Sphere: The Rebirth of Theatre as Comedy and the Genealogy of the Modern Public Arena* (London, 2013). My (second) edition of Collier has inscribed on the inside cover, by Sir Richard Blackmore: “John Drydens Enemies were three / Sir Dick, Old Nick, & Jeremy / Against the first he kept the Field / But the two last oft made him yield / Yet had he lived a little holier / He’d have beat the Devil and the Collier.”

maining, however, with comedy, with the playful and humorous, it cannot be apprehended in any direct way as the scene of judgment, nor is the sudden and astringent satire a straight path or *via regia* to the motive of decision. There is a degree of threat and hence also of misplaced and insinuated use of the humorous in our case example. Judge Biery shies away from either acknowledging or analyzing his use of imagery, his slip, let alone accounting for the colorful character of his punning rhetoric. To the contrary, he adds a prosaic appendix of twice the length of the judgment, justifying the decision in due deference to the authorities, the binding precedents pertaining to the application of such ordinances at issue in his case. Unlike the mythical promontory carried on the visage of Slawkenbergius, Biery's nose deflates, retracts, and loses its bulbousness, and sadly, unthinkingly sobers up, devoid of comedy, free of puns, *détourned*, turned back to a point prior to humor, to an inertia of thought. Biery offers a short-lived inebriation, a glimpse of thought, a momentary excitation and then lengthy deflation in which prejudgment, the return to precedent, displaces and replaces wit. Tumescence and then detumescence, hope without happening.

Biery shifts rapidly from play to the prosaic, from levity to the lachrymose, from the poetic and uplifted to the formulaic and its downward drift of humorless judgment as repetition. He has to hide his wit, put his robes back on, and garner the proper obfuscatory gravitas of the black letter of law. Returning to Sterne, however, or even to Nikolay Gogol's absconded nose, there is visible even here a sense of a happy aberration, of a closet opened momentarily and then shut, a glimpse, let us say, of a surreal moment of witticism as criticism of the judicial and of judgment. Biery loses his nerve, and the jokes fall flat or more precisely are abandoned to judgment without wit. Yet still, hold on, what a resource, what a pedagogic treasure trove, how many mnemonic devices and clues to invention this finally frowning judgment can provide. The humorous and intuitive, the assonant and alliterative, the punning and playing are modes of apprehension and expression in the form of invention. They provide a glimpse and curlicue of the inevitable lightness (and light-headedness) of decision, the very poetry of practice. If these are to be pursued, had Biery had the courage of his convictions, the will of his wit, then a different future, a properly premonitory as opposed to minor *détournement* would have come into play. He did not feel he had the right to his wit, he could not comprehend the discursive role of his humor, and his surmise was that it lacked legitimacy. Thence does law dissipate comedy, eviscerate the foundational, and abandon the *genius loci* as irrelevant to the decision. So we need to engage a question of jurisdiction, the recognition of the right

as well as the power of comedy that can be elaborated again through *Tristram Shandy* and its sources.

Bruscambille first. He hides his arguments in prologues as a means of “safe conduct in attacking the works (*cabinets*) of the most serious.”³⁶ Sterne in not dissimilar fashion, as a reader of Bruscambille, adopts a prefatory or, let me put it like this again, a prolegomenal style. He describes himself as a “caressing prefacer,” and that tells us much of the satirical path and pitfalls with which he has to contend (*TS*, p. 178). He breaks off, he starts again, he inserts images of marbled pages, and he begins novels within the novel, including the fictitious Latin treatise of Slawkenbergius, *De nasis*. The gentlemanly, even courtly, Slawkenbergius arrives on the scene with a nose so fine and so long as to match or even exceed those of the gods in Greek sculpture or the rhinoceros in early modern texts (*TS*, p. 228).³⁷ He is lovesick and escaping from Spain, we learn eventually, seeking to reclaim the heart of his innamorata Julia. As is common in Sterne, we don’t learn what happens to the protagonist or his proboscis. Rather he disappears back to Spain, the land of Don Quixote, of tilting at windmills, which recent excavation has shown was both humorous and serious, as contrary to enacted and then current law.³⁸ It is not the content of the narrative but the form that is thus significant. The stranger’s extraordinary nose is an unsettling intervention. It is not even determined whether it is real or false, true or fictitious, though we do learn that it requires a bed of its own. And with that we are left.

The nose and the narrative are at one. More strongly, I want to suggest that in being foreign and being fancifully fictitious, part of a facetious story, within a story, within a novel, the stranger and his irregular nose is a challenge to the jurisdiction and to Englishness, to the *mos britannicus*, the Anglican common law. The noble nose introduces an element of the foreign, of other jurisdictions, and specifically of a Latin philology and law, of whose tincture common lawyers had long tried to rid themselves by means of that most legal of argumentative techniques, assertion or, at greater length, simple, counterfactual denial. It is fiction put into play as critique of law. In sum, Sterne’s method of reasoning by his nose, his proboscations, as also his litigation over noses are a prognosticatory means of mixing genres and so generating fissures, diffractions, and other

36. Bruscambille, preface to *Prologues*, n.p.

37. On the noses of the gods, see Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character, as Manifested through Temperament and External Forms, and Especially in “The Human Face Divine”* (New York, 1867), p. 190: “ancient sculptors . . . had only to add a few lines to the length of the nose, and the face becomes that of a god”; hereafter abbreviated *NP*.

38. See Susan Byrne, *Law and History in Cervantes’ Don Quixote* (Toronto, 2013).

headstands or *détournements* in the spirit of challenging established jurisdictions, and expressly those of the robes and of the gowns, theology and law. To proboscate is to recognize the epistemic import of laughter in legal reason, and so too the aesthetics in its argumentation, the imagery in its texts. The literary divagation, the method of witticism as criticism—how dear A. E. Housman would cringe at the saying—comes precisely to discomfort lawyers—hence the anxiety of Judge Biery when he momentarily allows the pun to play the part of the law. That is the message of the novel and the lesson of the method. As Sterne puts it, in a frontispiece citation to John of Salisbury, “it has always been my purpose to pass from humour to seriousness and from seriousness back to humour (*a jocis ad seria, a seriis vicissim ad jocos transire*)” (TS, frontispiece to volume 4). The two blend, the rival jurisdictions coalesce, and it becomes impossible fully to tell them apart. They have to nose and mosey their way along together.

Denouement

It takes humor to reason with the nose, comedic flair to combine poetry and prose, image and letter, wit and judgment in the rendering of justice. The tendency, as analyzed here, is for one or the other to slip away and thence to abandon judgment to humorlessness or wit to lack of determination. The maxim of method that proboscation promotes is not the age-old norm of *procedere ad similia*, as lawyers have from time immemorial tended to advocate in the mode of bland analogies and timorous holdings back, but rather the more honest *procedere ad naso*, according to sense and wit. Forwards, because proboscating is a manner and method of attending to the face, of looking to the prognostication of the visage, and heeding the honk of the other. There is the animus of appeal, the aspect of attraction, the lure of the peninsula, the premonitory promontory of being, the purpose and presence of the tip of the person. The proboscis, to expand a little, is the advance party, prodromus and prolepsis of *ideona persona*, the appropriateness of being, and once the nose is through the door, past the hinge, then there is nose way back. Doing justice, one might opine, is a matter of having a nose for others and an appropriate apprehension of their uniqueness, of their incalculability, of their visage and vociferation. Do I need to point out, you are such splendid scholars to be reading this far, that *Justitia* is often depicted with her eyes blindfolded, occasionally with her mouth gagged, sometimes without hands, even with ears stuffed, but she always has her nose unbound, nostrils open so she can sniff out the truth, scent the path, protrude, and progress. The beak attaches law to an order of value, to the honor of the face, of facing up to and facing off, effacing and defacing, as well as recognizing the inexpungeable

singularity, the scent of the case and also—last call—the opacular and undecided quality of what the nose introduces and hence also the necessity of its *in vivo* investigation.

Early jurists angrily acknowledge the emblematic quality of the schnoz in the drama of defacement, “since the nose is a member on a person that, when removed, completely disfigures the person.”³⁹ No nose, no mask, no persona, it would seem, because, as a later work expounds, “the nose will make its sign in spite of all precautions” (*NP*, p. 185).⁴⁰ One can close the eyes, hide the ears, purse the mouth, but the nose will out: “a nose physiognomy good is of unspeakable weight. . . . It is the sum of the forehead and the root of the under part of the countenance” (*NP*, p. 36). Leading, prognosticating, to a final excursion, much delayed, greatly to be anticipated, borrowed from Antonio de Jorio’s treatise on gestures, the question of the *signia propria* of all lawyering, the vexillological juristic apparatus itself is no less an item and organ than the legal nose. The lawyer should be *homo emunctae naris*, a man of clean nose, according to that Neapolitan saint of chirolgy and font of semiotic acumen.⁴¹ Not everyone can be a lawyer because, to borrow from Martial (*Epi.* 21), *non cuicumque datum est habere nasum* (not everyone has a discerning nose). Such an important member and so proper a sign should undoubtedly be well kempt and free of taint and adulteration. That is well established. But, say Sterne and the satirists, the juridical nose should also be flexible, *naris cereum* in the old language of the *Nebulo nebulonum* (A Fog of Scoundrels), where the lawyer is introduced as *flexiloquos*, “babbling,” and the law as *ius cereum*, as waxen.⁴² Note that the nose is here a synecdoche for the law, and while a waxen nose may bend to or purse with every wind, that very wax is equally the emblem and the medium of the signature, of the signing and sealing of legal documents, the mark of our faith in instruments upon which all law depends. The wax needs, in other words, its seal and stamp, its moment of decisiveness, of rectification and forward intendment or prowess. It allows a final point, a preliminary conclusion of a preludic sort, a first

39. Valentin Groebner, *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages* (New York, 2004), p. 76.

40. Or it is *honestamentum faciei* according to the classics.

41. See Antonio de Jorio, *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity* (1832; Bloomington, Ind., 2000).

42. See Johan Flittner, *Nebulo nebulonum. Hoc est: joco-seria veraculæ nequitæ Censura, carmina Iambico depicta* (Leiden, 1634), p. 16: “In Procuratores flexiloquo, & rabulæ forenses. Nucleus. Ius cereum, quo volunt, rabulæ flectunt.” If further erudition on this point is desired, Murray, *Lawyers Merriments* devotes a learned but brief chapter to the lawyer’s waxen nose, Carlyle’s Hofrath Nose-of-Wax, and John Willock, *Legal Facetiae: Satirical and Humorous* (London, 1887), pp. 124, 340, also provides an account.

farewell, and one that evidences the contemporary *détournement* of satire, the literary import of the law and the value of the nose. A Sternian proboscation will be our beginning of an ending.

In the early 1970s, when plastic surgery, and rhinoplasty in particular, were in their nascency, Alice Sullivan, a singer, entered an oral agreement with Dr. James O'Connor, a surgeon, who promised to "perform plastic surgery on her nose and thereby to enhance her beauty and improve her appearance." Specifically, as judicially noted, the plaintiff's nose "had been straight, but long and prominent," and the defendant undertook to perform two operations to reduce its prominence and to somewhat shorten it. Alice had in fact asked for a nose like Hedy Lamarr's, a goddess of the silver screen back in her day, but what she got, after a horrifically botched operation, was a nose "that now had a concave line to about the midpoint, at which it became bulbous; viewed frontally, the nose from bridge to midpoint was flattened and broadened, and the two sides of the tip had lost symmetry."⁴³ A reading of the transcript of the trial indicates that in performing a third, unplanned operation in the attempt to rectify the damage, the surgeon had resorted to what looked to the nurse like a chisel and had so exsanguinated the patient that she was thought to be dying and a Roman Catholic priest was called to administer the last rites. She recovered, she sued, and was awarded damages for breach of contract. An action for professional negligence was unsuccessful.

While one might follow Proust in believing that symmetry should be left to those without imagination, our nasological sympathies must be with Alice. She had a case. As a matter of literature and law, Hedy Lamarr's nose cannot be on Alice Sullivan's face. As earlier adverted, it would be a trespass, while, for Erasmus, 'twere madness, and in law, a defacement—a point so obvious that lawyers at a wheel of state turning in the proper direction, against corruption—recollect—should kick the action, here the defendant, out in under half an hour. Worse than the improper promise, this occasion of Dr. Slop's flattening of the nose might help vision, our texts inform us, but not the voice, and so the opposite of what was necessary had been performed. Worst of all, the surgeon had misinterpreted the patient and being seemingly oblivious to nasology had inadvertently and most crudely effectuated a transformation of a Roman and aquiline nose, an intellectual proboscis, one needing only the smallest of extensions to become divine, into a parody of a celestial nose. The concave bridge is a definitive feature, according to Wells: "Add somewhat to the length of the Snub, and give it a turn upward, and you have the Celestial nose—*le*

43. *Sullivan v. O'Connor* 296 N.E. 2d 183 (1973) 184, 185, 186.

nez retroussé in the French” (NP, p. 197). Here the only celestial aspect of the nose was that its transformation had brought its owner within an ace of death.

The surgeon O'Connor was not a good witness, but he transpired to be a good loser. In the course of evidence, he declared that Sullivan, when he took her on as a patient, “had a tremendous nose—the biggest nose I’ve ever seen in my whole life.”⁴⁴ He had done what he could, in light of the prodigious size of the original and had at least reduced its expansiveness, even if he regretted the means necessary to doing so. To which it can be added that an impossible project leads ineluctably to impossible ends. He had failed juridically, he should never have made such a promise, and he had failed surgically; the operation escaped him. It remains to comment that after losing the case, O'Connor abandoned medicine and, after the requisite study, entered the profession of law. He sought a nasosophical remedy where the medical arts had failed.

Time now, however, to turn in, to say our nosaries and move to that law that plays itself out in the night. The proboscis expands oneirically. I said that already, so as to stress that in the properly imaginal order of dream, in the inspiration of poetry and the depth of desire, law’s dominion gains its initial revision. Probiscodology offers access to this image-laden, comedic jurisprudence, this playing of the law. If properly understood, I have argued, and not without tributaries, the illimitable protuberance, the unclassifiable proboscatory instrument, the nose, *in naso*, leads the way.

44. Transcript of trial, reproduced in Richard Danzig and Geoffrey Watson, *The Capability Problem in Contract* (New York, 2004), p. 31. For the sake of interest, the accumulation of credit, I will note that O'Connor continues, “she thought I was some kind of miracle worker. . . . She thought I would give her a nose that would make her look like a movie actress. Of course I couldn’t do that” (ibid.).

“You, Again?”

Gary Sullivan

Gary Sullivan’s “You, Again?” examines mechanisms by which comedy is made manifest in comic art and animation. The captions involve a series of tropes and clichés that are part of the visual language of humor comics and cartoons—the use of wavy lines to symbolize smells or stars to symbolize pain, for example. Sullivan puts these texts into poetic play by inserting them into speech and thought balloons coming from the mouths and foreheads of generic and iconic characters from comics around the world—from Ernie Bushmiller’s Nancy (page 2, panel 4), to Mette K. Hellenes’s Mette and Vanessa (page 5, panel 1), to several iterations of Mickey Mouse (page 9).

“You, Again?” draws upon Sullivan’s prior work as a poet and the creator of two ongoing poetry comics series, “The New Life” and Elsewhere. (The title page was actually redrawn from a page in the second issue of Elsewhere.) Rather than narrate stories (or tell jokes) with text and sequential images, Sullivan’s work samples and remixes existing comics and other found images to create destabilizing poems that proceed along associative lines

In a letter to the editors Sullivan writes:

There’s a theory about panel-to-panel transitions, a phenomenon the cartoonist and theorist Scott McCloud calls “closure,” that accounts for how narrative is constructed in comics.¹ Basically, readers fill in the gaps between panels with whatever information they need to explain how we went from the action detailed in the previous panel to whatever’s going on in the next one that follows. That always struck me as close to how

1. Gary Sullivan, email to editors, 4 Mar. 2016. On “closure,” see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, Mass., 1993), p. 63.

much of the experimental end of poetry tends to work, and I’ve always got it in the back of my mind when I’m creating comics. But rather than juxtapose a bunch of random, disparate images, I prefer to weight text and images in such a way as to exploit the gap between panels for whatever poetic value might be lurking in there. When it’s successful, a reader should only be vaguely aware that things aren’t actually adding up. I mean, they’re not—not on the expected, horizontal (or narrative) axis, anyway. But the moment you switch your focus to a vertical (or poetic) axis, that’s when the work, if I’ve done my job, begins to resonate.

—The Editors

The founder and leader of the controversial and influential flarf movement (2000–2010), GARY SULLIVAN is the author of half a dozen collections of comics, essays, plays, and poetry, including *PPL in a Depot* and *Everyone Has a Mouth*. His serialized poetry comic strip “The New Life” has run in *Rain Taxi Review of Books* since 1997. He hosts “Bodega Pop Live” every Wednesday on WFMU’s Give the Drummer Radio (wfmu.org/playlists/pg).



FIGURE 1. Panel redrawn and taken from Bülent Üstün, cover, *Lomback* #59 (Turkey, 2006).

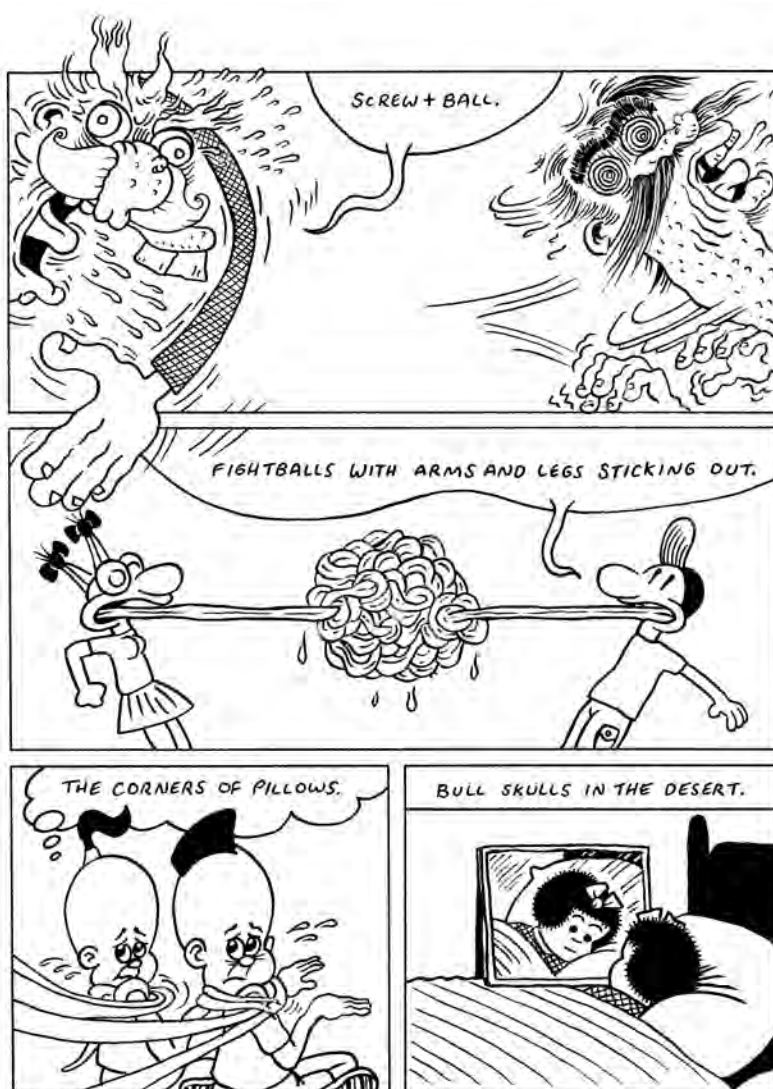


FIGURE 2. (From top) Panels redrawn and taken from Oky Fuki, "Saftirikler" (Turkey, 2006); Adão Iturrusgarai, *Kiki: A Primeira Vez* (Brazil, 1998); uncredited, *The Dandy Book* 1986, (Great Britain, 1986); Ernie Bushmiller, "Nancy" (United States, date unknown).



FIGURE 3. (At left, from top) Panels redrawn and taken from Shunji Enomoto, *Golden Lucky* 1992–1993 Shunji Enomoto (Japan, 2002); Peter Bagge, “The Sufferin’ Bastard” (United States, 1986); Abdül, “Yetenekli by Tüesday” (“The Talented Mr. Tuesday”), (Turkey, date unknown); Yoshikazu Ebisu, “Hell’s Angel” (Japan, 1985).



FIGURE 4. (From top) Panels redrawn and taken from: Behiç Pek, "Yönetmen ikram abi ve Asistan Ya ar" (Director Ikram Abi and Assistant Yasser) (Turkey, 2007); Thierry Guitard, *La Fureur d'Expectore* (France, 1997); uncredited, *The Dandy Book* 1986 (Great Britain, 1986).



FIGURE 5. (From top) Panels redrawn and taken from: Mette K. Hellenes, *Kebbelife* (Norway, 2002); “Uncle” Waldemar Hepstein, *No Comprendo!* (Norway, 1997); Glauco Mattoso and Marcatti, *Aventuras de Glaucomix o Pedólatra* (The Adventures of Glaucomix the Foot Fetishist) (Brazil, 1990).



FIGURE 6. (From top) Panels redrawn and taken from Maren Karlson, "Livin' a Cunt Lyf" (Germany, published in Spanish translation in *Gang Bang Gong*, Mexico, date unknown); Conrad Boates, "Dullboy" (South Africa, 1998); "Enstantaneler" (Snapshots), Kan Ertem (Turkey, 2007); Angeli, *Toda Ré Bordosa* (Brazil, 2012).



FIGURE 7. (From top) Panels redrawn and taken from Kaan Ertem, “Tartı -Malara son Noktayı Koyan Adam” (Turkey, 2006); Chaiwat, “Pho Son Wai” (Father Taught Me) (Thailand, date unknown); I’ve completely forgotten, but most likely Japanese or Norwegian; Bendik Kaltenborn and Kristoffer Kjølberg, *Friends for Fighting* (Norway, 2006).



FIGURE 8. (From top) Panels redrawn and taken from Aleksandar Zograf, *Hypnagogic Review* #3 (Serbia, 2000); Basil Wolverton, "Powerhouse Pepper" (United States, published in *RAW* 2, no. 1, 1989); Kiza, "Just Another Crazy Cop" (Serbia, 2000).

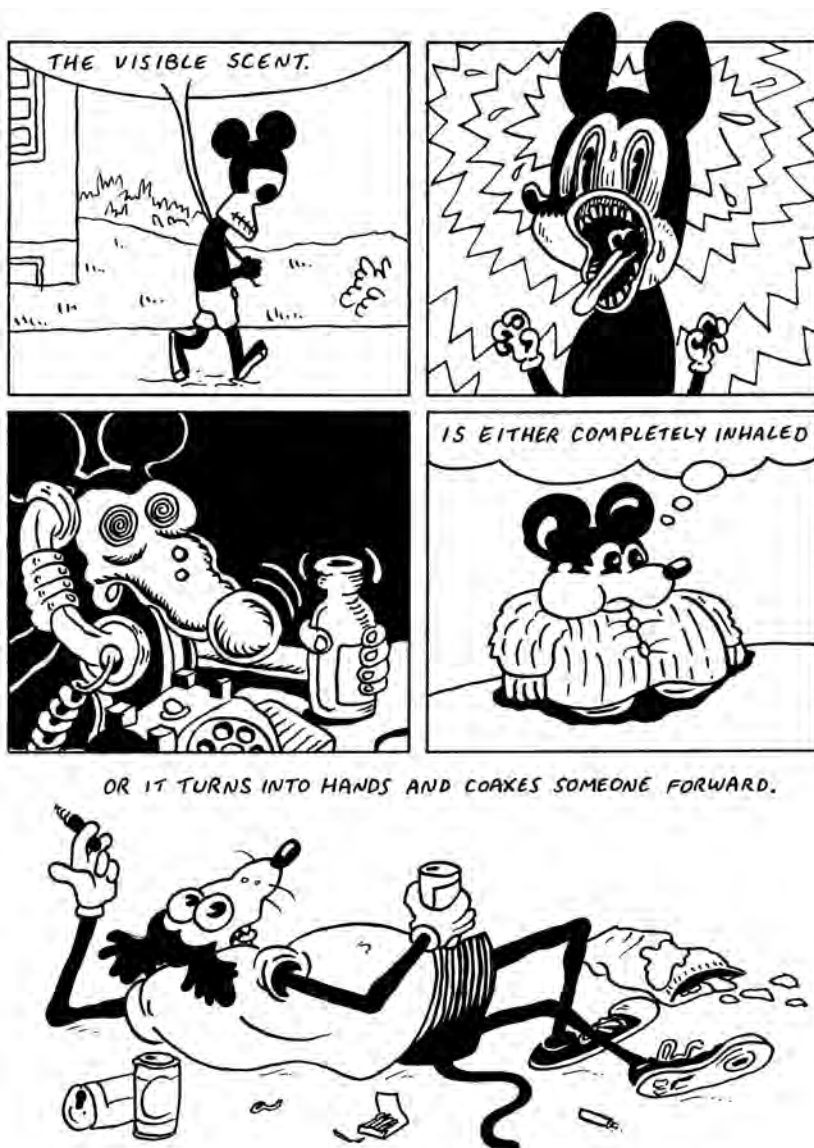


FIGURE 9. (At left, from top) Panels redrawn and taken from Jason, *Angst Vol. 1* (Norway, 2008); Winchluss, *The Mickey Mutant Show* (France, 1999); R. Suicide, *My Life as a Foot* (Canada, 2007); Aleksandar Zograf, *Hypnagogic Review* #5 (Serbia, 2001); Robert Armstrong, *Mickey Rat* #3 (United States, 1980).



FIGURE 10. (At left, from top) Panels redrawn and taken from Gomé & Fedi, @!!! (France, 2002); Aider Mahfoud, "Histoires pour rire" (Algeria, 1984); Fatih Solmaz, untitled (Turkey, 2006); unknown artist, "μ" (The Dynamic Napoleon) (Greece, 1980).

“You, Again?” Notes

RICHARD CURTIS: What is the secret to great com—

ROWAN ATKINSON: [*Interrupting.*] Timing.²

And inflection. Or, more broadly, context. But also tropes, or repetition.

Shame? Definitely projection. And distance. Comedy tends to hover at arm’s length from the teller, from what’s told, from the telling itself. The funniest single-panel comic has got to be some version of two or more people involved in something horrifying and shameful, maybe tragic; someone says: “Someday we’ll look back on this and laugh.” Comedy *is* invested, but in the meta-analysis as well as the individual study.

So, not really tragedy plus time, but potentially (a) whatever you’ve got plus (b) whatever it takes to see it. Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* isn’t funny because Bouvard and Pécuchet are tragic figures, nor because we’re witnessing their (fictional) postretirement activities more than a century after they were conjured up. They are, rather, the lens through which we see the weakness of a structured argument. Even if we don’t quite get the joke, we’re not really laughing at their failure but at failure’s repetition, its inevitability, its *insistence*.

“I’ve read *many* books,” Professor Mephisto says in the first sentence of the sex comedy *Candy*; “*many* books,” he concludes, seventy-four words later. Terry Southern has been compared to Flaubert, but not, I don’t think, to Li Yu, and yet his and Mason Hoffenberg’s *Candy* is nothing if not *The Carnal Prayer Mat*; both are picaresque novels detailing the exploits of sexual adventurers that poke at puritan assumptions. It’s not the sexual excess that’s funny in either; it’s the rhetorical excess itself, the accumulation, the repetition. Jokes may rarely translate, but comedy—an inventory, a pileup, a series of prodding gestures—often does. Some day we’ll look back on it and laugh, we hope.

I lifted the text for “You, Again?” from the *Comics Journal*’s long-defunct online message board. Someone had called for examples of comics and animation clichés, and responses flooded the thread for several days following. I organized the responses into a poem and then posted it with the title “Plop Takes” to the Flarf email list. A plop take is like a spit take, but rather than spewing his or her drink, the taker lifts off from earth, away from the observed object or event, motion lines beneath their feet.

Like *Candy*’s Professor Mephisto, I, too, have read *many* books; unlike the professor, a sizeable percentage of my own “books” are treasured comics, mostly in languages other than English, found in cities around

2. Rowan Atkinson and Richard Curtis, “Joke,” comedy sketch.

the world by myself or generous enablers aware of my lust for artifacts of international culture. To boast that I have read them is a stretch, of course. I've *pored over* them, dumbly. The panels in "You, Again?" were selected and redrawn, with minimal alteration, from some of my favorites.

"You, Again?" is obviously a meditation on comedy as made manifest in the comics, but it's not an attempt to say anything about any specific culture, nor about the "universality" of anything, really. While I do believe that comedy translates (as opposed to jokes, which require specific syntax, on top of—or, literally, beneath—everything else, and therefore don't), I don't believe we're all alike. Thus the *specificity* of individual panels by actual (living and dead) artists, depicting comedic themes or tropes shared across cultures: exaggeration, grotesquerie, shame, projection, mirroring, repetition, accumulation.

Gigantic Realism: The Rise of the Novel and the Comedy of Scale

Mark McGurl

1. They Might Be Giants, Really

This is a story about giants, about giants in literature but also, and more importantly, about the disappearance of giants from literary history or, rather, their migration from the mainline of that history to its margins, such that the phenomenon traditionally described as the rise of the novel occurs largely unburdened by the supersized beings who live on in children's literature and cinema and advertisements for frozen vegetables. The roll call of giants in earlier literature is quite long; there they are fighting the gods in the Gigantomachy of Greek myth; there they are again in the Bible and folkloric fairytale, whether it is Goliath or Gogmagog or the giants killed by Jack. Giants can be found in Dante Alighieri (1321) and of course François Rabelais (1564), in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596), John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) but not in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), let alone *Tom Jones* (1749), or in any of the works of Jane Austen, Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, or Henry James. If, as we have it from the highly developed critical discourse stemming with different emphases from Erich Auerbach and Ian Watt, the triumph of the novel is also the triumph of its realism, then that triumph would appear to have required the gradual culling of the herd of literary giants begun, let us say, in 1605, with the satirical reversion of those "thirty or more enormous giants" on the plains

This essay is dedicated to the Center for the Study of the Novel (est. 2000) and thereby to its founder, Franco Moretti.

Critical Inquiry 43 (Winter 2017)

© 2017 by The University of Chicago. 00093-1896/17/4302-0011\$10.00. All rights reserved.

near La Mancha into windmills.¹ It has often wistfully been said of history that the age of giants has passed into a sadly shrunken modernity, but the literary version of that passing bears the marks of aesthetic intention, a desire to get real.

So no doubt the most efficient way of explaining the marginalization of the giant in literary history would simply be to group him with all the other ridiculous beings cast off by the novel as it begins to produce “representations of everyday life in which that life is treated seriously,” including wizards, ghosts, trolls, elves, and foundling princes.² Hoping to draw attention to an underexplored comic dimension of that newfound seriousness, I would like to take a more circuitous path to an explanation. This one begins with the giant’s defining feature, his size, and not his obvious fictionality. “Where did man get his giants?” asks José Ortega y Gasset in his study of *Don Quixote*, seeking to explain how the “barbarous, brutal, mute, meaningless reality of things” like windmills is transmuted into such idealities.³ But if we grant, in line with a broadly anthropological conception of the literary, that all narrative forms are “realistic” in the minimal sense that they are symbolically responsive to (if also constructive of) experience, can we not see how the giant, in his earth-born bulk, might personify some profoundly pressing exigencies of ordinary life? For that matter, has not every single human being “really” lived among giants, in a sense? They did so when they were children living among adults, occupying the spaces underneath and between those comparatively all-powerful bodies. While most children are fated to see their parents shrunken

1. Miguel De Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York, 2003), p. 58. See also Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1947; Princeton, N.J., 2003), and Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1957; Los Angeles, Calif., 2001).

2. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 342.

3. José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, excerpted in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, 2000) pp. 283, 285. Fascinatingly, the ur-text of giants seen at a distance, canto 31 of *Inferno*, perfectly reverses this polarity of reality and ideality when Dante thinks he sees a city in the distance, only to be told “because you try to penetrate the shadows / . . . from much too far away, you confuse the truth with your imagination. . . . But now, before we go on farther, / to prepare you for the truth that could seem strange, / I’ll tell you these aren’t towers, they are giants” (Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, vol. 1 of *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Mark Musa [New York, 1984], p. 354). This already suggests what this essay will argue at length: Miguel De Cervantes’s project of demystification might also be understood as a remystification of the problem of scale.

MARK MCGURL is professor of English at Stanford University. He is the author most recently of *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. His email is mcgurl@stanford.edu

down to ordinary size, they are not wrong to have internalized the lesson the erstwhile gigantism of their elders first taught them about priority and scale: no matter how stupid it might appear, the precedent world is bigger than you. While not necessarily quixotic, to tilt at it will be to feel the laws of physics in massive (re)action. Of course, this image of brute-force asymmetry does not begin to exhaust the uses of the giant, whose humanoid bigness has been a vehicle for any number of more specific symbolizations; and neither, crucially, does the question of spatial magnitude begin to exhaust the modalities of the problem of scale as it is presented to experience. And yet the largeness of the giant makes that problem particularly easy to see, literally.

The task here will be to rediscover the problem of scale as it informs the rise and subsequent history of the novel even as it is gradually *compressed* and made largely invisible therein, the better to manifest the seriousness with which it will henceforth take ordinary life. My argument will be that this compression is also a form of repression but that the shrinking of the problem of scale in the history of the novel sets the scene for its periodic explosive return as unbidden, outsize comedy—that is, as a problem for novelistic form.⁴ Further, I will argue that the comedy produced in these explosions is of a substantially different character than the good-natured, demotic comedy put at the center of the novel form by Mikhail Bakhtin and which the *realist* novel, in Auerbach's account, would laboriously marginalize (if by no means eliminate) in pursuit of its characteristically serious aesthetic ends.⁵ Distinct both from the slobbering hilarity of the Rabelaisian tradition on the one hand and from the more decorous satirical levity of the novel of manners on the other, the form of comedy that will occupy our attention stems not from ordinary perception but from forms of empirical observation that take the nature of the physical world, as it were, *too seriously*. As mirror gives way to microscope, it appears not prior to but as the result of a fervent desire to get real. Searching for the roots of this overserious, and thus comical, empiricism as it emerges in and as literary history, I will begin by revisiting a crucial moment in the rise of the novel in England, drawing attention to its preoccupation with various forms of visible incongruity, yield of the period's scientific and colonial adventures. I will then touch down on a series of later examples in which this problem of scale appears in what I take to be its progressively

4. As indicated by its title, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (New York, 2015) presents an interesting version of this repression, where the problem of the gigantic is more specifically associated with the imperfectly forgotten historical violence between peoples.

5. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1965; Bloomington, Ind, 2009).

modern form, as the problem of explosively small-scale or quantum reality. As we'll see, if optically enhanced experimental encounters with the physical world laid bare new frontiers of the real for authoritative empirical (and imperial) inspection, they also occasioned a literal derangement at the point of scalar observation and disembedding of the category of the human from its assumed place of pride on the *scala naturae*. Born in and alongside violent confrontations with the colonial other, these explorations convert a presumption of cultural superiority into a baleful, self-implicating universalism—even misanthropy—whose political charge can only be profoundly equivocal.

The concentrated literary expression of this dislocation is what I like to call posthuman comedy, thereby inflecting (and to some degree explaining) the comic tradition first anthologized by André Breton under the label *humor noir*.⁶ For Breton, who began to conceptualize this project in the 1930s but only saw it come to fruition in the 1950s, the “requirements of the modern sensibility” make it “increasingly doubtful that any poetic, artistic, or scientific work that does not contain *this kind* of humor will not. . . . be condemned more or less rapidly to perish” (A, p. xiv). Whether or not it should be granted such exclusive purchase on modernity, no one could dispute black humor’s increasing pervasiveness in and after the event of world war or the strength of its grip on contemporary quality entertainment in the novel, film, and cable television drama alike. In the immediate postwar period it came to be associated with philosophical existentialism, with its trademark fascination with the darkly comic absurdity of human life, and was a particularly strong note in US fiction of the 1960s, defining the sensibilities of figures like Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon.⁷ But as is already suggested in Breton’s curious framing of black humor in terms of cultural longevity (to be without it now is “more or less rapidly to perish”), it easily survived the passing of the absurdist-existentialist moment into the museum of faded intellectual fashions, just as its roots can be found nearly three hundred years in the past, in the work of Jonathan Swift, long before anyone thought of sporting a black

6. See André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco, 1997); hereafter abbreviated A. My first attempt to characterize posthuman comedy appeared in Mark McGurl, “The Posthuman Comedy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012): 533–53. The present essay can be considered a kind of prequel to the latter.

7. See, for instance, the appearance in succession of two Breton-inspired anthologies of contemporary fiction: *Black Humor*, ed. Bruce Jay Friedman (New York, 1965), and *The World of Black Humor: An Introductory Anthology of Selections and Criticism*, ed. Douglas M. Davis (New York, 1967).

turtleneck and beret. As Breton puts it, “when it comes to black humor, everything designates [Swift] as the true initiator” (A, p. 3).

By contrast to comedy in its classically ameliorative and optimistic form, where (as in Dante’s *Commedia* or William Shakespeare’s romantic comedies) everything tends either toward salvation or conclusive social reintegration and marriage, works of black humor have no obvious utility in the disciplinary reproduction of the social order, pitched as they are on the hazy border between a radically dissident consciousness and the collapse of the latter into pessimistic passivity.⁸ If they are frequently satirical, as in Swift, they instance a satirical imperative far removed from realistic hope of improvement in their targets, going more toward what Charles Knight emphasizes as the central drive of satire toward extramoral “correct perception,” toward the insight that “what we see” with ordinary vision “is not what is.”⁹ Accessing psychoanalytic categories, Breton’s way of putting this is to say that, in the deployment of black humor, the “hostility of the hypermoral *superego* toward the *ego* is . . . transferred to the utterly amoral *id* and gives its destructive tendencies free rein” (A, p. 213). That is, while the comedy of manners is socially regulative—the fun made of fictional characters working toward the correction of risible behavior in general—the *id* knows better than to expect improved behavior on the part of the ultimate object of its derision, humankind.

Indeed, it assumes otherwise, and if Patrick O’Neill is therefore correct, in his study of the postsixties moment in US literature, to associate black humor with “entropy,” with the “loss of certainty” and tendency of things to devolve into an unredeemed mess, his account needs to be supplemented in one crucial respect.¹⁰ This we can do simply by paying due respect to the paradoxical nature of the Second Law of Thermodynamics as a law—that is, a form of (negative) certainty about where things are eventually headed.¹¹ What is most fundamentally at stake in black humor is not the pathos of unknowability but the revelation of “truths” we worry we might not be able to deny: that humanity is at base an entropic matter

8. As Max Schulz puts it, black humor “enacts no individual release or social reconciliation; it often moves toward, but ordinarily fails to reach, that goal.” For Schulz, black humor can be partially differentiated from existentialism in removing the latter’s lingering “respect for the self” (Max F. Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World* [Athens, Ohio, 1973], pp. 8, 6).

9. Charles Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (New York, 2004), p. 3. See also Wyndham Lewis, “The Greatest Satire Is Non-Moral” in *Men without Art* (1934; Santa Barbara, Calif., 1987), pp. 85–93.

10. See Patrick O’Neill, “Entropy: The Loss of Certainty,” *The Comedy of Entropy: Humor, Narrative, Reading* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 3–23.

11. See *ibid.*

of fact, not a positive value; that, subject to the laws of nature, it *will* fall into every imaginable form of error. Locating this sentiment on the borders of the otherwise optimistic rise of the novel, I in turn will associate it with a growing awareness of a deep perplexity surrounding the scale of the human in what we have recently come to call the Anthropocene, its tendency to seem at once too small (ethically and otherwise) and too large, an irremovable burden on itself and others.

Tracing the genealogy of this awareness, my point will be that if one grants the latent realism of the figure of the giant, then, dialectically, the expulsion of the giant from the realist novel might be taken as evidence of a latent *unrealism* in the genre. This is true *even as* in some ways the novel grows more and more sophisticated, in fact more realistic, about scale, breaking its crude association with spatial magnitude alone. If the realist novel is the aesthetic expression of what Watt called “a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life than had ever been attempted before,” then posthuman comedy proves that one can always look closer still and that to do so might be to see the conception of the human taken for granted in novelistic realism begin to dissolve.¹² Attending to this novelistic mode, we can begin to take Watt’s “scientific” more seriously than he did and than criticism on the novel-qua-novel after Watt has tended to do. We can ask a deceptively simple question: apart from an occasional metaphorical resource, or inspiration for a set of themes; apart even from the ambiguously novelistic subgenre called scientific romance and then, later, science fiction, *what has science been to the novel?* To judge from literary history, it has not always been of help in allowing texts to realize themselves as serious representations of everyday life. Neither has it been an invitation to dispassion, generating instead a mash-up of hilarity and despair. As John Bender has noted, tying the rise of the novel to the radicalism of the scientific Enlightenment in a way that has been helpful to my thinking here, “Kant’s Horatian dictum, ‘dare to know,’ could turn corrosive.”¹³

2. Scaling the Novel

Our topic is the problem of scale as it appears in the novel, but it’s worth remembering at the outset that people have been thinking about the aesthetic management of scale at least since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where it is famously asserted that “a beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement

12. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 11.

13. John Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif., 2012), p. 14.

of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude.”¹⁴ For Aristotle this is true both of material objects of beauty and of narratives, which should be as large as possible but not too large, neither too large to see whole nor too long in duration to remember in toto. Whereas for Protagoras, its original author, the assertion that “man is the measure of all things” had apparently been a simple statement of epistemological relativism, his successor, keying artistic form to the faculties of the average spectator, converts it into an aesthetic norm.¹⁵ In the Renaissance the Protagoras slogan would be upgraded to suggest something even more impressive; the nobility and superiority of humanity as a whole, which species is now understood to have achieved a godlike singularity with respect to the act of measure.¹⁶ This is most obvious in the medium of painting as, looking outward from the perfect proportionality of the Vitruvian body, Renaissance art discovers and articulates the rules of pictorial perspective with new precision. It is also conspicuous, although in a different way, in romantic poetry and Kantian philosophy, where transcendental subjectivity, wielding the ultimate yardstick that is reason, takes the measure even of the sublime in nature with the mathematical concept of infinity. While the Renaissance version scales the world externally, submitting it to the discipline of modern optics and Euclidian geometry, the romantic version does so internally, accessing an even purer form of math. Given the importance and richness of these examples, which have inspired libraries of commentary and debate (including over the validity of the kind of commonplaces I have just enumerated), it is perhaps no wonder that the problem of scale has not been seen as central to the discourse of the novel. And yet upon closer inspection it has been crucial to defining the genre’s realism.

Certainly it was beginning to do so by 1719, when Daniel Defoe’s *Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* began what might be described as the wholesale conversion of the strange into the measured.¹⁷ By critical convention, the realism of *Crusoe* is evident in its avoidance of traditional romance plots in favor of a quasi-autobiographical, protobourgeois individualist form; in the relative contemporaneity and specificity of its settings as against the legendary or mythical past; and,

14. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York, 1961), p. 18.

15. See Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus* (New York, 2008).

16. “Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality) into the *phainomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine” (Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* trans. Christopher S. Wood [New York, 1991], p. 72).

17. See Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Thomas Keymer (New York, 2007); hereafter abbreviated R.

relatedly, in the new seriousness with which it takes the fundamentally temporal nature of human experience. Working the vein opened by Auerbach, Franco Moretti extends this account by attending to *Crusoe's* discovery of the unsurprising—that is, of the ordinary and everyday—as a legitimate source of interest for the novel genre, which will henceforth partially reverse the relation of foreground and background in more traditional narrative forms: “The island . . . was probably planned as one of several fillers *subordinated* to Robinson’s unheard-of adventures. . . . But an ‘unforeseen, uncontrolled expansion’ . . . of the everyday occurred within the maritime adventure plot: the island shook off its functional subordination, and became meaningful *in itself*.”¹⁸ Thus, for Moretti, in a way that will only come to full fruition in the Victorian nineteenth century, *Robinson Crusoe* reflects the emergence of a bourgeois world that is itself becoming more predictable and rationalized and comfortably scaled. An alternative view, entertained briefly by Moretti himself,¹⁹ would be to say that realism *compensates* for a world whose technoscientific modernity has kicked it out of joint, in which all that is solid is melting into air. Conjoining these views dialectically, we might begin to account for the latent contradiction, or at least tension, in the very idea of an uncontrolled expansion of the everyday. To the extent that the *everyday* is the cipher for social relations under capitalism, that expansion is perhaps bound to hit a limit and fall into crisis.

Arriving so early in this history, the realism of *Crusoe*, perhaps not surprisingly, is so compelling because it mightily struggles to tame what its original title calls the strange and surprising—compositional values that run opposed to the representation of the everyday but which are not, for all that, intrinsically opposed to the real. Indeed, what we see here is a character attempting in extremis to scale and rescale his experience in such a way that it can count as ordinary and where ordinariness is strongly correlated with a state of bourgeois emotional equilibrium, the scaling of affect.²⁰ As you’ll recall, since it is the most canonical moment of this most canonical of texts, having been perfectly alone for eighteen years, Robinson one day finds himself standing “like

18. Franco Moretti, “Serious Century,” *History, Geography, and Culture*, vol. 1 of *The Novel*, ed. Moretti (Princeton, N.J., 2006), p. 373.

19. See *ibid.*, p. 392.

20. I would therefore want to partially resist Sarah Tindal Kareem’s claim that Defoe’s novel intends above all to “reveal . . . the ordinary world to be beset by hidden mysteries and dangers,” although it’s true that *Crusoe's* *wondrous* (but is that an adequate term for his affective state?) discovery of the footprint happens many years into his project of establishing his island life as ordinary (Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* [New York, 2014], p. 81).

one Thunder-struck” or as if he has “seen an Apparition,” “exceedingly surpriz’d” to find “the Print of a Man’s Naked Foot on the Shore” (*R*, p. 130). In his initial attempt to talk himself out of the ghost story suggested by this footprint, which has him “fancying every Stump at a distance to be a Man” (*R*, p. 130), we encounter an image of realism as perfectly scaled mimesis and as perfect self-coincidence: “I began to perswade my self that it was all a Delusion; that it was nothing else but my own Foot” that had imprinted on the sand (*R*, p. 134). Surely, after such a long time alone, a forgotten mark of his own movement is the most realistic explanation of the print? Alas, the realism of self-coincidence is foiled by further empirical investigation:

But I cou’d not perswade my self fully of this, till I should go down to the Shore again, and see this Print of a Foot, and measure it by my own, and see if there was any Similitude or Fitness, that I might be assur’d it was my own Foot. . . . When I came to measure the Mark with my own Foot, I found my Foot not so large by a great deal; both these Things fill’d my Head with new Imaginations, and gave me the Vapours again, to the highest Degree. [*R*, p. 134]

Here, I would say, in the scalar incongruity of foot and much larger footprint, is not so much a ghost story as a miniaturized giant narrative, and as we see it is one associated with severe emotional disturbance. This won’t be fully quieted until Robinson takes virtual colonial possession of the racial other who is Friday and everything is adequately, realistically explained to his satisfaction, the small triumphing over the large. The point, though, is to notice how it was the strange and surprising explanation of the footprint, evidencing out-of-scale otherness and not perfect mimetic self-coincidence, which turns out to be the true one. When this point expands and begins to control a whole narrative, we are in posthuman comedy.

And sure enough, as against *Robinson Crusoe*’s slight but alarming discrepancy between foot and footprint, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, published only seven years later, gives us men who are seventy-two feet tall. The giants have already returned to literary history, and if it is tempting to say simply that Swift’s text lags behind its more serious predecessor, mired still in the world of mythical adventures, this can’t be completely true. While it restores many of the marvelous improbabilities to the voyage narrative that *Crusoe* had removed, thus provoking its banishment from most discussions of the rise of the novel, it distances itself just as fully as its Whiggish forebear from traditional romance plots and timeless, unspecified identities. If Defoe is, as Watt claims, “the first of our writers who

visualised the whole of his narrative as though it occurred in an actual physical environment,”²¹ then Swift is not far behind and then some; as has been convincingly detailed by Cynthia Sundberg Wall, *Gulliver’s Travels* is arguably *more* striking than *Crusoe* in the intensity of the virtually visual, visceral, and tactile narrative effects produced by its distortions of scale.²² How then to explain its relation to the realist novel? This question has given literary historians some trouble.²³ Michael McKeon, for one, interprets it as a conservative rejoinder to the progressive middle-class ideology of such as Defoe, puncturing that ideology’s pretensions to empiricist truth telling without however taking a *simply* reactionary form. Insisting, in the very outlandishness of Gulliver’s narrative, on the distorting effects of subjectivity in the naïve empiricist account of knowledge, Swift “contributes, as fully as Defoe does by sponsoring it, to the growth of modern ideas of realism. . . . The attack [on naïve empiricism] would be ineffective if it were based only on the old unsearchability of the divine spirit and its intentions.”²⁴

Indeed, especially coming from an ardent defender of the institutional authority of the Church of Ireland, the utter absence of Christianity in Swift’s text is highly interesting, but I think we can take McKeon’s interpretation even farther in this direction. The point is not simply, as he would have it, that Gulliver is crazy or a liar or both, as though he were an early instance of an unreliable narrator. The problem comes more so from his self-defeating disclosure of a hidden strangeness in the nature of ordinary physical reality. As first explored by Marjorie Nicolson at the dawn of the field of literature and science, *Gulliver’s Travels* would be unthinkable except as it has thoroughly absorbed the documents of the Royal Society and the burgeoning English scientific culture of its time more broadly, where telescope and microscope had recently altered the scale of experimental inquiry. In Swift the “results” of that inquiry are not offered as evidence of the triumph of Enlightenment man, but neither are they exactly refuted. As Nicolson explains:

21. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 26.

22. See Cynthia Sundberg Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2006), p. 81.

23. “Is *Gulliver’s Travels* a novel? Here most would demur” (Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* [1957; Princeton, N.J., 1971], p. 303). “*Gulliver’s Travels* is not a novel in any meaningful sense of that slippery term that I know, yet its generic status would be difficult to establish without the novel in mind” (J. Paul Hunter, “*Gulliver’s Travels* and the Novel,” *The Genres of “Gulliver’s Travels,”* ed. Frederik Smith [Newark, N.J., 1990], p. 56).

24. Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, 2002), pp. 352–53.

In the picture of Man as in the picture of Nature that emerged during the early period of the microscope, there was dualism. Optimism and pessimism were combined. . . . If microscopical dissection had proved that plants were much like animals and animals much like man, did they not also show the reverse? Was man but another animal, like in his destiny as in his structure? Was he too an automaton, a mere complex of parts, a 'little world made cunningly,' acting only by mechanical laws? Below him the long scale of nature stretched away indefinitely, perhaps infinitely; but what of his place in that scale?²⁵

Absorbing this context, *Gulliver* marks itself as an inescapably modern text—Breton speaks of Swift's "remarkably modern spirit" (A, p. 30)—even as it bends the progressive scientific optimism of the realist novel toward a darkly hilarious pessimism. One could certainly call this pessimism conservative, but given its unflinching outrage at the inhumanity of modern scientific and imperial exploitations, and out of respect for the alteration of political polarities since the early eighteenth century, it might better be called Swiftian. It is in any case an important moment in the history of comedy, and it coincides with an equally profound moment in the history of novelistic thinking—thinking via fictional narrative—as such: the advent of a newly sophisticated, *because suddenly confused*, literary understanding of scale.

Looking closely at *Gulliver*, one can construct a kind of dialectical sequencing in this understanding, and I think it's one that, writ larger, structures the modern literary history of scale as a whole. In its first moment, the moment of thesis, the strength of the human capacity for measure is affirmed. Man is still the measure of all things. Having, in Brobdingnag, discovered himself a tiny man soon after having endured life as a huge one in Lilliput, Gulliver borrows an insight from Bishop Berkeley:

Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison. It might have pleased Fortune to let the *Lilliputians* find some Nation, where the People were as diminutive with respect to them, as they were to me.

25. Marjorie Nicolson, *Science and Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1962), p. 227. See also Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment*, p. 34. The discovery that the scientific truth of the matter might reside at scales either much smaller or much larger than ordinary human perception specifies an even broader problematic of the scientific revolution as described by historians of science like Steven Shapin; while that revolution displaces authority from texts of the ancients (preeminently Aristotle) toward systematic observations conducted in the present, explanations of the latter ironically "assaulted common sense at a mundane as well as a cosmic level," thus depriving scientific truth of its "human-scaled character" (Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* [Chicago, 1996], pp. 28, 29).

And who knows but that even this prodigious Race of [Brobdingnagians] might be equally overmatched in some distant part of the World.²⁶

Gulliver is twelve times larger than the Lilliputians, and the Brobdingnagians twelve times larger than him, and this suggests a potential infinity of gradually scaled embodiments from the unimaginably small to the unimaginably large. The ability to frame such a thought is exhilarating, even liberating, and comports in a purely formal way with a reassuring image of the *scala naturae*, or great chain of being, that descends from classical thought to Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man" and beyond. The delight the first two voyages of *Gulliver's Travels* provide to children, in particular, makes sense if we consider the various ways they are learning to scale the world through which they move, associating the physical scale of things with various scales of value. (An even more elaborate rendition of this dynamic is represented in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.) In its gradually assumed function as a children's story, *Gulliver* converts a primary human cognitive developmental necessity into an aesthetic structure of mobility and mastery, the *pleasure of measure*.

And yet there is something obviously wrong in stopping here in our reading of *Gulliver*, with an affirmation of its capacity to produce comic delight. I think this is true even before one has considered the subsequent two voyages, which collapse into a more ragged sense of multiplicity than their pleasingly complementary predecessors, as though a beautifully completed thought had for some reason been pried open again. With their final arrival at a state of acid misery and misanthropy, they have been known—especially the third—to fall entirely out of the story's many abridged versions. But I think the problem that forces this reopening is already visible in the first two books, which differ from all previous giant narratives in conceiving the question of scale in *dynamically relative* terms: Gulliver is very large *and then* very small, and then normal sized again, depending on his context.²⁷ And what about these shifts? To me they suggest a restless excess of fascination with size that perhaps cannot help but produce further, and less delightful, insights. Thesis meets antithesis.

26. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Albert J. Rivero (New York, 2001), pp. 72–73. See also Frederik N. Smith, "Science, Imagination, and Swift's Brobdingnagians," *Eighteenth Century Life* 14 (Feb. 1990): 100–14.

27. And yet see Anne Lake Prescott's informative account of some early Stuart precursors to *Gulliver's* fascination with the relativity of scale, typically managed by the juxtaposition in the text of a large figure and a small one; see Anne Lake Prescott, "The Odd Couple: Gargantua and Tom Thumb," in *Monster Theory*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 75–91.

Take for instance that moment in the second voyage when Gulliver has become a thing of amusement to the Brobdingnagian ladies: "Neither indeed could I forebear smiling at myself, when the Queen used to place me upon her Hand towards a Looking-Glass, by which both our Persons appeared before me in full View together; and there could nothing be more ridiculous than the Comparison: So that I really began to imagine myself dwindled by many Degrees below my usual Size."²⁸ Here, as I have described elsewhere, the act of comparative scaling has already begun to sour. Looking in the mirror, he is both measurer and measured but comically belittled. And yet, amazingly, and crucially, things were no better for Gulliver when he was a giant in Lilliput. Far from gloating over his superior strength and power, as an ordinary giant might be wont to do, he wakes in a condition of bondage and persists in a state of abject humility. Although Swift criticism has done little with this irony, it is a point whose importance has been intuited by virtually every illustrator the text has ever had, who depict Gulliver strapped to the coastal ground and surrounded by little men. What exactly is it about this image that is so enchanting? For starters, it shows us the transformation of the problematic of scale from one of largeness to one of numerousness, where the many triumph over the one. In geopolitical terms it is the perfect inversion of the Crusoe-Friday encounter, where Crusoe is finally able to peel away one solitary other from the many who live on the neighboring island, the better to dominate him. As such, at however much distance from the actual plot of the story, it is a latent image of revolution from below.

Although Gulliver is happy, in time, to intervene in Lilliput's naval war with Blefuscu and to save the queen's burning castle with a heroically torrential act of urination, the latter act becomes cause for his shame and ostracism, not glory. Big or small, size as such is in this text an index of various kinds of vulnerability, not simply of perspectival mobility. This fact is made plain to Gulliver from his early moments in Lilliput when he begins to feel what he calls the "Demands of Nature." He is hungry, and it turns out that feeding him requires a provision equivalent to the needs of 1728 (12 x 12 x 12) Lilliputians. The waste he produces is similarly gargantuan, requiring the work of two Lilliputian laborers with wheelbarrows to daily take it away. Such is the ecological burden imposed by Gulliver, but what if there were 1728 or more of him? The satisfaction of the desires of the revolutionary mass glimpsed above, the many, would point to ecological crisis in poor Lilliput. Connecting the problem of waste with Swift's

28. Quoted in McGurl, "'Neither Indeed Could I Forebear Smiling at Myself': A Response to Wai Chee Dimock," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Spring 2013): 633–34.

scatological poems, and with Gulliver's disgust for the mottled enormity of the Brobdingnagian female body, critics have declared Swift's "Excremental Vision" a major component of his legacy and vigorously debated its meaning, by turns objecting to its misogyny and misanthropy and celebrating its prescient elaboration of a theme in existential psychoanalysis.²⁹

For our part we can simply observe how the exhilarating mobility of relative scaling in Swift would be nothing outside its coupling with a humiliating physics of embodiment. In this, despite the clear line of continuity one can draw from him back to Rabelais (and from there back to the Menippean satirist Lucian, perhaps the first exponent of a critical gigantism), Swift's version of the grotesque is importantly distinct from his predecessor's, where, according to Bakhtin, the "bodily element is deeply positive." In the grotesque realism of Rabelais the "material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed."³⁰ In this view not man but the mass of men will be the measure of all things. Not so in Swift, who according to Breton "shared to the smallest possible degree Rabelais's taste for innocent, heavy-handed jokes and his constant drunken good humor" (A, p. 3). Swift instead saw forms and levels of human embodiment that, while equally comic, he associated with stuckness, death, and waste. This is why Breton nominates him and not Rabelais to the position of "true initiator" of the tradition of *humor noir* and why one can detect in Swift's writings some intimations of an apocalyptic ecological vision (A, p. 3). In human fecundity Rabelais saw an open-ended future for mankind. Swift saw us eventually drowning in our own shit.

3. Being and Size

The pleasure of measure; the humiliation of embodiment: *scale* has both of these implications, which in turn have intertwined implications for the history of the novel. Although already comprehended as early as Galileo, the relation between them would finally find its clearest theoretical articulation in the early twentieth century, in the advent of the discipline of mathematical biology.³¹ As detailed in D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *Growth and Form* (1917):

29. See, for instance, Norman O. Brown, "The Excremental Vision," *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn., 1985), pp. 179–201.

30. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 19.

31. In his *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences*, Galileo's Salvati observes that "nature [cannot] produce trees of extraordinary size because the branches would break under their own weight; so also it would be impossible to build up the bony structures of men, horses, or

We are accustomed to think of magnitude as a purely relative matter. We call a thing *big* or *little* with reference to what it is wont to be, as when we speak of a small elephant or a large rat; and we are apt accordingly to suppose that size makes no other or more essential difference, and that Lilliput and Brobdingnag are all alike, according as we look at them through one end of the glass or the other.³²

But this, for Thompson, misses a deeper and broader sense of scale, one that points to inviolable rules of embodiment as measured by the entire “field of action and reaction in the Universe”—that is, by the operation of the laws of nature *in toto*, including gravity and electromagnetism (O, p. 24). This sense of scale is not relative but absolute, knowing no physical boundaries, least of all the membranous boundary between a living organism and the environment from which it draws energy. The absolute scalar laws of embodiment pertain to every living cell, indeed to every molecule and atom as deeply as one can think them.

Inspired by his reading of Thompson, J. B. S. Haldane’s classic essay “On Being the Right Size” (1928) brings the point home with examples taken, inevitably, from parts of literary history now only ambiguously differentiated from children’s literature:

Let us take the most obvious of possible cases, and consider a giant man sixty feet high—about the height of Giant Pope and Giant Pagan in the illustrated *Pilgrim’s Progress* of my childhood. These monsters were not only ten times as high as Christian, but ten times as wide and ten times as thick, so that their total weight was a thousand times his, or about eighty to ninety tons. Unfortunately the cross sections of their bones were only a hundred times those of Christian, so that every square inch of giant bone had to support ten times the weight borne by a square inch of human bone. As the human thigh-bone breaks under about ten times the human weight, Pope and Pagan would have broken their thighs every time they took a step. This was doubtless why they were sitting down in the picture I remember. But it lessens one’s respect for Christian and Jack the Giant Killer.³³

other animals” (quoted in John Tyler Bonner, *Why Size Matters: From Bacteria to Blue Whales* [Princeton, N.J., 2006], pp. 29–30).

32. D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form* (New York, 1992), p. 24; hereafter abbreviated O.

33. See J. B. S. Haldane, “On Being the Right Size,” *Possible Worlds* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2009), pp. 18–19.

So giants as we know them are physically impossible, even unnatural. In my experience, the lesson we learn here about the matter of absolute, as opposed to relative, scale is still capable of producing a mild shock as we realize just how deceptive, in physical terms, a lively tradition in popular storytelling is. To say that narratives of the giant are unrealistic doesn't seem strong enough, somehow. Their unreality is of a different order than, say, the suspiciously unlikely discovery that this foundling is heir to the throne, which could happen. Enforced in and by the absolute requirements of scale, the humiliations of embodiment are even more humiliating than Swift knew. The implication is indeed that man is measured by all things, internally, externally, completely, endlessly.

The result is comedy, product of a perceived incongruity between one version of human being (as free) and another (as bound) occupying the same field of vision. These versions of human being would seem to correspond, in turn, to the major split in modern philosophy between formal idealism and scientific naturalism. The comic deflation of the former by the latter can be described in Bergsonian terms, where for "mechanical" in Bergson's famous formula for the comic as "*something mechanical encrusted upon the living*" we read *materially determined*, and where "encrusted" is switched out for "intrinsic to."³⁴ Encoding these values in the ironic juxtaposition of small with large, and vice versa, Swift's comedy of scale illustrates this incongruity and in so doing produces a secular image of the Fall as pratfall. To the extent that a human being is defined as intrinsically free, the comedy of scale is a posthumanist comedy. Indeed, we can surmise that it could not function as comedy without at least a residual commitment to that freedom. This still leaves the question of who or what, in the account of scale as absolute scale, is doing the measuring? If one were Swift or Pope, the assumption would be that the source of absolute measure is God, whose scaling powers are of a wholly different order than those of the human, and make a mockery of them. In Kantian and romantic philosophy, by contrast, human subjectivity is given transcendental status, and man is once again the measure of all things. While in Darwinian thinking he is once again not. By the time one gets to the secular evolutionary biology of Thompson and Haldane, that transcendental observation point has been emptied out; to say that indifferent nature *observes* and *measures* the bodies that take shape within it is only a matter of rhetorical convenience.

34. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1914), p. 37.

Even so, this subjectless source of authority underwrites a questionable rhetoric of species propriety even in Thompson, who observes that “men and trees, birds and fishes, stars and star-systems, have their appropriate dimensions, and their more or less narrow range of absolute magnitudes” (O, p. 17). The question of course is how elastic our conception of the human (or the bird or the fish) is allowed to be. Granted, a person could not be the same in every respect as an ordinary human being except in being seventy-two feet tall. That simply wouldn’t work. But if we find a way to attach a human brain to a seventy-two-foot tall steel exoskeleton, could that still be a kind of human being? A posthuman being? Thompson tells us that the “scale of human observation and experience lies within the narrow bounds of inches, feet or miles, all measured in terms drawn from our own selves or our own doings. Scales which include light-years, parsecs, Angstrom units, or atomic and sub-atomic magnitudes, belong to other orders of things and other principles of cognition” (O, p. 17). Using this formulation, we could say that while the novel largely restricts itself to the scale of ordinary human observation, posthuman comedy begins to avail itself of these “other” orders of cognition. If the novel after Defoe is the genre that, as Moretti puts it, asks readers to “confront facts directly: *all* facts, including unpleasant ones,” then the status of Gulliver is arguably that of a hypernovel, in that it is both less and more “realistic” than its realist counterpart.³⁵ If the realist novel rebukes traditional narrative forms of childish wish fulfillment, so in a way does Gulliver and arguably more so. Whatever else it is and does, *Gulliver’s Travels* is about the gradual prying loose of a man from the security of the human point of view until finally, as he lives among and is exiled from the wondrously virtuous horselike Houyhnhnms, he finds himself utterly alienated from his native species being. There is of course a lot more to be said about the text’s arrival at a perspective it feels only slightly anachronistic to call posthumanist; what I’ve wanted to draw attention to here is how that journey to the posthuman begins in literal derangement, in the loss of the ability to scale experience appropriately, and in the representation of that inability as a certain kind of comedy.

4. The Great Compression

Whatever enduring perplexities are revealed in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, it is safe to say that the realist novel succeeds, in subsequent decades, in

35. Moretti, “Serious Century,” p. 385. Here my account converges with Bender’s account of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dracula* as what he calls “metanovels” for “their revelation of unreality within the real” (Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment*, p. 105).

diminishing them, in diverting the problem of scale to children's literature and science fiction and in presenting a serious, human-scaled world as the norm.³⁶ Whether pitched at the level of small-scale intimacies or straining toward a grasp of the entire social system, the limits of the novel are defined by the limits of the human—which, to be sure, leaves space enough for a discourse of majestic complexity. By the same token, not a little of the drama of the subsequent literary history resides in the reexplosion of the problem of the scale as comedy and the variously named generic challenges this poses to serious realism. That is what we find in a text like Horace Walpole's foundational work of gothic fiction, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), when, in the first chapter, a building-sized helmet falls from the sky. It crushes Conrad, soon-to-be-married heir of the illegitimate Prince Manfred, who beholds "his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being."³⁷ Although Walpole apparently intended *Otranto* to have at least some of the virtues of a modern realist novel, serial apparitions of the gigantic pitch it into a different imaginative domain altogether, closer to children's literature than fiction for adults:

Is it the ghost? [I asked him] The ghost! No, no, said Diego, and his hair stood on end—it is a giant, I believe; he is all clad in armour, for I saw his foot and part of his leg, and they are as large as the helmet below in the court. As he said these words, my lord, we heard a violent motion and the rattling of armour, as if the giant was rising; for Diego has told me since, that he believes the giant was lying down, for the foot and leg were stretched at length on the floor. [C, p. 33]³⁸

Even parceled out in horizontal, fetishlike parts, there is something about the giant body that threatens the entire form of the realist narrative, just as it threatens the castle that gives the narrative its name, which finally, in a scene that would be at home in a Hollywood blockbuster, finds its walls "thrown down with a mighty force," "the form of [usurped Prince]

36. After this point, even a work like *Crusoe* will live a sort of double afterlife, on the one hand becoming a staple of children's literature, on the other a literary historical monument on the way to adult realism. An excellent account of the transformation of *Robinson Crusoe* into a staple of children's literature is available in Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago, 2008), pp. 129–50. For Lerer, along with its capacity for moral instruction, this text becomes useful in teaching "how to tell a story," which virtue could certainly serve both children and a long line of serious novelists (p. 146).

37. Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. Nick Groom (New York, 2014), p. 18; hereafter abbreviated C.

38. See also Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment*, p. 51.

Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appear[ing] in the centre of the ruins" (C, p. 103).

And yet I would agree with Wall that the "Swiftian skein" of *Otranto* "portrays a certain realism in its outsize things."³⁹ For her it is a social realism, a satirical exaggeration of the importance of things—made things, artifacts—in and to eighteenth-century culture that threaten to overwhelm the persons who use them. But while it is refreshing to think of it, therefore, as a kind of novel of *very bad* manners, this line of interpretation can continue to honor the literal return of the repressed so important to its plot if we also understand *Otranto's* things as a new materialist might—think of them, in other words, as situated on the boundary between the human and nonhuman, where an excess of artifice threatens to collapse back into the nature from whence it surely came. Their largeness would then be the largeness of nature itself, the realm of brute force that can only temporarily be commandeered by an unhinged tyrant like Manfred. This is one way of understanding the so-called gothic sublime: that is, the outsize intervention of the sublime, under the banner of gothic, in the otherwise comfortably scaled domestic spaces of the realist novel. It arises from the rubble of everyday realism neither as an occasion for the experience of transcendental subjectivity, as in the Kantian sublime, nor even simply for the emotion of terror, as in Edmund Burke, but for the recognition of the measure taken of the human body by larger things.

The story of the gothic novel after Walpole is in many ways the story of its attempt to put Manfred's castle back together again, reclaiming a modicum of respectability for the genre by replacing the supernatural with the supernatural explained. The first order of business in this reconstruction was to get rid of Walpole's embarrassing giant, as Clara Reeve does in her explicit revision of *Otranto*, *The Old English Baron* (1777), whose preface concedes that "we can conceive, and allow of, the appearance of a ghost; we can even dispense with an enchanted sword and helmet; but then they must keep within certain limits of credibility. A sword so large as to require an hundred men to lift it: a helmet that by its own weight forces a passage through a court-yard"—these things, she asserts, are merely laughable.⁴⁰ And so the giant is banished from the gothic novel, or rather buried in it, his energies now transferred, one might surmise, to the sublime landscapes

39. Wall, *The Prose of Things*, p. 122. For Wall, the gigantic in Walpole's novel is "a metaphorically realistic measure of the presence of things in eighteenth-century culture" (p. 118).

40. Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron* (London, 1807), p. ix.

of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley. Giants, as Susan Stewart informs us, had always been associated with the earth writ large.⁴¹ Vulnerable even so to spoofing from the ideological perspective of novelistic realism, most notably in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, other branches of the gothic didn't even try to distance themselves from the comic, only trying to recruit its dark authority to their own ends. One thinks, here, of the lordly mocking laughter that rings like a refrain throughout Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820): "‘Monster! and you laugh?’—‘Yes, I laugh at all mankind, and the imposition they dare to practice when they talk of hearts. I laugh at human passions and human cares. . . . One physical want, one severe and abrupt lesson from the tintless and shriveled lip of necessity, is worth all the logic of the empty wretches who have presumed to prate it.’"⁴² It is in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, barely holding itself together as a genre, that the gothic novel becomes unscaled once again, this time explicitly via the deranging intervention of technoscience.

This is visible narratively in that wonderful moment on the glacier, when Viktor "suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing toward me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of man. I was troubled. . . . I perceived, as the shape came nearer . . . that it was the wretch whom I had created."⁴³ Here the solace of the landscape as we find it in Radcliffe is negated by the reappearance of the giant, a figure in whom nature and technology alike run amok. The "loud and fiendish laugh" Viktor later hears in the darkness comes to him with the authority of malevolent nature: "It rung on my ears long and heavily; the mountains re-echoed it, and I felt as if all hell surrounded me with mockery and laughter" (*F*, p. 146). Of a piece with the understandable association of this text with romantic biology rather than physics, it has been remarkably easy to forget that Frankenstein's monster is a giant, perhaps because he is not *that* gigantic, measuring only eight feet high.⁴⁴ In the novel the monster's size is explained as a matter of

41. See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C., 1993), p. 71.

42. Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ed. Douglas Grant (New York, 1989), p. 213. On the constitutive proximity of the gothic to the comic, see Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (New York, 2005). On laughter in Maturin, see Ute Berns, "The Romantic Crisis of Expression: Laughter in Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Beyond," *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, ed. Manfred Pfister (New York, 2002), pp. 83–98.

43. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York, 2012), p. 67; hereafter abbreviated *F*.

44. One can't help but notice an emergent sorting of giantalia into two size categories, the eight footish and the seventy footish. The first suggests a plausible narrative of biological

scientific and surgical convenience in that “the minuteness of the parts” Viktor must cobble together to make a body “formed a great hindrance” to his efforts, but this convenience soon turns into horror (*F*, p. 33). This is bad for Viktor, but it could hardly be more important in the literary history of scale. Compressing the forces of nature into the destructive person of the large-but-not-that-large monster, the scalar modality at work here is rather one of energetic intensity than of physical extension per se.

As the nineteenth century progresses, this becomes the modality proper to modern technology, which follows a relentless logic of miniaturization, of condensed power, even as that condensation enables an immensity of technological construction and destruction. In a physical analogue to the act of observing the world through a microscope, technology leverages the vast reserves of energy density discovered to be available on a small scale, not only but especially via the act of combustion, whether of wood or coal or other fossil fuel. As Stewart notes, the terminus of this logic is the splitting of the atom achieved in the mid-twentieth century, where a tiny thing has monstrously large consequences: “Thus nuclear energy can be seen as the most extreme embodiment of technological abstraction, for it incorporates the most miniature abstraction (the split atom) with the most gigantic abstraction (that of a technological apocalypse).”⁴⁵ Finally this arrives at the Promethean paradox of which *Frankenstein* is rightly seen as one of the first and most brilliant expressions. On the one hand, it’s in the shrinking of the problem of scale that humanity takes a great leap forward in the technological domination of the natural world, including the human bodies in it; on the other hand, as every single one of the untold trillions of atoms of which it is made is discovered to contain potentially city-flattening force, that same natural world is revealed as utterly uncontrollable in a whole new way, at a whole new scale.

From this perspective, a text like Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) might begin to look somewhat nostalgic, as though the only real problem is to comprehend the body of nature in its guise of extensional largeness. In the chapter called “Cetology” whales are poetically-scientifically

continuity with ordinary (European) humans, while the second is more explosive in implication. See, for instance, Walpole’s *An Account of the Giants Lately Discovered; in a Letter to a Friend in the Country*, which responds to putatively nonfictional reports of the sighting of giants in a still cognitively distant land: “All that the public can yet learn, is, that captain Byron and his men have seen on the coast of Patagonia five hundred giants on horseback. Giants? you will cry, what do you call giants? . . . Come, what do you think of nine or ten feet high? And what do you think of five hundred such? Will Mrs. _____ cry, ‘Pish! That is no giant, it is only a well made man?’” (Walpole, *An Account of the Giants Lately Discovered; in a Letter to a Friend in the Country* [London, 1766], pp. 3–4).

45. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 102.

categorized according to size, and each size-category analogically tied to a physical form of the book—folio, octavo, duodecimo. Conceptually, the book contains the whale. Later, meditating further on the size of the whale, the narrator Ishmael gloats that it “affords a most congenial theme whereon to enlarge, amplify, and generally expatiate.”

One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor’s quill! Give me Vesuvius’ crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk.⁴⁶

Here is the imagined triumph of rhetoric over even the largest of creatures, and it has to be said that the sheer brilliance of Melville’s writing in this passage nicely reinforces its theme. But isn’t it also comic brilliance? Isn’t there an element of self-satire in its virtuosic hyperbole? No one would accuse Melville of producing, in *Moby-Dick*, a serious treatment of the everyday, but the nature of its comedy is complex; in its historical moment the prospects for the human, as against the Leviathanic gigantism of nonhuman nature, are unclear.⁴⁷ However seriously, or not, Melville’s romantic rhetorical scalar humanism takes itself, there is no doubting its deflation in the follow-up to *Moby-Dick*, the novel *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (1852), where the gigantic rock formations of the Hudson Valley landscape are far less reliably contained by the symbolizations they inspire. The scale of nature is too great to be contained by the novel, as transcendental cetology gives way to self-mocking naturalism, that is, a sense of being determined from without, by forces substantially larger even than the human imagination. As Émile Zola would say, “Determinism dominates everything. . . . All that can be said is that there is an absolute determinism for all human phenomena.”⁴⁸

46. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (New York, 1992), pp. 654, 655.

47. See Richard Dean Smith, *Melville’s Science: “Devilish Tantalization of the Gods!”* (New York, 1993).

48. Émile Zola, *“The Experimental Novel” and Other Essays*, trans. Belle M. Sherman (New York, 1894), p. 18.

And naturalist fiction is of course full of giants, giants small by the standards of *Gulliver* but quite large in relation to the people around them: "For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blonde hair six foot three inches from the ground."⁴⁹ The size of Frank Norris's McTeague and other naturalist brutes is interesting, an image, to begin with, of the general "bestiality" of humanity understood in evolutionary terms but more precisely of the comparative largeness of the forces of natural determination as against the puniness of human will. The naturalist beast has to be large to function as their bearer; his largeness contains, as static image, the *longue durée* of generational heredity. In this he becomes the inheritor of the gothic impulse to test the seriousness of the realist novel against the "laughter more terrible than any sadness . . . a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility," as Jack London would put it, that emanates from the wild.⁵⁰ Indeed, naturalist fiction is relentlessly comedic although only occasionally funny and is as apt to find the source of the problem of the human residing at a small scale as at a large. This is part of what motivates the hyperdescriptiveness of naturalism whose "inhumanity" would prove so objectionable to Georg Lukács, depriving the novelist of his politically salutary capacity for artfully manipulating proportions, for putting and keeping things in perspective.⁵¹ But if the "scientific truth" of the matter is molecular, or genetic, and if the novel wants to take its cues from science, relentless attention to detail is justified even if, as Fredric Jameson affirms, the "trajectory" of the naturalist text is one "of decline and failure, of something like an entropy on the level of then individual destiny."⁵² The life stories in and by which that small-scale truth is *expressed* are, in physical terms, also following a logic of *explosion*.

Of course, as has become clear in a recent wealth of illuminating studies of the relation between late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and science, the fiction we now tend to call naturalist was only

49. Frank Norris, *McTeague* (Mineola, N.Y., 2004), p. 4.

50. Jack London, *White Fang*, in "The Call of the Wild," "White Fang," and *Other Stories* (New York, 1981), p. 169.

51. "The descriptive method lacks humanity. Its transformation of men into still lives is only the artistic manifestation of its inhumanity" (Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn [London, 2005], p. 140).

52. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2013), p. 149. What the otherwise persuasive account of naturalism as staging entropic decline arguably misses is the protracted suspension or "stuckness" attendant to its "compulsion to describe," which Jennifer Fleissner astutely associates with the investigation of new historical possibilities for the (relatively small) women who so often accompany the naturalist giant (Jennifer L. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* [Chicago, 2004], p. 37).

one segment of a literary field broadly impacted by contemporaneous developments in biology, geology, and classical thermodynamics, all of which have consequences for the question of where, and on what scale, the truth of a given matter of human concern resides.⁵³ For instance, while utterly lacking the descriptive grittiness of naturalism, so-called nonsense literature is arguably no less a meditation on the meaning of the human in a world rescaled by modern science, and its comedy no less dark. The influence of evolutionary theory on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was noted long ago and continues to inspire readings of a work only awkwardly (but that is the point) described as a novel.⁵⁴ But in some ways the presence of "science" in the text is more basic than this. The natural fact most troubling to the Alice books is the passage of time, first encountered in the form of the nervous White Rabbit with a watch and then manifest in the ever-altering size of an ambiguously "little" (a word used more than a hundred times in the text) girl who must, alas, inexorably realize her biological destiny as a grown woman.⁵⁵ For the time being, however, as in Lilliput, littleness is in command. It is what sets the creation of the fictional world in narrative motion: "Imperius Prima flashes forth / Her edict 'to begin it.'"⁵⁶ As in Swift, much of the pleasure children take in Alice's adventures is the pleasure of measure, as she gradually learns to adapt her size to the scale of Wonderland society, at some points a giantess and at others threatening to shrink down to nothing, finally learning to regulate her size effectively. By the same token, the conditions placed upon that pleasure, which Carroll (in his day job as Charles Dodgson) would have associated with the balanced equations of mathematics and geometry, are felt in the merciless operation of the laws of physics acting in and on the body. From

53. See for instance Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven, Conn., 2009) and the vigorous line of Victorianist criticism stemming from Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York, 1983), and George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago, 1991); works like Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004) and Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (Chicago, 2013) have attended to the impact of geology on literature, and vice-versa, while that of thermodynamics is analyzed in Bruce Clarke, *Energy Forms: Allegory and Science in the Era of Classical Thermodynamics* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2001), and Barri J. Gold, *Thermopoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

54. See for instance William Empson, "The Child as Swain," *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York, 1974), pp. 253–94, and Rasheed Tazudeen, "Immanent Metaphor, Branching Form(s), and the Unmaking of the Human in Alice and *The Origin of Species*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 43 (Sept. 2015): 533–58.

55. The pervasiveness of the term *little* in Alice is noted in Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *The Story of Alice: Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland* (London, 2015), p. 39.

56. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Princeton, N.J., 2015), p. 3.

this perspective, again as in Swift, increased size is not an occasion for strength and pride, only of increased clumsiness and vulnerability.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle is surely right to claim that the “rule” (meaning here both the act of measure and the imposition of sociopolitical authority) at work in the Alice books is one “of *inversion*, not subversion. The game of nonsense . . . [is] the negative moment in the pedagogic dialectics of the acquisition by the child of good manners.”⁵⁷ And yet who could deny the remainder left behind in this dialectic? It lingers most obviously in the mass of undigested ugly feelings that run rampant in it, an early warning of the discontents of civilization. (Was there ever a more unpleasantly “delightful” book than *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, with its surfeit of crabby-souled creatures giving and taking offense? Like *Otranto*, if in a different way, it is a novel of very bad manners.) But it’s also there in the giant puppy Alice encounters soon after shrinking small enough to free her giant body from the White Rabbit’s house without, *Otranto*-like, destroying it. Remember this puppy? Unlike the other animals she meets underground, all of whom wear clothing and speak English, this dangerously galumphing puppy would appear to have entered the story from the real world, where dogs can’t talk, can’t even enact the inversion of sense as nonsense. Would it be too cute to claim that this giant puppy is the most surprising thing in the novel, the novel’s navel, its secret point of contact with an original reality where something essentially “small,” a puppy, needs only to be recontextualized to be seen as something huge, an existential threat?

A different version of this logic of compression and explosion is visible in Mark Twain’s late, unfinished novels, *The Great Dark* and *Three Thousand Years among the Microbes*, which achieve a depth of comedic darkness extraordinary even for a writer who, by this point in his career, had found himself as alienated from the general category of the human as Gulliver had finally been.⁵⁸ Like Swift, although starting from a generally more progressive, technophilic outlook than had been conceivable to his Augustan forebear, Twain’s disgust with imperial folly and exploitative capitalist inhumanity, combined with some wretched personal

57. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (New York, 2002), p. 113.

58. These texts are included in Mark Twain, *The Devil’s Race-Track: Mark Twain’s “Great Dark” Writings*, ed. John S. Tuckey (Berkeley, 1980). For Patricia Mandia these stories are instances of black humor in the specific sense that “the satire in them does not attempt to reform” (Patricia M. Mandia, “The Mysterious Stranger and ‘3,000 Years among the Microbes’: Chimerical Realities and Nightmarish Transformations,” in *Dark Humor*, ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby [New York, 2010], p. 208).

misfortune, propelled him into posthumanist perspectives that changed the nature of his comedy. In each of these stories a man is shrunk to the size of a microbe and begins to move among the microbial folk, only to discover the nightmarish incapacitation of human will at this scale, where time is dilated endlessly and there are simply too many seething trillions of sources of competing agency to achieve one's ends ("There are upwards of a thousand republics in our planet, and as many as thirty thousand monarchies").⁵⁹ In *The Great Dark*, as the narrator sails miserably for years and years across a single drop of brackish water he had previously been safely viewing through a microscope in his comfortable study, even the smallest of creatures looms monstrously large:

The moment I turned the corner of the deck-house and had an unobstructed view astern, there it was—apparently two full moons rising close over the stern of the ship and lighting the decks and rigging with a sickly yellow glow—the eyes of the colossal squid. His vast beak and head were plain to be seen, swelling up like a hill above our stern; he had flung one tentacle forward and gripped it around the peak of the main-mast and was pulling the ship over.⁶⁰

Here it is not the Castle of Otranto but Twain's comic realism that is put at risk from an apparition of the gigantic, even as we are given to understand that the creature is in fact—that is, by the criteria of ordinary human perception—quite small. This passage is straining to be cinema, or rather a B movie, which media form, sure enough, would soon become one of the more reliably spectacular vehicles of this kind of semicomical horror, from *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) to the *Incredible Shrinking Man* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1957) and *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* (dir. Nathan H. Juran, 1958) and on to a lively subgenre of pointedly domestic scale comedies including *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1981) and *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (dir. Joe Johnston, 1989). The latter are instructive, not least in how they force the issue of gender apparent in the discourse since Swift toward the center of our attention. Gulliver's travels had been a transparent attempt by a professional gentleman to flee the confinements of domesticity for adventures abroad, and his problem of scale is likewise always strongly associated with his self-image as a man. In Carroll it was little girlhood under attack by telescopic time. In Twain it is rather that the delights of the domestic sphere, lorded over by the happy paterfamilias, are ruined by his

59. Twain, *Three Thousand Years among the Microbes*, in *The Devil's Race-Track*, p. 166.

60. Twain, *The Great Dark*, in *The Devil's Race-Track*, p. 120.

seemingly innocent purchase of a microscope for use in his leisure time. In these and many other scale comedies the fit between a person and his or her officially gendered role is revealed as comedic incongruity. No matter how intimate the social spaces in which they occur, the affective bonds of sex and family life prove unscalable, even *unrealistic*.

It has always fascinated me that Twain was unable to finish his scale comedies, although he seems to have worked on them off and on for years. It's as though he had stumbled upon a conceptual, existential, and aesthetic problem that, while deeply fascinating to him, was not resolvable in ordinary narrative terms, certainly not in terms of the more affable novelistic realism of his earlier days, perhaps not at all. In Twain's iteration of posthuman comedy all the fun of scalar mobility, all the pleasure of measure, has evaporated, leaving behind a mass of incomplete manuscript. Can we read a prophecy in that incompletion? If it is true, as conventional accounts of the novel's history tell us, that the twentieth century would bring with it a sustained assault on its realism, bring with it a revolution in its form, or perhaps simply its death, we can see from the long history of posthumanist deviations sketched out here how, rather like one of the buried alien artifacts of science fiction, the seeds of modernist and post-modernist destruction had been lingering in the ground all along.

5. Coda: The Disintegrating Leviathan

In J. G. Ballard's 1962 story "The Drowned Giant," in a carefully unspecified time and place, an enormous dead giant washes up on the beach, and the narrator, a member of some sort of scientific society in the town, goes to investigate. Although the story is short, its titular figure is enormous. This is not the miniature giant of *Frankenstein* but something like the Brobdingnagian ones of *Gulliver*; his dead body, borrowing the coastal imagery of the earlier story, stretching some ways out to sea. Being dead, lying silent and still, he cannot become the vehicle of an adventure plot with the scope of *Moby-Dick*, although his washing up on the shore recalls the fate of many a real Leviathan. He will instead be the object of a parable, indeed a footnote to the history of the novel.

Arriving at the shore, the narrator finds the giant body swarmed by a crowd. They walk across its face, having fun, and then begin to amputate, cutting off the giant hand, the giant head. The narrator's interest is more philosophical, and somewhat surprising in its conclusions:

What I found so fascinating was partly his immense scale, the huge volumes of space occupied by his arms and legs, which seemed to confirm the identity of my own miniature limbs, but above all the

mere categorical fact of his existence. Whatever else in our lives might be open to doubt, the giant, dead or alive, existed in an absolute sense, providing a glimpse into a world of similar absolutes of which we spectators on the beach were such imperfect and puny copies.⁶¹

I said near the beginning of this essay that we might consider the giant, not simply as an unrealistic figure, but as embodying a realism of his own, and here in Ballard that idea is confirmed. For the narrator, the giant is not miraculous but a testament to the absolutely real. The question is what happens to this reality when, as the giant body is slowly consumed in and by the time of the many, the categorical fact of his existence begins to fade: “Despite his immense size, the bruises and dirt that covered his body made him appear merely human in scale, his vast dimensions only increasing his vulnerability” (“DG,” p. 646). Soon enough, he doesn’t even seem human, “the carcass resembl[ing] that of any headless sea-animal” (“DG,” p. 647). From there the giant body gradually folds back into undifferentiated nature, until finally the populace barely remembers where that strangely large pelvis bone on the beach came from. They get on with ordinary life, the form of life represented in any number of realist novels, which, going about the business of the human comedy, do not allow themselves to be interrupted by such strange and surprising things. There are human footprints everywhere on the beach beside the outsize bone, and the difference in size between them hardly matters.

If we read this story, as I think we can, as a parable of the disappearance of the giant in literary history, we can also follow Ballard’s suggestion that this disappearance comes at the cost of a certain insight into the human relation to nature. That relation is of course an ecological one, a metabolic one, as it already had nascently been in *Gulliver’s Travels*, whose temporarily giant protagonist needs to be fed enough for 1728 Lilliputians. In Ballard’s story, by contrast, we are the Lilliputians, but we count, in our seething manyness, as something very large indeed, something comically obscene: Anthropocene. For all its political ambivalence, one of the many virtues of fiction in the mode of posthuman comedy is in how it is able to keep our parasitical relation to the body of nature in view even as we persist in believing ourselves the measure of all things. And so it is in this story. The narrator’s perception of the giant as an index of absolute existence, which is also the absolute reality of scale, persists in its truth even as it shrinks from sight.

61. J. G. Ballard, “The Drowned Giant,” *Complete Stories* (New York, 2009), p. 644; hereafter abbreviated “DG.”

Genres of the Dialectic

Joshua Clover

1. The Illegible Opening

Crisis, bursting forth from the roil of history, enables a dialectical reading of comedy and tragedy at the level of the world-system; comedy and tragedy, when applied to systemic crisis, illuminate in turn that most elusive of intellectual objects, the dialectic.

That is to say, a renewed dialectic of the world-system raises the question of whether history is itself comedy or tragedy. It is a question that has been asked before, to comic and to tragic effect. Necessarily—this is the dialectic after all—any answer must be expected to begin, “Both!” But it is precisely in history’s *way of being both* that confusions arise. Are comedy and tragedy the same thing? In an implicitly spatial model, can a given circumstance appear from a certain position as one genre and from a different position as another? Or does one transform into the other and back and back again, following a temporal model? These are not simply different solutions but contradictory understandings of what history is, whether the characteristics we associate with genre are given by us or whether they might inhere within history, preserving for themselves an objective existence.

We must resolve this delicate opposition, restoring the unity of space and time in thought as it exists in reality, moving swiftly out from the suggestive heuristic of genre at one level to the system of the world at another. Only from this perspective might we grasp history as an object with the potential to contain its own logic. But it is a theory of crisis that allows us to mediate the two scales.

One easy misrecognition might be dismissed immediately: crisis, while laden with pathos, is not itself tragedy. Tragedy is a dramatic structure, as is

comedy; crisis is the moment of greatest intensity within historical transformation. The character of that transformation is not itself set in stone. At best it is written on the waters, changing swiftly, eddying here, purling there. A crisis always happens, so to speak, twice: once in the breakdown and again in the metamorphoses that follow and through which it takes on its full historical content.

You will have recognized all of these themes from the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It is worth recalling that this document emerges from crisis as do the events on which it meditates. They follow hard on the Panic of 1847, misnamed like most panics; it manifested early in agriculture with bad harvests and rising bread prices and only later destabilized the nascent modern banking sector.¹ The ensuing fiscal crisis proved a spur to the Springtime of the Peoples across Europe. In France, the February Revolution came first, and a bourgeois second revolution followed in June; then came the Second Republic and then Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's coup ushering in the Second Empire. Second, second, second. Even Karl Marx knew this is the structure of a joke.²

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the nephew for the uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances of the second edition of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.³

No doubt the appointment of farce as comedy's representative has something to do with its traditional incomprehensibility, with its sudden re-

1. See John Bouvier, François Furet, and Marcel Gillet, *Mouvement du profit en France au deuxième-neuf siècle* (Paris, 1945), and Ernest Labrousse, *Aspects de la crise et de la depression de l'economie française au milieu du deuxième-neuf siècle (1815–1851)* (Paris, 1956).

2. For a thoughtful assessment of the *Eighteenth Brumaire's* staging of comedy in relation particularly to the German theater, see Martin Harries, "Homo Alludens: Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*," *New German Critique*, no. 66 (Autumn 1995): 35–64.

3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. pub. (New York, 1994.), p. 15.

JOSHUA CLOVER is author of six books; the most recent is *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (2016). He is a professor of English and comparative literature at University of California, Davis.

versals and absurd turnings of plot we are scarcely expected to follow, punctuated by a violence we must take seriously for the very reason that we know we are not expected to do so. Anyone who has tarried with the unremitting *bouleversements* of 1848–51 will know the feeling. Just as surely the answer lies in farce's backward glance. To travesty is transitive after all; it requires a preexisting object. In this way our mid-century farce played largely on the stage of Paris for an audience terraced across the Continent. It travesties not simply revolution in general but a previous revolution in particular, the revolution of 1848 endeavoring in its negative example to reassert the political norms that 1789 and 1793 abjected. We might say it is the narrative expression of parody, Marx's other preferred term for the events in question; in the same opening he adds, "the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793–95."⁴ At the close of the Prussian War in 1870, he again conjoins these terms for the same events: "Whatever may be the incidents of Louis Bonaparte's war with Prussia, the death-knell of the Second Empire has already sounded at Paris. It will end, as it began, by a parody. But let us not forget that it is the governments and the ruling classes of Europe who enabled Bonaparte to play during eighteen years the ferocious farce of the *Restored Empire*."⁵ Parody and farce, then. Both of them always the second time around, comedy as history. Or as historical, at least.

As Frances Wheen notes, the historical doubling, the rhetorical and logical kernel of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*'s celebrated opening, appears drawn from *Scorpion and Felix*, a novel Marx began and abandoned at the age of nineteen, in 1837.

Every giant, and thus also every chapter of twenty lines, presupposes a dwarf, every genius a hidebound philistine, and every storm at sea—mud, and as soon as the first disappear, the latter begin, sit down at the table, sprawling out their long legs arrogantly.

The first are too great for this world, and so they are thrown out. But the latter strike root in it and remain, as one may see from the facts, for champagne leaves a lingering repulsive aftertaste, Caesar the hero leaves behind him the play-acting Octavianus, Emperor Napoleon the bourgeois king Louis Philippe.⁶

4. Ibid.

5. Marx and V. I. Lenin, *Civil War in France: The Paris Commune*, trans. pub. (New York, 1972), p. 25.

6. Quoted in Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (New York, 2001), p. 25.

Wheen measures the work as “a nonsensical torrent of whimsy and persiflage that was all too obviously written under the spell of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*.”⁷ It is not an easy verdict to refute. It reminds us nonetheless that the *Eighteenth Brumaire* finds its force and its farce in placing literary comedy alongside history. And not just literary comedy. In the case of the source text, it draws its comic structure in no small part from a capricious relation to time and particularly to the ordering of events.

Tristram Shandy, through its profligate undermining of narrative niceties, foregrounds emplotment and its relation to the production of dramatic form. It does so however in negative. If there is emplotment in some technical sense—the author has after all arranged the parts—it refuses the very possibility of an ordering that makes an order, of an order that seems to belong to the story. This cannot but emphasize the arbitrariness and even main force subtending emplotment.

This willful and arbitrary character is the very condition which authorizes Hayden White’s argument, the most ambitious on offer, that history as such is neither comic nor tragic but can only become so via our telling of it. Revisiting the locus classicus of *Metahistory* for an overview, White provides the formula, “The same set of events can serve as components of a story that is tragic or comic, as the case may be, depending on the historian’s choice of the plot structure that he considers most appropriate for ordering events of that kind so as to make them into a comprehensible story.”⁸

This concludes a more thorough-going passage that stages itself, no surprise, on the boards of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*; it is worth quoting in detail. Responding to R. G. Collingswood’s general call for the historian to uncover the “true,” that is to say “explanatory,” story, White demurs.

No given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story elements. The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. For example, no historical event is intrinsically tragic; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privileged place. For in history what is tragic

7. Ibid.

8. Hayden White, *Tropics Of Discourse: Essays In Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), p. 84.

from one perspective is comic from another, just as in society what appears to be tragic from the standpoint of one class may be, as Marx purported to show of the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, only a farce from that of another class. Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic—to use Frye's categories—depends upon the historian's decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another. The same set of events can serve as components of a story that is tragic or comic, as the case may be, depending on the historian's choice of the plot structure that he considers most appropriate for ordering events of that kind so as to make them into a comprehensible story.⁹

Perhaps grasping the series of transfers that link the two texts, White discovers in Marx's chronicle something like Sterne's arbitrariness of emplotment, transposing novel logic onto historical. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Tristram Shandy*. Dramatic mode may not be found immanently in history but coalesces in the position of the teller: "historical events are value-neutral" in as much they are always subject to being assigned competing values that exist at the level of appearance, such that "what appears to be tragic from the standpoint of one class may be . . . only a farce from that of another class."

However, the passage from which White draws this lesson says nothing of the sort.

It is a striking misreading and has gone strangely unremarked. Doubtless *The Eighteenth Brumaire* includes shifting class positions, as must any history running from the Cordeliers Club to the Bon Marché. Nonetheless it does not in any regard authorize White's claim about tragedy and farce as class subjectivities. In truth it says more or less the opposite. In the original text, there is a tragedy *and then* there is farce. They are not separated by the parallax of subjectivities viewing the same event but by a span of more than a half-century.

White is not the only prodigious reader for whom the opening of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* has proved oddly illegible. Consider Fernand Braudel, who believed himself to be quoting the well-known dictum opening the second paragraph when he wrote that "Men make their own history, but *they do not know they are making it*."¹⁰ The dramatic misquotation is appar-

9. Ibid.

10. Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, 1980), p. 39; emphasis mine.

ently received from Claude Levi-Strauss.¹¹ Departing from error, Braudel continues, “Marx’s formula pinpoints the problem, but does not explain it. In fact it is the same old problem of short time span, of ‘microtime,’ of the event, that we find ourselves confronted with under a new name.”¹²

Misrecognition must after all be one theme accompanying farce. Braudel’s misprision underscores White’s, as they share the same features. They are in fact the same error; it happens twice. Sequence in the original formulation is now marked down to event. Patiently objective conditions (“they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past”) are condensed into a blurt of subjective unknowledge (“they do not know they are making it”). The very thing that transforms tragedy to farce—the intervening period, the change in the total circumstance—is conjured away. Time, in a reversal of the well-known formula from the *Grundrisse*, is annihilated by space.

These then are the first set of coordinates, muddled as they are. The objective is paired with the temporal (such that the conjuring away of one equally banishes the other). The subjective is paired with the spatial. To grasp the significance of this schema, however, these items must be set against each other *as* pairs, for it will not suffice to reduce White’s misrecognition to a preference for the subjective or the simple substitution of space for time. Each requires the other. The dispute between Marx and White is founded rather on the opposition of the concepts that mediate each pairing: causality and positionality, respectively.

Marx’s transit from tragedy to farce is not a matter of position but in the first instance one of succession. Here he intimates but leaves incomplete what might rescue succession from simple ordering—first time, second time—and deliver it into the properly historical. The succession has an element of necessity, exposed only incompletely to contingency—we *do not make history as we please*. The unfolding of events features determinations that are external to us. This produces temporality as something more than empty homogeneous time, beyond the deadpan of the clock face and the slow burn of entropy; it provides time a unity, a shapeliness, a capacity for transformations more or less independent of subjective reattunements and repositionings. What is social, not metaphysical, about time creates a transformative power.

11. See Jerzy Topolski, “Lévi-Strauss and Marx on History,” *History and Theory* 12, no. 2 (1973): 193.

12. Braudel, *On History*, p. 39.

Here we seem to elide the distinction between history as causal time, with a necessary unfolding, and history as social time—as if the objective element of history could be the same as its social character. And yet this real elision is precisely what constitutes history in the present. It is a great scandal of Marxism that it on occasion finds an identity in the history of capitalism and history as such. Fredric Jameson, modulating this swift categorial collapse sotto voce, remarks on “Benjamin’s angel blown backwards by the storm wind: and that the storm wind, which he identified with history, or in other words with capitalism, is to be imagined as increasing in intensity from year to year and period to period.”¹³

“History, or in other words . . . capitalism.” It is a hyperbolic equation but not without import. The argument is that history is not events, not even placed in order. Rather it is something like directionality or tendency. *History is what moves*, we would like to say. But that’s not it exactly. History here is the dynamic that gathers all into the realm of the social and moves this gathering social totality toward certain inflection points, passing ever more swiftly through vales of volatility, the sides steeper each time. Not the storm wind but its intensification. Not history but its autonomization. *History is what moves itself*.

The feudal world featured a political order that appropriated surplus via direct domination of some local or state sovereign, commanding an economy external to itself. With the transition to capitalism, surplus is appropriated not by violent coercion but in the same gesture as reproduction, as survival. The great metamorphosis through which people enter “freely” into a new set of definite relations—the wage/commodity nexus in its generalization—shifts the causal force of history from direct to indirect domination, to structural compulsion. It invents a social being that is everywhere in general and no place in particular, a social being that corresponds both to this materialism of relations (rather than objects) and to the world market. A singularly consequential feature of this new arrangement lies in the way that the body of capital not only *can* move but *must* move. The theorization of value which concerns the vast majority of *Capital* insists that the *differentia specifica* of capital is in the imperative to accumulate as existential threat; capital not producing further surplus for reinvestment is not capital at all. No human subject has this will or interest. If each regime of power presents itself as more or less autochthonous, rising from its own ground, the very thing which distinguishes the capitalist mode of production is that, even were such autochthony to be stipulated, capital as regime, as body without sovereign, begins immediately

13. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London, 2001), p. 129.

upon rising to shamle forward. It is a body without sovereign that 1793 proposes with the guillotining of citizen Louis Capet, a proposal that 1851, thinking to reverse matters, in truth ratifies. The head of state returns farcically abjected, the only thing such a figure can now be: a manager, a service worker for capital itself that thunders ahead according to its inner logic, traveling ever faster just to stay upright. It is in this sense that capital becomes autonomous from its observers even as it still depends on them for its existence (in this regard providing a context for theory itself). It inaugurates the objectively social, having its own compulsions, its own necessities, its own fate. A hero of sorts. Now capital bears historical fate within itself; the identity that before seemed so scandalous is now simply an achieved fact: “capital and not the proletariat or the species, is the total Subject” of its history, driven forward toward expansion or abolition.¹⁴

2. The Hero Takes a Fall

“The true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself,” as Marx writes.¹⁵ Is this not the language of tragedy? It is the fate of capital to transform itself ceaselessly not because it understands its own nature but because it does not. Tragic hero of its own age, it struggles to overcome the barriers it sees always before it, imagining them as external features of the world through which it blunders, not discovering until too late that it bears the absolute barrier within itself.

We have now begun to introduce the Aristotelian categories of narrative: *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and *pathos*. What would it mean to transcode these for the history of capital? Jameson, departing from *Temps et récit*—the very Paul Ricoeur so influential for White—offers an account so majesti-

14. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 79. Postone's full discussion of capital as total subject bears close attention—particularly for present purposes the engagement with the question of David Ricardo:

Marx did not simply “radicalize” Ricardo and “materialize” Hegel. His critique—proceeding from the historically specific “double character” of labor in capitalism—is essentially historical. He argues that, with their respective conception of “labor” and the *Geist*, Ricardo and Hegel posited as transhistorical, and therefore could not fully grasp, the historically specific character of the objects of their investigations. The form of exposition of Marx's mature analysis, then, is no more an “application” of Hegel's dialectic to the problematic of capital than his critical investigation of the commodity indicates that he “took over” Ricardo's theory of value. . . . The identification of the proletariat (or the species) with the historical Subject rests ultimately on the same historically undifferentiated notion of “labor” as does “Ricardian Marxism.” [Pp. 81–82]

15. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach, 3 vols. (London, 1991), 3:358.

cally syncretic it can only be called Jamesonian. We might note, in a dire simplification, that he eventually revises the terms from the standpoint of class. Anagnorisis, for example, summons class being and belonging: “recognition would thereby mean the coming into view of those multitudinous others suppressed from the official story and field of vision.”¹⁶ Settling on discovery as preferable to recognition, anagnorisis designates the disclosure of the real (which is to say, productive) content concealed behind the surface of political form: Roman slaves in the classical era, the working class with the rise of capitalism. More broadly, “we grasp anagnorisis as an act of theoretical production, in which new characters are produced for our collective and political discovery and recognition” (V, p. 582).

A striking feature of Jameson’s account is the extent to which it hovers between the positional account wherein a given tragic narrative is comedic if attributed to one’s enemies and a distinct reading wherein the coequality of comedy and tragedy is grasped as a form of the dialectic, which itself “consists in the difficult wisdom in which these two outcomes become one and the same, in which defeat becomes success, and success becomes defeat.” (V, p. 554). This difficult formulation holds an inner spark of contradiction that will illuminate the mystery not simply of comedy and tragedy but of the dialectic itself: do its two sides *become one and the same*, or does each *ceaselessly turn into the other*? The former remains on the side of the static, the synchronic, while the latter keeps its diachronic restlessness.

We will resolve this delicate opposition in the end by putting time and space together again. In truth they cannot ever be separated; any disarticulation is to be measured not by representational accuracy but by heuristic yield. We wish to preserve the heuristic for a few moments more, toward one last transcoding, wherein time and space are made to designate the respective spheres of production and circulation. If this claim seems overly schematic, at least it is the case that these two spheres, like time and space, can be disarticulated only in theory. The attempt to disarticulate them in practice, it will turn out, is a pivot by which comedy and tragedy are arranged.

Marx himself assays this heuristic separation when he invites us across the threshold separating “this noisy sphere” of circulation and “the hidden abode of production.”¹⁷ The production of surplus value, valorization, is made possible by the aforementioned generalization of the wage/commodity nexus and its domination of abstract over concrete labor such that all labors can be commensurated; the quantitative aspect of the qualitative

16. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London, 2010), p. 569; hereafter abbreviated V.

17. Marx, *Capital*, 1:279.

social relation of value is the socially necessary labor time needed to produce a commodity at a given level of development of productive powers. Value's quantitative aspect comes in packets of time.

Nonetheless, the commodities once valorized are exchanged in units of price in the sphere of circulation; there, surplus value arising in production is realized as profit. This exchange, which might lead to further trade or to consumption, must involve a changing of places (literally, metaphorically, or both) in that the commodity switches owners. Marx associates this in the first instance with spatial motion. "This locational movement—the bringing of the product to the market, which is a necessary condition of its circulation, except when the point of production is itself a market—could more precisely be regarded as the transformation of the product *into a commodity*."¹⁸ On the one side, then, production, time, value, surplus value; on the other, circulation, space, price, profit.

For whom are these a contradiction and a unity? Neither for the proletariat alone nor for the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the classes—which orient the question of historical genre, albeit in distinct ways, for both White and Jameson—are themselves arguably one level of the contradiction immanent to the capital relation. In some regard granting classes a conceptual autonomy from each other as differing agents is a condition of possibility for further confusions about the relation of comedy and tragedy and thus about history's structure beyond standpoint. Our argument must overcome this if it is to argue that history has a genre which cannot be adduced to the experience of class, even if class is a necessary feature. Accordingly we might return to our sense of capital as the unity of proletariat and bourgeoisie, which, holding them both, is the ambiguous hero of its own era.

But here difficulties arise. Even amidst the personifications that genre requires, it is hard to imagine capital *as such* having recognitions or discoveries, having any practical self-understandings either mistaken or not. Its self-understanding is, rather, nothing but the cumulative grasping of the individual capitals it comprises; its motions are those impulses in blind coordination. But it is precisely here—in the gap between singular and aggregate—that we find the fatal flaw: the individual capital's misrecognition of price for value, and thus of profit for accumulation. No single capital knows of value much less worries over it; survival wants profit alone. It brings together labor and means of production in search

18. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London, 1993), p. 534; hereafter abbreviated G.

of this profit; pursuing it via the competitive advantage gained from increased productivity per worker, it expels from production the very labor from which surplus value is appropriated.¹⁹ Clouds hover over the happy marriage of constant and variable capital (c and v , henceforth) on which accumulation rests. In the way of happy marriages it has depended on one party confusing its immiseration for security and on the indifference of the other but in a sort of equipoise. The balance between the two cannot hold. It goes down to the c . It substitutes machines for living labor in that existential compulsion toward productivity, the ceaseless revolutionizing of the means of production—this is Walter Benjamin's storm wind. Perhaps, as some would suggest, capital's antagonist, the proletariat rather than intercapitalist competition, appears to drive this struggle. The result is the same. Accumulation founders within a given arrangement of capital. Eventually, the hero takes a fall.

As the story unfolds, the hero struggles mightily against fate. There are ways, after all, to defer the end: countervailing measures. Capital assays them all. It goes first to production with hammer and tongs to drive down wages, to sweat those who receive them, to extend the working day, and so forth. These measures reach their limits; meanwhile the domination of c over v continues iteratively. The productive sectors are hollowed out. Crisis follows. This should be the anagnorisis not for us but for capital, the moment of revelation when the hero, no less an aggregate beast than Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan in the renowned frontispiece, comes face to face with its own tragic flaw externalized in the world before it.

But the tragic flaw is precisely capital's inability to recognize this. It does not see that value has gone missing. Capital's being is in production, but its self-knowledge is in circulation; this is a rift within capital itself. Recognizing value only when expressed in the form of profit, it goes seeking profit otherwise: lowering the cost of inputs; driving up the mass of profits against a declining rate; building out the logistical chains of transport toward new markets, toward the reduction of expenditures required in the churn and circulation of reproduction's full circuit; and profit taking from various sorts of financial schemes. There are still profits to be gotten and no choice but to chase them; they can be gotten only at the expense of

19. Readers will recognize this as a swift summary of chapter 25 of the first volume of *Capital*, the book's climax. The most succinct assessment of the argument is to be found in the *Grundrisse*, within the famed "Fragment on Machines": "Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary" (G, p. 706).

other capitals. The situation comes to resemble the mercantile world and not only because of the renewed significance of technologies of transport. Money-dealing capital sets the ships in motion in a zero-sum game. It is common to describe this whole transformation as “financialization,” reasonably enough. This is where the money pools and where the remaining profits most miraculously appear, in finance and insurance and real estate, in the flux of nominal prices detached from the production of values. Any systemic accumulation is minimal, bubbling under, hidden by cloud banks of fictitious capital that billow, are pushed aside, belly out again. A peculiar sensation of suspension and stagnation settles on the land.

This is what it means, this is all it means, to say that capital leaps into circulation. It does not mean that production has come to an end, that nobody works there, that it is a matter of indifference. It does not mean that the spheres of production and circulation are more (or less) autonomous than they had been; the being of each still rests within the other. But neither does it mean that capital has found new ways of generating value where once there was none, some cold fusion of sea water that has made circulation newly productive.

We have been using the metaphor of the sea from which is born the world-market, the originary space of circulation for the Mediterranean world-system, for the Hanseatic league, for the empire on which the sun for a very long time did not set. It is a metaphor that flows easily, suggesting not just the merchant’s ocean but the liquidity provided by money dealers with their circulatory systems.

We should be clear that, integrated into modern global capital, these circulatory factors can play vital roles in the real accumulation process. First of all, they are a necessary basis, guaranteeing that production will never have to pause while awaiting returns from sales: “the greater the scale on which fixed capital develops, in the sense in which we regard it here, the more does the *continuity* of the production process or the constant flow of reproduction become an externally compelling condition for the mode of production founded on capital” (G, p. 703).

Further, we might consider the ways that a smoothed and accelerated supply chain built on the spine of a massive credit-financed shipping industry can provide access to cheaper labor markets for commodity production, and in turn open up new opportunities for interregional wage arbitrage—increasing thereby the rate of exploitation. Similarly, the faster the turnover time the less capital need be occupied in the circulatory process, freeing it (at least hypothetically) for other ventures. Even given propositions regarding location, there is an imperfect match between circulation and transport.

For all that, there is a sea change. Unable to generate adequate value from production, the real economy stagnates (or worse). Individual capitals grasp in their blindness after the profits available in the circulation sphere, trying to undercut the distribution costs or overwhelm the market share of rivals, discovering no other way to sustain themselves. When enough capitals have done this, we might say it of capital as a whole. It is a generalization and an imperfect one. Its consequences nonetheless seem clear.

This is the force of Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century*, with its model of hegemonic rise and fall recurring across six centuries or so, each new regime coordinating the capitalist world-system toward a higher capacity for accumulation, each unable to shrug off its own fatality. The recursion to circulation, the atavistic and fatal leap that Arrighi too calls financialization, comes to each cycle, a crisis signaling that this particular arrangement of the world system has reached its limit of expansion. Then comes the period of visible tragedy, for circulation is precisely the realm of visibility, of to-ing and fro-ing, wherein world capital's hegemon tries to remedy its error but only intensifies it. Seeming to have choices, it can make only wrong ones. As the irritable grasping after profit necessarily undermines the capacity for value production, the hegemon staggers ineluctably toward the terminal crisis, with its massive bloodletting, its political volatilities, and the devaluation of value at a systemic level. Surely this death of the hegemon and, more critically for capital, of the possibility for accumulation, satisfies our standard for tragedy. And surely the insistent historical repetition of this fatality, repetition not of event but of sequence, provides a kind of empirical validation for the case that this unfolding is, contra White, something more obdurate than a matter of mere emplotment.

But in this moment of tragedy comedy returns with a vengeance. And it returns in a way that offers a final brief for the White view. Up to this point I have argued that the self-undermining character of capital is necessarily, objectively tragic. But we can seemingly not escape the question, tragic for whom? A hegemon is not history. The demise of one cycle is not the death of capital as such. If the hegemon and the cycle it superintends go down to fate, another cycle is already spiraling outward. From the perspective of history—the scale of the world system that orients this inquiry—the death of one hegemon is what allows for the next cycle to expand beyond the limits of the last in a comic reunion of all that the last cycle's tragedy had put asunder. And more.

3. The Reversal Reversed

Arrighi's long and broad view, inherited from Braudel, provides an affirmative verdict on Henryk Grossman's declaration that "the object of

Marx's analysis is not crisis, but the capitalist process of reproduction in its totality."²⁰ The economist, one of the earliest members of the Institute for Social Research, is well-known for his attempt to derive a "logical and mathematical basis of the law of breakdown." This effort culminates in his reproduction schema, a series of tables showing the year-by-year development in which an economy, beginning from a given equilibrium, will move toward a fatal degradation of its capacity for accumulation.

Writing in the wake of Weimar hyperinflation and amidst the transfer of global hegemony from the UK to the US, Grossman provides one of the first sustained efforts to derive a unified theory of crisis from its scattered appearance in Marx's writings. His own graphing of capital's development seeks to derive the abstract operations of an economic system. It is the corollary at the level of logic to Arrighi's global and empirical history. These are always differing expressions of a unity, modes of presentation. If we begin with the observable, with the historian's version of G. W. F. Hegel's sense-certainty, we must move beyond this if we are to make claims that said history has its own properties. This is the task to which Grossman sets himself. Starting with a simple model of intensifying accumulation and ensuing breakdown for capital—the tragic model at its most crude—he leaps to a more systematic account that will compass not just countervailing measures but the larger *ratio* of crisis itself. Consequently, his chart becomes the double for Arrighi's or vice versa: a rising and falling action that, over the *longue durée*, ratchets upward (figs. 1–2). The identity of these two charts, one "historical" and one "logical," is nothing but the underlying unity of political economy to which we must return again and again. Having detailed the graph's elements, Grossman glosses his account.

We know that in Marx's conception crises are simply a healing process of the system, a form in which equilibrium is again re-established, even if forcibly and with huge losses. From the standpoint of capital every crisis is a 'crisis of purification'. Soon the accumulation process picks up again, on an expanded basis, and within certain limits (for instance, o_1 — r_2) it can proceed without any disruption of equilibrium. But 'beyond certain limits', from point r_2 on, the accumulated capital again grows too large. The mass of surplus value starts to decline, valorisation begins to slacken until finally, at point z_2 , it evaporates completely in the way described earlier. The breakdown

20. Henryk Grossman, *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System*, trans. Jairus Banaji (London, 1992), p. 83.

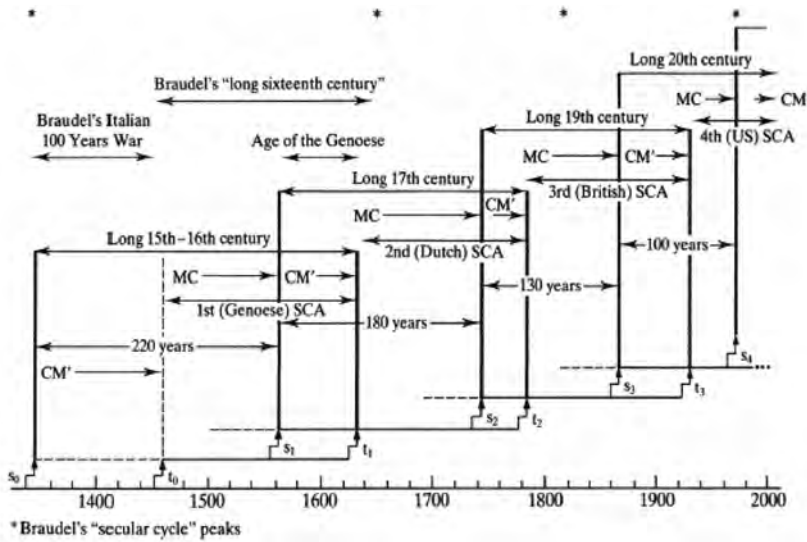


FIGURE 1

sets in again and is followed by devaluation of capital, z_2 — o_2 , and so on.²¹

The course of capital never did run smooth. In the accord of Grossman's and Arrighi's models, the dialectic of genre within capital's history becomes clear. If the tragic course of accumulation and value's self-undermining character delivers the hegemonic cycle to a watery end, capital springs forth elsewhere. Capital's pathetic fragility reverses into the revelation of unbreakability, that slapstick secret that betrays the presence of a far grander comedic motion. Pathos for the part is peripeteia for the whole.

The problematic that Arrighi adds to Grossman however, that of transfer, cannot be reduced to generational agon or interstate competition, just as the consistency of capital's comic reformation at a higher level cannot itself explain where it will happen or the mode of conveyance. Arrighi provides only an incomplete explanation of the leaps from cycle to cycle, more descriptive than theoretical, wherein "their sequence describes an evolutionary pattern towards regimes of increasing size, scope

21. Ibid., pp. 84–85.

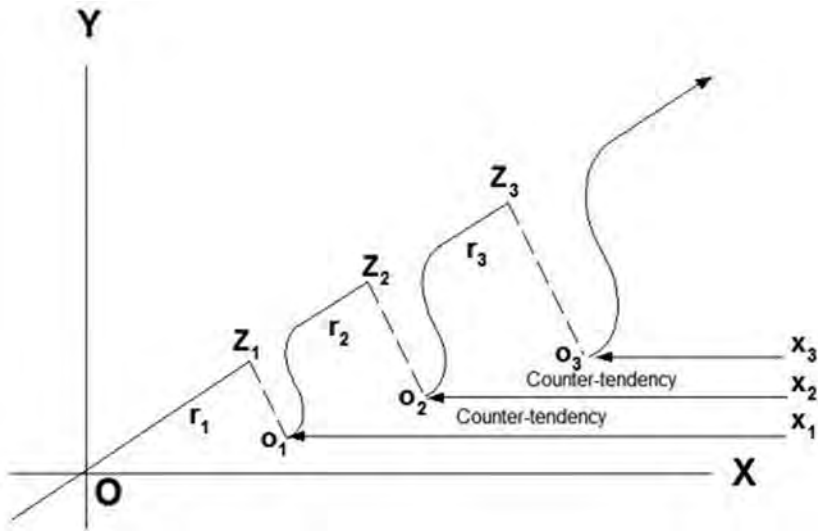


FIGURE 2

and complexity.”²² Each new cycle must seemingly be founded on a larger geographical basis, with a more encompassing leading governmental organization, and must internalize new costs that previously provided a frictional *faux frais* for the leading economy. Further, the transfer has in the past been characterized by an outflow of credit from declining to rising hegemon.

A theoretical account of this transfer can be educed by restoring to Arrighi the particulars of Marx’s theory of value, which persists in *The Long Twentieth Century* largely in sublated form. Such a reconstruction suggests that in the long moment of tragedy capital must find a new container of power with specific features. It goes in search of a situation wherein the dialectical development of value production we have been tracing will be still in its initial flowering. It will have a still-growing industrial sector and thus a more labor-intensive economy over all. It will feature, that is to say, a lower organic composition of capital: less constant capital in ratio to variable. Consequently it will be more able to absorb new labor inputs for expansion, and investment-driven productivity will not yet have approached the limits of profitability. In short, it will be positioned to draw rates of profit high enough to draw mobile capital in search of better

22. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origin of Our Times* (London, 2010), p. 375.

returns than are to be found in the ruins of the last cycle and will operate on a scale large enough to draw a massive magnitude of investment. This is the generic leap. Capital, to sum up the transformation, slouches toward whatever Bethlehem offers the basis for a new cycle. It will be both larger and less developed in its productive capacities so that constant and variable capital might be brought together once again toward renewed accumulation, a restored unity of value and price, production and circulation. This remarriage is the comedy of the world.

We have arrived finally at the understanding that, in as much as this sequence of breakdown and reformation inheres to the logic of capital itself—is the objective form the social relation takes in its unfolding—genre inheres to history. Genre will no doubt appear differently from different positions or at different moments in a succession, but this should not be mistaken for a dependency upon perception for its existence. Far from history being nether tragic nor comic, it is both, as promised at the outset. But the particular way in which this is the case becomes clear only when we transcend or repair the antinomy of space and time, position and simple succession. Now we might expand the dialectic of capital's genre beyond the initial proposition that both sides, tragedy and comedy, are one and the same or that each is always turning into the other.

In traditional terms, tragedy is the bursting forth of capital's internal contradiction; comedy is the resolution of this contradiction. The former is a necessary moment in the latter, but it cannot be formalized as a purely conceptual sequence of reversals and transformations. Comedy requires tragedy so as to overcome barriers toward accumulation on an enlarged basis. This is the enabling condition that allows for the generic situation to persist. To put matters another way, crisis is the mediation that allows tragedy at one level to return as comedy at a higher level, a greater compass both historically and conceptually. The "crisis of purification" Grossman mentions is the very formula for catharsis—but not one that on its own completes the tragedy any more that it alone reinaugurates the comedy. Comedy is in this regard not tragedy plus time, exactly. Comedy is tragedy plus scale.

4. The Storm Wind

Certain details from the opening pages must now return in their full significance. "Not the storm wind but its *intensification*": this has been a constant in Benjamin, Jameson, Arrighi, and Grossman. This intensification is the underlying dynamic of both crisis and scalar leaps. It drives toward tragedy and drives tragedy toward its reformation as comedy writ larger. But this is not to say that crisis and the scalar leap are identical or travel always together (as

implied by, for example, David Harvey's idea of spatial and temporal fixes). Indeed, while they share a dynamic, they are at the same time in contradiction. Here our competing models of the dialectic come into clearer view, as we approach what we earlier called history's way of being both.

When we think of the dialectic as purely formal object, unbounded, lacking its proper historical content, churning endlessly in an abstract process, we think of the identity of opposites, of comedy and tragedy, and the process of one forever becoming the other through the mediation of crisis, which can always be recuperated. A somewhat different understanding of the dialectic allows both for genre's objectivity (which is to say its autonomy) and for its dialectical doubling. This one, its logical form situated historically, is premised on systemic expansion, with its breakings and reformations of societies and of humans, the very content that tragedy and comedy designate. If we arrived before at the formula that history is what moves itself, we must amend it once more. History is not what moves itself; *history is what moves itself outward*. And in this sense, to make the most capacious move, history as self-expanding whole is isomorphic with value itself, which must not only move but expand if it is to preserve its own existence. This dialectic is not itself transhistorical; rather it is the form of thought that arises with the systematic expansion of history enabled by the doubling of tragedy and comedy and that retains its analytic power within that movement.

We must admit that this expansive dialectic is absent from the opening of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. The general assumption is that the matters which might have demanded such an understanding of the dialectic—of scalarity, of accumulation-driven imperialism, of the limits of the world—had not yet been posed as questions by the course of capitalist development in 1852. But this is not quite the case. It turns out that Hegel himself sketched an economic theory of imperialism in 1821, in a two-paragraph aside within *The Philosophy of Right*: “a specific civil society” (he seems to have England in mind) will be inevitably confronted with excess polarization of wealth and misery. The internal solutions, redolent no less of Thomas Malthus than modern capitalism, come down to transfer payments or jobs programs: welfare or workfare, we might say. Either will result in “an excess of production and in the lack of a proportionate number of consumers who are themselves also producers.”²³ Thus the society must search elsewhere for its resolution. And then the punchline: “246. This inner dialectic of civil society thus drives it—or at any rate drives a specific civil society—to push beyond its own limits and seek markets, and so its necessary means of subsistence, in

23. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1942), p. 150.

other lands, which are either deficient in the goods it has overproduced, or else generally backward in industry.”²⁴ Historians of political economy will recognize in this underdeveloped aperçu the makings of a theory of imperialism for the age of capital, one presaging those of Rosa Luxemburg and J. A. Hobson almost a century later, similarly depending from a crisis of underconsumption.²⁵ This is not the theory of crisis developed by Marx nor the one implicit in Arrighi, which find their basis in the waning capacity to exploit labor in production rather than a need to discover new consumption markets. Nonetheless it sets forth a dialectic that moves outward, expanding materially toward the limits of the globe as Hegel’s dialectic of spirit expands toward the limits of the idea. Are these two one?

It is not possible to think so. Only one of those dialectics can end in comedy. It is notable that Hegel does not discover in that moment that by his own logic “a specific civil society” will be driven not to realize itself in full and reign—a comic conclusion that requires the autonomy of the political, the compulsory intensification of capital somehow dropping away—but that such a society must eventually become the world and die in its very realization.

We might suggest that in that moment Hegel was not driven to the largest scale of analysis. Our present is something else. We do not know, cannot know, if we have arrived at the outer bound of the dialectic. We find ourselves currently paused in tragedy at the scale of US hegemony in its fatal unraveling, awaiting capital’s reformation at a further scale. We are awaiting the comedy that is not for us, but we are still strangely invested in its humors.

And yet it is not clear that such a thing is possible. There could be further hijinx ahead. Logic demands it. However, because the resolution requires an expanded scale not only conceptually but historically, the dialectic of genre is premised on a given world situation. Comedy, we have come to discover, is only comedy if it has room to move; the funniest of jokes is one about which we are not at first clear whether it is funny at all. Then it moves outward, becomes atmosphere, becomes world, and we are in it. It takes time, this scaling. But this room to move within the comedy of capital is not in fact an infinite resource, not a conceptual dimension, but an objective limit. The moment comes when there is no longer any *out there*, no nascent empire with the right size, the right demographics, the

24. Ibid., p. 151.

25. This connection is developed by Albert O. Hirshman, “On Hegel, Imperialism, and Structural Stagnation,” *Journal of Development Economics* 3 (1976): 1–8. Hirshman goes on to compare Hegel’s brief passage to Latin American developmental economics of the mid-twentieth century, not altogether persuasively.

right degree of externality, which is to say the right composition of capital, developing but not developed, productive enough but not too productive, able to soak up mobile capital and mobile labor toward vast productive growth. It is not clear that this room to move is anywhere to be found any longer. Even emerging economies are now far along the developmental path; *il n'y a pas dehors du monde*. Where once were dragons, now are capital's outlands. The scale will come when no comic reformation is possible, no remarriage of the spheres in disalignment. At this moment the generic dialectic as we have known it withdraws, and the only remaining matter is whether tragedy for capital as a whole might be comedy for something else, comedy without scale, delight without genre.

You Had to Have Been There: Laughing at Lunch about the Chinese Dream

Judith Farquhar

When I arrived in Beijing in July 2014, a friend who works at a university there told me that, a few days before, a high official in the Communist Party (CCP) headquarters had denounced the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), apparently for being too leftist. My friend said, “We all think this is some kind of black humor on their part.” This invocation of black humor—the phrase was in English—instantly made sense to me. Understanding *both* why the Communist Party needed to be taken quite seriously *and* why its funniness was also patent, we laughed. But why? How did a dark threat issuing from party headquarters translate into a shared laugh for academics belonging to two different continents and relying at times on a “foreign” language?

Much of this essay will be devoted to this kind of question about the translatability of humor, and it will suggest that much more than a punchline is funny.¹ Though my friend’s remark about party central’s attitude toward the left deviations of some social researchers was not exactly a joke, it was certainly a form of levity. The pleasure we felt in our shared ability to appreciate the tortuous (il)logic of an official pronouncement was made possible by a complex shared knowledge of modern Chinese history and institutions and considerable experience of the everyday life of Chinese mass media. It was not only a fieldwork moment for an ethnographer; it was also an expression of a certain moment in Beijing, one

1. The converse is also true, of course: working in translation, quite often not even punchlines are funny. Our contemporary situations, taken as a whole, are both deadly serious and—at times and in places—hilariously funny.

that is now past or passing. To get the joke, you had to have been there, and you had to have been then.

Anthropologists often remark that jokes are especially untranslatable; some have told me that they seldom really *really* laugh in the field, experiencing a return to Chicago or New York or their family culture or English language television as a “return to laughter.”² It is as if we never can educate our gut—the place belly laughs come from—to live comfortably either with other people’s sober proprieties or with their violations of them. When obligatory and thickly nested local frames are both invoked and exploded in a joke, much of the point is lost on those of us who are not entirely there and then.³ As visitors, we are usually relative newcomers to the world thus framed and thus transgressed, so we don’t even see what proprieties and commitments might be at stake. Shouldn’t criticism of a research institute issuing from party headquarters in Zhongnanhai be taken seriously? Presumably this news is bad, or black, because the party configures and supports the institutional structures allowing some people to live as intellectuals. If this CCP policy maker is serious, lives and jobs might be at stake. Why is it also possible to see this denunciation as comical? Presumably because some representative of the party has failed to notice that the intellectuals reporting to him have been doing exactly as directed, keeping the Chinese communist dream alive, helping him and his government do their job in a one-party state where all academic institutions are publicly governed. As the audience of this (by now not very funny) joke,

2. This is a misuse of the title and central trope of Elenore Smith Bowen’s fictionalized ethnography of the Tiv people of Nigeria, *Return to Laughter* (Garden City, N.Y., 1964).

3. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York, 1974).

JUDITH FARQUHAR is Max Palevsky Professor Emeritus in the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago. Her research on contemporary China spans three decades, focusing on theories and practices of modern traditional Chinese medicine; everyday life and embodiment; popular culture and media; post-Mao and postsocialist micropolitics; and, most recently, national movements to systematize the traditional medicine practices of China’s ethnic minorities. She is the author of *Knowing Practice: The Clinical Encounter of Chinese Medicine* (1994); *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* (2004); and coauthor with Qicheng Zhang of *Ten Thousand Things: Nurturing Life in Contemporary Beijing* (2012). With Margaret Lock, she edited and annotated the reader *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life* (2007). Her email address: farquhar@uchicago.edu

I find myself simultaneously worrying about the dark implications of a high cadre's outburst and laughing at the way the weapon has been turned on its user, showing up the fault lines in the party apparatus in a not quite typical example of socialist black humor.⁴

We anthropologists—at our best—are thoroughly relativist in our efforts to appreciate distance and difference; we pride ourselves on being experts at cultural displacement and even transgression.⁵ Even so, the classic work in anthropology tends to have no sense of humor. When we translate joking behavior from our field sites the humor tends to be *read through* to find those enframing structures or invariant principles that might be challenged or reinforced (or both at once) by a play on words, a ludic pratfall, or a paradoxical contretemps. Jokes tend to be thought of as a light-hearted text that indexes a very serious context,⁶ and when they are analyzed to reveal their architecture and foundations, anthropologists and their readers are in danger of becoming numb to all possible pleasure in the moment itself.

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown published the classic treatment of joking relationships as two essays in his *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. His treatment of a disrespectful or teasing practice, which he found distributed around the world in correlation with certain forms of lineage politics, was markedly scientific and sober. In the two essays, there is one joke described and that only in part:

There is space for only one illustrative point. A very common form of joke in this connection is for the grandchild to pretend that he wishes to marry the grandfather's wife, or that he intends to do

4. Irony, sarcasm, and cynicism in actually existing socialism has been much noted by commentators on the discursive life of the former Soviet bloc. See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), and Anna Krylova, "Saying 'Lenin' and Meaning 'Party': Subversion and Laughter in Soviet and Post-Soviet Society," in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham, N.C., 1999), pp. 243–65. Martha Lampland and Maya Nadkarni have recently reported that dark humor seems to be on the wane in neoliberal/postsocialist Hungary; see Martha Lampland and Maya Nadkarni, "The Death of Jokes? The Shifting Landscape of Humor in Post-Socialist Hungary," lecture, American Anthropological Association, Budapest, Hungary, 20 Nov. 2015. China scholars have tended to avoid this question of specifically socialist joking, feeling that insofar as irony has been a feature of Chinese conversations it has nevertheless appeared in local forms that do not compare immediately with the Eastern European experience.

5. Among anthropology's favorite historical sources authorizing this stance are Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986).

6. An exception to this anthropological sobriety about context was evident in comments by Michael Silverstein on the panel "Anthropology of Humor, Humor in Ethnography" at the 2015 meetings of the American Anthropological Association; see Michael Silverstein, personal communication to author, 20 Nov. 2015.

so when his grandfather dies, or to treat her as already being his wife. Alternatively the grandfather may pretend that the wife of his grandchild is, or might be, his wife. The point of the joke is the pretense at ignoring the difference of age between the grandparent and the grandchild.⁷

In reporting this instance of humorous behavior, Radcliffe-Brown was not trying to suggest that bawdy grandmas and disrespectful youngsters are a universal formation in society. His comparative science worked at another level: once we understand why standards of propriety are relaxed between individuals occupying particular positions in a rigid kinship structure, he argued, we can look for similar transgressions in those other societies that share the same kinship structures. In other words, humor functions as “the means of establishing and maintaining social equilibrium in a type of structural situation that results in many societies from marriage.”⁸ Analysis of “joking behavior” in the hands of the anthropologist reveals little more than the dead-serious structural imperatives that constrain and give meaning to social action. Of course there are many problems with Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalist privileging of stability, “equilibrium,” and systems.⁹ But though he seldom felt it worth his while to actually present a joke in translation, he does appear to have considered jokes to be translatable once they were understood in context. He presumed that actions that at first appear odd—describing a new policy statement as black humor, for example—should be legible as quite rational and normal, once we understand (soberly, of course) the whole “structural” situation.¹⁰

In this essay I will continue some parts of this anthropological tradition by presenting some exchanges that had me laughing—really *really*

7. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York, 1952), p. 97. These two essays cite other important treatments of joking, especially by Africanists. The topic was an occasion in the structural-functionalist Anglophone anthropology of the 1940s and 1950s to explore questions of method and scientific analysis, especially of kinship systems.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

9. See John L. Comaroff and Simon Roberts, *Rules and Processes: The Cultural Logic of Dispute in an African Context* (Chicago, 1981).

10. Here I use *situation* more as Donna Haraway has in “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (Autumn 1988): 575–99, than as writers on the comedic have used the term. The situation of situation comedy is a unique, unusual, and untoward conjuncture of awkward, maladjusted circumstances; compare Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), pp. 5–6. For purposes of the present discussion, situation is much more “usual”; it is everything in place on which the moment of laughter is contingent, and especially the context that is made relevant in the performance of the joking narrative; compare Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis, 1984).

laughing—with others, in the field.¹¹ On one hand, I follow Radcliffe-Brown's example in showing that locations in space and time, gatherings of place and history, and conventional formalities and proprieties are the irreducible field of the funny. Insofar as joking transgresses the normal givenness of its world, it is thoroughly situated; it behooves us to understand *both* Rabelais *and* his world.¹² But, on the other hand, I also want to dwell on the joke itself before reading through it to the social field in which it plays and from which its humor may or may not be translatable. I will thus touch only lightly on the contemporary Chinese political terrain across which joking walks and talks. The etymologies of *translate* and *transgress* suggest wordplay and fancy footwork, and I want to appreciate these leaps and bounds. At the same time, I will show that joking is done by fully embodied people whose lives are specific to histories and localities and thus difficult to understand in isolation.

So let's reconsider the black humor of a Communist Party functionary. What could be humorous about the central governing structure of the Communist Party turning against China's most elite social researchers? Statements like this from CCP headquarters at the time were greeted in the US academy with a very bleak outlook. American China studies specialists expressed fear that we would all be denied visas and our Chinese colleagues would be silenced on every matter of social and political concern. (These fears continue and are intensifying as I write in late 2015, as new anticorruption policies and information disciplines begin to have an impact.) Many of us expected our Chinese academic friends to be sunk in despair. Instead, we have found them sharing hilariously plausible conspiracy theories over convivial meals and speculating about who is the funniest comedian among senior cadres in CCP headquarters, as well as whether anyone in the party compound of Zhongnanhai actually gets the joke.

I think you had to have been there, up to your neck in Chinese academic politics for a long time, to see the black humor in the situation.

11. In what sense are encounters with academic colleagues in China "the field" for me? With my collaborator Lili Lai, an anthropologist in medical humanities at Peking University, I have since 2010 been investigating state-led initiatives for developing minority nationality traditional medicines. Anthropology in Chinese academic and other government institutions is part of the field we are trying to understand better, and learn from more attentively. Our book (in preparation), tentatively entitled *Gathering Medicines in the Mountains: Nation, Body, and Knowledge in China's Ethnic South*, will elaborate on the varieties of collaboration "in the field" in which we have been engaging. For a preliminary report, see Lili Lai and Judith Farquhar, "Nationality Medicines in China: Institutional Rationality and Healing Charisma," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57 (Apr. 2015): 381–406.

12. Nancy K. Miller's interesting exploration of how rabelaisian humor translates into modern American male-dominated reception contexts makes a more complex argument along these lines. See Nancy K. Miller, "Rereading as a Woman: The Body in Practice," *French Dressing: Women, Men, and Ancien Régime Fiction* (New York, 1995), pp. 45–53.

You would have to have known in your own practice that the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is the party's kept think tank. You had to be accustomed to CASS's looming presence in the knowledge industry—huge and long-standing and heavily funded by the government. You would have been aware of a large number of prominent intellectuals—philosophers, historians, sociologists, Marxist theorists, social theorists, area studies experts, humanists—whose careers were entirely attached to CASS. You would have known that the leadership in CCP headquarters had often involved CASS intellectuals in the policy process through formal consultation and collection of their research results. And complaints about CASS's internal research funding competitions, in which the aim is to design and propose valid research that answers the questions posed by the state, would be fresh in your mind.

The critic who attacked CASS in June 2014 argued, apparently, that too many researchers at CASS are being “corrupted” by their involvement with transnational NGOs and other “civil society” organizations. There was also the suggestion that CASS theorists are too allied with the Chinese New Left, which is well known for its critical stance that favors some old Maoist and socialist values and opposes many of the newer business-friendly neoliberal policies that encourage privatization and market freedoms. My particular friends who were “laughing at [the CCP] Leviathan”¹³ also knew that a large part of the CASS charge during the last two years or so has been to research “the Chinese dream.”¹⁴

The Chinese dream has been ubiquitous in the PRC mediascape since about 2013; one sees “public service” posters everywhere featuring drawings of fat happy children, assuring us that the Chinese dream is “my dream,” or “the people’s dream.” A very interesting Wikipedia article notes that “according to the party’s theoretical journal *Qiushi*, the Chinese Dream is about Chinese prosperity, collective effort, socialism and national glory” (among other things, but see the joking conversation reported below). These ideological labels are rather vast and vague, and turning such propaganda categories into socially useful alliances of actors takes creative social research. This is part of CASS’s job, but the task has frustrated many in Chinese research units over the last couple of years.¹⁵

13. See Danilyn Rutherford, *Laughing at Leviathan: Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua* (Chicago, 2012).

14. See the fascinating “Chinese Dream,” Wikipedia.com, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Dream. It is a lot more informed and informative than the “insiders” conversations I report in this article, though it might not be entirely accurate.

15. In the course of the conversation I report in the latter part of this article, my collaborator Lili mentioned that a mutual friend of ours had met a guy who had received more than twenty

If you had been there, then, the ridiculousness of this CCP leader's criticism might have been quite clear. His was a paradoxical critique: the Communist Party suddenly found its kept intellectuals, its policy mouthpieces, to be too darn socialist. And this was a charge by communists against communists, disvaluing the earnest labor of perhaps the only group of intellectuals in the twenty-first century who were still trying to make a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist social theory a plausible guide for the people of a modern nation. The unsettling message of the joke is: "All critics of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'—otherwise known as neoliberal laissez-faire market piracy—Beware!" Some Communist Party leader might tar you with the brush of "civil society," revoke your research funding, and make it nearly impossible for you to make the Chinese dream your own. Especially if some people fail to realize that he must have been joking.

But what about the Chinese dream; is *it* a joke all by itself? This was the subject of the jolly conversation to which I want to devote the remainder of this discussion, partly reporting what was said and partly sketching the explicit and implicit elephants in the room as we talked. (An elephant in the room is a pretty good joke in itself, with its juxtaposition of large and small, wild and domestic, lovable and terrifying, and undeniably visible yet totally ignored.)

Later in July 2014: My collaborator Lili Lai and I are in Kunming, Yunnan, which is rather far from Beijing and the CCP headquarters at Zhongnanhai, at a university where I gave a talk. We went to a department-sponsored lunch, in a restaurant's private room, with five college teachers. I asked them, what is this Chinese dream I see all over the billboards and on TV? What is included in it?

The charming senior professor at the table, Professor He, said "I haven't got a clue, I'm no Communist. Ask a Communist! Teacher Li here is a party member, ask her."

Teacher Li admitted, however, that she also wasn't sure, but she hazarded a guess: "Freedom? Justice? Equality?" Teacher Chen, another colleague,

program grants from government foundations, and he is now undertaking well-funded research on "the theoretical foundations of the Chinese dream." Professor He, in Kunming, recalled that they have similar experience at his university. At a meeting for planning research on the Chinese dream, he reported, an annoyed sociologist colleague got up and said, "If you want to defend this kind of top-level ideology, fine, no problem, but it's a done deal, it is already everywhere. If you want to oppose it, though, I bet you wouldn't dare. So, there's no point in attempting this kind of 'research.'" Professor He said, "Seriously, we don't care about state ideology, we are only interested in real research questions." Note his turn to the real when he means to be serious.

followed up with a reference to *last year's* big propaganda category: "Surely it also includes a 'Harmonious Society'!"

This remark broke everyone up, especially Teacher Chen himself, whose face split into a huge grin with a giant belly laugh. In a place like Yunnan, more multiethnic, rural, and subject to borderland conflicts than many Chinese provinces, these intellectuals were understandably sardonic about the party's multiyear (and now not very evident) harmonious society campaign. By 2014, none of us were seeing public slogans about social harmony any more. Moreover, the harmonious society had not, we guessed, been subsumed within the newly ubiquitous Chinese dream. Propaganda history doesn't seem to work that way. So Teacher Chen's joke, in a few words, dredged up a bit of arguably "tragic" history—the harmonious society had never really been achieved, after all—to suggest that the Chinese dream was bringing it back as farce. The logic of the Eighteenth Brumaire is never far from contemporary Chinese senses of history—or senses of humor.

As we continued to talk about the "meaning" of the Chinese dream, everyone realized that they had no idea what this ubiquitous term *the Chinese dream* was supposed to include. Not only was the referent lost, nobody present had—up to this point—cared at all what it was. And this was the cause of a lot more laughter. Unforced, uncynical, trusting laughter, unafraid of seeming childish. Our amusement (or in this case I should perhaps say their amusement) stemmed from a shared awareness that we were not properly receptive subjects of the propaganda state. After all, it is the party-state that talks of the Chinese dream, so it seemed like we *ought* to care. And know what all the fuss was about.

I said, it sounds like there's nothing especially Chinese about this Chinese dream. Is it different from the American dream? So our group went to work trying to define the American dream. Teacher Bai—who has studied in Australia—began working on the Horatio Alger angle of individuals working their way up to wealth and power through sheer grit and hard work, but I told her I thought it was simpler than that; maybe the American dream is just that every individual can get rich somehow. With this remark, I was invoking a much older Chinese state policy, the early reform period's state economists' view that a few can get rich first (so everyone else will eventually get rich, too, or at least comfortable).¹⁶ The convergence of an American dream with the Chinese dream, we could agree, would take place on a neoliberal capitalist terrain that shares at least the logic of trickle-down economics.

16. See Liu Kang, *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China* (Honolulu, 2003).

Our companions more or less agreed to the similarities, but we had not solved the problem of what the specific state-crafted content of the Chinese dream might be. Everyone thought it was hilarious that they couldn't be sure of it themselves, but they also tried out various versions of propaganda language with sheer enjoyment and a great sense of citational fun. My companions at that lunch are specialists in words, after all, and they found it funny that there's a whole class of language that hasn't been engaging them, even though it is everywhere.

Teacher Zhu got out her smart phone and started googling the Chinese dream.¹⁷ Every once in a while someone would ask her if she'd found a definition, and she would say with an embarrassed laugh, "lots of hits, no information." Every site has pages of prose, she said, but none of it says anything!

Finally Teacher Li—the party member—proposed calling her ninth-grade daughter and asking her. Surely this middle school student would have studied the Chinese dream in depth. Sure enough, she knew the answer right off. The Chinese dream, she said, "is an expansion of the core values of socialism: revitalized national spirit, national wealth and strength, well-being among the people, social harmony." The daughter was a little horrified that we—her mother's professional friends—had to ask. For this schoolchild, this kind of knowledge is the iron rations of official truth. Professor He said later, she must have thought we were playing a trick on her or giving her a pop quiz—a whole group of adults seeking official information from a kid? How ridiculous is that?¹⁸

The situation *was* ridiculous. Or it actually was "a trick" we were playing on Teacher Li's very sober and already well-educated daughter. Even though, as our virtual informant, she seemed awfully serious on the subject of the Chinese dream, Professor He guessed that she suspected a joke was being played on her. We could all understand the "I am not amused" tone of the person who thought she might be the butt of a joke. The real targets of all this wordplay were the adults; but Teacher Li's ninth-grade daughter would have had to have been there to see that.

As everyone knew, as a party member Teacher Li had sat through lots of political trainings since the Chinese dream was rolled out by the Propaganda Ministry in 2013. These training sessions are intended to help

17. She didn't literally use Google because it is not available in China. She was probably using Baidu, a very effective alternative for searching Chinese media.

18. Teacher Bai told about a visit she made to a primary school, back around 2000, where the kids had all been told to write an essay on the then-government-slogan of "The Three Represents." She said the amazing thing was that all the school children seemed to actually know what the Three Represents were (unlike her and the other adults present at the time).

everyone in a leadership position get the language of policy correct, understand its implications, and think through ways to exemplify and implement the Party's latest imaginary, in this case, the Chinese dream.¹⁹ Such trainings are one of the practices that build institutions of government and give them weight. But they are also classroom settings where everyone is a little fractious, bored, and sometimes looking out the window. "Political-study" trainings are also, even in China, opportunities for the class clown to act up and lighten the mood and for those in authority to look the other way. It's not as if Teacher Li had blown off these trainings. She probably took notes, adopted some new vocabulary herself, and even at times thought about the implications of positively charged principles like freedom, justice, equality for her work at a university in Kunming, in 2014.

The condition that was being laid bare by our joking conversation, however, was a familiar one, perhaps especially because we are all academics trafficking constantly in idealistic abstractions like these. Much of our work involves excavating the concrete social activities that advance (or not) the achievement of freedom, justice, equality even as we realize that everyday life everywhere undermines and problematizes such ideals. Though we don't theorize it much (at least in anthropology, our shared field at that lunch), the work of forging a relationship between concrete life and abstract principles, between things and words, is what we routinely and soberly do. This signifying labor of referring to a world is what we as social scientists are all about.²⁰ So this occasion of casual talk, good food spread out before us, comfortable laughter at the ready, was an opportunity to notice how little we, or anybody, really care about the politically correct abstractions in which we routinely trade.²¹ We prefer the stories and jokes that encapsulate without denouncing all the contradictions of modern struggle over words and the real.

19. Teacher Li was not really as clueless as she felt she was. In her first doubtful list of dream contents, she was recalling some of the "core values of socialism" in her guesses about the meaning of the Chinese dream. Here are the "core values of socialism in twenty-four characters" as looked up later by Lili:

富强/民主/文明/和谐/ (strength and wealth, democracy, civilization, harmony)

自由/平等/公正/法治/ (freedom, equality, justice, rule of law)

爱国/敬业/诚信/友善 (patriotism, professionalism, honesty, friendliness)

20. In making this point I am recalling Michel Foucault's argument in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. pub. (New York, 1994) that natural science at its birth had to forge a representational or referential relationship between epistemological and natural, material things. The patterns of discourse came to be anchored in depth to a secularized world. See also Timothy J. Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982).

21. When we got back to our hotel room, Lili said, these guys are intellectuals, "they know it's all blah blah blah."

Previously I have attempted a historically situated and appreciative reading of Chinese state propaganda dating from the Maoist period.²² This effort departed from the rather suspicious readings of some experts on the Chinese media of the Maoist and reform periods.²³ I argued that propaganda images, like the cartoon children now embodying the Chinese dream, are a form of realism even though they do not engage in a literal-minded discourse of truth. Everyone knows that the rosy-cheeked female welders and model soldiers one saw in the classic posters, and especially their happy smiles, were implausible in the flawed present of Chinese lives and labors. But these happy socialist workers were not pretending to be a news photo; they were not meant to convey factual information. Rather they were drawn (in a more naturalistic style than the poster children of the contemporary Chinese dream) to articulate with the people's realistic aspirations toward a near future. The plausibility of a socialist propaganda image is its postulating of an ideal situation that can be read as being within the reach of its audience's real lives.²⁴ With a little more effort and collective good will, viewers should think—as they note all the familiar details that add up to a comfortable everyday life—“we can be like that, too.” I don't know whether the pudgy folk-art children claiming ownership of the Chinese dream on today's urban signboards speak to the aspirations—for wealth? for plenty of food? for grandchildren?—of my lunch companions. But it was fairly clear that no one saw the campaign as mere cynical state posturing. A dream postulates possible worlds. I doubt if, under contemporary conditions, my Kunming colleagues would object to the futures being dreamed for them by the state Propaganda Ministry.²⁵

22. See Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* (Durham, N.C., 2002), esp. pp. 17–25, 285–92.

23. See, for example, the explanatory texts connected to posters in Stefan Landsberger's amazing collections: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization* (Armonk, N.Y., 1995) and *Chinese Posters: The IISH-Landsberger Collections* (Munich, 2009).

24. See Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997), and Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley, 1990).

25. I have discovered in the course of writing this discussion that the particular dreams of the Chinese Propaganda Ministry (宣传部) are subject to some rather conspiratorial readings. An academic living outside the PRC, while recommending a Chinese government website that collects lots of documentation of the Chinese dream campaign, remarked that this was all the work of “the immortal Jiang Zemin.” Half in jest (as they say), he was suggesting that in keeping with the perceived gradualness of Jiang's release of power after he stepped down as party secretary in 2002, Xi Jinping had not been able to wrest control of state-centered mass media from his well-connected and still-meddling predecessor. The implication is that the message, whatever it might be, of the Chinese dream campaign might not be entirely welcome in today's Zhongnanhai.

This is not to suggest that academics in China are coopted by the state. To make their relative distance from the seats (or hilarious collapsing chairs?) of power a little clearer, I want to report another joke that came up at that same meal. Academics all, and under pressure not to spend too much of the university's money on hosting foreign guests, our Kunming friends didn't insist on the old-fashioned ritual proprieties of constant toasting with distilled liquor. A few polite gestures had to be made, however, so at one point Lili chose to represent me in posing a toast to our colleagues at the table. I followed with a toast of my own, saying—awkwardly, perhaps—that I wished them good health “on my own behalf” (*benshen*). Professor He corrected me; I should have said I was toasting them “my own self” (*qinzi*). He told a joke—a very widely repeated joke, he said, in this provincial university—about a Yunnan Province governor, a member of a well-known and locally powerful minority nationality, who while attending a meeting in Beijing actually encountered Premier Deng Xiaoping in the men's room. The provincial official got all flustered, not sure what one says to the nation's paramount leader in the men's room. He blurted out, “Comrade Deng, you actually go to the toilet *qinzi*, your own self?”

Professor He then analyzed this joke.²⁶ He said everyone finds this funny because the protagonist is a provincial and a minority; it partly lampoons the presumed muddle-headedness of even the most important leaders in this province so far from Beijing, the seat of sovereign rationality (and home of much dark comedy). And of course it expresses a predictable resentment on the part of academics, who sometimes feel they are being governed by relatively clueless officials, administrators who are provincial in several senses of the word. But it also ridicules a regrettable tendency to see the national leadership as somehow made of paper and words rather than flesh and blood, sweat and piss. In some ways, then, this joke about Deng Xiaoping in the toilet was the same one that had been running throughout our conversation: flesh-and-blood academics in Yunnan confess cheerfully to each other that they have no grasp of the meaning of state communications on paper. The real referent of all the signs has gone missing, not only for intellectuals but even for out-of-touch government officials. Only school children can keep the signifier and the concept

26. It is important to bear in mind the situation in which all this comedic performing was going on. See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980): 213–36. Though Professor He and his colleagues were presuming that Lili and I knew much that was salient about their political lives, they nevertheless also knew how to be excellent “informants” for visiting anthropologists. Surely Professor He would not have bothered to “analyze” this political joke if only his regular colleagues had been present.

provisionally attached to each other. Perhaps the realization that the tiger of state power really *is* made of paper has not even escaped middle school students, however serious they are required to be about official semantics. At least until they have passed the terrifying college entrance exam.

Being There

Are good, satisfying, really funny jokes untranslatable? Are there worlds so different that transgressions in one appear only as conventions in the other? Are there displacements within some worlds that wittily challenge an established order at its roots but that appear only as lack, failure, or muddle in another world? Is state propaganda a joke everywhere, or are there audiences, witnesses, or publics that appreciate its ironies beyond the rustling roar of paper tigers? The lunchtime joking I have discussed in this essay begins to address such questions, exploring some ways in which a whole situation in contemporary China is translated into a specific conviviality. After all, those of us gathered at lunch were all academics, Chinese speakers, urbanites, world travelers, and—most important—habitual translators of contemporary worlds. At that moment, none of us felt especially vulnerable to the disciplinary black humor criticizing New Left sociologists, issuing from party headquarters at Zhongnanhai. The fun we had as we tried to define the Chinese dream can be contextualized in the highly mediated lived world that we had in common, and some of the background we invoked—even when it was ancient history, like the “some can get rich first” policy of the 1980s—could be taken for granted among us. We shared a great deal, so some things did not need to be translated.

Nevertheless, there was an excess in this situation, a surplus of pleasure in sharing our freedom to laugh at Leviathan and to make light of official terminologies and abstractions. Most of the time, the core values of socialism and the Chinese dream are just part of the air we breathe while we pursue our life and work in Chinese cities.²⁷ But the disruption achieved by joking conversation reasserts a distance between worlds, even when these worlds are tightly intertwined. That is to say, it was only because we could laugh at the central state propaganda machine that we knew we were able to exist at a remove from it. For awhile, the state could be the other to our (quite diversely positioned) selves.

27. The ideological and propaganda-supported air is rather different in the rural areas, the county towns and villages in China's south and southwest, where Lili and I have been doing fieldwork over the last five years. The problem of the comic and shared laughter in these places could be presented as rather different from what I am considering here.

Were we laughing for different reasons or in full solidarity as we worked together to define the Chinese dream? Was this a case of same bed, different dreams? Does any maker of jokes really know if those present are laughing *with* him or *at* her? There may have been some cross-currents of ridicule at that lunch in Kunming. But given that we all knew from professional travel and struggles with multilingualism, in painful embodied practice, that jokes are not supposed to translate well, surely it counts that we all found a way to really really laugh together about research policy, state propaganda, and the provincialism of those above us.

In a way, though, it must be admitted that we were not really laughing *about* such things. Rather, we were laughing within them. This lunch gathering was more than a collection of critical intellects engaging in paradoxical or transgressive thinking; we were not sharing ideas or facts. If our “jokes” had been *about* politics, the stubborn failures of translation that secretly afflict all communication would have been more noticeable. Everyone there, for example, could claim much more knowledge about academic life in a Chinese provincial capital than I have ever possessed, so there were certainly things I didn’t understand. And there may have been tensions among these colleagues simmering beneath the respectful and convivial surfaces of our conversation that even Lili, as a Beijinger, could not perceive but that may have inflected everyone else’s remarks. There is much that we did not have in common; yet our enjoyment of the situation—both copresent and recently past, both memorious and aspirational—was genuinely shared. The fact that we laughed so much, with so much enjoyment, is the proof that we were all there and all then, translating the big joke of state power for each other, from within it.

Conclusion

Do the comedians in the Chinese Communist Party propaganda apparatus get the joke? Do they see the ludicrousness of the situation in which self-evident core values are proposed as a shared dream for everyone? The general impression is that they do not. Perhaps they are not in a structural position to share the laughter of the people. Classically in China, the sovereign is not allowed to joke.²⁸ Where the lord’s word is law, it would not do for him to engage in wordplay or paradoxical foolishness. The fact that modern leaders of fractious republics famously do so—Mao’s

28. Thanks to Haun Saussy for pointing this out. He cites a story from the *Shi Ji* (Historical Records) 39 assembled by Sima Qian (135–86 B.C.E.) in which a young royal who playfully “enfeoffed” another princeling was held to his imperial word. Overhearing the boys at play, the court historian insisted, “Whenever he speaks, the historian records his words, the rites bring them to fruition, and music celebrates them in song” (Sima Qian, *Shiji* [Beijing, 2013], pp. 1965–66).

witticisms are different from but not less clever than those of John Kennedy or Barack Obama—must be an index of the modernity of power in nation-states. Jokes bubble up at all levels in the everyday life of state power in China, as they do in other modern nation-states. The murmur of billions of sarcastic text messages, so many of which twist and challenge the proprieties of power, persuades us that the premodern imperium is no more. The system of cosmo-political lordship for which every imperial word was a decree and which tabooed the names of the sacred powerful is long gone. In the People's Republic of China, a very secular sovereignty addresses the multitude; it recognizes, relies upon, and *thus* disciplines the many modes of existence of the consumers of state communications. Unlike the provincial rube in the men's room, the people insist on some carnal necessities, and when the message fails to connect with actual life, they simply forget to consume it.

But that leaves us with a truly puzzling question: why is the Propaganda Ministry so humorless, why are its cute dreaming babies so flat-footed? If we could answer this question, reading the state agenda expressed in a media environment through the ephemeral laughter of the public, we might draw closer to an understanding of how contemporary sovereignty works. To adapt a common Chinese saying, in the people's laughter we might discern the state's continued achievement of a shared dream—vaguely conceived but not seriously challenged—for millions of different beds.

Theory of the Gimmick

Sianne Ngai

1. Labor-Saving Device

What are we as subjects of capitalist lifeworlds implicitly saying when we call something a gimmick, regardless of the inevitably varying objects to which the evaluation is applied and varying identities of those applying it? What is being registered about a shared world, perhaps without the speaker entirely knowing she or he is registering it, in this ambivalent, if mostly negative aesthetic judgment? That is, in the fascinatingly complex but also ordinary speech act—a demand for universal agreement based on feelings rather than concepts—spontaneously elicited by a perception of form?

We can start by putting the question differently: why are gimmicks almost comically irritating? Even the word seems to grate on Ivor Brown, who nonetheless devotes an entire essay to lovingly exploring his distaste for it in *Words in Our Time* (1958). “Comedians have their gimmicks, either as catch-phrase, theme-song, or bit of ‘business,’ which they exploit in . . . their appearances.”¹ Gimmicks seem to provoke contempt simply in part because they are job related: bits of business for performing aesthetic operations that we somehow become distracted into regarding as aesthetic objects in their own right. Here the much vaunted concept of aesthetic autonomy turns into an undesirable feature for once, when asserted not by

Versions of this article were presented at several institutions, and I would like to thank audiences at the University of Copenhagen, the University of Maryland at College Park, the University of Chicago, New York University, Johns Hopkins, the University of Toronto, Northwestern University, Ohio State, the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and Stanford University for their comments. I am especially grateful to Lauren Berlant.

1. Ivor Brown, *Words in Our Time* (London, 1958), pp. 58–59; hereafter abbreviated as *W*.

the work as a whole but illicitly by an instrumental part-object. More significantly, we see that in addition to being what Brown calls a “poor kind of artifice,” the gimmick irritates because it “abbreviates” work and time. As Brown writes, “I remember an old music-hall comedian called Phil Ray who began his turn by announcing, ‘I always abbrev. It’s my hab.’ Never to finish a word was his (not wildly diverting) gimmick” (W, p. 48).

Repulsive if also in an important way attractive, maintaining a degree of charm we often acknowledge grudgingly, if at all, labor and time-saving gimmicks are of course not exclusive to comedy or the arts. We find them in shoes and cars, appliances and food, politics and advertising, journalism and pedagogy, and virtually every object made and sold in the capitalist system. But comedy, and especially what David Flusfeder calls the “comedy of procedure,” is especially suited for bringing out the uniqueness of the gimmick as an aesthetic category—that is, as a form linked in a specific way to a judgment based on the feelings our perception of the form elicits.² As with the “operational aesthetic,” described by Neil Harris in *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*, the comedy of procedure turns modern rationality in general into an aesthetic experience, encouraging the reader’s “fascination with the ways things come together”³ and the “visualization of cause and effect.”⁴ This incitement of pleasure in “information

2. David Flusfeder, introduction to Helen DeWitt, *Lightning Rods* (High Wycombe, Bucks, UK, 2013), p. ix. On the aesthetic category as a historically specific relation between a style and a judgment, between a form and a perlocutionary speech act, see Sianne Ngai; *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012).

3. “The objects inside [Barnum’s American Museum], and Barnum’s activities outside, focused attention on their own structures and operations . . . and enabled—or at least invited—audiences and participants to learn how they worked. Adding an adjective to the label, one might term this an ‘operational aesthetic,’ an approach to experience that equated beauty with information and technique” (Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* [Chicago, 1973], p. 57; see also pp. 61–89; hereafter abbreviated *H*).

4. Tom Gunning, “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy,” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (London, 1994), p. 100; hereafter abbreviated “CM.” For a discussion of these texts relating the operational aesthetic to the dialectic comedy of Buster Keaton, see Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany, N.Y., 2007), pp. 68–72.

SIANNE NGAI is the author of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), winner of the MLA James Russell Lowell Prize, and *Ugly Feelings* (2005). Ngai has taught at the Cornell School for Criticism and Theory and in 2014–15 was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, where much of the essay in this issue was drafted. She received an honorary D. Phil in humanities from the University of Copenhagen in 2015.

and technique,” which Harris locates in a range of nineteenth-century objects “expos[ing] their processes of action,” from newspaper hoaxes to sea novels, was also central to early film comedy (*H*, p. 57). As we learn from Tom Gunning, the invitation to visualize causality becomes especially noticeable in comic films featuring a “device gag” or “apparatus”: the sausage machine, in which animals herded into one end come out as links from the other; or the webs of string with which children join buckets, blankets, and other commodities to unsuspecting adults who thus become parts of an elaborate “connection device”—one which the living beings absorbed into it cannot fully see (“CM,” p. 100).⁵

With this image of an apparatus binding together agents who otherwise seem to be acting independently (connecting them “behind [their] backs,” as Karl Marx likes to say), we may begin to suspect that the gimmick form, like the comedy of procedure that puts it so ostentatiously on display, emerges explicitly as a phenomenon of industrial capitalism, not just of a rationalized modernity.⁶ Today this mode of production continues to subtend and coexist with its postindustrial or deindustrialized aftermath, in which financial instruments like CDSs and CDOs, ways of dividing and moving values created in the immediate production process, give older gimmicks like the tontine and Ponzi scheme a new lease on life. The gimmick, this essay argues, is a specifically capitalist aesthetic phenomenon. Tellingly, the word that finally consolidates the concept of this not-so-marvelous marvel does not appear in print until the late 1920s, a moment of both euphoria as well as radical disenchantment with a host of capitalist techniques (industrial and commercial as well as financial).⁷

To be sure, there are marvelous devices centuries before these economic developments that we might be tempted to call gimmicks today. Describing the “mechanical apparatuses, restored and painted by Melchior Broederlam, that sprayed the guests of Philip the Good with water and dust,” Giorgio Agamben notes that prior to the seventeenth century European sensibility did not recognize a significant difference between “works of

5. We should however keep in mind that capitalist processes involve complicated kinds of causality less easy to visualize than the unidirectional, mechanical relations of cause and effect showcased in these films.

6. See, for example, this moment from *Capital*: The “division of labour is an organization of production which has grown up naturally, a web which has been, and continues to be, woven behind the backs of the producers of commodities” (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. [New York, 1976], 1:201).

7. This according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s surprisingly vague, even listless etymology (given such a idiosyncratic word), which, while citing another reference suggesting that *gimmick* might be an anagram of *magic*, finally lists its origin as “unknown” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “gimmick”).

sacred art” and elaborate contraptions such as those in the castle of Hesinde, where “in a hall decorated with a series of paintings representing the story of Jason, a series of machines was installed which, in addition to imitating Medea’s spells, produced lightning, thunder, snow, and rain, to obtain a more realistic effect.”⁸ Gimmicky as we might think them now, these precapitalist devices made no particular claim to abbreviating work on which they could henceforth renege. More significantly, such devices were objects of admiration only, unmixed with suspicion or contempt. It is only today that the *deus ex machina*, the machine or crane used to transport gods to the stage in ancient Greek tragedy, has become the name for a cheap or aesthetically unconvincing contrivance for achieving narrative closure.⁹

Devices like these were wonders only and not in any way equivocal or funny to their ancient and feudal contemporaries. The capitalist gimmick, however, is both a wonder *and* a trick.¹⁰ It is a form we marvel at *and* distrust, admire *and* disdain, whose affective intensity for us increases precisely because of this ambivalence.¹¹ Indeed, the gimmick is the very

8. Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, Calif., 1999), p. 14.

9. Citing Frances Dunn, however, Rob Breton suggests that the “critique of the *deus ex machina* is as old as the device itself.” As Breton writes, “Dunn translates the comic poet Antiphanes, who complains that the device ‘covers up the incompetence of tragic poets’: ‘when they don’t know what to say / and have completely given up on a play / just like a finger they lift the machine / and the spectators are satisfied / There is none of this for us’” (Rob Breton, “Ghosts in the Machina: Plotting in Chartist and Working-Class Fiction,” *Victorian Studies* 47 [Summer 2005]: 557).

10. Thanks to Lauren Berlant for this particularly succinct formulation of my argument.

11. We thus move closer to the gimmick proper in Michel de Montaigne’s “On Vain Cunning Devices” (1580), in which he singles out with both contempt and amusement “those poets who compose entire works from lines all beginning with the same letter.” Comparing these literary feats to the stunts of a performer specializing in “throwing grains of millet so cleverly that they infallibly went through the eye of a needle,” Montaigne notes how they point backward as well as forward in time. On the one hand they hark back to “the ancient Greeks [who] would form poems of various shapes such as eggs, balls, wings, and axe-heads.” On the other they point forward to the art of Montaigne’s contemporaries, including one “who spent his time counting the number of ways in which he could arrange the letters of the alphabet and found that they came to that incredible number we can find in Plutarch.” Perhaps to deflect similar criticisms about his own highly stylized, often digressive experiments with the novel form of the essay (as the last self-reflexive paragraph suggests), he notes, “it is a wonderful testimony of the weakness of Man’s judgment that things which are *neither good nor useful* it values on account of their rarity, novelty, and even more, their difficulty” (Michel de Montaigne, “On Vain Cunning Devices,” *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech [New York, 1993], p. 348).

Absent from the object of wonder, there is a negativity in this assessment of the cunning device that brings us closer to the gimmick’s ambivalence. Yet note how Montaigne still lacks a determinate concept for these overvalued aesthetic objects. At his historical moment, only a negation of positive terms (“neither good nor useful”) seems available to describe the mixed

slippage between these positive and negative judgments—wonder and trick—in a way that gives it a special relation to comedy, opening a window onto the genre in a way that the unequivocally appreciated precapitalist device does not.

As I suggest above, the “connection device” Gunning singles out as an example of the classic gimmick or gag and also of early film comedy’s operational aesthetic might be read as the emblem of an entire mode of production. Could our experience of the gimmick’s compromised aesthetic form, illuminated for us in a special way by the comedy of procedure, be related in an even deeper way to the methods and devices of capitalism? And in a way that has something to do with the gimmick’s special relation to time (its saving), to labor (its reduction), and to value (its cheapening)?

As already glimpsed in Brown’s comments about comedians, there is clearly a connection between our negative evaluation of the gimmick’s aesthetic integrity and our negative relation to the abbreviation of labor it appears to encode. Take “Notes on Comedy” by L. C. Knights (1933). Knights opens with a complaint about literary criticism, invoking the domestic appliance—vacuum cleaner, dishwasher, coffeemaker—to underscore the contempt that the gimmick’s promise of reducing labor elicits therein: “Labor-saving devices are common in criticism. Like the goods advertised in women’s journals they do the work, or appear to do it, leaving the mind free for the more narcotic forms of enjoyment. Generalizations and formulae are devices of this kind.”¹²

Note how the very idea of a “labor-saving device” seems suspicious to Knights and in a way underscored by its association with machines and women, regardless of whether such devices merely appear to or really do save labor. There is thus a real social insight in what might otherwise seem like fussing on the part of someone not wanting to succumb to the lure of gimmicks in his or her own line of work. In what circumstances might the reduction of labor by way of a device—the simplest promise of all technology—become regarded, even when *not* illusory, as a contemptible, untrustworthy, or generally negative thing? When, due to the structurally

aesthetic experience he wants to describe. Missing here as well is the gimmick’s claim to saving labor. Far from promising to reduce or eliminate toil, the “vain cunning devices” of which Montaigne writes appear to increase it, putting the very laboriousness or “difficulty” of their achievement on display.

On ambivalence as increasing the affective intensity of our attachments to an object overall, rather than involving a kind of averaging, in which the positive or negative feelings cancel each other out leaving us with a final “balance,” see Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners*, trans. Lisa Rosenblatt, Charlotte Eckler, and Camilla Nielsen (London, 2014), pp. 100–103.

12. L. C. Knights, “Notes on Comedy,” *Scrutiny* (Mar. 1933): 356–57.

compelled pursuit of maximum profits by capitalists solely capable of reuniting what capitalism fundamentally separates—means of production and labor power—labor-saving machines proliferate in tandem with rising proportions of machines to workers. What Marx calls the increasing “organic composition of capital” in turn produces a tendency toward falling rates of profit, leading to flights of capital into nonproductive sectors and rising levels of unemployment, while also driving the capitalist to devise new, increasingly nuanced ways to squeeze increasingly small increments of surplus labor from workers in the immediate production process on which the entire system continues to depend.¹³ While we would not be wrong to hear it in Knights’s comment as well, indignation on behalf of a violated Protestant work ethic is thus only part of the story. It cannot by itself account for this more fundamental distrust of the labor-saving device, which relates not only to the “spirit” of capitalism but its most basic operations. Here the very concept of labor saving comes to be profoundly ambivalent. Whether in the form of an idea (“generalizations and formulae”) or thing (“goods advertised in women’s journals”), the device that “saves” human labor contributes to both its intensification and elimination in the long run.¹⁴

The gimmick is the objective correlative of this ambivalence, translating a source of increased economic productivity and material wealth, the reduction of human labor through progressively advanced machines and techniques of production, into a sign of impoverishment in the aesthetic realm. For gimmicks register as deficient in aesthetic value even when their appeal is obliquely acknowledged. Calling something a gimmick is a distancing judgment, a way to apotropaically ward off, by publicly proclaiming ourselves unconvinced by, or impervious to, the capitalist device’s claims and attractions. At the same time the gimmick enables us to indirectly acknowledge this power to enchant, as one to which others, if not ourselves, are susceptible.¹⁵ In this elliptical fashion, gimmicks can be

13. Marx, *Capital*, 1:762.

14. Second-wave feminists were quick to notice this about domestic appliances, in particular, countering the optimistic claims of treatises in home economics such as Christine Frederick’s *Efficient Housekeeping or Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* (Chicago, 1925). Betty Friedan, among others, noted that domestic appliances could indirectly lead to an increase of work for women in the household; see Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 2013), pp. 285–88. For a reading of the “device” comedies of American filmmaker Charley Bowers as a satire of Frederick and the Taylorization of housework, see William Solomon, “Slapstick Modernism: Charley Bowers and Industrial Modernity,” *Modernist Cultures* 2 (Winter 2006): 176.

15. This simultaneous act of repudiation and acknowledgment makes the gimmick an excellent example of what Robert Pfaller calls illusions without owners: beliefs like the superstitious rituals of the sports fan that in contemporary secular cultures “always belong to others, that are

found amusing or even cute (indeed, the gimmick often takes the form of a charmingly miniaturized machine). Yet it is our feeling of suspicion, followed closely by contempt, that defines the aesthetic judgment/experience of the gimmick as such. A device cannot be a gimmick—it would just neutrally be a device—without this moment of distrust and aversion, which seems to respond directly to or even correct our initial euphoria in the image of something promising to lessen human toil. This is again what separates the capitalist gimmick proper from ancient or feudal machines that might call attention to their ability to make work more efficient, because the compound crank or water mill's promise of enhanced productivity does not elicit (potentially comic) feelings of misgiving or fraudulence. Always enchanting and repulsive at once, and never simply one or the other, the gimmick is once again fundamentally a capitalist phenomenon—what the poet George Oppen calls a “sad marvel.”¹⁶

This ambivalence comes forth most strongly in the aspect of the gimmick which I think irritates and charms us the most: the way in which it seems both to work too hard and work too little. The self-described inventions of former vaudevillian and mining engineer Rube Goldberg, explorations in his own words of “man’s capacity for exerting maximum effort to accomplish minimal results,” highlight this contradiction in a memorable way (fig. 1).¹⁷ In these tongue-in-cheek designs for fictional machines, first appearing as newspaper cartoons in the early twentieth century and living on today in examples ranging from engineering contests to Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s art film *The Way Things Go* (1987), a stunning

never anyone’s own [beliefs].” Knowledge of these illusions *as* illusions does nothing to dissipate our attachment to them; it may in fact strengthen their power. However, in contrast to the more passive form these suspended illusions take in, say, the horoscope (enjoyed by a possible majority of nonbelievers), the judgment of the gimmick enables subjects to actively distance themselves from the attractions of the capitalist device. Through it they performatively declare their resistance to being taken in by its false promises of saving labor, even as others elsewhere implicitly are (Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, p. 2). Snobbery is undeniably part of the story of this displacement or delegation of belief. Yet I do not think it finally tells us much about what the judgment of the gimmick means or about the critical work the affective speech act performs.

16. George Oppen, “Of Being Numerous (1–22),” *New Collected Poems* (2008), www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/53223

17. Maynard Frank Wolfe, *Rube Goldberg: Inventions* (New York, 2000), p. 53. Related to this extravagant expenditure of labor in art is Theodor Adorno on the subjects of what he calls “tour de force” or technical virtuosity and Thomas Mann’s idea of “art [as] a higher form of prank”: “Technological as well as aesthetic analyses become fruitful when they comprehend the tour de force in works. At the highest level of form the detested circus act is reenacted: the defeat of gravity, the manifest absurdity of the circus—Why all the effort?—is *in nuce* the aesthetic enigma” (Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor [London, 2013], p. 254).

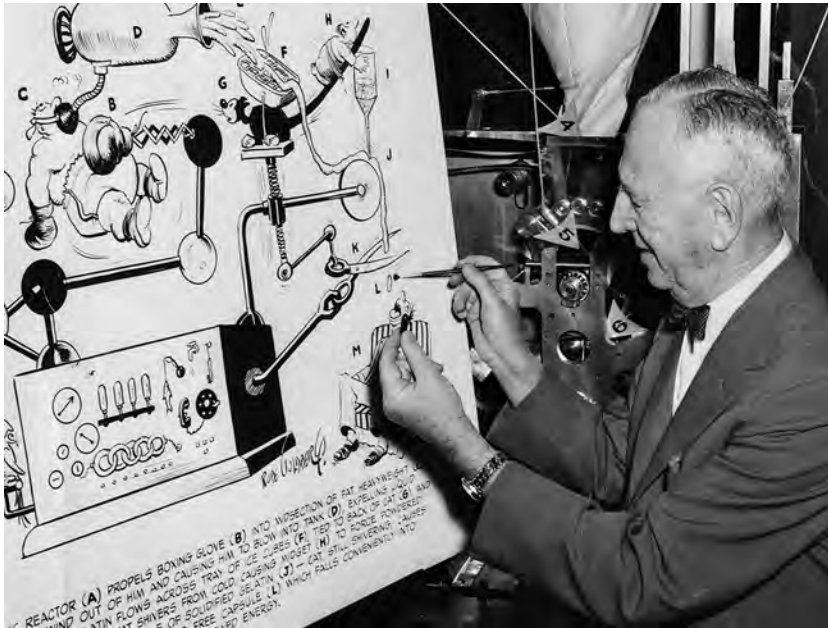


FIGURE 1. Rube Goldberg. Copyright heirs of Rube Goldberg / Courtesy Abrams Books. Source: www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-wacky-inventions-of-rube-goldberg.

variety of inanimate devices are combined with animal or human agents in painstakingly elaborate ways, if also in ultimately simple chains of linear cause and effect, to perform anticlimactically ordinary tasks: emptying ashtrays, buttoning a collar, sharpening a pencil (fig. 2).¹⁸ Reminiscent of the gag film's "connection device," the Rube Goldberg perfectly captures how what the gimmick does to achieve its intended effect seems at once excessively laborious but also strangely too easy. This is why we can refer

18. To be clear, I take the Rube Goldberg (and the novel *Lightning Rods*, discussed below) as a representation of the capitalist gimmick, a meditation on or study of how its aesthetic operates through a mimetic enactment of its form and logic; whereas I take *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (also discussed below) as both a representation and also an example. Since the Rube Goldberg is a mediation on the *capitalist* gimmick, it is worth remembering something often forgotten by its contemporary revivalists, which is the frequency which his contraptions combine their wide array of inanimate objects (dead labor—what we always remember) with living animals or small human beings (living labor). As Michael North notes, for all their "irrational complexity," the Rube Goldberg devices ultimately rely on simple "organically generated" sources of energy, usually involving some kind of animal pain: "A jack-in-box scares a porcupine, a dish of hot chili scalds a porcupine, or a French poodle jumps for joy at seeing a German dachshund collapse, and the works begin to turn" (Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* [New York, 2009], p. 90; hereafter abbreviated as MC).

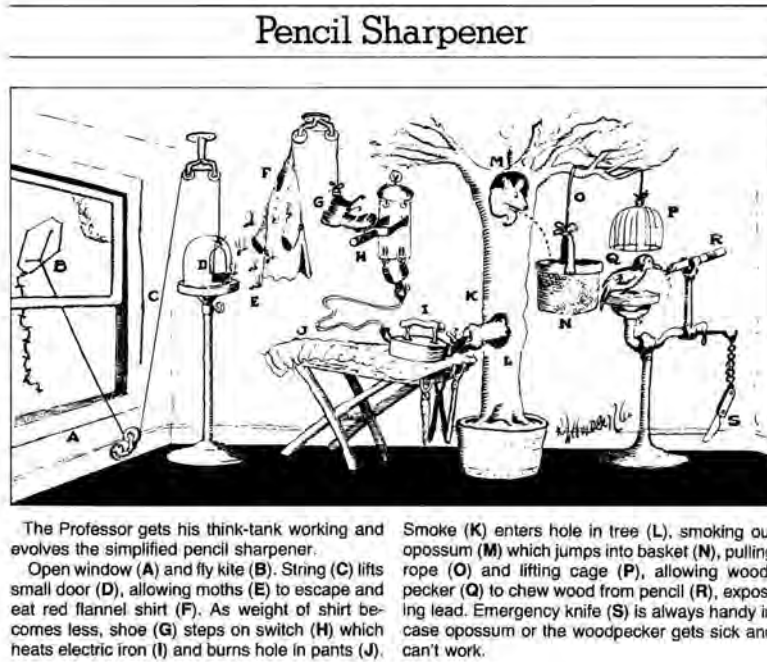


FIGURE 2. *Pencil Sharpener*. Copyright heirs of Rube Goldberg / Courtesy Abrams Books. Source: www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-wacky-inventions-of-rube-goldberg.

to it both admiringly as a labor-saving “trick” and also disparagingly as a labor-avoiding “dodge.”¹⁹

Mirrored in this appearance of both overperforming and underperforming, the equivocal saving of labor that the gimmick’s form encodes is the main reason for why it both attracts and repels us. Because the

19. Goldberg’s cartoons, like the mischief gag films analyzed by Gunning, were part of early twentieth-century “New Humor,” a medium-crossing mode of popular comedy influenced predominantly by vaudeville, where comedians began to “favor striking, intense effects over the slow development of comic plots” (MC, p. 136). To both comedians and audiences, the stage routines, drawings, poems, and stories associated with New Humor seemed “alarmingly more ‘mechanical’ than the humor of the past” (MC, p. 8). Moreover, as gimmicks came to predominate over traditional storytelling, “the mechanics of comedy [came] to be treated almost as a science”; in the words of one early twentieth-century writer cited by North, as “a vocabulary of basic mechanical devices, insertable into any performance regardless of context, and calculated to produce an immediate and outward response” (MC, p. 8). New Humor was thus comedy redefined by techniques regarded as akin to those of industrial production, at roughly the same time as the use of *gimmick* expands beyond the world of entertainment, eventually describing devices (and effects) used in contexts ranging from mechanical engineering to politics.

capitalist seeks state-of-the-art machinery at costs lower than those at which new technologies are introduced, his or her mode of production requires a constant negotiation with the social aging of productive devices. If we speak of outdated equipment as working too hard, below a standard of productivity continually being reset at higher levels, expensive new technology adopted too early might be described as working too well, performing above standard, but unprofitably. And so the ambiguous reduction of labor by productive devices *whose timeliness greatly matters* is reflected in another closely related contradiction on the part of the gimmick qua compromised aesthetic form: that of seeming either too old or too new.²⁰ Being out of synch with “the times” as defined by their productivity, whether by lagging behind or hubristically advancing too far ahead, is another reason why the gimmick irritates us, and all the more so given how aggressively it insists on its contemporaneity with its audience.²¹ It is moreover in this insistence, one against which the gimmick’s anachronisms become apparent in the first place (and one significantly shared by advertising), in which something about the gimmick seems too revealing of its aim: that of giving its addressee what it says it knows we want. It is from this interpellation that we recoil, not because the gimmick’s claim to knowing us is wrong but because it so often isn’t.

Comedy shares the gimmick’s insistence on its contemporaneity, according to some critics, because of its special relation to appraisals of worth (and to the meta-appraisal of those appraisals). Due to a commitment

20. Whether perceived as a device working too little or working too hard, as outdated or too advanced, our experience of the gimmick involves a judgment about the intensity of labor made in relation to an implicit norm (since any judgment of insufficiency or excess presupposes a standard from which deviations occur). This silent or implicit norm seems to be what Marx calls the historical standard of productivity, informed by and informing what he calls socially necessary labor time. The historical productivity of labor is thus the gimmick’s nonaesthetic shadow. Both use labor as a measure of contemporaneity and vice-versa. The gimmick is for this reason unique among other aesthetic categories, which however reflective of capital’s relations in other aspects, do not confront us with its social abstractions in such a concrete way.

Note, however, how the gimmick points to this historical standard of productivity while letting it remain unspecified. We might think of it as affectively encircling its very resistance to quantitative measure.

21. As we will see in more detail below, the gimmick highlights contemporaneity as a problem of time, mediated by capitalist forms of sociality, and also as a problem of sociality, mediated by capitalist forms of time. And because both will prove central to the form of gimmick, it must be underscored here that the contemporary is of course not the same as the present, but rather a temporal concept that “performatively projects a [fictional] unity onto the disjunctive relation between coeval times,” as Peter Osborne puts it (Peter Osborne, “The Fiction of the Contemporary,” *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* [London, 2013], p. 23). It is also an equally speculative thesis about mutual belonging or collectivity: “belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “contemporary”).

to “exhibiting current evaluations in light of their shortcomings,” James Feibleman argues, comedy’s “specific points bear always upon the contemporary world.” The “contemporaneity of comedy” is thus “one of its essential features” and directly linked to its critique of idealization.²² Alenka Zupančič makes a similar argument, albeit from a point of view explicitly countering the humanist one tacitly underpinning Feibleman’s argument about comedy’s metaevaluative correction of overevaluations. Rejecting the thesis that comedy brings us down to earth from our identification with abstract ideals by exposing the universal’s contamination by particularity, returning us with joy to our embodiment and the knowledge that we are only human, comedy is rather understood as a finitude compromised by universals—as a finitude that leaks.²³ In making this argument about the inherently comical contamination of particularity by universality (and of its corollary image, the walking abstraction or idea in the flesh), Zupančič expands on Agnes Heller’s claims about the genre’s “preeminent involvement with the present” (*O*, p. 177). Heller points out that in contrast to the centrality of mourning in tragedy, no past-oriented emotion seems equally central to comic experience. We see comedy’s unusual attachment to the present reflected also in the fact that live improvisation on the stage is the exclusive *métier* of comic actors: “there is no *tragedia dell’arte*, only *comedia dell’arte*,” Heller writes.²⁴ To these insights Zupančič adds the following: comedy is “extremely adept at *showing how something functions*—that is to say, it is adept at showing the mechanisms, *in the present*, that allow its functioning and perpetuation.”²⁵ Here it is not the project of metaevaluation that accounts for comedy’s special tie to the present but rather the way in which it shares the gimmick’s operational aesthetic, its interest in showcasing how things are done. What is interestingly suggested is that this focus on procedure might not just define one species of comedy among others but comedy in general.

Toggling between wonder and trick, overvaluation and correction, the gimmick thus draws into sharper relief something about the workings of comedy, just as comedy reveals the gimmick as aesthetic form. Yet

22. James Feibleman, “The Meaning of Comedy,” *Theories of Comedy*, ed. Paul Lauter (New York, 1964), pp. 464, 465.

23. See Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Boston, 2008), p. 178.

24. Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life* (Lanham, Md., 2005), p. 13.

25. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, p. 178; my emphasis. “Comic elements always react (to others) in the present, and although they usually give the impression that they . . . unavoidably react as they do, they also—since this always happens right before our eyes—display a radical contingency involved in this very necessity” (*ibid.*).

gimmicks also belong to a world of practical and industrial inventions.²⁶ In twentieth-century engineering manuals and popular science magazines, we see the term used as technical slang to refer to the working part, often a unit enclosing or comprised of many smaller parts, of a larger machine.²⁷ Here *gimmick* seems descriptive instead of evaluative—a generic term, like *gadget*, *thingamabob*, or *doohickey*, for any functional device.²⁸ Yet it is this explicitly industrial as opposed to aesthetic version of the labor-saving gimmick that best reflects the way some notable early-twentieth-century aesthetic theorists regard comedy. For Theodor Lipps, for example, the “feeling of the comical” is what results when the mind’s preparation for grasping something it thinks will be challenging is revealed as being in excess of the actual amount of effort required.²⁹ What was anticipated as being strenuous suddenly turns out to be “easily comprehended and mastered” in a kind of paradoxically uplifting deflation (“CRL,” p. 395). At the same time, for Lipps the “feeling of the comical” produced through this reduction of mental exertion is interestingly one that does not “gratify” even as it “arouses joy” (“CRL,” p. 394). Rather, it remains a complex, ambivalent pleasure that never forgets the initial moment of strain, retaining an unease akin to that which the gimmick’s promise of saving labor elicits. Freud makes this connection between comedy and the reduction of work even more explicit, though in his case mental exertion is not the problem but the cure: “By raising our intellectual expenditure we can achieve the same result with a diminished expenditure on our movements. Evidence of this cultural success is provided by our machines.”³⁰

There is an emphasis on the “intellectual” in these theories of comedy as a “diminished expenditure” of work that comes to a head in the comedy of capitalist procedure as a fetishization of the idea. “If you’re an ideas

26. Though of course the border between aesthetic culture and practical invention will always be porous in an age of what Hal Foster calls “total design” (Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* [London, 2003], p. 18).

27. See, for just a few examples, John Francis Rider, *Perpetual Trouble Shooter’s Manual* (New York, 1947), pp. 86, 88, 89 and *Successful Servicing* (New York, 1951), pp. 2, 12, 31. Copious references to the “GIMMICK” abound in issues of *Beechcraft Engineering Service*, an aeronautics periodical. In *The Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the National Association of Building Owners and Managers* (Chicago, 1940), pp. 126–28, “gimmick” and “Gimmick Manufacturing Company” are playfully used as names for a generic commodity and manufacturing company in a hypothetical business scenario (and also as explicit substitutes for “widget”).

28. Though note how all these now primarily descriptive terms for working parts still retain a certain cuteness, which is to say an aesthetic and therefore evaluative dimension.

29. Theodor Lipps, “The Comical and Related Things,” trans. Lee Chadeayne, in *Theories of Comedy*, pp. 393–97, 394; hereafter abbreviated “CRL.”

30. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York, 1989), p. 242.

man you don't just stop having ideas because cash flow is not a problem," thinks the personification of capital who is the protagonist of Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* (much more on this novel soon). "You go right on having new ideas, and when you have an idea you want to see that idea in action."³¹ In a way that might explain why the conceptual artwork remains such a prominent stereotype of a gimmicky artifact, in capitalist culture *idea* and *gimmick* often become synonymous. We see this slippage in the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition: "gimmick, n. A gadget; spec. a contrivance for dishonestly regulating a gambling game, or an article used in a conjuring trick; now usu. a tricky or ingenious device, gadget, *idea*, etc., esp. one adopted for the purpose of attracting attention or publicity."³² If, as Zupančič suggests, the materialism of comedy resides not in the rejection of abstractions but rather in their enticization, something similar seems to happen in the form of the gimmick. The gimmick is both an idea and also its thingly materialization in a "gadget," "article," or "contrivance"; it is more precisely the transformation of idea *into* thing in a way that charms but also disturbs us. It is worth lingering on the negative element of this affectively mixed response. Is not the realization of supposedly abstract ideas in supposedly concrete things regarded as desirable by pretty much everyone, skeptics and proponents of capitalism alike? And is not the capitalist gimmick a trivial and merely symptomatic form and/or judgment, incapable of critical reflection on the mode of production for which it is merely a synecdoche? Yet in this aesthetic experience the well-nigh universally celebrated transformation of ideas into things becomes an object of rare misgiving—as if to underscore just how little distance separates realization from reification in a system of generalized commodity production.

This is of course a system in which the production of commodities increasingly encompasses the production of the specific way in which they will be consumed. Here, to cite the main idea of one post-Fordist "business bible" designed to look like a bro-friendly cookbook, the reception of a commodity is not something organized after the fact of production by a separate division of workers.³³ Rather, the marketing is to be "baked" into the commodity during the process of production itself. The male authors of *Baked In: Creating Products and Businesses That Market Themselves* attempt to market this conflation of production and reception as

31. DeWitt, *Lightning Rods* (New York, 2012), p. 223; hereafter abbreviated LR.

32. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "gimmick"; my emphasis.

33. See Alex Bogusky and John Winsor, *Baked In: Creating Products and Businesses That Market Themselves* (New York, 2010).

a cutting-edge capitalist technique (if also, interestingly, as a cutesy domestic one). Yet it is a conflation already central to the gimmick as a historical phenomenon coinciding with the birth of mass advertising, when methods for realizing the values of otherwise unsalable commodities by creating unprecedented kinds of demand were codified in response to one of the first waves of visible overaccumulation of industrially produced goods. Mirroring the unity of production and exchange distinctive to capitalism—beginning with the worker’s sale of labor power to the capitalist, these activities mediate one other at every point—in the gimmick making and selling always seem to happen at once.

We are given a detailed demonstration of how this “classic” version of the gimmick works in “The Glory Machine” (1883) by symbolist writer Villiers de l’Isle-Adam.³⁴ The device at the heart of this late nineteenth-century story, narrated in the blustery tone of a market still difficult to separate from theatre, is a “machine” for insuring French playwrights against ruin by guaranteeing that their aesthetic productions will be met with an unequivocally positive response. “In the future, [such] risks will be completely ruled out” (“GM,” p. 62).³⁵ The punch line of Villiers’s laying bare of the gimmick form—the story’s metagimmick, if you like—is that the “sublime mechanism” for generating Glory proves to be nothing other than the physical building of the theatre. The output of the “The Glory Machine” is thus a paradoxically glorious deflation akin to that at work in Lipps’s and Freud’s theories of comedy. For we quickly discover that the Machine is not a scientifically advanced marvel difficult for us to understand but just an ordinary amphitheater modified with hundreds of mechanical devices and controlled by a hidden central operator on a giant “Keyboard” for generating a simulation of collective aesthetic pleasure. Even more than the theatrical production for which it is simultaneously produced as both a response and a work to be aesthetically consumed in its own right, the artificial reception is an elaborately orchestrated *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In addition to “laughing and lachrymatory gases” pumped out at the appropriate moments from pipes, automated cane ends to thump on floors, and the installation under every seat of a folded “pair of very shapely hands, in oak” (the narrator archly notes, “It would be superfluous here to indicate their function”), its devices include “tiny bellows . . . operated by electricity” placed in “phonographic machines”

34. See Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, “The Glory Machine,” *Cruel Tales*, trans. Robert Baldick (Oxford, 1985), pp. 48–63; hereafter abbreviated “GM.”

35. On the preindustrial imbrication of marketplace and the theater, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1988).

hidden in the mouths of the proscenium cupids. At appropriate moments these phonographic machines play the prerecorded sounds of aesthetic reactions—"Bellowings, Chokings, 'Encores,' Recalls, Silent Tears, Recalls-with-Bellowings-extra, Sighs of Approbation, Opinions Proffered, Wreaths, Principles, Convictions, Moral Tendencies, Epileptic Seizures, Sudden Child-births, Blows, Suicides"—said to exceed the variety already offered by any "well-organized Clique," the paid human applauders who represent what the Machine technologically supersedes. The Glory Machine's much vaster repertoire extends even further to "Ideas" and "Noises of Discussion (art for art's sake, Form and Idea)" and even to full-blown "Critical Articles," churned out while the play under review is still in process of being performed ("GM," p. 65).³⁶

The seemingly exotic futuristic device for securing the ideal reception for an aesthetic commodity ends up being nothing other than the ordinary present-day apparatus for the commodity's production. The final joke is that the Machine's production of an unambiguously positive aesthetic reception ends up producing an *unfeigned* pleasure for the audience in the world of the story. "Whence it comes—and here is the solution of the problem of a physical means attaining an intellectual end—that success becomes a reality—that Glory does veritably pass into the auditorium! And the illusory side of the . . . Apparatus vanishes, fusing itself, positively, in the glow of the True!" ("GM," p. 63). With this moment of metaphysical triumph, the emergence of the "real thing" from its simulation, which Robert Pfaller claims defines the essence of comedy, the tale completes its comedic act of *generic* self-deflation, as the speculative allegory or philosophical parable we may have thought we were reading—which begins with a series of pseudo-Hegelian reflections on the "common point" between substance and idea, or matter and thought—devolves as it were into a satire on the pettiness of contemporary French dramatists and the mediocrity of their drama.³⁷ In accordance with the disappointment specific

36. Anticipating Villiers's return to the same device in *Tomorrow's Eve*, the Machine further comes equipped with "twenty Andreides, straight from the workshops of Edison," which we are told can be dispersed among live members of the audience to "lend tone" to the aesthetic reception being produced and enjoyed in simultaneity with the performance ("GM," p. 65).

37. In an interesting parallel to Zupančič's claim about the centrality of plasticized abstraction to comedy, Pfaller argues that comedy is the emergence of a "cogent truth" from "something transparently fictive"; it is "based on a deception which fools no one while at the same time the performers come under its spell" (Pfaller, "Introduction," *Schluss mit der Komödie! Stop That Comedy! On the Subtle Hegemony of the Tragic in Our Culture*, ed. Pfaller [Wien, 2005], pp. 170–71). In a similar vein, Mladen Dolar singles out "find[ing] of the Real in the very trade of appearances" as the one of the genre's defining features (Dolar, "Comedy and Its Double," in *Schluss mit der Komödie!* p. 182). This emergence of the real thing from its simulation in "The Glory Machine" recurs in *Tomorrow's Eve* when Lord Ewald truly falls in love

to the overworking/underworking, too laborious/too easy gimmick, this deflation cleverly takes place in tandem with the story's demonstration of how its eponymous aesthetic machine works.

Yet there is disappointment precisely because euphoria comes before. The gimmick lets us down—self-corrects our overestimation of its abilities—only because it has also managed to pump us up. We express contempt for it as a labor-saving trick because our attention was in fact initially caught by its promises of saving labor; we describe it as cheap or aesthetically impoverished only because something about it seemed so truly shiny with value. Even if the gimmick is fundamentally an aesthetic failure, our irritation by it has everything to do with the fact that it also partially succeeds. One wonders if we find gimmicks repulsive *insofar as* we find them attractive, as if in a reevaluation of the initial evaluation (here, reversing the order of the sublime's two affective phases, our negative response overrides the positive one). In an almost homeopathic as well as autocorrecting way, the gimmick qua device of capitalist production, as well as distinctively capitalist aesthetic form and judgment, deflates the claims to value or hype it initially excites.

This prompts us to ask: is it production per se that irritates us in our aesthetic experience of the gimmick or something about the specific way in which the gimmick comes to index it? Why is the gimmick's operational or procedural aesthetic not a source of simple pleasure, as it is in the practical jokes and how-to-do-it books Harris describes in *Humbug*, the "task films" and "device films" analyzed by Trahair and Gunning, or today's Discovery Science Channel television show *How Is It Made?* Given that all involve revealing and inviting audiences to take pleasure in learning about methods of production, why are we charmed in these instances but not entirely so in the experience of the gimmick? Even if the literary archive from which he builds his argument lies at the opposite end of the cultural spectrum from these popular entertainments, a similar question could be asked about Viktor Shklovsky's concepts of "art-as-device" and as "exposing the device," in which the elucidation of the procedures by which an aesthetic effect is achieved contributes to the salutary project of art as *ostranenie* or making-strange, a formalist idea subsequently politicized in Bertholt Brecht's epic theater and high modernist *Verfremdungseffekt*.³⁸

with Edison's "stupefying machine for manufacturing the Ideal" (Hadaly the female Android) (Villers, *Tomorrow's Eve*, trans. Robert Martin Adams [Champaign, Ill., 2001], p. 194).

38. Viktor Shklovsky, "The Novel as Parody," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Champaign, Ill., 1991), p. 149; hereafter abbreviated "NP." At times it is interestingly hard to separate Shklovsky's "device," the thing, from the action of "exposing the device," in part because the device seems to perform this action to itself. This reflexivity throws in even greater

For Brecht and Shklovsky, whose privileged example is Lawrence Sterne, the making visible of methods of production *adds* pleasure, *adds* aesthetic value, whereas in the gimmick it directly detracts from both our enjoyment and esteem. What accounts for this difference in our relation to the exact same maneuver of calling attention to the process of making by way of the aesthetic device? It can only be the fact that the capitalist gimmick seems to make promises about the reduction of labor in a way that Shklovsky's literary device does not—promises that, interestingly, we distrust from the start.³⁹

Ambiguities surrounding labor and value in capitalism are also ambiguities about time. We will take a much closer look at this aspect of the gimmick below, which will return us in a direct way to the issue of comedy.

2. Timing

Consider this display of comic devices in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1974): scaled-down versions of the spectacular products made in the fireworks factory that symbolically dominates this satire of capitalist life in the early twentieth-century United States:

There were exploding cigars, rubber roses for the lapel that squirted water, boxes of sneezing powder, telescopes that left black eyes, exploding card decks, sound bladders for placing under chair cushions, glass paperweights with winter scenes on which snow fell when you shook them, exploding matches, punch-boards, little lead liberty bells and statues of liberty, magic rings, exploding fountain pens, books

relief the curious relationship between Shklovsky's device and the capitalist gimmick, which performs a similar conflation of what it is/does with its own laying bare of what it is/does. I am grateful to Louis Cabri for initially drawing my attention to this comparison. On the relation between Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and Brecht's *Verfremdung*, see Stanley Mitchell, "From Shklovsky to Brecht: Some Preliminary Remarks towards a History of the Politicisation of Russian Formalism," *Screen* 15, no. 2 (1974): 74–81.

39. The key difference being also that Shklovsky's "art-as-device" and "exposing the device" (synonymous roughly in his writing with *ostranenie*) are meant to *slow down* aesthetic perception. The goal is to make aesthetic perception less instantaneous, to narrativize or turn it into a "step-by-step structure" ("NP," p. 22), hence countering "automatization" or the "algebraic method of thinking" by which "objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye." This is why the main example of a "device" across Shklovsky's essays is what he calls "the device of deceleration" ("NP," p. 5). The labor-saving gimmick, on the other hand, is almost always a way of speeding things up, even when it participates in the operational aesthetic of calling attention to the process by which it achieves its effect, and of course especially when it takes the form of the black box. One might say that while the comedic gimmick is an (equivocal) way of reducing energy expenditure, Shklovsky's "device" is a way of increasing it.

that told you the meaning of dreams, rubber Egyptian belly dancers, exploding watches, exploding eggs.⁴⁰

This passage is curiously static, even though every gimmick featured in it—a good many of them simulations of luxury items, designed to self-destruct for the entertainment of the nonrich—seems to be a kind of action.⁴¹ Each device is presented in or as a tiny blast of text, but with no sense of momentum due to the cordoning of each successive squirt, sneeze, and flash from its neighbors by commas. In this manner the possibility of the explosions affecting one another or accumulating into something larger is blocked, highlighting their disconnection even while packed into the same discursive space.

Popped off like tiny, nonreusable fireworks, the gimmick here in its specifically comedic form looks a lot like what Fredric Jameson calls a “singularity,” a “pure present without a past or a future.”⁴² This is exactly how Gunning describes the film gag: as an “essentially discontinuous” comic action. Simply adding one gag to another will not a narrative make, Gunning argues, because of a tractionless surface that keeps the form’s action inherently self-contained: “Each gag ends in such a way that the gag machine must be started all over again to produce an additional one. Rather than a flow, longer gag films are structured as a series of explosions. After an explosion there is little to do” (“CM,” p. 96). The ultimate gag that is the explosion, an event that can happen only once, epitomizes the gimmick’s status as a device for producing a quick but immediately vanishing aesthetic payoff, one that cannot begin a project or sustain a tradition (see “CM,” p. 96). It is this very unrepeatability, we might say, that the series of exploding devices in *Ragtime* repeats.

There is thus a sense in which the gimmick confronts us with a kind of bad contemporaneity, one akin to the “elongated present,” “endless present,” or “perpetual present” strikingly diverse theorists use to account for the peculiar feel and situation of our contemporary moment.⁴³ It is

40. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York, 1996), p. 109.

41. Thanks to Joshua Clover for this observation.

42. Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” *New Left Review* 92 (Mar.–Apr. 2015): 113; hereafter abbreviated “AS.”

43. In various ways and for differing reasons. See, for a few key examples, Jane Elliott, “The Problem of Static Time: Totalization, the End of History, and the End of the 1960s,” in *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory* (New York, 2008), pp. 21–46; Gopal Balakrishnan, “The Stationary State,” *New Left Review* 59 (Sept.–Oct. 2009): 5–26; Jasper Bernes, “Logistics, Counterlogistics, and the Communist Prospect,” *Endnotes* 3 (Sept. 2013): endnotes.org.uk/issues/3; Hans Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York, 2014); Paul Virilio, *The Futurism of the Instant*, trans. Julie Rose (London, 2010); Harry Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Spring 2007): 471–94;

Jameson, however, who makes an argument about the reduction of time to the present in a way that hints at its special relevance for a theory of the gimmick as a capitalist and especially late-capitalist aesthetic form. In “The Aesthetics of Singularity” (2015), his reassessment of postmodernism and postmodernity as “indispensable” periodizing concepts, Jameson returns to the action film as example, noting how “nowadays they are reduced to a series of explosive presents of time, with the ostensible plot now little more than an excuse and a filler, a string on which to thread these pearls which are the exclusive center of our interest: at that point the trailer or preview is often enough, as it offers the high points of films which are essentially nothing but high points” (“AS,” p. 105).⁴⁴ Arguing that the temporal form of this “singularity-event” dominates every semiautonomous “level” of late capitalism (economics, technology, politics, and so on), Jameson singles out two high-cultural examples of its characteristic “reduction to the present or the reduction to the body”: Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, where a man who has lost his past from a head injury pays people to re-create isolated memory fragments he can repeatedly reexperience in the present; and the installation art of Xu Bing, whose *Book from the Sky* is based on what looks like but isn’t writing. For Jameson, postmodern works “soaked in theory” like these are to be distinguished from an older modernist conceptualism, in which ideas are “universal forms” used to “put a contradiction through its paces” or “flex mental categories” in a way that actively sustains or energizes thought (“AS,” pp. 114, 113). By contrast, the idea in the gimmicky neoconceptual works is no longer a universal but rather nominalist form and as such is no longer generative. Rather, it assumes the form of a one-off or mere “technical discovery,” the “single bright idea” that leads to the “contraptions of the lonely crackpot inventors or obsessives” (“AS,” p. 112).

This argument about the postmodern transformation of the idea in art from universal concept to historically isolated contrivance leads Jameson to note the following:

Both these works are one-time unrepeatable formal events (in their own pure present as it were). They do not involve the invention of a form that can then be used over and over again, like the novel of naturalism for example. Nor is there any guarantee that their maker will

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011); and Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1996); hereafter abbreviated *TLS*.

44. Jameson is here recalling a point made in “The End of Temporality,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003): 695–718.

ever do anything else as good or even as worthwhile (no slur on either of these illustrious artists is intended): the point being that these works are not in a personal style, nor are they the building blocks of a whole oeuvre. The dictionary tells us that the word ‘gimmick’ means ‘any small device used secretly by a magician in performing a trick’: so this is not the best characterization either, *even though it is the one-time invention of a device* that strikes one in such works. It is, however, *a one-time device which must be thrown away* once the trick—a singularity—has been performed. [“AS,” p. 113; my emphasis]

At the same time, gimmicks *are* used over (and over) again. They are in this sense less like “one-time unrepeatable formal events” than equipment whose essence is to endure across multiple operations. Indeed, the perpetual reuse of an otherwise neutral device for producing a specific aesthetic effect is often exactly what transforms it into an irritating impoverished gimmick. Such reuse inevitably weakens the impact of the aesthetic effect itself in a way that might explain how, in our experience of the gimmick, the effect often seems collapsed back into the device that produces it. Like the checkerboard wipe and other special effects in PowerPoint, the term *gimmick* describes both the effect and the procedure used to generate it, conflating two ostensibly discrete moments in the same way it conflates idea and thing. The ease with which any technique can turn into a gimmick is thus internal to the gimmick. Its historical but also more fundamental temporal instability is essential to what the gimmick is; nothing if not the magical trick we dismiss out of overfamiliarity with its deployment.

This is one of the reasons why another highly paradigmatic instance of a gimmick is the overrepeated joke, such as the one compulsively retold in Mark Twain’s time-travel comedy *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). Hank Morgan’s complaint about the unfunniness of the Round Table’s class clown, Sir Dinadan the Humorist (“I never heard so many old played-out jokes strung together in my life”) not only inadvertently perpetuates the Humorist’s unfunniness (to demonstrate the badness of his repertoire Hank must repeat it) but ends up being as discursive as the aptly named Dinadan. Hank reports the comedian’s joke that has somehow managed to circulate even in Hank’s century, while running on repeat there long enough to get stale. If Dinadan’s joke is thus at once too contemporary and not contemporary enough, it is worth noting that similar criticisms have been directed at *Connecticut Yankee* from its moment of publication. For this is a novel, if there ever was one, with an obvious shtick—the juxtaposition of two historical eras and modes of

production—that many readers have found as irritating as Hank finds the Humorist’s joke.

This comically indestructible joke is about a “humorous lecturer” whose jokes fail not because they are unfunny but because the provincial members of the performer’s audience prove not to be his real contemporaries. The audience is unable to recognize the modern genre of comedic performance—Twain’s specialty, the humorous lecture—to which the laughter they suppress is the correct and intended response, thinking instead that they have attended a sermon:

While Sir Dinadan was waiting for his turn to enter the lists, he came in there and sat down and began to talk; for he was always making up to me, because I was a stranger and he liked to have a fresh market for his jokes, the most of them having reached that stage of wear where the teller has to do the laughing himself while the other person looks sick. I had always responded to his efforts as well as I could, and felt a very deep and real kindness for him, too, for the reason that if by malice of fate he knew the one particular anecdote which I had most hated and most loathed all my life, he had at least spared it me. It was one which I had heard attributed to every humorous person who had ever stood on American soil, from Columbus down to Artemus Ward. It was about a humorous lecturer who flooded an ignorant audience with the killingest jokes for an hour and never got a laugh; and then when he was leaving, some grey simpletons wrung him gratefully by the hand and said it had been the funniest thing they had ever heard, and “it was all they could do to keep from laughin’ right out in meetin’.” The anecdote never saw the day it was worth telling; and yet I had sat under the telling of it hundreds and thousands and millions and billions of times, and cried and cursed all the way through. Then who can hope to know what my feelings were, to hear this armor-plated ass *start in on it again*, in the murky twilight of tradition, before the dawn of history, while even Lactantius might be referred to as “the late Lactantius,” and the Crusades wouldn’t be born for five hundred years yet?⁴⁵

The gimmick is nothing if not a device used “hundreds and thousands and millions and billions of times.” Yet Jameson is also clearly not wrong in noting its presentism, which is what the Humorist’s joke is also about. This bad joke about how good joke-telling goes bad when it fails to be

45. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Allison R. Ensor (New York, 1982), p. 49; my emphasis; hereafter abbreviated CY.

contemporary endlessly repeats *in every present*; what turns it into a gimmick is not just its re-use but *also* its perpetual present tense, and these now start to look less like opposites than versions of the same thing.

We now have the last of the several temporal ambiguities specific to the gimmick as form. At once dynamic (like an action) and also inert (like a thing), at once like a cause but also its effect, the gimmick is *both* a singular event *and* the proverbial old saw. As Jameson rightly argues, it is a novelty with no consequences beyond its immediately vanishing moment. The gimmick is also, as Twain suggests, the device that refuses to die.⁴⁶ As this paradoxical unity of discrepant temporalities—instantaneity and duration, disruption and continuity, singularity and repetition—the gimmick embodies one of the most significant temporal contradictions of capitalism overall: the way in which its organization of production enables the “ongoing *transformation* of social life—of the nature, structure, and interrelations of social classes and other groupings, as well as the nature of production, transportation, circulation, patterns of living, the form of the family,” but also “the ongoing *reconstitution* of its own fundamental condition as an *unchanging* feature of social life—namely, that social mediation ultimately is effected by labor” (*TLS*, p. 300). For Moishe Postone, this contradiction is reflected in the emergence of two distinctly capitalist kinds of time, the first involving “changes in concrete time effected by increased productivity,” what Postone calls historical time, and the second the abstract time involved in the labor-based production of value (Marx’s socially necessary labor time).⁴⁷ A discord that becomes “increasingly perceptible” then arises between the production of material wealth made possible by the accumulation of past knowledge or historical time (increasingly the case for production *over* time) and the production of value based on the expenditure of abstract time, which takes place only in a present tense. This is the case even as the very dynamism of capitalism depends on the “constant *translation* of historical time *into* the framework of the present, *thereby reinforcing that present*” (*TLS*, p. 300; my emphasis). Postone’s language is technical but his point bears directly

46. Hence the gimmick provokes impatience both for its overfamiliarity (as Brown complains, “not long ago it became impossible to read a notice of a film or play in which the word gimmick did not appear”) but also for its exaggerated claims to novelty (even the word is a trendy “vogue-word,” Brown also points out) (*W*, p. 58).

47. A key or especially tricky point to grasp here being that capitalist society generates not only a distinctive kind of abstract time but also a distinctive form of concrete time: “The dialectic of capitalist development is a dialectic of two kinds of time constituted in capitalist society and therefore cannot be understood simply in terms of the supersession by abstract time of all kinds of concrete time” (*TLS*, p. 216).

on the gimmick's temporal contradictions and is therefore worth the time it takes to digest:

Changes in concrete time effected by increased productivity are mediated by the social totality in a way that transforms them into new norms of abstract time (socially necessary labor time) that, in turn, redetermine the constant social labor hour. Note that inasmuch as the development of productivity redetermines the social labor hour, this development reconstitutes, rather than supersedes, the form of necessity associated with that abstract temporal unit. Each new level of productivity is structurally transformed into the concrete presupposition of the social labor hour—and the amount of value produced per unit time remains constant. *In this sense, the movement of time is continually converted into present time.* In Marx's analysis, the basic structure of capitalism's social forms is such, then, that the accumulation of historical time does not, in and of itself, undermine the necessity represented by value, that is, *the necessity of the present*; rather, it changes the concrete presupposition of that present, thereby constituting its necessity anew. Present necessity is not "automatically" negated but paradoxically reinforced; it is impelled forward in time as a perpetual present, an apparently eternal necessity. [*TLS*, p. 299; my emphasis]

A perpetual present (Jameson's singularity) and a relentlessly ongoing historical continuity (Twain's joke). Postone refers to the interaction between these two kinds of time generated by capitalist labor as capitalism's "treadmill effect," and it is what we register in the gimmick's own peculiarly "alienated interaction of past and present" (*TLS*, pp. 289, 300).

Twain's comedy about the Colt Arms factory foreman who attempts to impose his century's mode of production onto a mythical precapitalist England was written when Twain was falling into bankruptcy after years of financial hemorrhaging through his ill-fated investment in an all too new-fangled technology (figs. 3–4). The infamous Paige contraption with which Twain's novel came to have a "strange identification" was a capitalist machine that failed the test of proper timing in its quest for social uptake, rendered obsolete by the Linotype typesetter before its technical problems could be corrected.⁴⁸ Questions about capitalist timing were thus at the forefront of Twain's mind while writing a novel in which we see the gimmick's temporal contradictions played out at virtually every level

48. On the "strange identification" of Twain with the "Paige contraption," see James M. Cox, "The Machinery of Self Preservation," *Yale Review* 50 (1960): 89–102; rpt. in Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, p. 398; hereafter abbreviated "MSP."

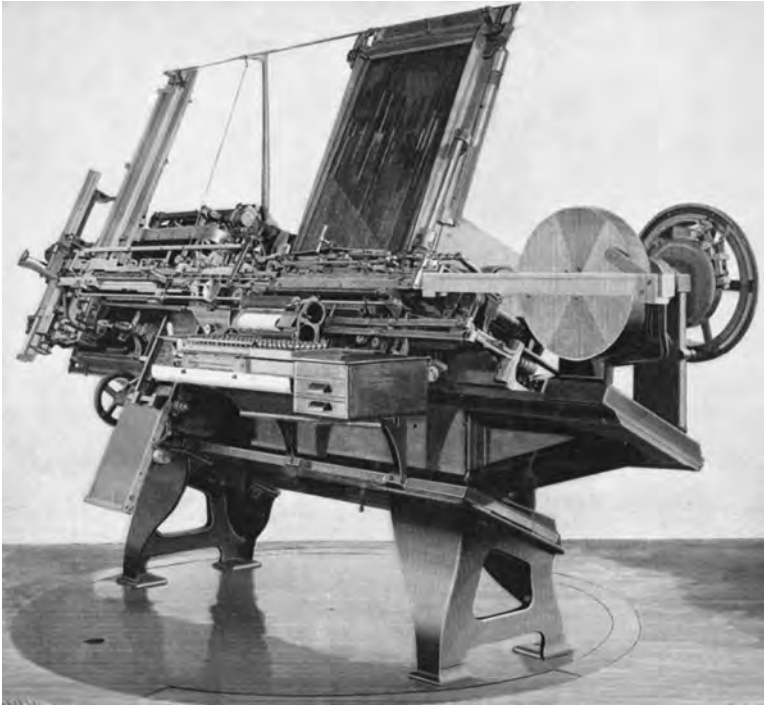


FIGURE 3. Paige compositor. *Scientific American* (1901). Source: Wikipedia.

and in a way highlighted as much by the novel's comedic failures as by its successes. Excoriated by reviewers from the 1890s up to as recently as 2010 as a one-joke production, memorable primarily for a title communicating the novel's gist so efficiently that one feels released from any obligation to read it, the novel is essentially a series of fast-acting but ultimately inert gags.⁴⁹ These gags are in turn nothing but simple anachronisms: knights

49. See Cushing Strout, "Crisis in Camelot: Mark Twain and the Idea of Progress," *Sewanee Review* 129 (Spring 2012): 336. On *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as a "one joke" novel, Strout refers to Adam Gopnik, "The Man in the White Suit: Why the Mark Twain Industry Keeps Growing," Gopnik is in turn citing Van Wyck Brooks, who

became famous in the nineteen-twenties with a book, "The Ordeal of Mark Twain," arguing that Twain, despite outsized gifts, had produced a stunted body of work: a great novel (or at least two-thirds of one) in "Huck Finn," one good book for boys in "Tom Sawyer," a couple of chapters of memoir in "Life on the Mississippi," and not much else worth keeping. There was "Innocents Abroad" and "Roughing It," baggy and relentlessly facetious, and a couple of one-joke productions that are notable mostly for their titles, "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" and "The Prince and the Pauper," and whose sturdy high concepts—New England inventor time-travels to Camelot; rich and poor look-alikes change identities—can't save their stodgy execution" [Adam Gopnik,

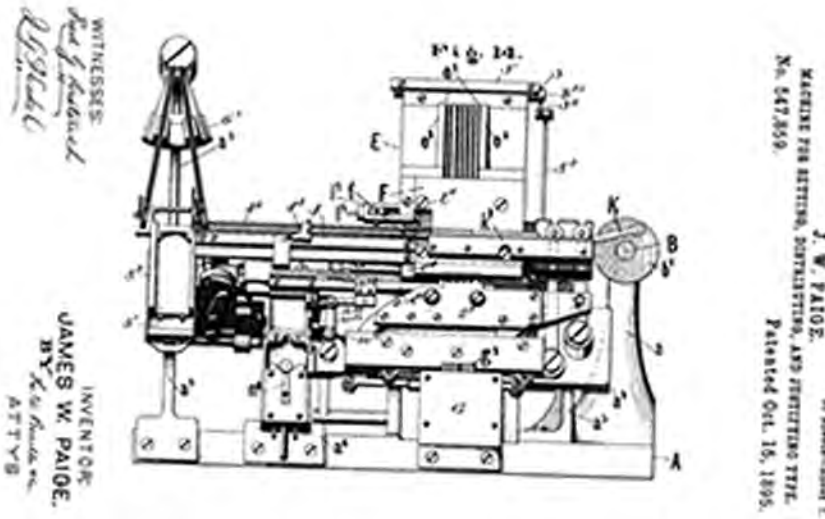


FIGURE 4. Paige compositor blueprint. Source: innovationprinciples.blogspot.com/2012/01/failed-invention-of-day-paige.

with tabards painted with advertisements for soap, a bowing and praying hermit harnessed to a sewing machine for the automated fabrication of linen shirts; newspapers and telephones in Camelot; and so on. Even Twain's contemporaries saw these palimpsests as an overfamiliar contrivance. "The conceit of taking a Yankee of this generation of telephones and the electric light back to King Arthur's Court may please some minds, if presented in a story of moderate length," the *Boston Literary World* noted, "but there can be few who will really enjoy it when long-drawn out to the extent of nearly six hundred pages."⁵⁰ "No doubt there is *one* element of wit—incongruity—in bringing a Yankee from Connecticut face to face with feudal knights," wrote the *London Daily Telegraph*, "but sharp contrast between vulgar facts and antique ideas is not the only thing necessary for humor." Twain's take on the "alienated interaction between past and present" at the heart of capitalist production thus seemed strangely out of sync with the author's own present.⁵¹ His time-travel device was

"The Man in the White Suit," *The New Yorker*, 29 Nov. 2010, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/29/the-man-in-the-white-suit]

50. Review of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Twain, *Boston Literary World*, 15 Feb. 1890, pp. 52–53; rpt. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, p. 334.

51. Review of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Twain, *London Daily Telegraph*, 13 Jan. 1890; rpt. Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, pp. 328, 398.

already a gimmick—a compromised form for which the funnily unfunny, all-too contemporaneously noncontemporaneous humor of the humorist comes to serve as an inadvertent *mise en abyme*.

At the same time, much in the spirit of P. T. Barnum's exhibitions, which as Harris argues deliberately invited audience suspicion in order to activate the pleasures of judgment, *Connecticut Yankee* puts the capitalist gimmick as aesthetic trickery on self-conscious display; the series of "effects" ostensibly showcases Hank's historical advantage as the novel's officially designated contemporary.⁵² But so much so, James Cox points out, that as the novel moves forward and the "effects" of the "compulsive showman" accumulate ("MSP," p. 401), the target of Twain's satire becomes increasingly unclear and, with a remarkable "waste of energy," the narrative disintegrates into a "mere sequence" of gags (or anachronisms).⁵³ The plot manages to obtain closure out from this bad infinity only through the gimmickiest of literary devices: the *deus ex machina* of Merlin's suddenly revived powers of magic, ineffectual for the majority

As Louis Budd sums it up, *Connecticut Yankee* seemed to say "almost nothing new as it leaped back thirteen centuries to look forward"; "the very gimmick of bringing the past and present face to face [had become] common property" (Louis Budd, *Mark Twain, Social Philosopher* [Bloomington, Ind., 1962], p. 141).

52. As Harris writes,

This delight in learning explains why the experience of deceit was enjoyable even after the hoax had been penetrated. . . . Barnum, Poe, Locke, and other hoaxers didn't fear public suspicion; they invited it. They understood, most particularly Barnum understood, that the opportunity to debate the *issue* of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself. The manipulation of a prank, after all, was as interesting a technique in its own right as the presentation of genuine curiosities. Therefore, when people paid to see frauds, thinking they were true, they paid again to see how the frauds were committed. Barnum reprinted his own ticket-seller's analysis: "First he humbugs them, and then they pay to hear how he did it. I believe if he should swindle a man out of twenty dollars, the man would give a quarter to hear him tell about it." [*H*, p. 77]

"Effects" is Morgan's own term for his spectacles (*CY*, pp. 124, 219).

53. "As Morgan assumes power in the Arthurian world the fantasy begins to rout the criticism and progression degenerates into mere sequence" ("MSP," p. 392). At the same time, Paul Lauter suggests that there might be something fundamentally comedic (and thus, with regard to Twain's novel, successful) about "mere sequence" or serial plots:

Critics following his lead . . . assumed that Aristotelian strictures on the need for tragic plots to have an organic structure necessarily applied, and *in the same way*, to comedy. But if, as Schlegel argues, the comic world is not one of tragic necessity, a looser, more fantastic, indeed (to use the word most deplored by Aristotelian critics) "episodic" plot might be more proper to comedy. And as a matter of fact the best comic novels have often been picaresque—as many recent works, such as Bellow's *Augie March*, Heller's *Catch-22*, and Pynchon's *V*, remind us. But critics have not yet had much to say about the comic character of the plotting in these novel. [Lauter, introduction, *Theories of Comedy*, p. xxii]

of the novel but now inexplicably effective at restoring Hank neatly back to the nineteenth century. At the same time, commentators repeatedly describe the novel's form as machinelike, a description that counterbalances this all-too-subjective assertion of authorial will and in a way that testifies further to *Connecticut Yankee's* overarching identification with the unsuccessful, promise-breaking capitalist "contraption." The novel is said to lean overheavily on "a fairly mechanical proliferation of burlesque 'contrasts'"; on "stock devices" and "clichés of travelogue nostalgia" that become "mere parts of the machinery of this mechanical novel"; and on a protagonist "more mechanical than any of the gadgets in which he specializes, [who] grinds laboriously through his 'acts,' his only means of attracting attention being to run faster and faster, to do bigger and bigger things, until the mechanism of his character flies apart."⁵⁴

Both the obtrusive surge of authorial subjectivity, tellingly coinciding with the revival of supernatural magic in the diegesis, and the all-too-mechanical literary contrivance are gimmicks that simultaneously constitute and undercut the novel's comedy. Not surprisingly, the novel seems only half-heartedly committed to the illumination of capitalist procedure in spite of it being repeatedly pointed up in the discourse. We are told that "at the great arms factory," Hank Morgan "learned to make everything; guns, revolvers, cannon, boilers, engines, all sorts of labor-saving machinery," as well as how to become "head superintendent" of a "couple of thousand men." Hank brags: "Why, I could make anything a body wanted—anything in the world, it didn't make a difference what; and if there wasn't any quick new-fangled way to make a thing, I could invent one—and do it as easy as rolling off a log" (CY, p. 8). Yet as Henry Nash Smith reminds us, Hank "actually performs no constructive feat except the restoration of the holy well; and it will be recalled that the technology in this episode does not go into repairing the well, but into the fraudulent display of fireworks with which he awes the populace."⁵⁵ Twain's novel

54. A "fairly mechanical proliferation of burlesque 'contrasts'" (James D. Williams, "Revision and Intention in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*," in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, p. 365); "stock devices" and "clichés of travelogue nostalgia" that become "mere parts of the machinery of this mechanical novel" ("MSP" pp. 393, 394, 398); a protagonist "more mechanical than any of the gadgets in which he specializes, [who] grinds laboriously through his 'acts,' his only means of attracting attention being to run faster and faster, to do bigger and bigger things, until the mechanism of his character flies apart" ("MSP" p. 392).

55. Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress: Political and Economic Ideas in "A Connecticut Yankee"* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1964), p. 86; excerpted in Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, p. 413. All in all, after "emphasizing at the outside the protagonist's ability to build or invent all kinds of machinery, Mark Twain seems strangely reluctant to make use of this power in the story" (ibid.). It is as if the novel's operational aesthetic, or will to one, runs out of steam in tandem with Twain's rapidly crashing hopes for his Paige machine. Indeed,

never delivers on the operational aesthetic to which it initially seems so enthusiastically to subscribe.

This brings us to one final contradiction. On the one hand, the gimmick seems to make certain capitalist operations transparent, in a curiously not entirely pleasurable way. On the other hand, something about it seems to make these capitalist operations obscure. In “The Glory Machine” the device exposes its own process of action, laying bare how it achieves its intended effect, but in *Connecticut Yankee* the gimmick takes the form of the engineer’s classic black box: an opaque input/output structure actors can implement without knowledge of its internal workings.

We can now add this to the list of the gimmick’s other antinomies—contrary propositions that are equally true—that together go a long way toward explaining both the obtrusiveness of the aesthetic form and the peculiarly intense form of irritation it elicits:

The gimmick saves us labor.

The gimmick does not save labor (in fact, it intensifies or even eliminates it).

The gimmick is a device that strikes us as working too hard.

The gimmick is a device that strikes us as working too little.

The gimmick is outdated, backwards.

The gimmick is newfangled, futuristic.

The gimmick is a dynamic event.

The gimmick is a static thing.

The gimmick is an unrepeatable “one-time invention” (Jameson’s singularity)

The gimmick is a device used “hundreds and thousands and millions and billions of times” (Twain’s joke).

The gimmick makes something about capitalist production transparent.

The gimmick makes something about capitalist production obscure.

as James D. Williams notes, Twain originally planned for The Boss to do even more than makes its way into the final version of *Connecticut Yankee*, including introducing “steam engines, fire companies, aluminum, vaccination, and lightning rods” (Williams, “Revision and Intention in Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee*,” p. 365). The fact that these plans were abandoned well into the writing of the novel (a good fourteen chapters in), suggests that Twain eventually felt something about the initial promise of the labor-saving capitalist machine—the novel’s shtick, its foundation—could no longer be sustained.

It is not accidental that these antinomies are each about labor, time, and value—elements capitalism makes impossible to separate. To single out one is necessarily to perceive or think the others, and this is what sets the features of the gimmick in such a close relation, with each seeming to imply or be implied by the others.⁵⁶ As it compels us to oscillate between the poles of each pair of conflicting, yet partially true observations, the gimmick points to a “situation which encompasses the opposed terms but which neither side can grasp on its own,” one “we can only allude to in the oscillation itself.” Drawing on the work of Kojin Karatani, Michael Wayne refers to this as a “parallax,” a “constant shuttling between perspectives that cannot be synthesized.”⁵⁷ In this manner, through the perception of an everyday form and the judgment it spontaneously elicits, the gimmick’s antinomies index the most fundamental contradictions of capitalism: proliferation of labor-saving devices in tandem with an intensification of human labor in the immediate production process; increase of labor productivity in tandem with lesser availability of secure work; planned obsolescence and routinized innovation; overproduction of commodities in conjunction with the creation of “surplus populations” unable to buy goods. It is the parallax between the aesthetic and economic overall that obtrudes in our everyday experience of the gimmick, which more than any other capitalist aesthetic experience demands that we “hold multiple registers of value in sight at once.”⁵⁸

There is another way in which the gimmick demands this. Gimmicks are fundamentally cheap even when they look or really are expensive.⁵⁹ In

56. With, of course, the exception of the last antinomy, which could be read as a synthetic interpretation of all the preceding ones. It’s worth noting that the questions which the gimmick’s form introduces (overworking or underperforming? outmoded or too advanced? cheap or overvalued?) mirror, on an aesthetic plane, the questions an economist might ask when wanting to ascertain whether a capitalist machine or technique is productive of value (not just material wealth).

57. Michael Wayne, *Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism, and the Third Critique* (London, 2014), p. 23.

58. Daniel Spaulding and Nicole Demby, “Art, Value, and the Freedom Fetish,” *Metamute*, 28 May 2015, www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art-value-and-freedom-fetish-o

59. It might be tempting here to collapse the gimmick into the broader concept of kitsch to which it is undeniably related, and into which so many other equivocal aesthetic categories have been for so long subsumed. Yet to do so would be to lose sight of the gimmick’s fascinating specificity. Certainly the commodity aesthetic of kitsch is as much a product of the capitalist mode of production. Yet its concept does not encompass the connotations of labor-saving technology that the gimmick does. The paradigmatic kitsch object that is the tchotchke, bibelot, or collectible—snow globes, cookie jars, fuzzy dice—makes no promise to save anyone time or effort; in fact, often just the opposite, signifying dilatory pleasures, a utopia of luxurious purposelessness or affordable waste. Most significantly, kitsch is an aesthetic of consumerism and does not call up the image of production or draw it into reception in the direct way that the gimmick qua technique or device does.

the case of the gimmick, moreover, the *economic* concept of cheap designates the spectator's sense of a specifically *aesthetic* fraudulence in which value is judged as not being what or where we expect it to be. Here we arrive at a feature that for all its simplicity remarkably distinguishes the gimmick from other aesthetic categories and even from other capitalist ones like cute or cool: the way in which its judgment of negative aesthetic worth aligns almost exactly with a judgment of negative economic worth. What is cheap is that whose price is lower than its cost of production. What the gimmick brings out is how inextricable this *theoretically neutral* idea of a lowered production cost is, like that of the reduced labor that usually lowers it, from connotations of illegitimacy and deception in capitalist culture. Brown's meditation on the labor and time-saving devices of comedy in *Words in Our Time* thus fittingly ends with him noting the derivation of gimmick from *gimcrack*, an initially neutral description of the inlay work of a craftsman that eventually flips into a synonym for the cheap and the fake with the development of mechanized methods of production.⁶⁰

Under conditions in which the production of value systematically coincides with the appropriation of surplus value and surplus labor, the promises of saved time and work made and broken by the capitalist gimmick are also promises made and broken about value. The economic measurement of cheapness—already in an interestingly gray zone between the qualitative and quantitative—is embedded *inside* the aesthetic judgment of the gimmick and in an odd way worth underscoring. For as we all know, aesthetic evaluations typically sit at a vast distance from economic ones, even in the case of a commodity aesthetic like cute (which does not call up anything so explicit like a price or cost). The beautiful with its deeper spiritual claims relies especially on seeming radically disconnected from a sphere in which value must be expressed in/as money. By contrast, one cannot think or even perceive a gimmick without a judgment of cheapness immediately attending that perception; that is, without a gestalt of a commodity's cost of production based on a rapid synthesis of sensory and conceptual cues (materials, design, location of manufacture).⁶¹ Note how

60. Other dictionaries suggest a different but equally trick-based etymology in *magic*, of which *gimmick* is an anagram. Even the word *gimmick* is thus a verbal trick of sorts.

61. Kitsch also connotes cheapness, but the cheap and the kitschy do not align so perfectly. Sometimes kitsch both looks and really is expensive, and the expensive look or cost of an object can often intensify its kitsch value, as in the case of a pink marbled mansion or a bejeweled candelabra. Cost of production is moreover a highly specific quantity that neither camp nor kitsch explicitly reference.

usually polarized registers of value converge in this appraisal.⁶² However implicitly or obliquely, nothing seems less likely to factor into our *aesthetic* experience than a production cost! Yet our everyday spontaneous judgment of things as gimmicky and therefore implicitly cheap involves precisely this qualitative relation *to* the quantitative, linking a world of judgments based on feelings to a world of values necessarily expressed as money after being created in production and realized in exchange. The gimmick, like the concept of cheap at its center, is in this sense a catachresis, involving an illogical, if also utterly normal or ordinary, reevaluation of value defined in one universe in terms of value defined in another.

We have already seen comedy regarded as fundamentally about evaluation: an art of judgment about judgment and of contemporary judgments in particular. Some theorists suggest that comedy more specifically turns on the *minimization* of claims to value: on a “strained expectation suddenly reduced to nothing,” as Immanuel Kant argues, anticipating Lipps and Freud;⁶³ or, for William Hazlitt, on a pleasure we take in disappointment, which becomes possible and no longer paradoxical when the object that disappoints us is suddenly revealed to be a “trifle.”⁶⁴ Elder Olson makes this argument most explicitly. If tragedy involves the belated bestowal of worth on the right objects, comedy involves a timely devaluation of overvalued goods, not unlike the periodic crises that violently reset the relation of prices to values. And if tragedy bestows value in part through *katharsis*, the characteristic technique of comedy is by contrast *katastasis*, which Olson describes as a “special kind of relaxation of concern.” This “annihilation of the concern itself” happens not through the displacement of one emotion by another, “not by the substitution for desire of its opposite, aversion, [or] of fear . . . by the contrary emotion of hope,” but rather through a rational process of “conver[ting] the grounds of concern into absolutely nothing.”⁶⁵ Such minimization or reduction by reason however often involves fairly elaborate affective-aesthetic procedures, sometimes taking up the length of an entire novel, as we are now about to see.

62. We could say that cheapness entails and expresses a nonquantifiable relation to the realm of the quantitative that becomes affectively and sensuously underscored in the aesthetic perception of the gimmick.

63. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith and Nicholas Walker (Oxford, 2007), p. 161.

64. William Hazlitt, “Lecture I—Introductory: On Wit and Humor,” *Lectures on the Comic Writers, &c. of Great Britain* (London, 1819), p. 1.

65. Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington, Ind., 1968), p. 25.

3. *Guné ex machina*

Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* (2011) is a comedy about Joe, a white male heterosexual American personification of capital, and his gimmick. While masturbating to his favorite sexual fantasy—a woman visually “divided in half” does office work in front of others as if nothing unusual is happening while being fucked by a man from behind—Joe comes up with the perfect idea for increasing the profits and protecting the assets of American corporations (*LR*, p. 12). The key lies in enhancing the productivity of a select group of “high-performing” heterosexual male employees while simultaneously indemnifying firms against the risk of sexual harassment lawsuits from their female coworkers. How exactly does this all transpire? Showing us in a way that encourages enjoyment in “information and technique” is what makes for the novel's procedural comedy. We are thus taken carefully through the steps by which Joe turns his *idée fixe* into a device and then a service around which he in turn builds a firm and then a vast corporation. The first of these consists of an apparatus that transports the anonymous “naked bottom half” of a woman through a hidden door into a bathroom stall for the male user, discretely retreating back through the same door after the conclusion of his purgative act (*LR*, p. 9).⁶⁶

The productivity-enhancing, profit-guarding device at the heart of the novel's larger story of capitalist *poesis* is a *guné ex machina*. But the Lightning Rod is not only a machine. Founded on a classic principle of repressive desublimation—dispensing sex at work to desexualize and increase the efficiency of work—it is also a service, embedded in a temp agency also called Lightning Rods that initially serves as its front but eventually becomes entirely and openly coextensive with its backend operations. The complex Rube Goldberg of a commodity comprised of these interlocking parts (female body, machine, sex service, temp agency) enables the firms in the story to provide straight male employees with a hygienic way to get rid of distracting sexual tensions, increasing the productivity of this core of permanent workers, while conveniently reducing risks of sexual

66. The first stage involves a machine designed for the stall in men's bathrooms for users with disabilities, mandatory in the United States only since the 1990 passage of the American Disabilities Act. Joe's ability to extract profits from his “big idea” thus hinges on his ability to take advantage of “free” or commonly owned resources: public infrastructure and an existing culture of bathroom segregation by gender. There is much more to say than I can here, since my goal is a reading of the gimmick and not the novel per se, about the way DeWitt's personification of capital finds ingenious way after way to capitalize on cultural and noneconomic factors, much of it based on civil rights legislation protecting the rights of women and minorities in the workplace. There is also much more to say about the novel's use of disability and alignment of sex with disability in particular.

harassment litigation on the side (reducing actual sexual harassment comes only as an afterthought).⁶⁷

The novel's productivity-enhancing gimmick—a woman embedded in a machine embedded in a sex service embedded in a temp agency—is thus finally a product for protecting firms against employee-related liabilities and, by implication, from what the novel depicts as the ultimate employee-related liability that is simply *a full-time employee*. Used to justify layoffs even at times of high profits, we see this “liability theory of labor,” of the employee as a drain on rather than a creator of value and thus an inherent risk to her or his employer's financial well-being, reflected in DeWitt's extra comic flourish of making all of her novel's characters either sexual harassment litigants or litigators in waiting.⁶⁸ By the end of the novel, through nothing other than the initial advantage gained by Joe's “bifunctional personnel” gimmick and the basic laws of capitalist competition, Lightning Rods has evolved into the largest company in the global temp industry. Its superior position has moreover enabled it to revolutionize temping by compelling all its competitors to adopt its innovation, which eventually becomes the industrial status quo.

In the spirit of the novel's operational aesthetic or explicit invitation to us to take pleasure in analyzing cause and effect, how exactly does the sex business that is Lightning Rods come to be embedded in and eventually coextensive with a temp agency? As Joe makes clear in his spiel to both his prospective male clients and prospective female employees, the distinguishing feature of Lightning Rods is that it keeps identities (relatively) anonymous:

A notification would appear on a participant's computer screen. It would be entirely up to the participants whether they took action or not. Administrators of the program would have no information as to uptake on the part of individuals. Participation or non-participation would be entirely confidential. . . . Should the participant choose to avail himself of the opportunity, he could either accept immediately

67. Litigation, as the novel makes clear, is the only real counterpower, significantly noneconomic, that women have against “aggro” in the male-dominated world that its story depicts; comically, the main Lightning Rods in the story, Lucille and Renée, all go on to have spectacular second careers as lawyers and judges after their retirement from Joe's firm (*LR*, p. 27). Threats to the job performance of women from either sexual desire or harassment, meanwhile, do not factor into Joe's scheme as significant enough to warrant countering (or inventing a profitable way of countering). Gay men are similarly excluded, on Joe's premise that their sexual urges are always completely fulfilled and thus under control in the workplace; see *LR*, p. 26.

68. The phrase “liability model of work” is from Erin Hatton, *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America* (Philadelphia, 2011), pp. 4–18.

or select the LATER option on the menu, in which case he would be allowed to either specify a later time, or simply wait until a convenient moment occurred and then click on the I'M READY NOW icon. [LR, pp. 67–68]

Male employees might suspect some of their female coworkers are sidelining as Lightning Rods but will never know for sure (a uniform of PVC tights slit at the crotch, an innovation introduced by Lucille, ensures that the one or two token Lightning Rods of color can remain anonymous, too).⁶⁹ Lightning Rods will know some of their male coworkers are using the service but never the specific individuals. (Left out of the loop entirely are the female employees who are not Lightning Rods—a slot logically implied in the story but occupied by characters barely mentioned in the diegesis and fewer and fewer as the story and Joe's product concomitantly develop.) This ambiguity implicitly turns *all female workers* in workplaces using Joe's invention—and it is key that the novel ends with every workplace adopting a version of it—into *possible* sex workers. And it is the need to maintain this perpetual ambiguity (the essence of the product is “is she or isn't she?”) that provides Joe with his rationale for convincing corporate clients to outsource all their temporary hiring exclusively to Lightning Rods:

Now it was Joe's belief that in the long run a company that wanted to include lightning rods in its team for the twenty-first century had only one option: to outsource all personnel recruitment. Otherwise how are you going to guarantee anonymity? If you just outsource the lightning rods somebody in the company is going to know which employees are handled by personnel and which are handled by an outside firm, and if that person happens to know why the outside firm was taken on that person is going to be able to identify the members of staff who are providing an extra service for the company. The thing was, though, that there was no way in the world that he was going to persuade a company to hand over its entire personnel operations to an outsider. The actual service he was providing was radical enough without challenging received opinion on personnel. The important thing is not necessarily to persuade someone straight off the bat to do something in some totally different way; the important thing is that you need to be aware of what your ultimate aim is. What Joe

69. This, in turn, enables Joe to avoid the costly legal repercussions of violating the Equal Employment Opportunities Act—the real purpose of the PVC device. Prior to its adaptation, Lightning Rods exclusively hired white women, on the grounds that only their anonymity could be secured. See LR, pp. 178–85.

did, anyway, was he left the whole question of personnel strictly out of bounds. He simply explained that, given the importance of anonymity, his company would have to handle all temporary personnel requirements. Some of the temps provided would be lightning rods; some would not. At the end of a six-month period they would review the success of the program. [LR, p. 58]

All Lightning Rods must be temps, which means that when Joe's innovation becomes the standard all temp agencies adopt, all temps become possible Lightning Rods. This is the moment when "bifunctional personnel" both ceases to be a gimmick (an isolated contraption of a crackpot inventor) but also truly becomes one (an endlessly repeated overfamiliar device).

The gimmick of DeWitt's comedy is the Lightning Rod, which is also capital's gimmick. This labor-saving device is a sex worker whose reverse image is that of the *permanent temp*, whose paradoxical synthesis of perpetuity and transience echoes the gimmick's temporal contradictions. It is a synthesis perfected in the bizarre-sounding but entirely nonfictitious concept of "in-house outsourcing," in which workers are staffed through a temp agency discreetly *embedded inside the company* for which such permanent nonemployees are *specifically* trained to work (as in Warwick University's Unitemps and Bank of America's B&A Temps).⁷⁰ In this shift staged from seemingly exotic contraption to ordinary contemporary labor practice, DeWitt's novel produces a comically elevating deflation akin to that of "The Glory Machine." But there is a sense in which DeWitt's anatomy of the gimmick downshifts things further, suggesting that, at bottom, capitalism's ultimate labor-saving device is quite simply a woman.

The feminization of labor and the becoming contingent of labor: which is the presupposition and which is the result? In a world in which all Lightning Rods *must* be female and *must* be temps and in which *all* employers use Lightning Rods (in an interesting turn of events, the US government becomes Joe's biggest client), the positions of temp and woman structurally coincide. And of course this diegetic situation is not fantastic but points to a familiar truth: still the world's largest reserve army of labor, women continue to be, as they historically have been due to the gender-

70. As Erin Hatton notes, "in-house outsourcing" presupposes a workforce already permanently composed of temporary labor. If one must hire temps in any case, why not hire one's own? In tandem with practices like "payrolling," firing long-term employees and asking them to join temp agencies in order to be rehired to perform the same job (which frees corporations from paying unemployment taxes, worker's compensation, pensions, and benefits); and the outsourcing of entire departments of large businesses such as mailrooms, accounting, and customer service, "in-house outsourcing" has long become normal (Hatton, *The Temp Economy*, pp. 110, 74).

ing and subsequent devaluation of specific activities, capital's most popular and longstanding profit-protecting device—permanently transient, cheaper labor used to further cheapen labor in general. It is worthwhile to note Zupančič on comedy's reliance on the surprising absence of surprise, which echoes arguments by Feibleman and Olson on its function of corrective devaluation:

[Comedy] likes to unveil the veils, tear down the folding screens, and open the closets. Yet it does not usually claim directly that there is nothing behind. Rather the contrary: behind the veil there is always a naked bottom, behind the folding screen a scantily clad lady. . . . We could even say that in comedy, there is always something behind. Yet the comic point is that what is behind is—Surprise, surprise!—nothing but what we would expect (from the surface of things). [O, p. 209]

Comic art here is not so much defamiliarization as a kind of funnily irritating refamiliarization, constantly surprising us with things we already roughly expect. We see this principle worked out to the fullest in DeWitt's story of capital/Joe, whose gimmick of "bifunctional personnel" simply literalizes the temp industry's efforts at midcentury to recruit workers to temping and sell temping overall to businesses by explicitly feminizing and eroticizing temporary work (fig. 5). Such eroticization, as we learn from Hatton's history of the industry, did not preclude comparisons of female temps to labor-saving household appliances ("Turn her loose on temporary workloads of any kind and watch the work disappear") nor to office equipment, as in the case of one 1970 Manpower ad featuring a female typist inside a packing box.⁷¹

In laying bare the operations of a labor-saving gimmick that converts half the working population into nonproductive and permanently contingent labor (that is, sex workers and temps), DeWitt's comedy is significantly telling a story about the *standardization*, not the innovation, of a capitalist technology. This focus makes her story of Joe stand out among other narratives about male American inventors on which it clearly also riffs.⁷² Amplifying this theme of normalization is the strikingly homogeneous free indirect discourse in which the entire process is relayed. Here, due to the diegetic dominance of the verbal gimmick as medium of expression and thought (whether as slogan, platitude, maxim, jingle, or

71. Ibid., pp. 59–60.

72. Benjamin Franklin's Benjamin Franklin, Villiers's Thomas Edison, Twain's Hank Morgan, Ralph Ellison's "thinker-tinkerer" Invisible, E. L. Doctorow's Henry Ford, and Samantha Hunt's Nikola Tesla, among others.

The Never-Never Girl.

(Invented by Kelly Girl.)

- Never takes a vacation or holiday.
Never asks for a raise.
- Never costs you a dime for slack time. (When the workload drops, you drop her.)
- Never has a cold, slipped disc or loose tooth.
(Not on your time anyway!)
- Never costs you for unemployment taxes and social security payments.
(None of the paperwork, either!)
- Never costs you for fringe benefits.
(They add up to 30% of every payroll dollar.)
- Never fails to please. (If our Kelly Girl employee doesn't work out, you don't pay. We're that sure of all our girls.)

Kelly Girl®
A DIVISION OF KELLY SERVICES

499 of last year's FORTUNE 500 use Kelly Services. (Number 500, we want you!)

KITY

FIGURE 5. "The Never-Never Girl," Kelly Services advertisement. Source: Erin Hatton, *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America* (Philadelphia, 2011), p. 51.

catchphrase), the style and tone of narration stays remarkably consistent regardless of which particular character's subjectivity inflects it. The converging dictions of self-help and corporate management philosophy and

the modular forms in which both are dispensed shape the rhythms of thinking and feeling in *Lightning Rods* to such a degree that all points of view seem to converge as well.

Thus evoking a world in which there seems to be a chronic deficit of language, the same stock phrases endlessly circulate among Joe, Steve, Mike, Ray, Al, Ed, Louise, Elaine, Renée, and Lucille,⁷³ as if, strapped together into something like the mischief gag film's "connection device," they unknowingly constituted a single creature. DeWitt thus makes use of the language shared by pop psychology and business bibles as a sign of collectivity and alienation at once, part of a world in which, in spite of a heightened awareness of social differences in the workplace and their methodical functionalization by capital, every person—male or female, employer or employee, Lightning Rod or client, African American or white—talks and thinks in exactly the same modular forms and in the same limited repertoire of ways. These include addressing oneself in the second person ("You're going to run into aggro whatever you do, so you might as well get paid for it" [Elaine]; "Suppose someone offered you the chance to go to Harvard Law School, and all you had to do was pick up a turd a couple of times a day, wearing plastic gloves, on top of your regular job" [Renée]); making generalizations from the perspective of "people" ("This is the kind of thing people want to hear from a role model" [Lucille]); and isolating the dominant traits of a type of person (*LR*, pp. 130, 176, 157). Famously central to comedy, which "puts aside all subtleties of a situation or character, ignoring their psychological depths and motives, reducing them all to a few 'unary traits,' which it then plays with and repeats indefinitely" (*O*, p. 176), this last way of thinking and speaking noticeably predominates in the novel and is significantly tied to occupation: "If you're in accounting, it's your job to be skeptical, and that's not something you can just turn off" [Mike]; "a salesman has to see people as they are" [Joe]; "'we're businessmen, Al. . . . At the end of day, we've got to be realistic. We've got to deal with people the way they are, not the way we might like them to be'" [Steve] (*LR*, pp. 76, 21, 100). DeWitt's doubling-down on the verbal gimmick thus does more than affect the novel at the level at which this experiment is deployed (that is, its discourse). It also affects the novel's character system. Because all characters speak and think in the exact same way, even as their social differences matter enormously to the comedy's plot (first as obstacles for Joe/capital to overcome, then as

73. Another De Witty touch: the unifunctional personnel all have monosyllabic names (Joe, Steve, Ed, Mike, Pete, Al, Ray) while the bifunctional ones have bisyllabic ones (Elaine, Lucille, Renée, Louise).

opportunities for him/it to harness), we get the impression of more than just a set of characters who are either personifications of capital or labor. As if to underscore the power of production as a socially binding activity, but one in which this sociality is created “behind the backs” of its agents, we get the impression of DeWitt’s novel having *only one character* distributed across a multiplicity of nodes.

In *Lightning Rods*, as in actual capitalism, the enhancement of productivity through labor-saving devices both presupposes and reinforces the permanence of temporary labor. And the link between higher levels of productivity and greater contingency of labor presupposes and reinforces contingent labor’s articulation with *female* labor. A woman, we are not allowed to forget, lies in the core of the elaborate (or is it simple?) capitalist apparatus DeWitt’s novel comically dissects for us. The innermost joke of *Lightning Rods* is thus one about the ambiguous temporality of capitalist development. At the beginning of the novel, female sex work implies or requires temping; by the end, female temping implies or requires sex work. This X suggests a fundamental stillness at the heart of capitalism’s dynamism. DeWitt’s implication is that regardless of the stage of technological development, and in a way that might explain why the novel’s exact historical moment is so hard to pin down, capitalism’s main productivity-enhancing device remains what it has always been: contingent-because-feminized, feminized-because-contingent labor.⁷⁴

Labor, time, value: the contradictions that explain why the gimmick simultaneously annoys and attracts us explain why it permeates virtually every aspect of capitalist life. With this in mind, let’s conclude by noting one of the final comedic touches in DeWitt’s anatomy of this capitalist form. Even when Joe’s productivity-enhancing technology becomes

74. Since comedy is all about timing, it is worth noting how the reader’s progressive understanding of the surprisingly ordinary “behind” to Joe’s labor-saving gimmick develops in synch with the progressive narration of its normalization. It is synced also with our dawning realization about the sort of time the novel represents. What at first seems to be a story about the future is a history of the present, but not a specific one like, say, the 1950s (as suggested by references to Joe’s first job selling vacuum cleaners door to door) or, say, the early 1990s (as suggested by references to accessible bathrooms, PC feminists, and the first appearance of blue M&Ms). Rather, and in a way that explains the novel’s historical indefiniteness overall, it seems more like a story of the “perpetual present” Postone associates with the “apparently eternal necessity” of the production of value. If the capitalist development of productivity changes the concrete presupposition of the social labor hour (for example, two hundred sweaters rather than twenty per hour) but in a way which leaves the amount of value produced per unit time constant—if it “reconstitutes, rather than supersedes, the form of necessity associated with that abstract temporal unit” such that “*the movement of time is continually converted into present time*”—DeWitt’s gimmick-driven comedy of capitalist procedure enacts a strikingly similar conversion.

standard for all workplaces, the laws of capitalist competition oblige him to continue innovating, differentiating his now generic product from all the others with specialty lines. So Joe is compelled to come up with one last new B2B commodity. It is a service designed for companies who know they must continue to make use of “bifunctional personnel,” while wanting the edge that comes from cornering ever smaller client niches. For these firms, the hope for a new market capture will lie in the expression of a new corporate subjectivity: declaring an adherence to family values in their hiring and business practices. This will in turn call for a product capable of *eliminating* Joe’s technology from the capitalist workplace, where it has become so ordinary as to be practically undetectable, infiltrating the pores of the entire system of production. Joe’s final innovation is thus a service designed to guarantee the new family-friendly corporations that their workforces will be “100% Lightning Rod free” (*LR*, p. 259)—even when *still* composed, as they must be to stay competitive, of a permanent ring of contingent labor. What is this new specialized service? A regular old-fashioned temp agency. Offered exclusively as a product of the Lightning Rods Corporation.

The gimmick is such a widely disseminated, all-encompassing capitalist phenomenon, DeWitt’s comedy of procedure finally suggests, that its form encompasses even this antigimmick: capital’s ability to turn the ultimate labor-saving device—a synthesis of the nonproductive and contingent worker—into its now finally desexualized, but still gendered and contradictory antithesis.

Even Laughter? From Laughter in the Magic Theater to the Laughter Assembly Line

Anca Parvulescu

There was a time when the literary and artistic avant-gardes defined themselves through their laughter. Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche and later Georges Bataille, they saw in laughter a space of freedom—from norms, from form, from the artist's ego. The artist aspired to laugh a true laugh; for it was clear that there were fake laughs, too. The path to laughter was tenuous, but its promise was rarely questioned. Laughter was the secret to a subjectivity capable of genuine art. And art, as with all avant-gardes, was to be indistinguishable from life. It needs to be emphasized that such laughter was not necessarily comedic. This is a story about laughter valued in itself, regardless of what mechanism produced it, whether that be comedy, jokes, humor, and so on. It was in the burst of laughter, often awkwardly and sometimes tragically produced, that promise lay.

Yoshua Okón's *Canned Laughter* (2006) can be said to be nostalgically diagnosing the loss of this laughter.¹ In the installation, contemporary laughter is produced in sweatshop conditions in Mexico, on an assembly line, and is carefully canned for long-term consumption by tame and unquestioning audiences. Gone is the spontaneity of laughter, its eventual promise, its touch of the sacred. The revolutionary potential of laughter has given way to the seriality of the laugh track. In this essay, I read Okón's

1. I encountered Okón's installation in an exhibition titled <laughter> curated by Kari Cwynar at apexart, New York, 23 May–27 July 2013. Cwynar's exhibition engaged with my book, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

installation, drawing out what I take to be its project and its effects on the installation visitor. I also offer an analysis of a text the installation tacitly invokes: Hermann Hesse's novel *Der Steppenwolf* (1927), a modernist celebration of the promise of laughter, the presumed loss of which Okón deplores.² Throughout, I trace the ramifications of a few questions: Is Okón's installation a symptom of our contemporaneity? Is nostalgia an appropriate affective relation to modernist laughter? What is the interplay between spontaneous and canned laughter? How are we to think of laughter *after* the laugh track?

This, then, will be a meditation on laughter and only ancillaryly on comedy. What I am proposing is a methodological reversal of the relation between laughter and comedy. We usually start with comedy and assume that it leads us to laughter; we subscribe to the presupposition that we laugh in the audience of a comedy or in the wake of a comedic situation. Sometimes we do, but often we do not. We sometimes laugh in response to tragedy (Bataille is fond of quoting the famous lines in Nietzsche: "To see tragic natures sink and *to be able to laugh at them*, despite the profound understanding, the emotion and the sympathy one feels—that is divine").³ Furthermore, recent studies have shown that most of the laughs we laugh are noncomedic in nature; we laugh by way of punctuating conversation, out of nervousness, embarrassment, awkwardness, and shock and, indeed, often gratuitously.⁴ In short, there is no stable connection between laughter and comedy. We might say, provisionally, that the relation between laughter and comedy is analogous to that between sexuality and gender in the queer theory of the 1990s; they are distinct categories, in need of distinct analytical frameworks of study. Like sexuality and gender (recall Eve Sedgwick's second axiom in *Epistemology of the Closet*), laughter and comedy sometimes intersect, but we cannot tell in advance how.⁵ This means that after we strategically posit their separateness and linger on

2. Hesse's translators have opted not to translate the title of the novel. I follow this convention here when referring both to the English translation of the novel as *Steppenwolf* and to the name of the title character as Steppenwolf. See Hermann Hesse, *Der Steppenwolf* (Frankfurt, 1970); trans. Basil Creighton under the title *Steppenwolf: A Novel* (New York, 1963); hereafter abbreviated S.

3. Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Bolt (Albany, N.Y., 1988), p. xxxi.

4. See Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York, 2000).

5. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 27.

ANCA PARVULESCU is professor of English at Washington University. She is the author of *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (2010) and *The Traffic in Women's Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe* (2014).

their distinctness for a while, the challenge is to *sometimes* bring the two together, through careful reading, at the points where they most forcefully converge, in ways that cannot be anticipated.⁶ In this essay, I start from laughter, I dwell on laughter, and, at a few junctures, when laughter leads me to it, I touch on comedy. This reversal takes the conversation beyond the question of genre, beyond texts recognizable conventionally as comedies (neither Hesse's *Steppenwolf* nor Okón's *Canned Laughter* are comedies), asking us to ponder moments of comedy opened up by laughter rather than the other way around.

Canned Laughter

Okón's artwork has been exhibited, in various spaces, in three formats: a video installation; a single channel video; and a photograph.⁷ *Canned Laughter* came into being in the context of a program (Proyecto Juárez) within which artists were asked to create artworks based on their experience of the city of Ciudad Juárez.⁸ The city is located on the Mexican-US border and is known in the international media for smuggling, drugs, prostitution, and violence. It is also the site of a number of maquiladoras, factories that operate in sweatshop conditions and avail themselves of the tax benefits of the border location. Okón, who lives in Los Angeles and Mexico City and exhibits his work globally, interviewed former maquiladora employees (he did not get access to actual, highly securitized maquiladoras) and asked them about their lives and work. He then rented a warehouse and hired the same workers he had interviewed to work in a fictional maquiladora named Bergson. In this space, Okón orchestrated and recorded a chorus of the workers' laughter and staged a fictional as-

6. The analogy is eloquent given that the separation of sexuality and gender has largely been superseded; see, for example, Robyn Wiegman, "The Times We're In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative 'Turn,'" *Feminist Theory* 15 (Apr. 2014): 5–25.

7. The video installation involves three projections, two robe racks, a table with shelves, five monitors, one hundred sixty cans, eight multimedia cans, and lamps. It has a duration of 14:25 minutes, on a loop. The single channel video has a duration of 9:56 minutes, on a loop. The photograph is a lightjet c-print, 39 × 54.6 inches. Apexart displayed a synchronized three-channel video installation, 14:24 min, on loop.

8. The description of the project reads:

Guns, narcos, prostitutes, rape, murders, these are some of the most common images that the media utilizes to portray Ciudad Juárez. Once considered an attractive city, in recent decades Ciudad Juárez has become synonym with violent crimes and terror. As an artist residency program, Proyecto Juárez started as an independent initiative in an attempt to approach the socioeconomic changes of the border city; commissioning artworks that considered the context of the city while benefitting from the help of local institutions and the community. Lasting only from 2006–2007, ten artists from different areas of the world were invited to participate and create works. [dawire.com/2010/11/23/proyecto-juarez-at-el-museo-de-arte-carillo-gil/]

sembly line on which the workers produce cans of laughter for American sitcoms. In the installation, visitors walk between tables that serve as improvised replicas of this assembly line and handle some of the 160 red cans, labeled Canned Laughter, with subtitles like Hysterical Laughter, Evil Laughter, Manly Laughter, and so on. Headphones attached to some of the cans allow them to listen to the recordings of the laughing workers. Against the assumption that laughter is contagious, none of the visitors in the exhibit seem to be laughing. As Slavoj Žižek might put it, there is already laughter going on; there is no need for visitors to laugh.⁹

In the video part of the installation, a camera is fixed on a chorus of laughers (fig. 1). The Mexican workers are lined up in three rows on choral risers and dutifully follow the cues of a German conductor. There are two recording microphones on each side of the chorus and a recording table to its left. The workers wear navy robes with the company logo written in stylized font on their chest (*Bergson*). As if worried about the hygiene of the production process, they wear hairnets. They laugh in unison, mechanically. Some are barely opening their mouths, some are yawning, some are visibly embarrassed, some make large, soundless mouth movements. Their facial expressions are often impassive, sometimes forced, sometimes pained. There is no laughing sparkle in these laughers' eyes. An abyss is opened between the sound of laughter and the facial expressions of the laughers. While, in itself, the sound might allow for some pleasure, or at least fascination, the facial expressions of the workers foreclose any such possibility. The effect on the viewer is of sadness mixed with a dose of horror. And, of course, revolt: Is *this* what laughter has become?

One minute into the laughing choral, the German conductor announces, in Spanish, that the workers will now do Witch Laughter from his homeland in the Black Forrest. The ensuing unison laughter is as flat as the previous laughs.¹⁰ The laughers are out of sync with the sound, which seems to be superimposed on the images of laughter. The laughing faces are in fact out of synch not only with the sound of their own laughter but with the idea of laughter tout court. Okón's video frames a triangular clash between the visual, the aural, and the conceptual. We could not be further from the revolutionary potential of witch laughter that second-wave

9. See Slavoj Žižek, "Will You Laugh for Me, Please?" lacan.com/zizeklaugh.htm

10. Okón declares: "[Witch laughter] connected very well with the spooky atmosphere I was trying to convey through the sound of laughter coming from faces that are not actually laughing; a sort of metaphor to the hidden darkness that lies behind consumer products" (Okón, interview via email with author, 10 Sept. 2015). While I engage with the statements Okón generously offered in this interview and others, I sometimes move beyond them. As is the case with all art, the installation does more than the artist intends it to do.



FIGURE 1

feminists tried to revive in the 1970s. *Even* the laughter of the early modern witch, which for a while functioned as a learning text for in-your-face, feminist laughter, seems to have been canned by a global capitalist laughter machine. Historically trusted to be one of the most authentic, place-specific sounds, Black Forrest laughter is now made in Mexico. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément's gloss on Jules Michelet's figure of the witch ("As she left she laughed, the most awful burst of laughter") acquires macabre resonances; unlike the witch's laughter, which sounded awful to some ears but registered as music in many feminist ears, the laughter of the contemporary laughing chorus imitating witch laughter is indeed awful.¹¹ The pained faces of Mexican maquiladora workers testify to it.

In another segment of the video, the workers are taking a break, holding hands and meditating. In case the viewer might be tempted to think that this is a union meeting, the counterpoint to the assembly line, Okón explains that the workers he interviewed told him about mandatory "spiritual breaks" in the maquiladoras; they are organized, in his words, for the workers to be "thankful for being exploited."¹² It is as if, instead of nineteenth-century experiments that electrocuted the laughing muscles of the face in order to capture the elusive expressions of laughter, we have invented an even ghastlier, ever larger machinery that forces some people to laugh for their survival and then, perversely, asks them to express their gratitude for their chance at being exploited. The predicament repeats *in nuce* the familiar neoliberal refrain: it is better to work in sweatshop conditions than to not have a job at all. This means that all working conditions and all work are fair game.¹³ We know that in the flexible phase of capitalism we are asked routinely to commercialize the recesses of our affective life. We have sold our smiles long ago. But our laughter—even our laughter? The affective resonances of this question are of intense, indig-

11. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 5.

12. Harvey K. Robinson, "An Interview with Yoshua Okón," 17 Apr. 2013, www.monkeywhale.com/profiles/an-interview-with-yoshua-okon/. On worker solidarity and organizing in the maquiladoras, see *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-border Organizing since NAFTA*, ed. Rachel Kamel and Anya Hoffman (Philadelphia, 1999), *NAFTA from Below: Maquiladora Workers, Farmers, and Indigenous Communities Speak out on the Impact of Free Trade in Mexico*, ed. Martha A. Ojeda and Rosemary Hennessy (San Antonio, Tex., 2006), and, in a comparative framework, *Labor versus Empire: Race, Gender, and Migration*, ed. Gilbert G. Gonzalez et al. (New York, 2004).

13. The Border Industrialization Program (BIP) that created the maquiladoras on the US-Mexican border imitated similar manufacturing arrangements in East Asia. Competition with East Asia and, more recently, with China over under-paying manufacturing jobs ensure that working conditions remain precarious. On the emergence of maquiladoras, see Kathryn Kopinak, *Desert Capitalism: What Are the Maquiladoras?* (Montréal, 1997).

nant surprise; the installation visitor is left with a sense of too muchness, of things pushed too far.

Laugh tracks for American sitcoms were for a long time produced by a machine called the Laff Box. In the words of its inventor, Charley Douglas, the Laff Box was “an organlike mechanism with six keys that when played with the left hand, can provide small chuckles, medium chuckles, small laughs, medium laughs, medium heavy laughs, and rollin’-in-the-aisles boffs.”¹⁴ Laugh tracks produced by the Laff Box (there were about one hundred variations) were introduced in the 1950s and were thought to induce a sense of immediacy at a time when television shows were increasingly filmed rather than live productions. In fact, even when television shows were live productions, producers believed that audiences could not be depended on to laugh at the appropriate time. Laugh tracks were superimposed on the unreliable laughter of live audiences. The presumably original moment of recording a laughing chorus has always been an illusion. One could think of Okón’s chorus as providing the recording for a fictional Laff Box, in which case it is appropriate that the Mexican workers are in fact not producing the sound of laughter. The sound comes from the recording table, which has already typologized laughter into giggles, chuckles, and boffs of different intensities. The can of laughter does not imprison any “real” laughter; canned laughter is always already recorded laughter.

Laughter’s association with a can has always had negative connotations. The intertextuality with Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (1962) cannot be missed. Warhol’s paintings of Campbell’s soup cans dramatized the seriality of consumer choices (there were thirty-two identical soup cans differentiated by one word on the label). Okón likewise produces quasi-identical laughter cans differentiated by one word and by the shape of the laughing mouth on the label. Canned laughter is serial laughter. Unlike canned Campbell’s soup, however, to which one might prefer authentic soup (today we would say organic) but that nonetheless has its uses (Warhol is said to have been fond of the predictability of eating soup out of a can), canned laughter is strongly oxymoronic. In their tacit invocation of modernist conceptions of laughter as the epitome of spontaneous singularity, Okón’s serial laughter cans register a contradiction in terms.

During their exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1962, Warhol’s cans were displayed on shelves imitating store shelves, like products in a grocery aisle, in a gesture towards performance that Okón’s installa-

14. Charley Douglas, “Strictly for Laughs,” *Newsweek*, 10 Jan. 1955; quoted in Jacob Smith, “The Frenzy of the Audible: Pleasure, Authenticity, and Recorded Laughter,” *Television New Media* 6 (Feb. 2005): 43.

tion pushes to another level. Warhol's soup cans were paintings (portraits of cans), but in 1964 the Factory also produced oversized Campbell's soup boxes, which were displayed in a gallery, with visitors walking between them. Visitors—their bodies and affective performance—were inducted into the world of the installation. Okón further develops this strategy, having the visitors in his installation space stand by the tables that function as replicas of the assembly line and thus temporarily occupy the position of the workers in the video. They experience, among other things, the alienating effects of the spatial distribution of bodies along the assembly line and the troubling resonances of the focus on hygiene. In other cases, visitors walking through the installation listen to the recordings attached to some of the cans, uncomfortably standing in for the American sitcom viewer hailed as the consumer of canned laughter. The result is a mixture of fascination, guilt, and repulsion. *Even* laughter?

Okón interpellates the visitors in the installation at the same time as spectators (they contemplate the space), performers (they interact with the space and with each other), and coproducers (the artwork is simply not complete without their presence). In an interview, Okón talks about his work as a “hybrid between video installation and performance.” He explicitly claims allegiance with the historic avant-gardes: “bringing art and life together, which is not a new idea.”¹⁵ Beyond Warhol and the installation art movement, what tradition is Okón's installation invoking? What exactly did laughter use to be? And when did it become this hateful, canned thing? *Did* it become this hateful, canned thing? And are all canned things to be thought of as hateful?

Modernist Gelotoscopy

Okón's installation weaves together multiple layers of intertextuality. Alongside Warhol, Okón is in dialogue with Piero Manzoni's “Artist's Shit” (1961), which consists of ninety tin cans filled with the artist's feces. Aside from the can connection, however, the installation works with the assumption that the visitor is somewhat familiar with a Western tradition of writing on laughter. This is an old tradition, going back to Aristotle and passing through a thick early modern moment (Laurent Joubert, Michel de Montaigne, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes,), but Okón's installation specifically claims familiarity with its modernist configuration. Modernist laughter can be said to start with Nietzsche's laughing Zarathustra, pass through Charles Baudelaire's meditations on caricature, and culminate in Bataille's thoughts on laughing sovereignty. Okón, somewhat unjustly,

15. Robinson, “An Interview with Yoshua Okón.”

condenses this diverse genealogy in the name Bergson, a reference to the philosopher's well-known 1900 essay on laughter.¹⁶ Rather than help explain the workings of laughter, in 2006 Bergson becomes the ironic name of the laughter factory.

Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf* will be my point of entry into the modernist genealogy Okón's installation tacitly takes as a reference point. The novel was written in 1926 by a German writer in exile in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland and in dialogue (often tense) with other avant-garde and modernist artists. To briefly set the scene: The novel's protagonist, Harry Haller, understands his alienation in the modern world through the figure of the divided self; he has a "dual and divided nature" (S, p. 43). He is both wolf and man.¹⁷ Like other modernist heroes, he claims kinship with artists: "Many artists are of this kind. These persons all have two souls, two beings within them" (S, p. 44). Over the course of the novel, he slowly learns that his idea of a dual and divided nature is a convenient fiction, nothing but a pose. With the help of two other characters, Hermine, a wise prostitute, and Pablo, a handsome Mexican saxophonist, both ambiguous characters in terms of gender and sexuality, Harry proceeds to take apart the illusion of a "dual and divided nature." The Steppenwolf slowly learns to enjoy the pleasures of dancing, eating, and sex. The path leads to the magic theater, an externalization of Harry's fantasies.¹⁸

There is only one solution to Harry's crisis: learning to laugh. Glossing the language of learning and training, drawn from the tradition of the bildungsroman, Theodore Ziolkowski avers that the novel could well have been titled *Harry Haller's Apprenticeship*.¹⁹ Against assumptions that laughter lurks at the background of consciousness, ready to erupt at any time, Hesse's novel proposes that laughing takes learning; the spontaneity

16. See Henri Bergson, "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," trans. Cloudesley Brereton, in *Comedy*, trans. Brereton and Fred Rothwell, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore, 1956), pp. 1–53.

17. On wolves, see Barry Holstun Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York, 1978). Donna Haraway's debate with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari over their invocation of wolves in *A Thousand Plateaus* constitutes the most recent twist in this literature. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, vol. 2 of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Hurley et al. (Minneapolis, 1987), and Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2008).

18. Aside from literature, Hesse tried his hand at painting and was well versed in music, which he thought of as the highest achievement of German culture. But it is not an accident that the art he privileged in this novel is the theater. If the avant-gardes are in search of a space where the distinction between life and art does not hold, the theater comes closest to this ideal. Famously, the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago borrowed the title of the novel in the 1970s.

19. See Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Novels of Hermann Hesse: A Study of Theme and Structure* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), p. 207.

of laughter is to be achieved through a project, through a certain discipline. Unlike other apprentices, who undertake their *Bildung* in their adolescence or early twenties, Harry is fifty (and thinks of himself as close to his death), the novel extending the temporality of one's formation as a laughter over one's lifetime. If the modern civilizing process has been, among other things, an apprenticeship in the restraint of laughter (as Norbert Elias's essay in this issue argues), the Steppenwolf is challenged to learn precisely that which his Protestant formation has marginalized.

To begin with, in order for Harry to learn to laugh he needs to differentiate between different kinds of laughs, to distinguish tonalities in laughter. The novel could be said to be a virtual tour de force of varieties of modernist laughter. The education of its protagonist involves his capacity to develop himself in relation to these different laughs. In the following, I draw out the novel's taxonomic work of typing laughter. This typing is a form of canning *avant la lettre*. Contemporary canning follows its own patterns (which Okón's installation foregrounds), but it is important to remind ourselves that laughter has long been canned into various labels. Gelotscopy, a branch of physiognomy, is the pseudo-science of divination by laughter. Both physiognomy and gelotscopy had their heyday in the nineteenth century, but their rudiments survived well into modernism.²⁰ We continue to see their traces in our contemporaneity.²¹ It is particularly important to acknowledge that the canning of laughter into types occurred in modernism, the very tradition thought to have given us the spontaneous, singular laughter that we often oppose to the canned, unison variety.

In keeping with its title emphasis, one of the first laughs the reader encounters in Hesse's novel is animal laughter, lupine or steppenwolfish laughter. At the beginning of the novel, laughter is the property of the wolf, not of man, as a tradition of writing on laughter from Aristotle to Bergson (famously excluding Darwin) has maintained.²² Hesse of *Steppenwolf*, like Thomas Mann, with whom he had a long correspondence, insists that some animals, like the wolf (for Mann, his dog) can laugh: "For example, if Harry, as a man, had a beautiful thought, felt a fine and noble emotion, or performed a so-called good act, then the wolf bared his

20. See, for example, George Vasey, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling* (London, 1877).

21. During the 2008 election season, voters were told Hillary Clinton could not be trusted on account of her laughter. Fox News invited a "body language expert," today's physiognomist, to explain Clinton's "cackle" as evil ("Fox News' 'Body Language Expert' Accused Clinton of Exhibiting 'Evil Laughter,'" 25 Sept. 2007, mediamatters.org/research/2007/09/25/fox-news-body-language-expert-accused-clinton-o/139934).

22. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London, 1872).

teeth at him and laughed and showed him with bitter scorn how laughable this whole pantomime was in the eyes of the beast" (S, p. 42). The wolf bares his teeth, the aggressive gesture par excellence, but instead of biting, laughs. "He who laughs cannot bite," suggests Elias.²³ Within the "dual and divided nature" framework in which the Steppenwolf functions, lupine laughter can only be directed at the human game, the pantomime modern humans go through daily. Wolf laughter has overtones of ideology critique; it poignantly and scornfully (aggressively, one could say, in line with recent commentators on ideology critique) shows the pantomime to be a pantomime.

When, in the last part of the novel, Pablo, a jazz saxophonist and a hallucinogens-smoking pleasure-seeker, enters the frame, he is described through "his jolly eyes that really were animal's eyes except that animals' eyes are always serious, while his always laughed, and this laughter turned them into human eyes" (S, p. 173). Pablo's laughing eyes help Hesse reposition laughter, initially the property of the idealized animal, on the threshold between the animal and the human. Laughter in fact becomes the test of the human animal, offering something like a Turing test to the skeptic.²⁴ In the economy of the novel, Pablo is racialized as Mexican; clearly a fiction, Mexico is, spatially, from the perspective of European modernism, somewhere else, somewhere other than European modernity. There, the assumption is, people might not have forgotten how to laugh (and, yes, modernists are already extremely worried that they might have forgotten how to laugh). It is also necessary that Pablo laugh with his eyes. In the nineteenth century, Duchenne de Boulogne's experiments showed that, since the choreography of human expression can be deceptive, "real" laughter becomes legible as *both* the eyes and the mouth laugh.²⁵

Another form of laughter in relation to which the Steppenwolf learns to position himself is feminine laughter, laughed by Hermine, a prostitute. Having listened to Harry's narrative of a "dual and divided nature," she replies: "I've understood your story very well, Harry. It's a funny story. You make me laugh" (S, p. 91). Hermine proceeds to actually laugh at Harry on a number of occasions, as she simultaneously offers to help: "You need

23. This is the title of Michael Schröter's German-language article on Elias's essay. See Michael Schröter, "Wer lacht, kann nicht beißen: Ein unveröffentlichter 'Essay on Laughter' von Norbert Elias," *Merkur* 56 (Sept. 2002): 860–73.

24. It is not only the animal/human distinction that laughter is thought to mark, but also that of machine/human. On the latter, see Linda Ruth Williams, "The Laughter of Robots," *The Last Laugh: Strange Humors of Cinema*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Detroit, 2013), pp. 209–22.

25. See G.-B. Duchenne de Boulogne, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, trans. R. Andrew Cuthbertson (1862; Cambridge, 1990).

me to teach you to dance and to laugh and to live" (S, p. 110). She subsequently sends him Maria, another "lost woman," who duly teaches him the pleasures of the body. Not surprisingly, Maria's beauty "laughingly offered itself" (S, p. 157). Hermine is an androgynous figure, who reminds Harry of a childhood friend, Hermann. Within the rather macho gender dynamics of the novel (the wolf is a hyperbolic masculine figure), it is Harry's feminine self, the self he develops through his identification with Hermine, that starts laughing and aims to teach his multiple over-serious selves the secrets of laughter. As in other avant-garde and modernist texts (think Bataille), this privileged feminine character has an ambivalent status. She is a necessary mediator (on one occasion the novel refers to her as a door).²⁶ Hermine is there to help with Harry's apprenticeship by reminding him of the feminine laughter within himself. But Hermine herself, although intimately knowledgeable in laughing matters, cannot be the heroine of an apprenticeship similar to Harry's.²⁷

Another subspecies of laughter, this time located on the threshold between the human and the divine, is epiphanic laughter. In addition to its other functions, laughter in *Steppenwolf* is a method trusted to lead to an illumination. Harry discovers the benefits of laughter through reading: "As I thought again of that newspaper article and its jumble of words, a refreshing laughter rose in me, and suddenly the forgotten melody of those notes of the piano came back to me again. It soared aloft like a soap bubble, reflecting the whole world in miniature on its rainbow surface, and then softly burst" (S, p. 35). Recalling the experience of reading a "jumble of words," Harry starts laughing and, in the midst of his soaring burst, remembers an aesthetic experience. The memory of this experience condenses a miniature picture of the world, of "the order of things," as Michel Foucault might say (Foucault's own revelation of how *les mots et les choses* align famously came through his own laughter at a "jumble of words").²⁸ The brief and sudden burst of laughter, primarily a temporal burst, has long-term "refreshing" effects.

Epiphanic laughter in its turn leads to divine laughter. Midway into the novel, Harry has a dream about his literary idol, from whose *Werther*

26. See Ziolkowski, *The Novels of Hermann Hesse*, p. 210.

27. Second-wave feminism's long-standing centrality to this conversation could be explained, among other things, through the attention it paid to characters like Hermine, the wise prostitute who exclaims, "You make me laugh." Faced with philosophical seriousness, Annie Leclerc declares "that makes me laugh [*ça me fait rire*]" (Annie Leclerc, *Parole de femme* [Paris, 1974], p. 174; my trans.). On the wise prostitute, see Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

28. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 1970), p. xv.

he learned a great deal about the bohemian disdain for respectability, orderliness, punctuality, and the cultivation of suffering. In Harry's dream, "Goethe's face was rosy and youthful, and he laughed. . . . We immortals do not like things to be taken seriously. We like joking. Seriousness, young man, is an accident of time" (S, p. 97). Buoyant and youthful Goethe is the Steppenwolf's example of an immortal—a god-like artist. The gods of Hesse's cosmology are his adored artists; heaven is a laughter-filled bohemia. The time-space we call eternity resonates with laughter. "Laughter I have pronounced holy," Nietzsche writes.²⁹ Unlike Jesus in the Christian tradition, who famously never laughed, the gods of art do. The signature gesture of the immortals is in fact their laughter. In this modernist framework, seriousness, in turn, is a sure sign of an unimaginative disposition.³⁰ Seriousness, the *longue durée* of humorlessness, Lauren Berlant proposes in this issue, signals a certain intractability, a rigid commitment to one's subjective profile, in this case the pose of the double. While Harry Haller misunderstands his loyalty to this pose as a form of sovereignty, Goethe of his dream proposes that sovereignty can only be found in divine laughter.

Having met Goethe in a dream, Harry encounters his other idol in a hallucinogens-induced episode in the magic theater: "Mozart laughed aloud when he saw my long face. He laughed so hard that he turned a somersault in the air and played trills with his heels" (S, p. 207). The description of Mozart's laughter reads like early modern depictions of laughter in which it would not have been uncommon for one's whole body to engage in the act of laughing.³¹ This is a moment of slapstick cracking a very serious novel that could not be further from the generic conventions of comedy. Harry's search for laughter leads him to the immortal gods, who, instead of confirming his seriousness, point to it as *the* problem at hand. The way to draw this problem out is to act light themselves. If trills announce that we might be on the terrain of high classical music, Mozart is playing trills with his heels (*schlug Triller mit den Beinen*). High (classical music) and low (idiosyncrasies of the body) collapse in Mozart's somersault. Slapstick, one of the "lowest" modes of comedy, turns out to be underwriting the gestural choreography of the gods. Importantly, when faced with Mozart's somersault, Harry finds it

29. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York, 1995), pp. 295–96.

30. Sara Ahmed's work on the figure of the feminist killjoy challenges this assumption. See Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)," *The Scholar and the Feminist* 8 (Summer 2010): 50–87.

31. See, for example, Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (1579; Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1980).

peculiar; he certainly does not respond to it with laughter. It is, presumably, the other gods who get the comedy.³² Since they, however, are always laughing, it is impossible to tell which of their laughs are a response to Mozart's trills.

By the end of the magic theater episode, Harry has a final illumination: "For the first time I understood Goethe's laughter, the laughter of the immortals. It was a laughter without an object. It was simply light and lucidity" (S, p. 154). It is crucial to emphasize that, Mozart's somersault notwithstanding, the immortals' laughter does not have an object. This is Hesse's way out of the conundrum Sigmund Freud identified—we laugh *at* something or somebody and therefore laughter works by exclusion.³³ It takes three to laugh, Freud famously explained; I always laugh with someone and at someone, the object or butt of the joke. The butt of the joke is, by definition, excluded from the community of laughers. In contradistinction, the laughter of the immortals in Hesse's cosmology has no object—it is a laughing *with* rather than a laughing *at*. Theoretically, given the appropriate apprenticeship (which, as we have seen, is no small thing), divine laughter creates a nonexclusionary community of laughers. Much as it seems to desire this kind of laughter, however, Hesse's novel does not fully support its promise. At the end of the novel, when the gods punish Harry for his jealousy, they laugh at him, effectively laughing him out of the magic theater. Like the laughter of other gods or godlike figures, this remains an exclusionary, corrective laugh.³⁴

Finally, by way of learning not to take himself seriously, Harry needs to learn to laugh at himself. Nietzsche's Zarathustra has sent the provocation of self-laughter: "Learn to laugh at yourselves as one must laugh!"³⁵ Most

32. The immortals laugh a very peculiar laugh: "How the weird man laughed! And what a cold and eerie laugh! It was noiseless and yet everything was shattered by it" (S, p. 212); "I heard a laugh ring out, an extraordinarily clear and merry peal of laughter. Yet it was eerie and strange. It was a laugh, made of crystal and ice, bright and radiant, but cold and inexorable" (S, pp. 172–73). The laughter of the immortals, devoid of heat and passion, sounds cold and eerie, strange. It is, after all, ghostly, the laughter of dead artists. Although it functions as a haunting model for sovereign laughter, it remains in need of a body and a voice to give it volume, timbre, and grain.

33. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1960), p. 224. I explore this conundrum in relation to recent forms of exclusionary laughter in Anca Parvulescu, "Laughter and Literature," *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, literature.oxfordre.com/page/featured/new-and-featured/

34. James Wood distinguishes between a laughter of correction and a laughter of forgiveness. Its frequent anticlericalism notwithstanding, the laughter of correction, embodied by Momus, is religious in its genealogy; the gods and those claiming to laugh in their name laugh a superior laugh that attempts to correct. See James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (London, 2004), p. 4.

35. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 292.

importantly, Harry needs to laugh at his “dual and divided nature.” When Pablo shows him his reflection in a mirror, Harry indeed laughs. “‘Well laughed [*Gut gelacht*]’ (S, p. 178) is Pablo’s congratulatory acknowledgement of the wondrous event. Self-laughter gives form to the shattering of the illusion of duality. Harry laughs his illusion away, exploding it (bursting it, one might say) into a multitude of selves. He is sent back into the world to continue his apprenticeship. He failed, having mistaken a symbolic reality (Hermine’s reflection) for prosaic reality and having allowed a bourgeois affect (jealousy) to jeopardize his training. He cannot enter the world of the immortals, but, in an uncertain future perfect beyond the novel (“one day”), he will have been allowed to try again.

Steppenwolf is thus the story of Harry’s negotiation of his relation to a number of laughs: he slowly gives up his desire for animal laughter; he passes through a moment of identification with Pablo’s laughter; he instrumentalizes feminine laughter; he attunes himself to the laughter of the immortals; and finally he turns laughter against himself. Laughter’s promise is that the laughing subject undertakes a training in a particular kind of receptivity. And yet the spontaneity of laughter can only be achieved through a long-term project, what I have been calling an apprenticeship. And it can only be achieved in the magic theater, on stage, through artifice. In her study of modernist laughter, Julia Kristeva concludes with a statement Hesse would happily cosign: “Laughter is thus merely the *wit-ness of a process* which remains the privileged experience of the ‘artist’: a sovereignty (of the subject and of meaning, but also of history) that is simultaneously assumed and undermined.”³⁶ It is the presumed loss of this hyperbolic, quasi-mythical modernist laughter that Okón’s installation deplores.

The Culture Industry as a Laughter Factory

Throughout most of Hesse’s novel, moderns are despicable philistines. True artists are to be found in a nostalgic past and in eternity, the land of the immortals. Unlike classical music, jazz is “hot and raw as the steam of raw flesh” (S, p. 37). Everywhere in this modern world the threat of Americanization is palpable (Harry’s own name is an Anglophone version of Hermann). The *Steppenwolf* goes to the movies only as an occasion to announce how much he despises the new art (see S, p. 161). It is also an occasion to reveal that the cinema partakes of “the huge wholesale clearance of culture” (S, p. 162). There is a sense that the cheap laughter that

36. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, 1984), p. 223.

resonates in the movie theater forecloses the possibility of “real” laughter, reconciliatory laughter learned from immortal artists. Today we associate this account of modernity, and especially laughter’s place in it, with Theodor Adorno and the essay he cowrote in 1947 with Max Horkheimer on the culture industry. Adorno’s intellectual roots are in Hesse’s world. He too imagines himself as a Steppenwolf, a lonely intellectual in a world of vulgar music and commercial laughter. He too trusts that “real art” (for him, modernist art) has reconciliatory potential.

Laughter is a central index of a problematic modernity in “The Culture Industry.” You will recall Horkheimer and Adorno’s well-known argument about culture having become an industry; its *raison d’être* is to offer entertainment to a numb working force: “It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again.”³⁷ Escapism is best achieved through laughter. The culture industry fills workers’ leisure time with laughter. Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) is one of the texts of Adorno and Horkheimer’s time that gives voice to this refrain: “There is a lot to be said for making people laugh. That’s all that some people have.” Laughter is all they have; and it is a guarantee that this is all they will ever have. It is this laughter that Adorno and Horkheimer call “wrong [*falsche*].” “Fun is a medicinal bath [*Fun ist ein Stahlbad*],” which the entertainment industry prescribes. Laughter in this context is “structured amusement”; it is a form of “ordained cheerfulness” (*DE*, p. 112). Its perversity lies in the fact that it parodies the reconciliation it can no longer achieve. Ironically, the unison laughter of the culture industry forecloses the possibility of a community of laughers.

Horkheimer and Adorno do not discuss laugh tracks in the culture industry essay (laugh tracks are only beginning to make their way into comedy shows in the early 1950s), but I believe their arguments can be read in this light. It is fascinating to reread the culture industry essay as primarily concerned with laughter, canned laughter. We laugh when we are told to laugh: “the product prescribes each reaction.” Laughing alongside laugh tracks, laughers perform an “automated sequence of standardized tasks” (*DE*, p. 109). They are moved to respond mechanically to stimuli. The irony of this situation should not be lost; the culture industry has managed to coopt *even* laughter. We could say that the culture industry has managed to coopt *even* Hesse’s laughter. The “healing” (*S*, p. vi) through laughter that Hesse hoped for has become part of the “medicinal bath.”

37. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif., 2002), p. 109; hereafter abbreviated *DE*.

If Adorno and Horkheimer of the culture industry essay could have commissioned a contemporary artwork meant to dramatize their argument, this artwork could have been Okón's *Canned Laughter*. Somewhere halfway between *Steppenwolf* and *Canned Laughter*, in the second half of the twentieth century, the laughs that the Western tradition of laughter gave us, some of which Hesse described, were further and definitively *canned*, featuring labels like Feminine Laughter, Hysteric Laughter, Evil Laughter, and so on. An academic industry congealing around the name Bergson, whose 1900 essay remains the go-to academic reading on laughter, helped this process. The "advantages" (Kristeva's word) associated with modernist laughter are thought to have been lost.³⁸ Laughter was drained of the affective mix that has historically characterized it (joy, in particular). Its burst lost its edge. In a world of mechanical reproduction, laughter (*even* laughter) is reproducible, its singularity serializable. Confirming concerns about increasing Americanization, American sitcoms are the destination for Okón's cans. Exported to the rest of the world, including presumably back to Mexico, they are likely to be consumed by the same workers who participated in Okón's installation, after their working hours in the maquiladora. This would be a second, extended "spiritual break" through which they express their gratitude for their chance at being oppressed.

We are now at a point where we can say that Hesse sends his protagonist into the magic theater trusting that the theater can offer a stage for his revelation of the promise of laughter. Okón, for his part, brings visitors into his exhibition space trusting that it too can serve as a stage for a revelation, this time not of the promise but of the fraud laughter has become.

Laughter after the Laugh Track

If Hesse's novel claims its hero as a symptom of his time, Okón's installation asserts its own documentary value. The workers do not work in a real maquiladora but they are actual workers; their gestures and expressions carry documentary meaning. Okón is interested in the productive tension, which he theorizes with the help of readings on art cinema, between documentary and fiction. If the *Steppenwolf*'s story is trusted to impact his bourgeois neighbor, Okón similarly hopes to impact the exhibition visitor, who is challenged to reflect on laughter's relation to both work and so-called leisure time. Is, then, *Canned Laughter* a document of our times?

38. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 225.

Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (dir. Chaplin; 1936), laboring on an assembly line, is no longer our contemporary. The creative classes that produce contemporary laugh tracks, largely situated in the West, commercialize their affective lives, including their laughter, but they mostly labor in front of a computer.³⁹ Today's laughter is no longer opposed to a standard of seriousness; rather, as Berlant argues, it is in an ambivalent relation to humorlessness. The laughs that used to come out of the Laff Box have been digitized; as Okón knows, there is no need for an embodied laughing chorus. The Laff Box, for a long time a well-kept Hollywood secret, has been demystified; its workings are prosaically revealed in a YouTube video. The world of texting has created its own typology of e-laughter, drawing on older conventions in the theater and the opera and gesturing towards a new gelotscopy (your haha, hehe, lol, rotfl, lmao, and so on presumably say something about who you are).⁴⁰ Few television shows continue to use laugh tracks, and the ones that still do often deploy them ironically, often self-reflexively. William Chang's essay in this issue argues that laugh tracks are often hacked by Youtube users and put to creative uses.⁴¹

Okón's goal is to activate his audience so that installation visitors ask questions and interpret the media they encounter; the Adorno and Horkheimer-inspired worry that audiences might otherwise be passive motivates the artwork. These examples indicate, however, that audiences interact with laugh tracks in a range of ways. Once we historicize the modernist assumption of enforced passivity, the laugh track is freed to travel through the world of contemporary cultural forms. This does not mean that we smoothly move from an assumption of passivity to one of

39. Members of the creative classes are expected to be effortlessly funny. The required ability to work in teams is underwritten by the commercialization of an entertaining personality that can render professional situations convivial. There are numerous self-help books that purport to train prospective CEOs to develop or project a sense of humor. Additionally, the ability to laugh and make others laugh has become one of the most marketable traits on the dating market. On the latter, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times* (New York, 2012).

40. On e-laughter, see Sarah Larson, "Hahaha versus Hehehe," *The New Yorker*, 30 Apr. 2015, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/hahaha-vs-hehehe, and Hannah Jane Parkinson, "No More LOLs: 50% of Facebook Users Prefer Haha," *The Guardian*, 10 Aug. 2015, www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/aug/10/lol-facebook-haha. The old theater and opera conventions of offering bracketed stage directions for laughing return in the world of texting as "[scoffs]" or "[cracking up]."

41. One such use is to send others recordings of oneself or others laughing, creating one's own laugh track. Another phenomenon is the looping of celebrities' laughter, which is likewise sometimes sent as a gift to others. Dubsmash offers the occasion to adapt one's facial expression and lip synch over an audio clip with the sound of laughter. Snapchat's swapface function allows two users to take a selfie laughing together and then swap their laughing expressions.

“critical” activity. As Claire Bishop and others have argued, active participation in a work of art has very much become a neoliberal mode of audience cooptation.⁴² After all, exhibition visitors are called upon to contribute unpaid affective labor toward the installation and the gallery. In their so-called leisure time, they actively (“relationally”) contribute to the contemporary art scene. Relational, participatory art follows, rather than opposes, the neoliberal logic of the service economy.⁴³

The politics of the laugh track have changed as well. If laughter (the laughter of the laugh track) is all some people have, why would we want to take it away? Will they be better off without it? We have left behind another assumption, the Marxist premise that, once demystified, people revolt. Since we know that they do not, we have no justification to placate their fantasy of laughter as a form of enjoyment. In short, we have entered a post-laugh track predicament in which canned laughter and especially the debate around it appear more as a funny oddity of the past than as a symptom of either the cultural or laughing present.

A storied second-wave feminist contribution to this conversation (second-wave feminism remains one of its most compelling archives) functions as an eloquent reminder of the complex imbrication of active/passive/middle positions vis-à-vis laughter. It comes in the form of Annie Leclerc’s description of “playing laughter,” during which fake or forced laughter slowly slides into the exuberant, joyful kind. Leclerc writes:

I said to my sister or she said to me, come let’s play laughter together [*on joue à rire*]. We stretched out side by side on the bed and started in. At first we just made believe, of course. Forced laughs. Laughable laughs [*rires ridicules*]. Laughs so laughable they made us laugh. Then it came—real laughter, total laughter—sweeping us off in unbounded

42. See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, 2012). Rex Butler writes: “the interactivity and free play to be found in relational aesthetics is not at all opposed to procedures found in large corporations, but in fact replicates them. . . . ‘Participation’ is the place where the new practices of neo-liberalism are trialled and workshopped. . . . Liberated free spaces in which seemingly unproductive thinking is encouraged are part of the corporate strategy of such tech giants as Apple and Google, which understand themselves as involved in something like participatory art” (Rex Butler, “Performance as Populism / Populism as Performance,” *What Is Performance?* ed. Adam Geczy [forthcoming]).

43. Installation art travels globally, engaging multiple “comparative audiences.” These audiences engage with an installation differently depending on their position in the international division of labor and the service economy. On comparative audiences, see Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York, 2015), p. 45.

effusion. Bursts of laughter, laughter rehashed, jostled laughter, laughter defleshed, magnificent laughter, sumptuous and wild.⁴⁴

Leclerc's passage reminds us that one often plays laughter in order to get to laughter. Alongside Leclerc, one can argue that viewers today might laugh with a laugh track, knowing perfectly well that this is not their laughter, that they are just playing. But this does not mean that such laughable laughter cannot unnoticeably slide into "magnificent laughter, sumptuous and wild" or, for that matter, less hyperbolic, smaller, but nonetheless equally real laughs. From the perspective of Leclerc's laughter play, the threshold between real and fake laughter is blurred. Since retrospectively one cannot tell when forced, laughable laughter ends and real laughter starts, one might well conclude that laughable laughter has been laughter all along.

Conclusion: On Poaching

Okón's installation critiques a long history of fake laughing, a niche in the history of affective automatism. Marcel Proust famously has his Verdurins laugh fake laughs.⁴⁵ But the Verdurins' laughs are fake precisely because in modernism there is hope that not *all* laughs are fake. Hesse's Pablo is trusted to laugh real laughs. In Okón's installation, like in Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry essay, on the other hand, the world has become a laughter maquiladora. Fake laughter is technologically produced on an industrial scale and is all-encompassing. Of course, Okón's

44. Leclerc, *Parole de femme*, p. 174; my trans. The passage is famously reproduced by Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Heim (New York, 1986), pp. 57–58. Nancy Huston offers a germane challenge to Kundera's use of Leclerc's laughter. See Nancy Huston, *Passions d'Annie Leclerc* (Arles, 2007).

45. From the very beginning of the "Swann in Love" section, the reader is told that Mme. Verdurin has dislocated her jaw laughing too much. After this unfortunate event,

she no longer took pains to explode in true laughter and performed instead a conventional pantomime that signified, without fatigue or risk to her, that she was laughing to the point of tears. . . . She would utter a little cry, entirely close her birdlike eyes, which were slightly dimmed by leucoma, and abruptly, as if she had only just had time to avoid some indecent spectacle or avert a fatal blow, plunging her face in her hands, which covered it and allowed nothing of it to be seen, would appear to be doing her best to suppress, to annihilate a fit of laughter which, had she given way to it, would have caused her to faint.

The narrator differentiates M. Verdurin from his wife, with whose "incessant and fictive hilarity" he cannot compete, through another expression: "Scarcely had he begun moving his head and shoulders in the manner of a person shaking with laughter than he would immediately begin coughing as if, in laughing too hard, he had swallowed smoke from his pipe . . . he would prolong indefinitely this pantomime of suffocation and hilarity" (Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way: In Search of Lost Time*, trans. Lydia Davis [New York, 2002], pp. 213, 272).

installation performs the hope that the laughter factory is not absolute, that there can be real laughter, if not outside then within the laughter maquiladora. The goal of the installation is to deplore the mechanization of laughter *and* to create the viewer's desire for laughter. There is quite a bit of Hesse in Okón, which is why a strong distinction between modernism and postmodernism appears today as an unfortunate accident in literary history. It might be that a new generation of readers is discovering *Der Steppenwolf* today because, its elitism and misanthropism notwithstanding, they are attracted by the project of learning to laugh—that is, learning to laugh *after* the laugh track or, rather, after the debate on the laugh track.⁴⁶

Halfway into Okón's video, a woman working on the laughter assembly line starts laughing (fig. 2).⁴⁷ She is not part of the laughing chorus. In this segment of the video, she is supposed to work earnestly. She tries to stifle her laugh but cannot. It is a brief, timid, muted, stolen laugh. It is in fact not even a laugh, just the beginning or sketch of one. The woman is looking around worriedly, like a schoolgirl caught giggling in church. It is not clear if Okón planned this scene, or condoned it once it occurred, or has perhaps never noticed it. I like to imagine it is unscripted, possibly the only unscripted laugh in Okón's installation. As such, this laugh could be read as reassurance that there is still marginal real laughter here and there, despite the laughter machine. The woman in fact seems to be laughing at the laughing machine. Going back to my introductory comments, we might say she is laughing at the *comedy* of the laughter assembly line. "The comedy of it!" she seems to exclaim, realizing that her own laugh laughs at other, laughable laughs. In a different context, Jacques Derrida speaks of "the comedy that it [the burst of laughter] thereby plays for itself," similarly redeploying comedy as a hilarious competition between qualitatively different laughs.⁴⁸

46. Ziolkowski writes: "a new generation of readers, after years of relative neglect in Europe and at a time when Hesse is read in the United States almost exclusively by graying hippies, has discovered Hesse and is giving him serious critical and scholarly attention" (Ziolkowski, "A Celebration of Hermann Hesse," *World Literature Today* 77, no. 1 [2003]: 60).

47. Okón's installation does not linger on the fact that most maquiladora workers are women and that maquiladora precarity is profoundly gendered. See, for example, María Patricia Fernández-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (New York, 1984); Altha J. Cravey, *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras* (Lanham, Md., 1998); and Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley, 2003).

48. Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978), p. 256.



FIGURE 2

The woman in this scene could be said to be poaching Okón's installation to create her own laughing moment, her own event.⁴⁹ The brief episode reveals that not all nonsovereign laughter is equal. This woman's laughter is not nonsovereign in that it is enforced economically and technologically; it is nonsovereign in that she abandons herself to a burst of unscripted pleasure. The unpredictable effect of this laugh is that, in Tristram Shandiesque-style, she is taking a metaleptic leap from the level of performance in the video to the level of the installation visitor or, indeed, the level of the installation's critic. We know from Gérard Genette that metalepsis often works as comedy.⁵⁰ We could argue that this woman's furtive laugh offers an answer to the death of laughter on Okón's assembly line. We are familiar with this argument. Somehow, however, it no longer seems sufficient. Another reading would suggest that the scene decisively disables the spontaneous/canned antinomy, challenging us to find promise and pleasure both in the spontaneity of finding oneself laughing alongside a laugh track and the discipline it takes to allow oneself to be overtaken by a magnificent burst of laughter.

49. On poaching, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, 1984).

50. See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), p. 88.

Taking Back the Laugh: Comedic Alibis, Funny Fails

William Cheng

Eighteen days after 11 September 2001, a new season of *Saturday Night Live* premiered on schedule, making big headlines given how most other television programs were getting replaced by round-the-clock news coverage. The NFL and MLB called off games, the Emmys were doubly postponed, Rockstar delayed the release of *Grand Theft Auto III* (set in a fictionalized New York City), and Disney's parks closed their doors.¹ Entertainment across the United States—sitcoms, sports, rollercoasters—screached to a halt, ground to zero. For *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels to reboot his laugh factory was saying something.²

Specifically, Michaels wanted the host Reese Witherspoon to say “fuck-ing.”³ He told her to work the word into the opening monologue’s punchline, declaring he would happily pay whatever Federal Communications

I’m grateful for thoughtful feedback from Lauren Berlant, Judith Farquhar, Roger Mathew Grant, Sianne Ngai, Anca Parvulescu, and additional participants in the *Comedy: An Issue* workshop (10–11 Dec. 2015) at the University of Chicago.

1. See Scott Weems, *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* (New York, 2014), p. 52; Chris A. Kramer, “An Existentialist Account of the Role of Humor against Oppression,” *Humor* 26 (Oct. 2013): 629–51; Trevor J. Blank, *The Last Laugh: Folk Humor, Celebrity Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age* (Madison, Wis., 2013), pp. 38–56; and Bill Ellis, “Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global Response to Disaster,” in *Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture*, ed. Peter Narváez (Logan, Utah, 2003), pp. 35–79.

2. A well-known portion of this *SNL* premiere was the appearance of Mayor Rudolf Giuliani, to whom Lorne Michaels posed the question: “Can we be funny?” Giuliani deadpanned: “Why start now?”

3. Witherspoon’s tame joke featured a baby polar bear repeatedly asking his mom whether he’s really a polar bear. When the mom inquires why he keeps wondering this, he replies,

Commission (FCC) fines came their way. Although Witherspoon chickened out at the last minute (replacing the teleprompter's *fucking* with the word *balls* for her joke, leaving the audience none the wiser), Michaels's original plea conveyed how the arbitrary taboo of an F-bomb could feel ridiculously immaterial compared to the fire and brimstone a few miles away. With the world crashing down, a little uncensored *fucking*—scandalizing everyone but, really, no one—would have rhetorically embodied what all of the talking heads were claiming anyway: the country had been forever changed, no going back, no take-backs. After abundant media jabber about the death of irony, Michaels wished to send the message that, for at least one night, all bets were off and all laughs fair game.⁴

Fast-forward to 18 June 2015, the night Jon Stewart ran out of jokes on *The Daily Show*.⁵ As Stewart told a stunned audience, he couldn't bring himself to write funny material in the wake of the previous afternoon's massacre of nine black worshippers at a church in Charleston, South Carolina. Stewart's silent treatment made loud news. The moratorium on comedy flashed across the internet as sagacious testament to the stupefying effects of tragedy.

At the time, the respective acts of foreign and domestic terrorism sent shocks through the citizenry's collective funny bone, exploding entertainment's permissions and proclivities. *SNL* dared to make 'em laugh; *The Daily Show* dared to desist. Lorne Michaels wanted to *take back* laughter (to retrieve it and return it to the nation's viewers); Jon Stewart sought to *take out* laughter (solemnly hushing the audience and flipping the studio soundscape on its head). Opposite tacks, yet both got away with it, snatching praise and publicity for good measure . . . funnily enough.

"Because I'm fucking freezing!"—or, as Witherspoon told it, "Because I'm freezing my balls off!" ("Reese Witherspoon / Alicia Keys," *Saturday Night Live*, 29 Sept. 2011).

4. See Eric Randall, "The 'Death of Irony,' and Its Many Reincarnations," *The Wire*, 9 Sept. 2011, www.thewire.com/national/2011/09/death-irony-and-its-many-reincarnations/42298

5. See Ed Mazza, "Jon Stewart Says He Can't Tell Jokes after Charleston Church Shooting," *Huffington Post*, 19 June 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/jon-stewart-charleston-no-jokes_n_7618110.html

WILLIAM CHENG is assistant professor of music at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (2016) and *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (2014). Forthcoming books include *Meritopia*, *Touching Pitch*, and the coedited volume *Queering the Field*. His email address is william.cheng@dartmouth.edu

Laughing out of Court

Remember the last time someone told you to lighten up? It's a gut punch, a low blow. Accusations of "why so serious?" feel like *serious* attacks, striking at a core failure of character in societies ruled by laugh tracks, witty tweets, and punny headlines.⁶ Even (or especially) in times of strife, humor should presumably serve as fantastic armor against no-good realities. But this armor is not so much iron as it is ironic; for within neoliberal logics, people who endure systemic oppression (blacks, queers, crips)—who might have the *least* reason to lighten up arbitrarily—tend to be the ones who are *most* exhorted to gain a sense of humor, to take a joke, and to laugh things off. A quotidian illustration involves men who goad women to smile, as if an unhumored female countenance (Resting Bitch Face) were an affront to physiognomic aesthetics and social mores.⁷

Yet when disenfranchised people do appear overpeppy or do laugh out loud, they can get slammed anyway. On 22 August 2015, eleven women (ten black, one white), part of a book club called Sistahs on the Reading Edge, were kicked off the Napa Valley Wine Train because they allegedly made too much noise while celebrating a member's birthday. For the record, when the laughers asked the maître d' whether passengers had voiced complaints, he replied: "Well, people's *faces* are uncomfortable."⁸ In other (or no) words, the maître d' addressed the noise violation by reading into the passengers' silent expressions. The incident birthed the hashtag #LaughingwhileBlack, a spin on #DrivingwhileBlack. For a persecuted population to laugh, this meme suggests, risks circumstantial vulnerability and sanctions. Because minoritized individuals bear higher evidentiary loads for propriety, mirthful outbursts can sound amplified to suspicious or envious ears. Laughter may be damning not only for the chronically marginalized but also for anyone in temporary hot water—a child being lectured by parents, a student in detention, or a defendant on trial.

Consider the 1988 appellate proceedings of *State v. Parker*, in which the court found the defendant unremorseful based on his laughter during the

6. On stereotypes of the humorless feminist, see Mary Ann Doane, "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* 11 (Fall–Winter 1988–89): 50. See also Judith Butler, "Feminism by Any Other Name," interview by Rosi Braidotti, *Differences* 6 (1994): 27–61; Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26 (1999): 19–27; and Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8 (2010), sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print_ahmed.html

7. See Jessica Bennett, "I'm Not Mad. That's Just My RBE," *New York Times*, 1 Aug. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/fashion/im-not-mad-thats-just-my-resting-b-face.html?_r=0

8. Victoria Bond, "Dear White People, Laughing Is Not a Crime," *Al Jazeera America*, 28 Aug. 2015, america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/8/dear-white-people-laughing-is-not-a-crime.html, emphasis added.

prosecutor's statements. Although laughter can bubble up from all kinds of feelings and conditions—nervousness, despair, incomprehension—this court's litigious hearing of the defendant's laughter pegged the act as evidence of impenitence or even evil.⁹ Alternatively, take the case of Sgt. Robert Bales, currently serving a life sentence for murdering sixteen Afghan civilians in 2012. During the trial, prosecutors played a phone recording of Bales and his wife laughing as they discussed the case—again, a putative blow to claims of remorse.¹⁰ In these instances, courts assumed that laughter spills secrets, always saying something. To extrapolate from Miranda warnings, anything you say—and any laugh let loose—may indeed be used against you in court. Most recently, the public doubled down on its vilification of former pharmaceutical CEO Martin Shkreli, who, when testifying before Congress in February 2016 (on charges of price-gouging drugs), repeatedly pleaded the Fifth Amendment while smirking and looking “as if he were about to burst out laughing.”¹¹ Here, just the *look* of suppressed laughter—no less so than any sound of laughter—sufficed to cement Shkreli's reputation as “the most hated man in America,” racking up accusations of immaturity and douchery to boot (fig. 1).¹²

Or rewind to the biblical story about the birth of Isaac. God tells Abram and Sarai, who are one hundred and ninety years young respectively, that they will bear a child. Incredulous, Abram falls facedown and laughs, enacting the first ROFL in Hebrew scripture. Later, when God repeats this prophecy, Sarai laughs to herself. God asks her (rhetorically, since He obviously knows the answer), “Is anything impossible for the LORD?”

“I did not laugh,” says the fearful Sarai.

“Yes, you did laugh,” God replies. [Genesis 18:14–15]

It's a classic case of He said, she said, except there's little room for negotiation here; the He in this case *is* the final Word, the divine rule of law. Although Sarai tries to retract her laugh, God operates under the schoolyard principle of no take-backs. “Once laughed, a laugh persists,” points out Anca Parvulescu in her reading of this Bible

9. See Bryan H. Ward, “Sentencing without Remorse,” *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 38 (Fall 2006): 151. The case was *State v. Parker*, 373 S.E.2d 558, 559 (N.C. Ct. App. 1988).

10. See Lewis Kamb, “Bales Faces Survivors of His Afghan Rampage,” *Seattle Times*, 20 Aug. 2013, www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/bales-faces-survivors-of-his-afghan-rampage

11. Linette Lopez, “Martin Shkreli Could Not Stop Laughing during His Testimony to Congress,” *Business Insider*, 4 Feb. 2016, www.businessinsider.com/live-martin-shkreli-the-ceo-of-valeant-and-others-face-congress-2016-2

12. Zoe Thomas and Tim Swift, “Who Is Martin Shkreli—‘the Most Hated Man in America?’” BBC, 3 Sept. 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34331761



FIGURE 1. Martin Shkreli testifying before Congress.

passage. “God would not hear of it.”¹³ (Or, rather, God would not *not* hear of it.) Notably, both Abram and Sarai laughed, but God gave the latter a harder time. Gender politics aside, this discrepancy may owe to how Sarai laughed quietly (whereas Abram LOL-ed), as if attempting to get away with it. And if there’s one thing God can’t stand, as the Old Testament certifies, it’s people who underestimate his omniscience.

Such stories about laughter’s liabilities run counter to more common portrayals of laughter and humor as subversive, free, and empowering.¹⁴ Comedians and laughers, after all, often demand get-out-of-jail-free cards by professing something to be just a joke.¹⁵ The *just* in *just a joke* serves double duty, meaning not only *only*, but also *fair*, as in “all’s fair in love” and comedy. A homophobic punchline or an act of sexual harassment might dodge censure if the case can be made that it was performed in good

13. Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), p. 18.

14. Gaëtan Brulotte, for example, insists on laughter’s wholesale subversiveness in this grandiose manner: “With laughter, the social machine creaks, its herd-like unanimity falters, its habitual cohesion breaks up, and its mechanical reactions break down” (Gaëtan Brulotte, “Laughing at Power,” in *Laughter and Power*, ed. John Parkin and John Phillips [Oxford, 2006], p. 15).

15. See Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offenses of Art* (London, 2002), pp. 25–26. Closely related is what I’ve termed the “ludic alibi,” the excuse used by offenders who claim that they’re just playing a game, just horsing around; see William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (New York, 2014), pp. 6–8, 130–32.

fun.¹⁶ This is comedy's signature alibi. *Alibi* hails from Latin's *alius* and *ibi*, roughly meaning "someplace else." With a license to kill, comedians are expected to boast, "Oh yes, I went there!"—*there*, meaning "someplace else," out of bounds and beyond the pale. Comedy's anything-goes exemptions conjure the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, a state of upheaval where "serious matters are suspended, things do not count, absolution is offered *ex ante*."¹⁷ Comedic alibis can be so powerful that they drag errors and faux pas into the realm of respectability, enabling even the most egregious ethical or aesthetic *failing* to pass for . . . well, *passing*.¹⁸ Given how critical alchemy can turn just about any catastrophe into comic gold, the arena of risibility in today's media appears virtually boundless.

For how many of us can claim immunity to comedy's exculpatory rationales? Even Christie Davies, who has spent decades researching jokes and humor (in effect, studying why jokes matter), peppers his work with disclaimers concerning how jokes might *not* matter, noting that they do not "have any significant social consequences or express profound moral or existential truths."¹⁹ Against the familiar notion of rapier wits, Davies insists that most jokes neither embody nor engender antipathy.²⁰ A set-piece joke, he says, "cannot be used as a sword; it is merely decoration on the scabbard. Jokes are entertainment only, a mere laughing matter."²¹ This said, excuses about levity don't always succeed. Telling someone to "lighten up!" or "take a joke!" can fetch the killjoy retort that "you can't joke your way out of this!" (an appeal against effectivity) or "you hurt my feelings!" (an appeal to affectivity). So while comedic alibis have potential to excuse failings of aesthetics and ethics, they might fail unto themselves—not least in the face of a hostile jury.

16. See Julie A. Woodzicka et al., "It's Just a (Sexist) Joke: Comparing Reactions to Sexist versus Racist Communications," *Humor* 28 (May 2015): 289–309; Elise Kramer, "The Playful Is Political: The Metapragmatics of Internet Rape-Joke Arguments," *Language in Society* 40 (Apr. 2011): 137–68; and Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Critique of Humour* (London, 2005), pp. 1–6, 11–21.

17. F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2005), p. 35. See also Muhammad A. Badarneh, "Carnavalesque Politics: A Bakhtinian Case Study of Contemporary Arab Political Humor," *Humor* 24 (Aug. 2011): 305–27, and Lisa Gabbert and Antonio Salud II, "On Slandorous Words and Bodies-out-of-Control: Hospital Humor and the Medical Carnavalesque," in *The Body in Medical Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Klaver (Albany, N.Y., 2009), pp. 209–27.

18. See J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956–1957): 1–30.

19. Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets* (Indianapolis, 2011), p. 2.

20. See Egon Larsen, *Wit as a Weapon: Political Joke in History* (London, 1980), and Hans Speier, "Wit and Politics: An Essay on Power and Laughter" (1975), trans. and ed. Robert Jackall, *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (Mar. 1998): 1354.

21. Davies, *Jokes and Targets*, p. 267.

A familiar saying is that “against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand,” a Mark Twain gem uttered today in inspirational contexts (despite the lesser-known fact that it’s spoken by Satan in Twain’s novel).²² Beyond its advocacy of using mirth against malevolence, however, this quotation can be read another way: that when our bodies are assaulted by our own impulsive laughter, we show our cards and lose our moral credibility, leaving no leg—nothing—to stand *on*. If you snicker at a comedian’s racist joke, it becomes that much harder for you to scramble onto high ground because, listen, you laughed; the evidence is in the vibrations, *right here* (not *someplace else*, no alibi). Yes, you may argue after the joke that you were laughing cynically and knowingly at the structural racial injustices that fuel such cruel comedy, but by this point you’re necessarily on the defensive, carrying the burden of proof. In any case, having to say something was just a joke already implies that court is now in session, that some possible offense lies in need of retraction or explication. Complicating every aspect of the comedic alibi, furthermore, is the fact that people don’t always know (how to describe) why they laugh.²³ And just as people hate explaining jokes, most loathe having to rationalize their laughter out loud.

In this article, I perform an acoustemology of comedy’s alibis in contemporary media. I listen for means by which laughter—its emission, contagion, suppression—can serve as audible barometers of how alibis either fly or bomb. A paradox emerges from the ways spontaneous-sounding laughter can simultaneously free us from societal scripts while shackling us within our own telltale, tittering bodies. A laugher’s accountability poses a moving target precisely because so much of comedy’s generic success relies on procedures of failure, impropriety, and breakage. Through three progressive cases, I delve into modern technologies of taking back laughter via the breaking and hacking of cultural texts. Each case features a do-it-yourself (DIY) phenomenon that exposes the stakes and choreographies of comedy’s consumer sovereignties: first, television fans who, through techniques of editing and recomposition, remove laugh tracks from comedies (*The Big Bang Theory*, *Friends*) or, inversely, add laugh tracks to dramas (*Breaking Bad*, *The Wire*), using the silence or surplus sound to break the show’s original mood; second, a YouTube game show that tries to make

22. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger* (New York, 1916), p. 142. Immediately preceding this line, Satan says: “Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast” (ibid.).

23. See Peter Jelavich, “When Are Jewish Jokes No Longer Funny? Ethnic Humour in Imperial and Republican Berlin,” in *The Politics of Humour: Laughter, Inclusion, and Exclusion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Martina Kessel and Patrick Merziger (Toronto, 2012), p. 24.

contestants break into smiles or laughter by presenting them with outrageous videos; and, third, Apollo Theater audience members who, through brash laughter and boos, use their collective judge-it-yourself authority to make or break the dreams of hopeful performers on amateur nights. All three of these examples hinge on the breakage of norms and the breaking in of new normals, embodying or eliciting laughter that may variously sound ambivalent, uncomfortable, or out of line. Lending a musicological ear to laughter's stubborn materialities and technical hackability opens resonant perspectives into some of comedy's funniest alibis. I conclude with a tribute to laughter's Debbie Downer cousin: the groan.

Hacking Laughs: *Big Bang* Bombing

Bombing is the sonorous metaphor for the devastating silence that greets a floundering comedian. A maw of muteness engulfs the performer, turning an atmosphere of optimistic joybringing into cringe-worthy desperation. Just as bombs blast away landscapes, so bombing demolishes the ideal soundscapes of comedic call-and-response.

One domain of comedy where bombing remains virtually impossible is a television show with either a laugh track or a cued-to-laugh studio audience. So long as there's no audio malfunction or audience reticence, every gag and punchline should fetch reliable, lively chuckles. But although producers have historically used laugh tracks to bestow this sense of liveliness and liveness, the tracks can strike a deadening tone. Slavoj Žižek says he experiences both catharsis and unease when he watches a show with canned laughter. "Even if I do not laugh," he declares, "but simply stare at the screen, tired after a hard day's work, I nevertheless feel relieved after the show . . . : my most intimate feelings can be radically externalized; I can literally 'laugh and cry through another.'"²⁴ Canned laughter—or, as Ron Rosenbaum calls it, "Mirth Muzak"—is as flat as funny gets.²⁵ Ontologically, a recorded or synthesized laugh track is all surface, a veneer of jocund artifice; amplitudinally, decibels for canned chortles versus canned guffaws vary minimally, since television audio requires volume equalization according to the FCC, the European Broadcasting System, and comparable national broadcast-safe standards. Even at live tapings for sitcoms and stand-up comedy specials, audiences face flat-out restrictions in terms of how they're supposed to sound. Audience members may be instructed to laugh and cheer as they normally would rather than in attention-grabbing

24. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, 2008), p. 141.

25. Ron Rosenbaum, "Kanned Laffter," in *Media Culture: Television, Radio, Records, Books, Magazines, Newspapers, Movies*, ed. James Monaco (New York, 1978), p. 137.

ways. At a shooting for *The Big Bang Theory*, a producer told the audience, “Your mission is simple tonight—all you need to do is to sit back, relax; please do *not* identify your laughs.”²⁶ This audience’s task was to mesh like a musical ensemble, to produce an orchestrated simulacrum of a laugh track (recorded, remixed, refined) for the benefit of home viewers, whose patronage remains, of course, what really matters in terms of ratings and revenue.

With either obedient studio audiences or synthesized sound files, a sitcom can opt for laughter as a formatted failsafe. No need for alibis, no risk of comic failure. But similar to Žižek, Jean Baudrillard has expressed bemusement at how “laughter on American television” resembles “the chorus in Greek tragedy,” such that “it is the screen that is laughing and having a good time.”²⁷ For some critics, a laugh track already embodies affective alienation and failure. It epitomizes the potential falsities of laughter more generally, masking the fault lines of the homogenizing pleasure industry and its ransom promises of happiness. Technically, sounds of other people laughing in no way preclude ourselves from doing likewise. Yet this laughter, if heard as distracting or paternalistic or counterfeit, can seemingly yank the laughs out of our own mouths. Like a flat soda, a flat laugh track might leave a weird feeling on our tongues—all sugar and no pop, empty calories for the ingratiated body.

Although Žižek’s and Baudrillard’s hifalutin criticisms sound like familiar brands of Adornian spoilsport commentary, canned laughter has, since its inception, polarized popular audiences as well.²⁸ One of the most picked-on sitcoms today is none other than *The Big Bang Theory*, which contains frequent and over-the-top laughs. Pushing against the show’s egregious laughter, fans (or hate-watchers) have lately experimented with taking out this laughter through basic sound editing and scene splicing. These tinkerers scrub out the laughter while leaving the visuals and narrative progression intact. The result of this DIY *détournement* is that

26. “The Big Bang Theory—Live Show Taping HD 720p,” YouTube, 1 Mar. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEKm54STV2Q

27. Quoted in Mike Gane, “Baudrillard’s Sense of Humour,” *Jean Baudrillard: Fatal Theories*, ed. David B. Clarke et al. (1986; London, 2009), pp. 171, 172. See also Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley, 2008), pp. 15–49; Parvulescu, *Laughter*, pp. 146–48; and Darragh McManus, “No Laughing Matter: Silence Is Golden When It Comes to Comedy TV Shows,” *The Guardian*, 24 Mar. 2010, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2010/mar/24/canned-laughter-track

28. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, (Stanford, Calif., 2002), p. 112, and Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory, and the Avant-garde* (London, 2002), pp. 178–79.

characters' japes crash into silences. A YouTube user named Sboss has released a series of such videos with the explanation: "Due to my hatred for the television show 'The Big Bang Theory,' I expose how unfunny the show actually is when you take out the laugh track."²⁹ According to Sboss (essentially a *Big Bang* truther), canned laughter is the shoddy alibi for the show's comedic failings, both breeding and excusing unfunniness with a sonic smokescreen. Below is the transcript of a clip made by Sboss, a scene involving a drunk Raj on a horrendous first date with Lalita, an acquaintance from childhood.³⁰

RAJ. [*Smiles.*] I can't believe I'm sitting here next to little Lalita Gupta. [*1 second of light laughter replaced by 1 second of silence, and so on.*]

LALITA. [*Smiles.*] Well, you are.

R. [*Smiles.*] Little Lalita. That's kind of fun to say. Little Lalita, little Lalita, little Lalita. [*1 second of light laughter removed.*] You should try it.

L. [*Smiles.*] No, it's okay. [*2.5 seconds of medium laughter removed.*]

R. You have lost *sooo* much weight! [*2 seconds of loud laughter removed.*] It must have been difficult for you because you were so, so fat! [*2.5 seconds of medium laughter removed.*] Do you remember?

L. [*Smiles.*] Yes, I do.

R. [*Smirks.*] Of course you do. Who could forget being *that* fat? [*1.5 seconds of medium laughter removed.*]

L. [*Smiles.*] Well, I've been trying. [*Half second of light laughter.*]

R. So you're a dental student. Are you aware that dentists have an extremely high suicide rate? [*Half second of light laughter removed.*] Not as high as, say, air traffic controllers, but then, there are far more dentists than air traffic controllers, so in pure numbers, you're still winning! [*Half second of light laughter removed.*]

L. [*Smiles.*] Yay, me. [*1 second of medium laughter removed.*]

Especially for viewers who have seen the original episode, this minute-long segment's omission of a laugh track can be earsplitting and mindbending. In total, thirteen seconds of laughter-turned-silence (almost a quarter of

29. "The Big Bang Theory—No Laugh Track 1 (Avoiding the Shamy)," YouTube, 2 Jan. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKS3MGriZcs

30. "The Big Bang Theory—No Laugh Track 2 (Raj Is a Dick)," YouTube, 4 Jan. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfcCSb1JCo

the clip's runtime) blow a lot of dead air, a conversational vacuum made all the more awkward by Raj's clueless giggles and Lalita's politely rueful smiles. Without the noise of loyal laughers, Raj's quips about obesity and suicide sound downright cruel. Barbs wither on the vine, and any imagined alibi of *just joking!* fails because no one is laughing. The gaping silences, however, cause the scene to fail so spectacularly that it stands to become funny on another level. No longer an aesthetically sensible text, the scene can tease laughter anew from the YouTube viewers who may find the metatextual manipulation absurd and subversive. Rather than laughing with the drunk Raj, we laugh at the laugh-deprived show. A taken-out laugh track enables viewers to take back their laughs, to reassert sovereignty over the choice of laughing and, moreover, to find humor in the bleak laughlessness.

On *The Big Bang Theory* and other laugh-heavy shows, part of what makes laughter sound fake is the rigidity with which it punctuates on-screen events: a character will say or do something funny, and laughter ensues (then stops); another character replies, and more laughter follows; and on it goes. Producers cannot afford to let laughter drown out the dialogue or excessively stall a scene's pacing. Yet in real-life scenarios, people do not pause for laughter every five seconds, nor do laughers perfectly synchronize their outbursts. (Granted, if a friend tells a truly hilarious joke, it might cause everyone to crack up for a prolonged period of time, requiring people to catch their breaths; the point is, however, that these moments of dramatic hysterics are *rare*.) Tightly edited (or, with studio audiences, thoroughly instructed and choreographed), the laughter that erupts from sitcom one-liners boasts a sonic cleanliness in homogenized start-stop motions. At the same time, it is exactly these neat starts and stops that easily enable a sound-hacker to snip out the laughs without interfering with dialogue.

Even easier than removing a laugh track from a show is adding a laugh track using sound superimposition. One user did just this for the drama *Breaking Bad*. Besides interjecting laughter, the DIY video "Breaking Bad as a Sitcom" includes an upbeat musical intro, whooping cheers, a sentimental *aww*, genteel applause, and a cheery outro.³¹ The original scene is supposed to be unfunny, with Skyler White calling the cops on her estranged drug-dealing husband. Solely through sonic reframing, the affect short-circuits. Just a dash of well-timed laughter makes the scene funny. People have similarly added laugh tracks to shows and films such as *The*

31. See "Breaking Bad as a Sitcom," YouTube, 12 Sept. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6v-ApehVbc



FIGURE 2. Serious moments overlaid with (and undercut by) laugh tracks on (left) *Family Matters* (season 2, episode 20) and (right) *The Wire* (season 4, episode 3).

Wire and *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993), as well as to touchy scenes in sitcoms: Laura Winslow finding a racist slur spray-painted on her school locker in *Family Matters*; Will Smith getting reabandoned by his father on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*; and little Stephanie Tanner mourning her deceased mother on *Full House* (fig. 2).³²

Popular descriptions of laughter as a contagious force break down in instances where others' laughter (canned tracks) make us less inclined to laugh or where we laugh largely in response to nonlaughter (redacted tracks).³³ Such affective flip-flop bears out in an episode of the dramedy *Ally McBeal*, when Ally goes on a first date with a man named Dennis, who, it turns out, has a low threshold for what he finds funny and, what's worse, sports a massive braying laugh. In fact, during the date, he laughs and snorts so loudly that he draws the attention of nearby diners, who stop their conversations to stare. Ally, meanwhile, doesn't laugh; she is embarrassed. The next day, Ally tells her friend Elaine, "I spent the rest of the date either talking about AIDS or the Holocaust or Linda Tripp, the most unfunny, horrible things I could think of: anything just to make him not laugh again."³⁴ Ally, in sum, was trying to use her words to *remove the laugh track*—the overbearing sounds of Dennis's inexplicable (and admittedly machinelike) vocalizations. Alas, she failed to mute or hack him. His automaton mirth had no off switch. So later, in the company of Elaine and another coworker named Nelle, Ally finds Dennis and tries

32. See "Inappropriate Laugh Track," YouTube, 16 Apr. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZjP_IoxCHU, and "Inappropriate Laugh Track 2," YouTube, 13 Nov. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSvkkTWrRG0

33. Various recent videos show everyday people transmitting laughter to one another, typically in enclosed and resonant spaces such as subway cars (effectively, viral videos about viral laughter); see the humorously titled "Contagious Laughter Is Contagious," YouTube, 29 Nov. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fM45JMTpkBU

34. "In Search of Pygmies," 14 Feb. 2000, *Ally McBeal*.



FIGURE 3. Dennis, Nelle, and Elaine in *Ally McBeal* (left to right).

to do the next best thing—goad him into laughing so that her skeptical friends can at least hear firsthand how terrible he is. After the women tell several jokes—eliciting several fake outs along the way, leading Dennis to chuckle only lightly—he finally lets loose his obscene, gargantuan laugh. As Dennis howls, the three women are stunned into silence, albeit with mouths likewise agape (fig. 3). Dennis’s dramatic exhalations (laughs) and inhalations (snorts) suck up all the oxygen in the room, while Ally, Elaine, and Nelle remain motionless, breathless, speechless. The three women fail to stop his outburst once it starts, yet it is also this very failure that’s intended to tickle the show’s viewers, who stand to be moved, like Dennis, to laugh out loud.

For Ally, Dennis’s laughter turns out to be a deal breaker—unsurprising given that he breaks with conventions of polite conduct, breaks up flows of conversations, and sounds broken when he’s guffawing. Canned laugh tracks are bad enough. But a walking, talking laugh track? Inexcusable.

Laughable Games

Ally disapproved of Dennis not because he happened to laugh at offensive or discriminatory jokes (a would-be moral flaw) but rather because he laughed *offensively* and *indiscriminately* (apparently a far worse crime in the games of courtship). Confronted with Dennis’s outbursts, Ally and her friends understood neither what he found so funny nor why he laughed so much. Laughter indeed doesn’t always reveal accurate or actionable information. Its alibis and liabilities depend on legibility. A “laughing face,” says Murray Pomerance, “can indicate not mirth or release but secrecy, darkness, surrender, derision, and improbability.”³⁵ Yet the point remains

35. Murray Pomerance, “Introduction: The Great Corrective,” in *The Last Laugh: Strange Humors of Cinema*, ed. Pomerance (Detroit, 2013), p. 1.

that when people laugh, their sonic and physiognomic excess tends to draw attention and thus to invite scrutiny. Because laughter can be hard to stifle, its leakages purportedly speak volumes, gurgling with confessional authenticity. The assumption is that people who are laughing may do so despite themselves, unintentionally revealing something in the process.³⁶ For even when someone appears *about* to laugh (say, Martin Shkreli testifying before Congress), we might presume to know what they're all *about*. Imminence of laughter telegraphs immanence of character . . . or so believed the tweeters and YouTube commenters whose hatred for Shkreli intensified at the mere sign of his smirking face.

Leave it to none other than YouTube—Broadcast Yourself!—to popularize the recursive spectacles of stifling laughter. Fine Brothers Entertainment's *React Channel* initiated a recent series of YouTube videos called Laughing Challenges, which task contestants with suppressing smiles and chuckles while watching trending clips *on* YouTube. The slightest grin or chortle gets you booted from the competition. The winner is whoever keeps a steely face against the onslaught of humorous prods. For each contest, the camera cuts between twelve contestants and keeps an inset display of the footage that they are required to watch. Although, for the sake of fairness, all contestants watch the same series of videos, they will sometimes defiantly shout, "That's not *fair*!" upon breaking into grins or laughter at an irresistibly (unfairly) uproarious video. In one challenge, the contestants are shown a YouTube clip of a young man shrieking with laughter; some contestants manage to maintain a stony expression, but others don't last long. The off-camera producer coyly accuses a young contestant: "Sydney, you smiled!" And like the Bible's defensive Sarai (responding to the likewise disembodied voice of authority), Sydney tries to get away with it, protesting: "No, I didn't! I didn't! I didn't! I didn't!"³⁷ Pleading to no avail, she is removed from the competition (fig. 4).

The bankable purpose of these challenges is primarily to attract and to amuse YouTube viewers, who are encouraged to laugh at contestants attempting—and failing—to refrain from laughing. Watching someone aiming desperately to preserve a straight face can be a funny yet disquieting experience. As the Laughing Challenge contestants try to keep from smiling or laughing, they show bulging eyes, flaring nostrils, quivering cheeks, pursed lips, and other compensatory contortions (think of sci-fi scenes where an alien is about to burst out of someone's face). The gestural

36. See Mikita Brottman, *Funny Peculiar: Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor* (New York, 2004), p. 66.

37. "Try to Watch This without Laughing or Grinning #2," YouTube, 23 Apr. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxjjhQcODUE.



FIGURE 4. We (YouTube viewers) are invited to laugh at Sydney trying not to laugh at an inset video of a man laughing. Besides the laugh factor, the *mise-en-abyme* operates medially and geometrically (rectangular screen within screen within screen).

excesses born of suppressed laughter end up visually sonifying this laughter anyway, as pressures that normally would escape from one's throat find weird release from alternate orifices and pores. But for all of their funny fails, contestants may occasionally astonish us with how adeptly they *succeed* in curating a staid, blank expression. "I seem like a really cheerful person," a winner named Becca declared darkly, "but when I want to, I can be dead inside."³⁸ If Becca took any aesthetic pleasure in the carousel of funny clips, she let nothing show.

In the age of YouTube, remarks Sianne Ngai, "what we might call Other People's Aesthetic Pleasures have become folded into the heart of the artwork."³⁹ Affective responses refract and percolate through a palimpsest of spectators and spectacles. Ngai parses the case of the famous *Double Rainbow* video, in which the natural wonder of a double rainbow became upstaged by the effusive response of Paul Vasquez, who recorded it; Vasquez's response was subsequently upstaged by millions of delighted YouTube viewers, parodists, and media commentators. "Aesthetic artifact and affective response," Ngai points out, "were thus conflated in a way that ended up doubly short-circuiting the original object of aesthetic appreciation and leaving it behind."⁴⁰ Watching a Laughing Challenge, we likewise redistribute our attention and affects among a panoply of funny things. Were we to describe the laughing game with the stock preamble, "The funny thing about this *is* . . .," we would fail to pin down a singular subject. But in this carnivalesque melting pot of recursive laughter, would we really care to explain why we're laughing anyway? Or might we feel content to let this resonant laughter, like a good joke, stand on its own and speak for itself?

38. "Try to Watch This without Laughing or Grinning #5," YouTube, 16 July 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss39UktpXko

39. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), p. 28.

40. Ibid.

A Laughing Challenge on the *React Channel* appears to be just a game, just for laughs: safe spaces to frolic and fail in the name of entertainment. As contestants suppress laughter, or laugh at themselves for laughing, or make a YouTube viewer laugh at the laughability of nonlaughter, the spectacle of heavy-handed levity is both positively intense and intensely positive. But the chronic bright-sidedness of these games belies the possibility that the stakes can creep higher than their ludic façades. Predictably, many of the laughable videos shown to contestants involve, to riff on Ngai, Other People's Epic Fails: falls, face-plants, notorious groin hits, and the sorts of obvious painful acts long featured on clip shows (*America's Funniest Home Videos*), stunt shows (*Jackass*), game shows (*Wipeout*), and Tumblr blogs. These are physical injuries and sometimes near-death experiences. They are serious insofar as there might be visible evidence of maiming and trauma. In one Laughing Challenge that showed a montage of various people getting hit on the head, a young contestant named Anita proclaimed (while keeping her eyes obligatorily glued to the screen): "You know these people can *die*, right? I don't laugh at that kind of stuff." Now, maybe Anita truly found nothing funny about sadism. Or maybe she said this out loud in order to stymie her own impulse to laugh. (At the end of the challenge, after learning that she had won, Anita asked: "Can I laugh now?"—then undammed a huge guffaw.)⁴¹

What's revealing here is that even when an epic fail does involve injury, its outrageous goals of knee-jerk amusement tend to stamp out a spectator's long-term concerns. Viewers do not lose sleep wondering whether a crotch-smacked jackass has gone on to suffer permanent testicular damage or whether his health insurance will pick up medical fees. By subscribing to the comedic alibi that epic fails are all in good fun, viewers banish the inconvenient specter of killjoy consequence. In order to justify our externalized laughter at someone else's expense, we may have to internalize—conjoining Lauren Berlant and Susan Sontag—a certain cruel optimism regarding the pain of others.⁴² Comedy's alibis effectively make the very *genre* of epic fails possible.

Sure, we might feel mildly ashamed when laughing involuntarily at a video showing a skateboarder's agonizing pratfall. We might even wish we could take back our laugh so as to disavow guilt over *schadenfreude*. Yet the advent of YouTube has complicated the power gradients in spectacles

41. "Try to Watch This without Laughing or Grinning #16," YouTube, 4 Feb. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed7BhyZrGaA&index=1&list=PL73YndQawY3PB6odG3R5ThUelhxBw8xaS

42. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), pp. 3–6, and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London, 2004), pp. 95–103.

of harm and victimhood. Especially when a laughable injury goes viral, the viewers can plainly see its stratospheric page hits and up-votes, which convey not only that many other people must be laughing at the same thing (moral absolution via mass participation) but also that this epic fail has already become *too big to fail* (with the subject's fifteen minutes of fame compensating for whatever damages enabled this lulz-mongering celebrity to begin with). Alibis of permissible laughter therefore become that much tighter when there's safety in laughers' numbers and when we assume, whether rightly or wrongly, that notorious butts are willing subjects who are handsomely paid for their troubles.

To nuance these assumptions, let's eavesdrop on a Broadcast Yourself venue that preceded YouTube, an infamous stage where performers have sought fame, risked humiliation, and funnily bombed time and again: the Apollo Theater.

Judge-It-Yourself

In the Apollo Theater, Harlem's house of boos, comedians and musicians perform for a jury of their peers. Marion J. Caffey, producer of *Amateur Night* at the Apollo, sets the scene:

We offer [audience members] what no one else offers them—the power of the boo. . . . When you watch little old ladies, Eurocentric ladies and African ladies and Asian ladies, man, power up their boo? And they've never booed a person in their lives? And the freedom that comes over them, when it's like, "Is it OK?" To watch that transformation in the audience where, by the last person or second-to-the-last person, they feel like, "Hmmm . . . I'm gonna try this! Booo!" And it's a timid boo! Yet, it is a boo from deep within.⁴³

Caffey's gleeful synopsis of the Apollo audience's internal monologue makes the people sound akin to the metamorphosed participants of the Stanford Prison Experiment or Stanley Milgram's shocking tests. Apollonites' boos burst forth as if exposing an impish, repressed drive to judge and condemn. On *Amateur Nights*, an audience's prolonged razzes will summon the Executioner, the Apollo's tap-dancing avatar who uses a shepherd's crook or a broom to usher struggling performers off the stage.⁴⁴ If you watch any video recording of the Apollo's jubilant spectators booing an amateur performer, what you hear and see is, yes, booing (out of

43. Quoted in Christopher R. Weingarten, "Amateur Night at the Apollo: Behind the Boos of America's Toughest Crowd," *Rolling Stone*, 11 Mar. 2015, www.rollingstone.com/music/features/amateur-night-at-the-apollo-behind-the-boos-of-americas-toughest-crowd-20150311

44. Earlier incarnations of the Executioner included the Porto Rico and the Sandman.

puckered lips and oval mouths). What you also see—yet cannot hear—is people laughing at this spectacle of humiliation. Funnily enough, an acoustemology here requires sharp eyes; the staccato laughter is visible but virtually mute, drowned out by the wall of sostenuto boos.

Amateur Nights at the Apollo operate under the yays and nays of spectatorial DIY. With considerable sovereignty, audience members take adjudication into their own power-tripping hands and, if dissatisfied, use their vocal cords to terminate a performance and to hit Play Next on the night's set list.⁴⁵ But despite the garish sights and sounds of the Apollo's apparent mob mentality, audience members do not always agree. A performance can sometimes split a jury, especially at the outset. A famous yet frequently mischaracterized example is the 1988 debut of a thirteen-year-old Lauryn Hill, who, on the televised *Showtime at the Apollo* (featuring amateur artists along with more established performers), sang "Who's Lovin' You," the 1960 Motown standard by William "Smokey" Robinson. Most click-baity websites emphasize that Hill was booed, a delicious outrage given that she would go on to win eight Grammys. Few writers mention, however, that if you listen closely to the full performance, the audience's response undergoes several changes over the course of just two minutes.

HOST. Well, come on, Lauryn, we're going to love you! Sing for us!
[*The audience cheers and applauds; applause fades as Hill begins to sing.*]

LAURYN HILL. [*Singing.*] When I had you, I treated you bad [*audience boos immediately*] and wrong my dear. And boy since you been away, [*boos crescendo but are counteracted by a bit of applause*] dontcha know I sit around with my head hangin' down, and I wonder who's lovin' you. [*Boos and applause mix and jostle; both die down by the end of the first verse, leaving only some isolated cheers and jeers. In the three beats of rest between the first and second verses, someone from the audience shouts, "Move up to the mic!" Hill heeds the advice and keeps singing.*] I should have never, ever made you cry, and boy since you been gone, [*smattering of boos and cheers; cheers grow louder as Hill takes mic off its stand*] dontcha know I sit around with my head hangin' down, and I wonder who's lovin' you. [*Audience vocalizations begin to die down, replaced by people clapping along to the song's second and fourth beats.*] Life without love is oh so lonely. I

45. On the declines and renaissances of audience sovereignty, see Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 57–65; Danilyn Rutherford, *Laughing at Leviathan: Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua* (Chicago, 2012), pp. 10–22; and James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 228–35.

don't think I'm gonna make it. [*Clapping continues; there are no more audible boos by this point.*] Dontcha know I sit around with my head hangin' down, and I wonder who's lovin' you. [*With ritenuto in the song's final line, the clapping stops, then turns into full-on applause and a standing ovation.*]⁴⁶

Although Hill persevered through her performance and won the audience over, she reportedly cried afterwards backstage.⁴⁷ And who could blame her? Belated applause doesn't erase the horrors of initial boos, which must have felt particularly traumatic for a thirteen-year-old. Simply from watching this video, you would also never know that an unofficial rule prohibits Apollonites from booing children.⁴⁸ The rule shows a vague institutional acknowledgement that even comedy's alibis and free passes should have limits. The fact that this rule isn't enforced, however, implies the existence of certain limits *to* these limits.

Seeing as how the term *amateur* (*amator* in Latin) connotes a person doing something out of love rather than for monetary gain or fame, the boos and jeers during Amateur Night may come across gratuitously dissonant. But this gratuitousness is the point. Within the magic circle of the Apollo Theater, politesse has no place. Entering the Apollo is like entering a video game or a carnival, as players and performers acquiesce to an otherworldly domain that rewrites codes of conduct, re choreographs bodies, and rehearses trials by fire. Granted, Amateur Nights resemble mock trials rather than real ones. Juries and judges (audience members) and executioners (*the Executioner*) exhibit high-and-mighty personas that, by virtue of their overblown kitsch, signal the relatively soft stakes of the performances at hand. This doesn't mean that boos can't sting; it means that, in a colosseum where boos are part of the game, the consequences can seem diminutive because they operate *prima facie* under the comedic alibi, a vindication predicated on the phenomenal pleasures of aesthetic judgment and the consensual funniness of a booed, bombing artist.

As with Laughing Challenges, epic fails, and quandaries of sadism, the comedic alibi draws strength from the assumption that if *enough* people are laughing—if something is sufficiently funny by consensus—then the burden of responsibility becomes diffuse, soothing moral qualms along

46. "Lauryn Hill at 13 Dings Who's Lovin' You (Amateur Night at the Apollo)," YouTube, 6 Feb. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdwhGmvB7aA

47. See Touré, "The Mystery of Lauryn Hill," *Rolling Stone*, 30 Oct. 2003, www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-mystery-of-lauryn-hill-20031030

48. See Robert Smith, "Harlem's Apollo Theater Gets Its Own Show," NPR, 13 Feb. 2011, www.npr.org/2011/02/13/133729700/Harlems-Apollo-Theatre-Gets-Its-Own-Show

the way. Beyond the Apollo Theater, audiences' cheers and laughter have long resounded as beacons of populist metrics. A clap-o-meter on the 1950s game show *Opportunity Knocks* claimed to measure audience response, though the machine was operated by a hidden person who manually turned the dial according to his own estimate of applause volumes. On *America's Got Talent* (now in its eleventh season), the audience can boo and flash thumbs-downs to encourage judges to terminate a contestant's audition. Off the live stage, there's the well-named example of Funny or Die, a comedy website (founded by Will Ferrell and Adam McKay) that shows humorous videos open to viewers' votes. If a video receives ample votes, it is deemed "funny" and stays on the main site; if it receives insufficient votes, it "dies" and descends into the website's Crypt.⁴⁹ Like Reddit and other judge-it-yourself sites (along with, more generally, any online content algorithmically curated by search engine optimization), the game here is natural selection, where nonspreadability means virtual death. On a site such as Funny or Die, the binary system of up-voting or down-voting comes with the added benefit of obviating the need for anyone to elaborate on why a video passes as funny. If a video lives or dies, it is because the people have spoken and, in turn, because the humorous intricacies of the video need *not* be spoken. Systemically, the humor goes unexplained—which is, of course, how good jokes are said to remain.

Even as consumers today vote with their laughs, majority opinions leave room for dissent. *Boos!* might bump against *Bravos!* in the Apollo Theater, while trolls make their obligatory clamor on comment threads of beloved viral artifacts. In comedy reception, there's also a sound that, within itself, personifies ambivalence and contradiction—laughter's abject countersign: the groan.

Coda: Fade to Groan

Midway through the documentary *Saturday Night Live in the 2000s: Time and Again*, we see clips of past SNL sketches that pushed the limits of political correctness. One sketch involved Ben Affleck yelling at a "mentally challenged guy" (Fred Armisen) to shut up; another featured Jon Hamm encountering a grown-up trick-or-treater (Will Forte) "dressed up" as a sex offender.⁵⁰ Former cast member Horatio Sanz reflected on the studio audience's mixed reactions to these edgy moments: "What it would take to

49. "About Funny or Die," *Funny or Die*, www.funnyordie.com/about?_cc=__d__&_ccid=lzzifg.nvrnjz. If a video receives an exceptionally high number of "funny" votes, it attains the status of "immortal."

50. *Saturday Night Live in the 2000s: Time and Again* (Kenneth Bowser, dir., 2010).

offend us [the cast] is a lot higher than I think most people. So when we hear groans in the audience, we kind of like it. If the laughter stops, then we don't like it. But a groan and a laugh is probably the best thing you could ever ask for!"⁵¹ Groans mixed into laughter is like spice added to something nice, signaling affective equilibrium or illusions thereof.

For all of the critical thought devoted to laughter, it's funny that groans have received almost no consideration. Groans are a regular and vital component of audiences' responses to stand-up comedy, *SNL*, and talk show monologues. Superficially, a groan voices moral or aesthetic disapproval, suggesting that the comic has stepped out of bounds or failed to land a punchline. But as with the Apollo audience's reactions to Lauryn Hill, the time-lapse soundscape is complicated whenever groans are involved: typically, a foul joke or bad pun will draw sharp laughter, followed by *some* groans (from audience members realizing belatedly that such material might not merit laughter), then *more* groans (with recognition of faux pas catching on), and then finally yielding a reuptake of laughter at the situational humor of this very quandary.⁵² These reactions launch a boomerang of affective display, a graceful A-B-A ternary form that affirms the comedy's success, after all. In short, the game of groans is long exposure. A groan can't erase a prior laugh but demonstrates an effort to take back the laugh—that is, not through subtraction but through the addition of a neutralizing or mitigating agent. Short of being able to turn back time (or to snip out a laugh track with the click of a mouse), a groan is the next best thing.⁵³

So that you have a sense of your own body, try this: force yourself to laugh (it will likely sound artificial), listening as you do so, and then attempt to stop abruptly. How did your body feel at the moment of cessation? Probably uncomfortable, even vaguely painful. Now laugh again, but this time, let it give way to a groan, as if you've just heard someone's joke, chuckled instinctively, then realized a second later that the joke is misogynistic and that you better stifle your outburst lest nearby people judge you. Chances are you found this second routine far easier on your lungs, throat, and mind. Physiologically, this is because a laugh-turned-groan

51. Ibid.

52. For an example of the laugh-groan-laugh boomerang, see Louis C. K.'s 2015 *SNL* monologue (first aired 16 May 2015), in which he made fun of child molesters.

53. Just as people have taken out and added laugh tracks to television clips, so someone has replaced all laughter with groans for an episode of *Two and a Half Men* (to portray disparagingly that perhaps the show's jokes are more groan-worthy than laugh-worthy); see "Laugh Track from 'Two and a Half Men' Replaced with GROAN Track (Video)," *Huffington Post*, 25 May 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/02/19/laugh-track-from-two-and_n_469362.html.

involves a guttural quick-change with respiratory continuity. (Groaning merely takes the pulsations out of laughter's exhalations.) It's an awkward yet manageable transition, an exercise in glottal backpedaling that oozes apology and ambivalence. Admittedly, no less funny than the *feeling* of a groan is how groans *sound*. We stylize groans as monotone; while the utterance fades from loud to soft, the pitch stays mostly the same. A person groaning can thus sound almost nonhuman, like a machine emitting an error tone (indicating uncertainty over how to process the input of a joke). Maybe, then, groans have flown under our critical sonar in part because they come off as literal noise, plain and simple. Unlike bubbly laughter (music to the ears), groans sound and feel flat.

Any time we laugh, boo, or groan—inappropriately, inopportunistically, involuntarily—the utterance vibrates stubbornly in the air, admissible as exhibit A to all who care to judge. Like touchy speech acts or an embarrassing text message that you regret immediately upon hitting Send, take-backs are technically impossible. Life isn't a courtroom. We can't officially ask to strike a line or a laugh from the record. Yet in the wake of offensive jokes, injuries, or even national catastrophes, people have simultaneously found reasons to laugh and not to laugh (recall the contrasting cases of post-9/11 *SNL* and post-Charleston *The Daily Show*) because with laughter, reason isn't necessarily the point. Not only can laughter signify generously, but its verdict is also rarely final. Appeals abound, for even though the echoes of a laugh cannot be materially retracted, its hermeneutic terminus remains a shifting target.

Laughter isn't always overflowing with intense secrets. Anyone claiming that a joke is just a joke could likewise insist that a laugh is just a laugh—a syntactic tautology working double duty as moral alibi. Minding the sociopolitical stakes of laughing out loud means recognizing how different people shoulder differing burdens of sonic, gestural, and physiognomic propriety and, by extension, how people face variable charges and convictions amid the difficulties of taking back a laugh. Given how laughing bugs can infect any of us, we *should know* that we *don't always know* why people laugh. Modern hackers of laughter are producing humorous artifacts and performances that make such uncertainties wilder than ever. If laughter both begs inquiry and calls for interpretative forfeit, then it perpetually pleads alibis through its own semantic promiscuity. From one moment to the next, auditors of laughter might be tasked with condemning or forgiving a laugher, choosing between austere suspicion and benefit of the doubt. Resonating in our collective chuckle huts may be the funny feeling that, when we opt to humor others' laughable excuses, we stand to be humored in kind.

Peculiar Attunements: Comic Opera and Enlightenment Mimesis

Roger Mathew Grant

“They’re laughing at the opera, they’re splitting their sides with laughter!”¹ Or at least so claimed Paul H. D. d’Holbach, whose words would have been no small matter when they were penned in 1752. The Paris Opéra had been “profaned,” he satirically wrote, by “senseless laughter and indecent gaiety.”² As the home of sung French tragedy, or *tragédie en musique*, the Paris Opéra was a most unusual place for comedy.³ A space for gods and heroes, for love and death and classical ideals, the opera treasured there was nothing to laugh about. But that summer a small traveling group of Italian *opera buffa* performers took up residency at the Opéra, bringing to Paris for the first time a new form of comic opera that was slowly

Many thanks to David Halperin, Scott De Orio, Gavin Steingo, Michael Meere, Victoria Pitts-Taylor, the New York Seminar on Music and Mimesis, and the participants of the *Comedy: An Issue* conference at the University of Chicago for their helpful comments on and criticisms of this piece. I owe a special debt of gratitude to both Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai for their transformative guidance and encouragement. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. “On rit à l’Opéra, on y rit à gorge déployée!” ([Paul H. D. d’Holbach], *Lettre à une dame d’un certain âge sur l’état présent de l’opéra* [Paris, 1752], p. 2; rpt. *La Querelle des bouffons: Texte des pamphlets*, ed. Denise Launay, 3 vols. [Geneva, 1973], 1:122).

2. “Nous avons vû, à la honte de la Nation & de notre siècle, le Théâtre auguste de l’Opéra profané par d’indignes Bâteleurs. Oui, Madame, ce spectacle si grave, si vénérable . . . avoir pris soin d’écarter les ris insensés & la gayeté indécente” ([d’Holbach], *Lettre à une dame d’un certain âge sur l’état présent de l’opéra*, p. 2; rpt. *La Querelle des bouffons*, 1:122).

3. The one notable exception that directly anticipated Italian comic opera’s new popularity was Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Platée*, first performed in 1745. See Downing A. Thomas, “Rameau’s *Platée* returns: A Case of Double Identity in the *Querelle des bouffons*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 1–19.

spreading across Europe from its origins in Neapolitan theatres. This new form of comic opera lampooned the traditions of its tragic counterpart. Its stories concerned aspirational servants and hapless old misers, bumbling, pretentious losers and the tricksters who could hoodwink them with outrageous disguises. Though smaller in cast and in duration, it specialized in the overblown. Everything about it was exaggerated: the stage action and gesture, the inappropriate sentiments, the antics of the plot, and, most of all, the music.

Comic opera presented a challenge to the Enlightenment aesthetic doctrine of mimesis. Until the mid-eighteenth century, critics had seen opera as a union of poetry with music on the stage. Each moment in the drama employed these forces together to create a coherent image and action, using stock musical figures and procedures to amplify the intended affect of the drama. Especially in the case of French criticism, music was understood to be subservient to the poetry of the libretto; even in passages without singing, the music of the opera was tied to the expression of its text.⁴ Using these procedures, opera fell into accord with the neoclassical doctrine of mimesis, in which the goal of art was the imitation of the natural world. Comic opera originated, in part, as a parodic, metatheatrical critique of this operatic aesthetic.⁵ Composers of comic opera adopted several new mimetic techniques that mocked the ossified musical procedures of serious opera and, further, the neoclassical mimetic doctrine itself. These composers employed mimesis in exaggerated, excessive, and rapidly changing forms; they also began to use poetry and music as autonomous signifying systems, engaging in musical mimesis to suggest something other than what was expressed in the opera's poetry and thereby subverting the meaning of the text. These practices bolstered the relatively new notion that music had the power to act as a sign independent of poetry.

The growing awareness of comic opera's peculiar use of mimesis and of its distinctive musical style facilitated a transformation in operatic

4. See Catherine Kintzler, *Poétique de l'opéra français de Corneille à Rousseau* (Paris, 1991), esp. p. 365.

5. See Keith James Johnston, "È caso do intermedio! Comic Theory, Comic Style, and the Early Intermezzo" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2011), esp. pp. 178–223.

ROGER MATHEW GRANT is assistant professor of music at Wesleyan University. He is the author of *Beating Time and Measuring Music in the Early Modern Era* (2014). His new book project investigates the relationship between the eighteenth century's musical "doctrine of the affections" and the twenty-first century's turn to affect.

aesthetics. Curiously, instead of creating a more expansive mimetic theory to accommodate the new Italian style, critics explicitly turned away from this neoclassical doctrine in favor of a new view in which music, independently, was said to attune its audience to an affective state. In the domain of aesthetic theory, then, the extreme mimesis in this music was no longer mimetic. It was instead affective.

Precisely because the historiography of comic opera is tightly associated with the aesthetics of mimesis, the important role that this musical idiom played in catalyzing a reassessment of the mimetic doctrine has not always been apparent. Instead, historians and theorists of this repertoire have traditionally emphasized its contributions to the development of mimetic techniques in music.⁶ But one result of the critical quarrel on comic opera was the theoretical displacement of mimetic representation by affective attunement. Seen from this perspective, the twenty-first century's turn to affect is only the most recent motion of an ongoing dialectic concerning affect and signification that has been in place since early modernity. Comic opera and the debates that it incited have much to teach us about this crucial moment in intellectual history.

Mimesis Exploded: Three Comic Operas

To be sure, there was something immediately appealing, new, and funny about Italian *opera buffa* for Parisian audiences. Recalling Giuseppe Maria Orlandini's *Il marito giocatore* (which had its Paris premier in August of that infamous 1752 summer), the conservative critic Élie-Catherine Fréron noted with some disdain that the opera provoked "convulsions" and "extravagant movements" in the *parterre*. "It couldn't better resemble the sort of delirium that always follows the excessive exaggeration caused by strong alcohol."⁷ But what Fréron describes as immoderate behavior in the audience could also have aptly characterized the action on stage in any one

6. Notable examples include Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley, 2014); Mary Hunter, "Topics and Opera Buffa," in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (Oxford, 2014), pp. 61–89; and Daniel Hertz, *From Garrick to Gluck: Essays on Opera in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. John A. Rice (Hillsdale, N.Y., 2004), esp. pp. 11–51.

7. "C'est le jouer d'Orlandini, ouvrage dans son genre même assez médiocre, qui causa dans le Parterre François de mouvemens extravagans qui ressembloient à des convulsions, des applaudissemens qui tenoient du transport, une joye excessive qui avoit l'air de la folie . . . Rien n'a mieux ressemblé peut-être à cette sorte de délire qui suit toujours les excès outrés des liqueurs fortes" (Élie-Catherine Fréron, "Les Spectacles de Paris ou calendrier historique et chronologique des théâtres," in vol. 1 of *L'Année littéraire ou suite des lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps*, 8 vols. [Amsterdam, 1756], 1:159–67, esp. 1:161–62). For a skeptical view on the issue of audience laughter in the Paris Opéra, see Dominique Quérou, "Rire et comique à l'Académie Royale de Musique: La Querelle du 'bouffon'?" in *La "Querelle des bouffons" dans la vie culturelle*

of the works that the troupe of *bouffons* brought to Paris. Part of what made this type of comic opera so fresh and so controversial was the way in which it used music to mock serious opera, creating the hyperbolic exploits Fréron describes.

Perhaps the best known of the works performed during the *bouffons*' three-year tenure in Paris is Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*, an opera about the plucky servant Serpina who convinces her employer Uberto to marry her. The life of a housemaid doesn't suit her; she wants to be "revered like a mistress. Arch-mistress! Mega-mistress!"⁸ In order to pull off this caper, she disguises her fellow servant Vespone as her new potential husband: a mean-spirited ruffian soldier she calls Captain Tempesta. In a brilliantly manipulative aria, "A Serpina penserete," she asks Uberto to think of her from time to time when she's gone and to remember how good she was to him. Of course, she reasons, Uberto will marry her to avoid losing her, and also to avoid the dowry he would have to pay Tempesta.

"A Serpina penserete" explodes the mimetic conventions of the serious opera aria with an overload of mimesis. The aria begins in a stately, slow tempo with a corresponding 4/4 meter; Serpina's lines of entreaty are smooth and sweet, and on their own they could even sound earnestly saccharine. But accompanying them we hear a passage of quickly repeated, detached, staccato pitches in the orchestra that undercuts the sincerity of her text. This orchestral commentary begins just before Serpina sings her lines directed toward Uberto, and it returns as she is finishing them. It employs mimesis in the form of an orchestral agitation in order to deliver more information than is offered in the text of the aria, suggesting an anxiety in Serpina's bluffing performance within the performance. Suddenly, just as soon as she concludes her words to Uberto, Serpina launches into her own solipsistic world, singing to herself and the audience in a brisk allegro tempo and in 3/8, a meter associated with peasant dances and frivolity. The effect is a dramatic, unanticipated change of character. "It seems to me that he's already slowly beginning to soften!" she exclaims.⁹ Then the slow tempo and the 4/4 meter return just as abruptly as they had left, and Serpina repeats her original sentiment, again directed toward Uberto and again agitated by the staccato figure in the orchestra. Twice more the aria rapidly changes character, with Serpina asking Uberto to please forget

française du XVIIIe siècle, ed. Andrea Fabiano (Paris, 2005), pp. 57–72; but for a contrasting account, see David Charlton, *Opera in the Age of Rousseau* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 257–64.

8. "Voglio esser rispettata, voglio esser riverita, come fossi padrona, arci padrona, padronissima" (Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, of *La Serva padrona*, vol. 3 of *Opera Omnia di Giovanni Battista Pergolesi*, ed. Francesco Caffarelli [Rome, 1941], p. 10).

9. "Ei mi par che già pian piano s'incomincia a intenerir" (*ibid.*, pp. 37–38).

any of her bad behavior and remarking, again to herself, that the squeeze of his hand is a sign that her plot is working.

The entire scene is exaggeration, with Serpina's insincere serenade accompanied by the anxious violins and placed directly back-to-back with her joyous and energetic interior monologue. Serpina effectively listens to herself perform the aria; the music she sings as an aside comments on the song she directs to Uberto. Although eighteenth-century arias often contained a single contrasting emotion expressed in the interior of their form, the many abrupt changes in meter, tempo, and character of "A Serpina penserete" were far more drastic than what was typically heard in the Paris Opéra.¹⁰ This aria attempted to outdo mimesis with emotional portrayal that was simultaneously more exacting—altering the entire musical fabric with each rapidly encountered emotion—and also more formally complex, with each different affective disposition commenting metatheatrically on those around it. The result was a style of performance that was aware of itself as performance in its formal shifts of perspective.

La serva padrona was not the only one of Pergolesi's works to arrive in Paris with the *bouffons*. The less well-known but equally adventurous *Livietta e Tracollo* had its Paris premiere in May of 1753. This is another work that doubles mimetic procedures through performances within performances; the opera begins with every character in disguise. Livietta, dressed as a French country boy, and her friend Fulvia, wearing false jewels, are attempting to seek revenge against the thief Tracollo, who is himself disguised as an old Polish woman (the disguise is musically complete with an entrance aria that sounds like a traditional Polish Mazurka dance in 3/8 meter with emphases on the second beat of each measure). After a tussle in which both parties pretend to be incompetent in the Italian language, Livietta reveals her identity and calls for Tracollo's imprisonment. The second act begins with Tracollo in a new disguise. This time he has dressed himself up as an old, insane astronomer in a bid to win Livietta over. Here again, Pergolesi's score clothes the character in appropriate costume. The libretto indicates that Tracollo should gesticulate and "laugh indecently" (*sconciamente ride*), and we hear the orchestra perform this task for him.¹¹ Just before his first lines, the violins rip upward in two iterations of a rapidly ascending scale, descending from their height at half

10. In Charlton's words, "A total shift of sensibility was at stake, away from the aria or set-piece as musicalised poetry towards set-piece as musicalised emotion. Italy presented a simulacrum of sentiments expressed in 'real time'" (Charlton, *Opera in the Age of Rousseau*, p. 258).

11. Pergolesi, *Livietta e Tracollo*, trans. and ed. Charles C. Russell, in vol. 6 of *Complete Works/Opere Complete*, ed. Gordana Lazarevich (Stuyvesant, N.Y., 1991), pp. 47–52; hereafter abbreviated *L*.

the pace in staccato pulses. The result is something that sounds like an arching of the back and filling of the chest followed by a bursting cackle in a high register. “I seem to be doing this well,” Tracollo says of his new-found character. “But in pretending, I really don’t want to go, as they say, off my rocker” (*L*, p. 11; trans. mod.).¹² The orchestra concludes each of his lines with more instrumental laughter.

Tracollo is constantly transforming. A character that is always playing a character, his troped mimetic representations destabilize traditional mimetic technique. In this scene his exaggerated peculiarity is emphasized in the orchestral cackling, which lends the otherwise inconsistent and elastic Tracollo a temporary mechanical rigidity.¹³ Later in the opera, as he watches what he thinks is Livietta’s death (she is faking it), he is overtaken by her body’s flailing, dying motions and begins to act them out with his own body while punctuating each one with a sung “ha” (*L*, p. 14).¹⁴ Tracollo, like many comic opera characters, is an empty vessel ready to receive any distinct persona or action.¹⁵ He is in some ways like the malleable tones of music itself, adaptable to the presentation of a broad palate of affects.

Parisians heard many kinds of orchestral laughter during the tenure of the *bouffons*. Rinaldo di Capua’s *La zingara*, which received its premiere at the Paris Opéra in June of 1753, contains several experimental scenes that employ this effect. Nisa, our female protagonist, has contrived to simultaneously rob and also marry the elderly miser Calcante. She enlists the help of her brother, Tagliaborsi, who is disguised as a bear. The opera begins with the two siblings on stage, and in his first aria Tagliaborsi complains that Nisa is laughing at him in the bear suit while he suffers its constraints. Immediately after he sings “you laugh” (that is, “you’re laughing at me”), Tagliaborsi halts for a moment, and we hear the orchestra perform a high, rapid, descending figure in the violins—just long enough for a short chuckle. This device—which is traditionally mimetic, using orchestral

12. “Par che ci pigli gusto. Non vorrei che, fingendo, fingendo da vero poi, siccome dir si suole, avessi a dar di volta alle carriole” (*L*, p. 11).

13. In this sense, Tracollo embodies the tension between human life and mechanized action that Bergson identified as a hallmark of comedy; see Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1914).

14. In an interesting twist, he seems not to believe her when he sings, “Ah, Livietta, now you’re exaggerating. When are . . . ? Either hurry up and die or get up and live.” But he returns to miming her movements with the next utterance: “It looks like I’ve got the convulsions too” (*L*, p. 14). So contagious is the mimicry of mimicry.

15. This is what connects Tracollo—and many other comic opera characters—to the *commedia dell’arte* figure of the *zanni*. See in particular Sianne Ngai, “The Zany Science,” *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), pp. 174–232.

sound during a break in Tagliaborsi's singing—is repeated fourteen times in the short aria to solidify its effect.

Later, Nisa convinces Calcante that the bear in her company is in fact a famous and talented animal, and she sells it to him for twenty ducats. Calcante is quite pleased with his purchase, imagining that this famous bear will fetch more than a thousand when he offers it for sale. While he is celebrating his good fortune, Tagliaborsi quickly slips away. Calcante, now shocked and horrified, laments his financial ruin in an accompanied recitative that is particularly innovative. He begins to sing haltingly—"Where, where could the bear have gone?"—and the orchestra fills in his pauses with high, rapid turning figures reminiscent of the orchestral chuckles in Tagliaborsi's aria.¹⁶ The music settles for a moment in G major, and its quick, light giddiness taunts Calcante as he searches hopelessly for the bear. "My poor ducats! They've gone to hell!" he exclaims.¹⁷ Any seriousness with which we could possibly take this old Scrooge is undercut by the light-hearted orchestral accompaniment.¹⁸

In Rinaldo's ingenious writing, we hear one sentiment expressed in the text with a contrasting feeling provided in the musical design. The opera's music gives us a way to regard comically what is otherwise expressed in serious words. Although this method of using music against the text eventually became common in opera composition, it was unprecedented in the mid-eighteenth century, when Parisian audiences attempted to make sense of the new Italian style. Music, it seemed, was being employed as an independent aesthetic force, not limited to the expression or enhancement of the opera's poetry.¹⁹

It was bad enough that people in the *parterre* were laughing indecently, but Pergolesi and Rinaldo put laughter, impropriety, and bad behavior on center stage, using orchestral devices to inflate, surpass, and comment on the text. In so doing they parodied the very notion of mimesis, ridiculing the formulaic ceremony of serious opera in which sung tragedy used stock musical gestures to support its poetry. Serious opera worked to depict a unified image in each scene, while comic opera changed them out even

16. "E dove, dove l'orso n'andò?" (Rinaldo da Capua, *La zingara*, ed. Eva Riccioli Orecchia [Florence, 1969], p. 43).

17. "Poveri miei ducati! Alla malora se ne sono andati!" (More precisely: "To hell if they've been lost!") (ibid., pp. 43–44).

18. Although the music eventually moves to E minor before the onset of Calcante's upcoming aria, the giddy turn figure is developed throughout.

19. Scholars have generally overlooked the early manifestations of this innovation in early *opera buffa*, associating it instead with opera composition in the final decades of the century. See for instance Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, N.J., 1999), pp. 55–61 and the examples collected in Hunter, "Topics and Opera Buffa," pp. 83–87.

more frequently than its casts changed disguises. The characters we meet in these early comic operas are the prototypes for those more famous comic opera characters from the late eighteenth century, like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Leporello (from *Don Giovanni*, an Italian *opera buffa*) or the Queen of the Night (from *Die Zauberflöte*, a German *Singspiel*). Leporello runs his mouth on an unbelievable list at breakneck speed, and the Queen (who has no proper name; she is pure role) sings an aria requiring robotic pyrotechnics with popped high notes in the stratosphere of the soprano range. Their depictions are at once evocative of "something mechanical encrusted upon the living"—Bergson's formula for the comic—but also metatheatrically critical of the typical mimetic conventions of the opera.²⁰ The unexpected consequence was that this excess of mimesis destabilized the entire discourse surrounding music, an art whose purchase on mimesis was already tenuous.

Critical Quarrel

With performances like these, it was no wonder that everyone was talking about the opera. The arrival of the *bouffons* in Paris provoked a massive pamphlet war on the nature of opera and on musical aesthetics more generally. More than sixty pamphlets on the topic were printed and exchanged between 1752 and 1754, as defenders and detractors alike attempted to formulate what, exactly, was so thrilling or so objectionable about the comic Italian music.²¹ Now known as the *querelle des bouffons*, the debate reignited the issues of an older French controversy: a musical version of the early modern quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, which had already included within it an interrogation of the limits of music's capacity to express outside of or beyond the operatic text.²² The new quarrel placed increasing pressure on this question in particular.

There has been an understandable tendency in studies of the *querelle des bouffons* to see a polarization of opinions divided sharply between the supporters of serious, French opera (the *coin du roi*, or king's corner) and supporters of comic, Italian opera (the *coin de la reine*, or queen's corner). Typically, those in favor of the new Italian style are seen as the forward-thinking progressives; this group includes the Parisian encyclopedists Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert, and Denis Diderot, among others. The supporters of French opera are seen, by

20. Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 37.

21. The collected pamphlets are available in facsimile as *La Querelle des bouffons*.

22. In this sense, the larger eighteenth-century debate on musical aesthetics can be seen as an aspect of the Enlightenment's ongoing quarrel between the ancients and moderns; see Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago, 2010).

contrast, as a conservative group clinging to an older notion of operatic propriety; the members of this group are less well-known, as are their writings.²³

Apart from the clear duality organized around the two different repertoires, there was in fact a great deal of consensus among critics in the quarrel. Contributors agreed that something very different was at work in the music of the comic Italian operas—whether they enjoyed it or reviled it—and that this musical difference required new theoretical tools or language for musical style itself. In this sense, both sides of the debate worked to stabilize the notion that music was an aesthetic force independent of language.²⁴ Up until this point, writers on music and aesthetics had generally understood musical tones to convey and supplement the meaning of a text. Music without words was considered something of a form without a content, like random splashes of paint thrown against a canvas (as Charles Batteaux had it)²⁵ or, in the words of Noël-Antoine Pluche, like “a fine suit separated from a body and hung from a peg.”²⁶ Music without a text lacked a certain essence. It was the costume without the actor. It failed to communicate anything with specificity.

Because critics felt compelled to account for the musical differences between the French and Italian styles, they stumbled onto a new set of questions about music’s capacity for mimesis. Since art was supposed to be mimetic, the question had to be asked: what, if anything, was the basis of music’s mimetic power—what was it that the sound of music itself displayed? If music could be said to work mimetically, was it successful in its task? Answers to these questions were far from uniform along party lines in the debate, with both sides drawing on different aspects of the history of aesthetics in order to account for the new and provocative situation before them. While some authors insisted on grounding their account of the new style in mimetic theory, others doubted that this was even possible.

23. Classic accounts of the quarrel can be found in Alfred Richard Oliver, *The Encyclopedists as Critics of Music* (New York, 1947), and Hertz, *From Garrick to Gluck*, pp. 213–54.

More recent work includes the essays collected in *La “Querelle des bouffons” dans la vie culturelle française du XVIIIe siècle*; Thomas, “Rameau’s *Platée* Returns”; Jed Wentz, “Gaps, Pauses and Expressive Arms: Reconstructing the Link between Stage Gesture and Musical Timing at the Académie Royale de Musique,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 4 (2009): 607–23; and Charlton, *Opera in the Age of Rousseau*.

24. On the stabilization of the new aesthetic category of music—as something distinct from song—see Tomlinson, “Early Modern Opera,” *Metaphysical Song*, pp. 34–72.

25. See [Charles Batteux], *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris, 1747), p. 280.

26. “C’est un bel habit séparé du corps & pendu à une cheville” ([Noël-Antoine Pluche], *Le Spectacle de la nature, ou entretiens sur les particularités de l’histoire naturelle, qui ont paru les plus propres à rendre les Jeunes-Gens curieux, et à leur former l’esprit*, 8 vols. [Paris, 1747], 7:115).

Among those who theorized the new Italian style along mimetic lines was a critic writing under the name Rousselet, who pointed out that in its reproductions of the world Italian opera had managed to depict all of the “little things” of mundane existence. The objects of its comic depiction were always “the petty and the low.” French opera, by contrast, “does not debase itself to these puerilities.”²⁷ Another, anonymous critic voiced the same objection in the form of a dialogue between a supporter of the new Italian style and a conservative *Lullyste*—a supporter of traditional French opera and its seventeenth-century master, Jean-Baptiste Lully.

Paintings! Replied the [pro-Italian] musician, eh! This is where we shine. What richness! What profusions in our Italian opera! Everything is painted from tears, to laughter, to sneezes. . . . Your Lully had only one color for each image, which was sometimes tinged but basically dominant throughout. He never knew the science of details. We have varied designs for almost every modulation of the phrase; one also sometimes sees a single syllable artistically decorated and delicately fluttered over one or two octaves presenting four different images at the same time.

Eh! It is this piling up of designs, replied the *Lullyste*, it is this clever decorating which is a hundred thousand miles from nature.²⁸

For this anonymous critic, the varied and exaggerated use of music as a mimetic medium actually detracted from the often-repeated goal of the eighteenth-century neoclassical mimetic doctrine: the imitation of the beautiful in nature. Rather than working to supplement the clear images of the text, the music of the Italians was all distraction, filigree, and false-ness, attempting to depict far more than it was able.

27. “Dans le genre Italien ne nous a peint que de petites choses. . . . Elle sons presque toujours dans le petit & dans le bas. . . . La Musique François ne s’abaisse point à toutes ces puérilités” ([Jean-Baptiste-Claude Meunier, *dit Rousselet*, or possibly a pseudonym for Élie-Catherine Fréron] *Lettres sur la musique françoise en réponse a celle de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* [Geneva, 1754], pp. 25–26; rpt. *La Querelle des bouffons*, 1:787–88).

28.

Des tableaux! reprit le musicien, eh! c’est où nous brillons; quelle richesse! quelle profusion dans nos Opéra Italiens! tout y est peint, jusqu’aux pleurs, aux ris, aux éternuemens; & que ne peindroient-ils pas? Votre Lulli n’avoit qu’un coloris pour chaque image, qu’il nuançoit quelquefois, mais qui y dominoit toujours; il ne connut jamais la science des détails: nous autres, nous avons des desseins variés presque à chaque phrase de modulation; on voit même quelquefois une seule sillabe artistement *guillochée*, & voltigeant légèrement sur une ou deux octaves, offrir à la fois quatre images différentes. Eh! c’est cet entassement de desseins, repliqua le Lulliste, c’est ce *guillochage* savant qui est à cent mille lieues de la nature. [*Lettre écrite de l’autre monde* [1753], p. 25; rpt. *La Querelle des bouffons*, 1:367]

Jean-Baptiste Jourdan was even more skeptical, wondering how it was that musical tones could really depict anything substantial. He equated the folly of the Italian opera's comic characters with the semantic imprecision of music as a medium, wondering what on earth something like a musical flourish could possibly represent. Discussing the musical decoration at the conclusion of a melodic line (a cadenza), Jourdan wrote, "I would very much like for your philosophers of the *Coin de la Reine* . . . who have read in Aristotle that the arts are an imitation of nature, to tell me honestly what one paints with a cadenza. Would it not be a drunk who, weak in the legs, wavers, beats the walls, comes, goes, slides to the ground, gets up, and finally falls to be applauded?"²⁹ Turning a musical figure into a comic opera character—a clumsy lush—Jourdan reversed comic opera's mimicry. Rather than using musical tones for ridicule, instead he ridiculed musical tones by drawing them into an equation with sloppy bodily gestures, making an embarrassment of their materiality. Just as some subjects were deemed unfit for depiction on the stage, Jourdan intended a disqualification of music from the power of signification.

Among the most outspoken of the Italian opera's champions was Rousseau, whose scathing *Lettre sur la musique française* was a thoroughgoing condemnation of the French operatic style. For Rousseau the advantage of Italian opera was clear. The Italian language, with its sonorous, bright vowels, was more suited to song, and Italian composers were more adept at choosing the precise moments for modulations of the harmony and changes of meter. Most of all, though, Italian opera was primarily structured around its melodies. Its accompaniments, sometimes thin, existed only to support the voice and to reinforce what Rousseau called the "unity of melody" (a concept with classical roots).³⁰ Melody, Rousseau believed, possessed the power to imitate humanity's natural, passionate utterances. It was an echo of the antediluvian cries of primitive man, which were simultaneously speech and song. "Italian melody," he explained, "finds in every movement the expressions for every character and paintings for every object."³¹ Through the power of the voice, Italian opera was supreme in musical mimesis.

29. "Mais à propos, je voudrais bien que vos Philosophes du Coin de la Reine (car c'est à eux à qui j'en veux principalement) eux qui ont lû dans Aristote que les Arts sont une imitation de la Nature, qu'ils me disent de bonne foi ce qu'on veut peindre par un point d'Orgue. Ne seroit-ce pas un yvrogne qui, foible sur les jambes, vacille, bat les murs, va, vient, glisse jusqu'à terre, se relève, & tombe enfin pour être applaudi" ([Jean-Baptiste Jourdan], *Le Correcteur des bouffons à l'écolier de Prague* [1753], pp. 8–9; rpt. *La Querelle des bouffons*, 1:200–201).

30. See Jacqueline Waeber, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'unité de mélodie,'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62, no. 1 (2009): 79–143.

31. "Mais la mélodie Italienne trouve dans chaque mouvement des expressions pour tous les caractères, des tableaux pour tous les objets" (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre sur la musique Française* [1753], p. 68; rpt. *La Querelle des bouffons*, 1:740).

Rousseau's assessment draws on a long history of theorizing musical mimesis with reference to the voice. Especially in French neoclassical criticism—precisely of the variety typically used to uphold the values of serious French opera—the power of musical mimesis belonged to song. As Jean-Baptiste Dubos had put it as early as 1719, “just as the painter imitates the features and colors of nature, so too the musician imitates the tones, accents, sighs, inflections of the voice, and, in short, all of those sounds with which nature exudes the sentiments and passions. These, as we have already seen, hold a marvelous power to move us, because they are the signs of the passions instituted by nature, whence they receive their energy.”³² Traditionally taken as a component of the conservative view that would have subordinated the power of musical tones to that of the text they expressed, Rousseau repurposed this neoclassical understanding of musical mimesis such that it supported a kind of music that did no such thing. With attention to the ways in which critics interpreted and employed various understandings of mimesis to their own ends, it becomes clear that the debate over comic opera only intensified the need for clarification on how, exactly, music was a mimetic art.

It wasn't long after Rousseau issued his missive that Fréron responded with a lengthy, multipart defense of French opera.³³ Point by point, he took on Rousseau's provocations. Quoting a passage in which Rousseau extols the ability of the Italian style to depict “all characters imaginable,” Fréron had occasion to instruct Rousseau on music's mimetic capabilities. Music, Fréron insisted, appeals to the ear. Therefore, it can only imitate things which are themselves sounds or which produce sounds. Fréron anticipated the objections; if music can only imitate things which are themselves sounded, it would seem to be a very limited art. How then, ought we to account for the fact that music moves us? In response, Fréron elaborated an alternative way of thinking through the problem:

Experience demonstrates that music inspires sentiments and passions, but it neither expresses them nor paints them. Please do not to lose sight of this distinction. In order to make myself understood, I am

32. “Ainsi que le Peintre imite les traits & les couleurs de la nature, de même le Musicien imite les tons, les accens, les soupirs, les inflexions de voix, enfin tous ces sons à l'aide desquels la nature même exprime ses sentiments & ses passions. Tous ces sons, comme nous l'avons déjà exposé, ont une force merveilleuse pour nous émouvoir, parce qu'ils sont les signes des passions instituées par la nature dont ils ont reçu leur énergie” ([Jean-Baptiste Dubos], *Reflexions critiques sur la poesie et sur la peinture*, 2 vols. [Paris, 1719], 1:634–35).

33. See [Fréron], *Suite des lettres sur la musique françoise: En réponse a celle de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Geneva, 1754); rpt. *La Querelle des bouffons*, 2:1009–39.

obliged to enter into a mechanical examination of the effects of music on the human body.

It is a proven experience that if you pluck one of two strings tuned in unison, the other will experience a very sensible vibration, and will create a sound. The human body contains a multitude of nerves of different lengths and of different thicknesses, stretched to differing degrees. It is through them, as you know, that the soul receives its impressions. The chords of harmony that the musician passes over find themselves—regardless of the key—in unison with a more or less large number of nerves; these are then made to sound, they feel the vibrations and, by the inviolable laws of nature, allow the soul to experience sensations which, always more or less strong, are relative to the number of respective unisons.³⁴

Operating neither mimetically nor expressively, music in Fréron's view attuned its audience to various sensations through its physical vibrations. Musicians were not simply supplying the live soundtrack to a series of representations; in his model they were said to create affect itself. Fréron removed the problematic responsibility of mimetic depiction from music altogether, replacing it instead with an affective attunement predicated on the basis of music's material reality in sound vibrations. To be sure, his account of music's affective force was a limited one; the chief goal of music, he went on to say, is to "render more sensible the situation that the poet describes."³⁵ Nevertheless, in his effort to defend serious French opera he completely reoriented the traditional formula connecting mimetic depiction with affect.

The concept of mimesis—with its long intellectual heritage—is expansive enough to include Fréron's theory of attunement. But to understand it in this way is to miss the explicit rejection of the mimetic framework

34. Cependant l'expérience nous prouve que la Musique inspire les sentimens & les passions . . . mais elle ne les exprime ni ne les peint. Je vous prie de vouloir bien ne pas perdre de vûe cette distinction. Je suis obligé, pour me faire entendre, d'entrer dans un examen mécanique des effets de la Musique sur le corps humain. C'est une expérience reconnue que si de deux cordes montées à l'unisson vous pincez l'une, l'autre éprouvera un frémissement très-sensible, & rendra du son. Le corps humain contient une multitude de nerfs de différentes longueurs & de différentes grosseurs, tendus à différens degrés. Vous sçavez que c'est par leur moyen que l'ame reçoit ses impressions. Les cordes d'harmonie que le Musicien parcourt soit dans un ton, soit dans un autre, se trouvant à l'unisson d'un nombre de nerfs plus ou moins considérable, leur font rendre ces sons, & leur font ressentir ces frémissemens, loix inviolable de la nature, & font éprouver par conséquent à l'ame des sensations quelconques, toujours plus ou moins fortes, relativement au nombre d'unissons respectifs. [Ibid., pp. 23–24; 2:1027–28]

35. "Rendre plus sensibles les situation où le Poète le conduit" (ibid., p. 26; 2:1030).

that he and other period critics proposed.³⁶ On the one hand, Fréron was drawing on the Neoplatonic notion of *musica humana*, in which the human body is described as an instrument and its parts tuned in harmonious ratios. *Musica humana* is a microcosmography of the harmony of the spheres—or *musica mundana*—and an analog of human music making, *musica instrumentalis*. Transmitted through medieval music theory, the *musica humana* tradition had also found its way into theories of the affects by the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury, for instance, had equated the affective disposition of the human as a kind of attunement in his 1711 *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. “Upon the whole,” he wrote, “it may be said properly to be the same with the affections or passions in an animal constitution, as with the cords or strings of a musical instrument. . . . It might be agreeable, one would think, to inquire thus into the different tunings of the passions, the various mixtures and allays by which men become so different from one another.”³⁷ For Shaftesbury, affective dispositions were dictated by the tuning in which the instrument of the body was set. Fréron extended this notion to include sensations passed on to the soul through the vibrations of music’s sounds.

On the other hand, Fréron was responding to the growing consensus that musical tones constituted their own signifying system, which was a view he shared with Rousseau and with other proponents of the Italian style. Among these strange bedfellows was Friedrich Melchoir Grimm, the author of several pamphlets supporting Italian comic opera in the *querelle*. In his article “Poeme lyrique” for Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, Grimm describes music as an independent,

36. There has been a trend in historical studies of mimesis to read these eighteenth-century texts as representative of a transformation within mimetic theory rather than a move away from mimesis and toward affect. Most notable and direct on this topic is Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, N.J., 2002), esp. pp. 344–81; but this interpretation is also represented to a certain degree in Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture–Art–Society*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley, 1995), esp. pp. 151–216 (Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf’s coverage of the late eighteenth century is notably thin). Recent musicological accounts of this period in the history of aesthetics follow Halliwell’s historiography, seeing a transformation—but basic continuity—in mimetic theory through the century. Notable examples include Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia*, and Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge, 2013). But what these scholars take to be a new theory of mimesis I understand as something different altogether. Drawing on the historiography first suggested in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), I see these accounts as representatives of a new and growing theory of affect that provides an important historical counterpoint for the twenty-first century’s affective turn.

37. Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (1711; Cambridge, 1999), p. 199.

universally accessible semiotic system; “Music is a language,” he writes plainly.³⁸ Not only this, music for Grimm has a metalinguistic function, since as a “universal language” it “speaks the language of all nations and all ages.”³⁹ Rather than simply duplicating the power of language, music operates on our faculties directly; it “strikes our senses and our imagination immediately. It is also by its very nature the language of passion and feeling. Its expressions, going straight to the heart without passing, so to speak through the mind, must produce effects known in no other idiom.”⁴⁰ The view of music as a nondiscursive, corporeal, and affective medium crystalized the period’s twin goals of explaining how music could act as a sign and also how it managed to move its audiences successfully without access to the mimetic capabilities of the other arts.⁴¹

The clearest parallel to Fréron’s account of affective attunement is in the work of Diderot. An early translator of Shaftesbury, Diderot had already begun to sketch an account of musical attunement in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, published just a year before the arrival of the *bouffons* in Paris.⁴² One of the preoccupations of the text is to distinguish the signifying systems of the various arts. To Diderot, music seems less precise than poetry in its ability to signify. Nevertheless, he observes, “even if sounds do not paint our thoughts as clearly as discourse, still they say something.”⁴³ In an additional letter included in the volume, Diderot specifies the operation of music’s affective power:

38. “La Musique est une langue” (Friedrich Melchoir Grimm, “Poème lyrique,” in vol. 12 of *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert [Paris, 1765], p. 824; hereafter abbreviated “P”).

39. “La langue du musician . . . parle la langue de toutes les nations & de tous les siècles” (“P,” p. 824).

40. “Une langue universelle frappant immédiatement nos organes & notre imagination, est aussi par sa nature la langue du sentiment & des passions. Ses expressions allant droit au cœur, sans passer pour ainsi dire par l’esprit, doivent produire des effets inconnus à tout autre idiome” (“P,” p. 824).

41. Similar theories are elaborated later in the century. See [James Usher], *Clio: or, a Discourse on Taste* (London, 1767); [Michel Paul Guy de Chabanon], *Observations sur la musique, et principalement sur la métaphysique de l’art* (Paris, 1779); and J. J. Engel, *Ueber die musikalische Malerey* (Berlin, 1780), among others.

42. See [Diderot], *Principes de la philosophie morale; ou Essai de M. S*** sur le mérite et la vertu: Avec réflexions* (Amsterdam, 1745). Another account that prefigures (and may have influenced) Fréron is found in [Rémond de Saint-Mard], *Reflexions sur l’opera* (The Hague, 1741), p. 10.

43. “Si on ne parle pas aussi distinctement avec un instrument qu’avec la bouche, & si les sons ne peignent pas aussi nettement la pensée que le discours, encore disent-ils quelque chose” ([Diderot], *Lettre sur les sourds et muets, à l’usage de ceux que entendent qui parlent* [Paris, 1751], p. 55).

In music, the pleasure of sensation depends on a particular disposition not only of the ear, but of the whole nervous system. If there are resonant heads there are also bodies that I would gladly call harmonic: people whose fibers oscillate with so much swiftness and vivacity that upon experiencing the violent movements that harmony provokes in them, they sense the possibility of movements even more violent and reach the idea of a sort of music that could make them die of pleasure.⁴⁴

Diderot elaborates Shaftesbury's theory on the different affective dispositions of individuals, figuring these differently tuned individuals as the subjects of music reception. Though not as detailed as Fréron's account, this scenario informed Diderot's fully elaborated response to the *querelle*: his celebrated work *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

Comic Labor for Sale

It is a late afternoon in Paris, in the Café de la Régence—known for attracting the best chess players—when we meet the two central characters of Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*: *Moi*, the philosopher who would seem to approximate Diderot himself, and *Lui*, the ostensible nephew of the French opera composer and music theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau. The nephew is an excellent example of both a comic opera character and also a precarious laborer—roles that are thematized in Diderot's text. On their meeting, the philosopher describes the nephew as someone who is always appearing as different characters: on certain days he is a hungry pauper in ragged clothing while on others he is stylish, plump, and debonair. He does not have a conventional job but supports himself through a number of informal arrangements such as teaching music lessons (really, gossiping with the mothers of his pupils) and attaching himself to wealthy patrons.

The dialogue that takes place between the philosopher and the nephew covers a great many topics, but the new Italian musical style runs consistently through it. In the words of Daniel Hertz, the *querelle des bouffons*

44.

En Musique, le plaisir de la sensation dépend d'une disposition particuliere non seulement de l'oreille, mais de tout le système des nerfs. S'il y a des têtes sonantes, il y a aussi des corps que j'appellerois volontiers harmoniques ; des hommes, en qui toutes les fibres oscillent avec tant de promptitude & de vivacité, que sur l'expérience des mouvemens violens que l'Harmonie leur cause, ils sentent la possibilité de mouvemens plus violens encore & atteignent à l'idée d'une sort de Musique qui les feroit mourir de plaisir." [(Diderot), "Lettre a mademoiselle . . .," *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, pp. 299–300]

is “the setting for [Diderot’s] great satire.”⁴⁵ If comic opera was often a mocking imitation of serious opera’s mimetic doctrine, *Le Neveu de Rameau* was a metamockery; borrowing the forms and procedures of comic opera for the dialogue, Diderot playfully repeated on that idiom the very same parody that it had performed on serious opera. In yet further doublings, the nephew both explicitly discusses the issues of the *querelle* and also performs them, enacting Diderot’s theoretical contribution to the debate.

The nephew, despite being the descendant of an esteemed composer of traditional French opera, agrees with the philosopher that this older music is “rather flat.”⁴⁶ The nephew’s enthusiasm for the new Italian style manifests in a number of lengthy pantomime performances in which he shows off his musical abilities for the philosopher (hoping, perhaps, to win a student referral). He is not stopped by the fact that he has no instruments with him. Instead he plays air-violin, sings all of the parts, and runs up and down imaginary keyboards, working up a sweat and attracting the attention of the entire café. These pantomimes are small performances within the drama in which the nephew takes on temporary roles—a formal conceit borrowed from comic opera. But the climax of the dialogue—and one of the most frequently quoted portions of the text—is a performance in which the nephew pushes his pantomime into overdrive, mixing together arias of the comic opera composers Giovanni Pergolesi and Egidio Duni with music in a wide variety of other styles.

He piled up and mixed together thirty tunes, Italian, French, tragic, comic, with lots of different characters; at points, he would descend to the depths of the underworld in a low baritone, at others, he would go right up high in a glass-shattering fake falsetto, mimicking the different singing roles in the way he walked, held himself, and gestured; by turns furious, soothed, imperious, sneering. Now he’s a young girl weeping, and he acts out her every simpering move; now he’s a priest, he’s a king, he’s a tyrant, he threatens, he commands, he loses his temper; he’s a slave, he obeys. He calms down, he is sorry, he complains, he laughs; never a false note, never out of time, always capturing the meaning of the words and the character of the music. [RN, pp. 68–69]

45. Daniel Hertz, “Locatelli and the Pantomime of the Violinist in *Le Neveu de Rameau*,” *Diderot Studies* 27 (1998): 119.

46. Diderot, *Denis Diderot’s “Rameau’s Nephew”: A Multi-Media Edition*, trans. Kate E. Tunstall and Caroline Warman, ed. Marian Hobson (Cambridge, 2014), p. 66, www.openbookpublishers.com/product/216/; hereafter abbreviated RN.

Here the nephew is no longer emulating a single comic opera character; instead he has become an entire operatic cast in a single, zany metarole that folds various characters together.⁴⁷ Like the genre of comic opera, the nephew parodies styles by placing them in conversation with each other, rapidly adopting one and leaving it for the next. The scene continues:

But you would have roared with laughter at the way he impersonated the different instruments. The horns and bassoons, he did puffing his cheeks up like balloons, and making hoarse, low sounds; he made a piercing, nasal noise for the oboes; his voice catapulting up and down at incredible speed, he did as close an imitation of the strings as he could; he whistled the piccolos and cooed the flutes; shouting, singing, charging about like a madman, single-handedly doing the dancers . . . a whole orchestra, a whole opera company, dividing himself between twenty different roles . . . he was an unfortunate man, giving in to despair; he was a temple going up; birds falling silent at sunset; water burbling in a cool and solitary grove, or gushing forth in torrents from the mountain tops; a storm, a tempest, the cries of those about to perish, together with the howling of the wind and crashing of the thunder; he was night in all its darkness, he was shadow and silence, for even silence can be painted in sound. [RN, pp. 69–70]

While opera uses orchestral instruments to aid in the depiction of character, this passage enacts a chiasmus in which the nephew portrays the characters of the various orchestral instruments. His whistling of the piccolos and cooing of the flutes is a demonstration of one way in which musical tones have the ability to create distinctive significations on their own, outside of language. By the conclusion of the passage the nephew has become affect itself. The philosopher shifts registers in his account of the nephew from concrete descriptions to abstract analogies; the nephew, no longer simply a character, is now a state of darkness, a solitary grove, a tempest.⁴⁸

The nephew's performance retraces the effect of Italian comic opera on musical discourse. He is the embodiment of the theory of affect that resulted from the *querelle des bouffons*; music has the power to offer up

47. See in this connection Ngai's reading of both *Rameau's Nephew* and *The Cable Guy* (dir. Ben Stiller, 1996) in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, pp. 189–91, 197–205.

48. As John Hamilton put it, the "doctrines of mimesis are unworked" in Diderot's text (John T. Hamilton, *Music, Madness, and the Unworking of Language* [New York, 2008], p. 55). Ultimately for Hamilton this draws music closer to nonmeaning and therefore to madness.

affective states directly to its audience.⁴⁹ Music does not have to rely on the opera's poetry in order to render affects in its listeners. The nephew is the logical elaboration of the new social roles scripted in this relationship, in which performers—aware of themselves as performers within the performance—are said to be the conduit of affective states rather than simply the creators of mimetic representations. Diderot uses the nephew to show us the human side of this new aesthetic system. The nephew is exceedingly malleable, virtuosic, and energetic, but precisely because he is so amenable to so many roles he is detached from them all and committed to none; he is exacting, even mechanical, “never a false note, never out of time” (RN, p. 69).⁵⁰

The social role scripted for the nephew within musical aesthetics extends beyond the delimited area of the stage. The rest of his life is spent adopting various temporary jobs and taking on countless functions without having any of them stick to his person. He is a flatterer, seeking always to make others with money and power feel good about themselves and, by extension, him. When he works he does not produce tangible products but rather uses a carefully executed, perfectly harmonized science of feeling in order to put people in affective states. His entire life proceeds according to

49. Just before the pantomime quoted above, the philosopher poses to the Nephew a rather direct question on musical aesthetics: “All imitative arts have their model in nature. What model does the musician choose when he writes a song?” The nephew's answer is a parody of the intellectual indecision surrounding this issue during the *querelle*: “Song is the imitation of a scale, either invented by art or inspired by nature, whichever you prefer, using either vocal or instrumental sound to imitate either physical noises or emotional accents” (RN, pp. 64, 65). The nephew almost manages to provide every position available in the debate in his list of casually tossed-off options—every position, that is, except for Diderot's own theory of affective attunement, of which he is the embodiment.

50. In this sense the nephew is the type of supreme actor that Diderot describes in the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*. Indeed, Diderot uses musical harmony as the model for carefully calculated affective portrayal in that text:

Dira-t-on, ces accents si plaintifs, si douloureux, que cette mère arrache du fond de ses entrailles, et dont les miennes sont si violemment secouées, ce n'est pas le sentiment actuel qui les produit, ce n'est pas le désespoir qui les inspire? Nullement; et la preuve, c'est qu'ils sont mesurés; qu'ils font partie d'un système de déclamation; que plus bas ou plus aigus de la vingtième partie d'un quart de ton, ils sont faux; qu'ils sont soumis à une loi d'unité; qu'ils sont, comme dans l'harmonie, préparés et sauvés; qu'ils ne satisfont à toutes les conditions requises que par une longue étude; qu'ils concourent à la solution d'un problème proposé. [Tell me, what about those accents, so plaintive and dolorous, that a mother draws from the bottom of her insides, and that shake her violently—is it not a real feeling that produces them, and is it not despair that inspires them? Not at all. The proof is that they are all measured; they form part of a system of declamation and that, raised or lowered by a twentieth part of a quartertone, they ring false; they are subject to a law of unity; they are, as in harmony, prepared and resolved; and that they can only satisfy all of these required conditions after serious study.] [Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, ed. Stéphane Lojkin (1773; Paris, 1992), p. 95]

an aesthetics of affective attunement, in which he as a performer is aware of his own performances. When the philosopher attempts to tell him that “deep down” he must “possess a delicate soul,” the nephew replies: “I’ll be damned if I know what I am, deep down. . . . never false when it’s in my interest to be true, never true when it’s in my interest to be false” (RN, p. 48). Like the genre of comic opera, he parodies the baselessness of aristocratic convention. He is alienated from his labor in life as he is in art.

At least, this is what G. W. F. Hegel found so remarkable about the nephew and why he chose to feature Diderot’s text so prominently in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As an individual whose life is completely governed by aesthetics to the exclusion of all else, the nephew illustrates for Hegel a crucial turning point in Enlightenment subjectivity.⁵¹ The form by which he moves in and out of temporary attachments, momentary postures of flattery, and various affective dispositions does more than just render a caricature of comic opera. It also depicts a new social type: an individual thoroughly absorbed in virtuosic performances of the self who is nothing short of completely modern.

If eighteenth-century music was shaped by the emergence of the notional autonomy of art, it also provided for the history of subjectivity the model of a new aesthetic relationship. Comic opera’s parody of serious opera had the effect of challenging the neoclassical doctrine of mimesis, and musical aesthetics responded with fresh understandings of affect. In this exchange the procedures of comic mimesis undermined mimetic theory, while at the same time criticism doubled art by absorbing its style. That a comic art form should have provoked this is fitting; comedy often trades in doublings in order to mobilize the incongruities that are foundational to its operation.⁵² The consequences, however, precipitated a pivotal moment in the intellectual legacy of affect theory. As the Enlightenment doctrine of mimesis was fundamentally reoriented, both musical aesthetics and the modern subject were forever changed.

51. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, 1977), §489, p. 298; on the nephew, see esp. §521–§26; pp. 316–21. On this passage in Hegel, see Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit,”* trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston, Ill., 1974), pp. 400–17.

52. On the incongruity theory of comedy and its intellectual precursors, see Michael Clark, “Humor and Incongruity,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, N.Y., 1987), pp. 139–55. On incongruity theory and comic opera, see Johnston, “È caso do intermedio!” pp. 224–79.

The Comic Mimesis

Mladen Dolar

Let me start with a story, which is supposedly a true story, quite apart from its truth-value as a legend. There is nothing comical about it, quite the opposite, although it strangely verges on the comic. It will hopefully lead us straight to the core of the problem of mimesis and its comical penchant.

Against all odds, there is in Christianity a patron saint of actors, despite the ways in which Christianity has largely regarded acting, and theatre, as a dubious profession, a source of sinful entertainment and questionable virtue. There are condemnations of actors and acting, in most serious terms, from no lesser authorities than Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. But there is an actor who was worthy not only of redemption but also of sanctification. His name is Genesius, and his feast is celebrated on 25 August by the Catholic Church. So how did Genesius become worthy of sainthood and the patron saint of acting to whom actors are to commend their soul (if they have one)?¹

The present paper is part of a larger research project on mimesis and its modern fate. It deals only with some selected aspects of the topic, which has far too many complex ramifications to be properly dealt with in the present scope; I am well aware of its limitations. Versions of the paper were given at Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht; Södertörn University, Stockholm; Duke University; and University of California, Los Angeles. I am indebted to many discussants who contributed valuable comments. I am very grateful to Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai for their support and their most helpful suggestions and comments. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. I am relying for this principally on the excellent edition of Jean Rotrou, *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, ed. Emmanuel Hénin and François Bonfils (Paris, 1999), and William Egginton, *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity* (Albany, N.Y., 2003).

The time is 303 AD; the place is Rome. This was the period known as the great persecution, namely, the last, the largest, and the bloodiest persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. A decade later, with the Edict of Milan in 313, Emperor Constantine would stop all persecution, and a few decades later Christianity would become the official religion of the empire. But at the beginning of this bloody wave, which would cost thousands of lives, all means were employed to stop this pest (although Christians probably then formed less than 10 percent of the population). And one formidable weapon of the anti-Christian propaganda was theatre, a modest stand-in for mass media. Emperor Diocletian fostered this kind of theatre production, so he had a play produced in his court whose intent was to show the contemptible behavior of Christians, to display their irrational beliefs and rituals, to expose them to mockery, and to demonstrate by graphic means how the people who followed that creed would finish badly. The play ended with the theatrical torture and execution of Christians, on stage, no doubt to the general delight of the audience.

Genesius was a modest actor who had to play a Christian villain in this scenario and be submitted to the deserved ordeal in the end. But as the play progressed, so goes the legend, the young actor, himself a heathen believer in Roman deities, while enacting the Christian rites and professing their creed, no doubt with the great empathy of a good actor, converted suddenly to Christianity. What he enacted then became the place of revelation; he was touched by the grace of God, which enabled him to see the light and espouse the true religion, as the Christian account would have it. He was so profoundly involved in his role that he decided to abandon his previous sinful life, the life now seen in retrospect as a mere theatrical make-believe. He stopped acting and found the truth in what was to be a mere enactment. All previous life appeared as theatre, and theatre appeared as the place of truth. As the play finished, Genesius seemed unable to abandon his role, so he continued preaching Christianity. What was first seen as an incident was soon considered to be the major crime, the very crime against which the play was staged. The theatrical propaganda device backfired, producing a conversion instead of condemnation and repulsion. Genesius was brought to Diocletian; they engaged in bitter controversy and theological dispute, and he was ordered under severe threats to abandon this creed. He courageously refused, and the consequence was

MLADEN DOLAR is a professor and senior research fellow in the department of philosophy at the University of Ljubljana. He is the author of *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006).

that Genesius was tortured and put to death on the very same stage where he just a little before played a tortured Christian put to death by theatrical make-believe. Reality caught up with the play, the last scene was restaged now for real, theatre fakery was replaced by actual torture, the play served retrospectively as the rehearsal for the real martyrdom. (Was the audience as delighted as before, or even more so?)

Genesius did indeed become a Christian martyr and a saint, venerated to this day. He is the patron of the British Catholic Stage Guild. There is a shrine of St. Genesius in St Malachy's Catholic Church in Manhattan (in the Theatre District, just off Broadway); there is a Genesian Theatre in Sydney; and there are other sites of commemoration. There are some accounts of this story already in the fourth century, although it is hard to tell fact from fiction. The incident became very popular, and soon after lifting the anathema on Christianity there was a church built in Rome in his honor.²

It is clear that this event offers itself quite evidently to propaganda. What was meant as anti-Christian ideological warfare could be ideally exploited as propaganda for Christianity, staging the event as the showpiece of conversion, thus theatrically demonstrating the superior power of the true religion. So, it is actually quite surprising that it took Christianity more than a thousand years to come upon this simple idea and to produce a play about Genesius's martyrdom. His story was part of various martyrologies, often recounted in collections of gruesome anecdotes of Christian martyrdom but not put on stage—for a good and simple reason.³ What would be needed to tell his story on stage is a metatheatrical device of theatre within theatre, a play within a play. In the obvious scenario we would watch Diocletian's court on stage watching the performance of the actors, with one actor then experiencing conversion, thus descending from the stage onstage to the mere stage. The stage would have to redouble itself to tell this story, but this device was not yet available in medieval

2. The case of Genesius is the most famous one, but the phenomenon of actors converted on stage while acting seems to be no rarity. Already in Diocletian's time or shortly thereafter there were reportedly Gelasius in Heliopolis, Ardalion in Constantinople, Prophyrius in Rome, and others. Then there was Jean Bon in the thirteenth century and La Baltasara in the seventeenth, who was one of the most famous Spanish actresses of the time, up to Mademoiselle Thuiller in 1868 and Mademoiselle Hautin in 1932. In theatre the risk of conversion seems to run high; there is but a small step from the stage to the monastery. See André Villiers, *Le Cloître et la scène: Essai sur les conversions d'acteurs* (Paris, 1961).

3. The only exception seems to be the French fifteenth-century mystery play *L'Ystoire et la vie de Saint Genis*. It was a clumsy affair with forty-three actors, with a lot of theological disputes, where Genesius was scarcely ever referred to as an actor. What would seem to be the most efficient and obvious theatrical resource was completely omitted. See Egginton, *How the World Became a Stage*, pp. 80–82.

times. The invention of a play within a play, the play reflected in the play staged on stage, occurred in the sixteenth century when it quickly gained great popularity (particularly in the Spanish baroque theatre), producing its most famous example, the mousetrap in *Hamlet*.⁴ It was only after the mousetrap that Genesius could be put on scene, and there followed a number of plays based on his fate, the two most important among them Lope de Vega's *Lo fingido verdadero* (The True Impostor) (1608, printed in 1621) and Jean Rotrou's *Le Véritable Saint Genest* (The True Saint Genesius) (1646). (Here I must point out the most significant subsequent reference, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* [1952], the first great apology of Jean Genet, with the explicit reference to Saint Genest in the title and as a subtext.)

Jean Rotrou (1609–1650) was a man of spirit and talent who had the misfortune of living in seventeenth-century France, one of the great golden ages of theatre, where in the presence of the great stars Molière, Pierre Corneille, and Jean Racine all lesser stars were virtually eclipsed into oblivion, although their work was no less interesting and valuable. Rotrou was for some time Corneille's friend and competitor on stage, a formidable writer, but he died young and his plays are now almost never produced (very rarely in France, never outside). His piece on Genesius is no doubt the most accomplished version of the legend and had considerable success at the time. I am insisting on Rotrou's version of this legend for one simple reason, namely, its possible and likely influence on Blaise Pascal who must have known the piece (or some other pieces about Genesius, although I didn't find any reference to it in the literature). Now consider these very famous lines by Blaise Pascal from *Pensées*:

You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile.⁵

4. One can argue, of course, that metatheatre is as old as theatre itself—witness the function of the chorus in ancient theatre, for example—so that the newly found taste for the theatre within theatre was but a “literalization of a tendency inherent in all theatre” (*ibid.*, p. 75).

5. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. and ed. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York, 1995), pp. 124–25; hereafter abbreviated *P*. Compare to fragment 680 in Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Philippe Sellier and Gérard Ferreyrolles (Paris, 2000), p. 465.

This is Pascal's notorious advice for nonbelievers: if you don't have faith, pretend that you have it, act as if you have it, follow the rite, stage your faith, enact the belief that you don't have, turn yourself into a machine, and the faith will follow by itself. Turn yourself into an actor, into Genesisius performing the religious rituals on stage, an automaton saying the text learned by heart, mechanically and without understanding, a text written by another, imposed and merely repeated. There is "the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it" (*P*, p. 247).⁶

Thus, in one bold stroke, we find ourselves at the core of the theory of ideology, as expounded by Louis Althusser who took his cue from Pascal:

Besides, we are indebted to Pascal's defensive 'dialectic' for the wonderful formula which will enable us to invert the order of the notional schema of ideology. Pascal says more or less: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe.' He thus scandalously inverts the order of things, bringing, like Christ, not peace but strife, and in addition something hardly Christian . . . —scandal itself. A fortunate scandal which makes him stick with Jansenist defiance to a language that directly names the reality. . . . [The subject's] *ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.*⁷

From Christian conversion to Marxist theory of ideology, *il n'y a qu'un pas*. There is Genesisius lurking at the bottom of it, and insofar as this describes the very mechanism by which one espouses any ideology (and becomes a subject, for Althusser), we are all Genesisius at heart. First acting, then belief, belief induced by acting, acting as an automaton producing belief. The subject of ideology is Genesisius.

And in one stroke we are thus at the core of the problem of mimesis. One becomes what one enacts. This is the founding myth of mimesis. The enactment, as purely external, has the power of shaping the enactor, it contaminates him, its external mechanism has the power to seize his heart. One imitates, and by imitating one becomes what one imitates. Of course one knows very well that this doesn't quite happen that way (not with clockwork predictability, if ever), yet this is the inveterate structural

6. See also Pascal, "*L'Automate, qui entraîne l'esprit sans qu'il y pense* [The Automaton Which Induces Spirit Unwittingly]," *Pensées*, p. 436.

7. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *On Ideology* (New York, 2008), pp. 42–43. Note the four occurrences of "material" within a single sentence, which immediately raise the huge question about the nature of materialism. Is swearing by the material enough for materialism?

supposition that lies at the core of mimesis and its powers, pointing to the enigmatic kernel joining body and spirit. The story has the power of a parable far larger than Christianity. There is something vertiginous in it, bringing together the nature of theatre and its magical power, the nature of material reality, the nature of our beliefs, the inner conviction and the outer automatism.

Presenting this story as the demonstration of the superior powers of Christianity is obviously questionable. Does acting work in this way only in this case, when it induces the supposed true belief? But there are many examples, since time immemorial, since the dawn of theatre, of acting inducing all kinds of behavior, preferably the sinful ones, and this was one of the major causes for the various anathemas on theatre and acting, stretching from Plato via Christianity to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Does the same device of conversion by staging apply also to Islam? Or does one become an atheist by acting an atheist? By acting a scoundrel, doesn't one then run the risk of becoming a scoundrel? By acting a lover, does one fall in love? By acting disease, can one become sick? Every theatre is thick with anecdotes of actors not being able to get out of their roles or of extending their acting in their lives; this is part of theatre folklore. Any actor can become sick by acting disease, but it takes a real genius to act a hypochondriac and to die of it. One of the most famous anecdotes of the entire history of theatre tells us that this is how Molière died, struck by a heart attack on stage when impersonating *le malade imaginaire* (The Imaginary Sick Man). Can one die of mimesis, or rather of *mimesis mimeseos*, the mimesis of mimesis, of the enactment of a hypochondriac, of someone merely acting having a disease? Fake disease, or rather faking the fake disease on stage, entailing real death. Mimesis of mimesis, imitation of imitation, which appears a very slight thing indeed, can turn into a deadly affair; witness the greatest of all comedians.

This is the problem that Plato has to deal with at length in book 3 of the *Republic*. The problem of modern art is endemically put in terms of how to make art politically relevant, how to create politically subversive art. Plato's problem was exactly the opposite; art always involves too many political messages, it is far too politically subversive, so he saw his task rather in containing all these political strands in art. So Plato, in this work that laid the foundations of good politics, spent a rather astounding one third of the time discussing aesthetics and the political dangers of artistic endeavors. The problem is ultimately not that there is too much politics in art, so that one would have to protect its purity from political

contamination; the problem is that virtually all art's politics is wrong and dangerous for the community, such as Plato envisioned it, and that one should replace it by an even more artistic politics.

I can only give a glimpse of this problem, limiting myself to the *Republic*.⁸ The agenda of a large part of the second and the third books is that of censorship: how to censor all these pernicious parts occurring in Homer, the founding father, and on a larger scale (since Greek art took Greek mythology as its major source of inspiration) how to censor the religious narratives on which Greek society was based. Greek gods, to say the least, behaved in most questionable manners, far from setting examples that one should emulate. It all started already at the beginning of theogony, with Uranus, the god of the sky, proceeding to destroy his own children, while the youngest one, Chronos, managed to escape and to castrate him, his own father, with the due help of his mother Gaia.⁹ Plato is very alarmed by such stories, which abound in virtually all myths: "Even if it were true, it should be passed over in silence, not told to foolish young people. And if, for some reason, it has to be told, only a very few people—pledged to secrecy . . . —should hear it, so that their number is kept as small as possible" (*R*, p. 1016).

So Plato has a problem, a huge one: the temptation of emulation is immediate and irresistible, particularly for the unformed youngsters, so religion—all Greek mythology—should be kept away from youth, safely locked as far away as possible, if we are to secure their edification. (One may well wonder what he would make of the Bible.) Furthermore, there are so many questionable deeds by heroes and men depicted by poets that could instill fear of death, passions, lust, frenzy, "pleasures of drink, sex and food," and others (*R*, p. 1027).¹⁰ "We'll ask Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we delete these passages and all similar ones. It's not that they aren't poetic and pleasing to the majority of hearers but that, the

8. The most helpful book on the ancient problem of mimesis is Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, N.J., 2002). Plato deals with the problem of mimesis in a number of other works (*Sophist*, *Theaetetus*, *Ion*, *Laws*, and others) and under different aspects, so to deal properly with the Platonic theory of mimesis would demand a far larger development beyond this scope.

9. See Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve, *Complete Works*, trans. Grube et al, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997), p. 1016; hereafter abbreviated *R*. See also Plato, *Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders, *Complete Works*, pp. 1318–616.

10. Closer to comedy, there is the danger of inducing laughter: "Moreover, they mustn't be lovers of laughter either, for whenever anyone indulges in violent laughter, a violent change of mood is likely to follow. . . . Then, if someone represents worthwhile people as overcome by laughter we won't approve, and we'll approve even less if they represent gods that way" (*R*, p. 1026). Laughter stands opposed to freedom, one is helplessly overpowered by its force, and it's terribly contagious, a particularly intractable case of irresistible mimesis.

more poetic they are, the less they should be heard by children or by men who are supposed to be free" (*R*, p. 1024).

The bottom line is that we would have to censor the bulk of religion and "classical" literature if we are to establish the new free society. Keep the religion and classics away from the kids if you want them to be good citizens.

These are the concerns relating to the questionable content, which is bad enough insofar as it sets dubious examples and tempts impressionable souls to imitate them. But it is worse if one considers the form. The argument is that perhaps not so much harm can be done if one only relates such matters, with the authorial voice standing aloof from them (and hopefully condemning them). But already Homer had the fatal tendency of not merely relating the events but of stepping into the shoes of his heroes and speaking in their own voices. The problem is ultimately that of indirect and direct speech; for the moment he decides to impersonate his heroes and lends them his voice in direct speech, a more insidious trouble occurs. One speaks with the voice of another person and there is no way of telling who is speaking; even more, one cannot but adopt the identity of this other person and be marked by it, by what was meant merely as a rhetorical subterfuge. By lending one's voice one unwittingly pledges one's soul.

But when he makes a speech as if he were someone else, won't we say that he makes his own style as much like that of the indicated speaker as possible? . . . Now, to make oneself like someone else in voice or appearance is to imitate the person one makes oneself like. . . . In these passages, then, it seems that he and the other poets effect their narrative through imitation. [*R*, p. 1031]

There is the mimesis of directly impersonating another person, without the distance of indirect narration and comment, and this is where the greatest danger lurks. Socrates's interlocutor is quick to point out that "tragedies are like that" (*R*, p. 1031): "That's absolutely right. . . . One kind of poetry and story-telling employs only imitation—tragedy and comedy, as you say. Another kind employs only narration by the poet himself—you find this most of all in dithyrambs. A third kind uses both—as in epic poetry" (*R*, p. 1032).

So theatre presents a particular menace because it dispenses with all narration and proceeds by direct speech alone. Its very form is its message. So the question arises "whether or not we'll allow tragedy and comedy into our city," "whether our guardians should be imitators or not" (*R*, p. 1032): "They mustn't be clever at doing or imitating slavish or shameful

actions, lest from enjoying the imitation, they come to enjoy reality. Or haven't you noticed that imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought?" (*R*, p. 1032).

They should by no means imitate women (young or old, "abusing her husband . . . possessed by sorrows and lamentations, and even less one who is ill, in love, or in labor"), slaves, bad men, cowards, drunkards, madmen, and furthermore, just in case, they should also refrain from imitating "neighing horses, bellowing bulls, roaring rivers, the crashing sea, thunder, or anything of that sort" (*R*, p. 1033). In a word, one shouldn't imitate anything lowly, from villains, women, and slaves to animals or nature, anything below the rank of a free citizen, for one is necessarily affected by it, whether one wants to be or not—"unless it's done just in play" (*R*, p. 1034) (or in another translation, "unless it be for jest"),¹¹ Plato cryptically and laconically adds. For jest, in play? Is there a leeway for comedy? Can one ever keep a safe distance in mimesis?

On the other hand, one should by all means imitate good examples, the "brave, sober, pious, free" men; one should be edified and elevated by noble models, so imitation can cut both ways. One can become good or bad only by virtue of imitation; one is permeable to it. People are wax; imitation is the knife. The bottom line: imitation sticks. It ultimately contaminates and inculcates. There can be no neutral or innocent imitation; one cannot be untainted by the forces of imitation; one is formed by what one imitates, for better or worse. One is always *Genesius*. And the sequence is the same as in Pascal: first the body imitates, one only moves one's lips repeating others' words, then the spirit follows; it becomes other, unwittingly, and against one's better judgment. To follow this argument, there is a point where one becomes virtuous or depraved unwittingly, shaped by the powers of mimesis, against many of Plato's protestations to the contrary. But isn't there something inherently and unstoppably comical about this? Taking this insight seriously, aren't we already in the midst of comedy?

If serious poets and tragedians were to ask their admission into the city, this is what we should tell them:

"Most honored guests, we're tragedians ourselves, and our tragedy is the finest and best we can create. At any rate, our entire state has been constructed so as to be a 'representation' of the finest and noblest life—the very thing we maintain is most genuinely a tragedy. So we

11. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), www.archive.org/stream/republicshorey01platuoft/republicshorey01platuoft_djvu.txt

are poets like yourselves, composing in the same *genre*, and your competitors as artists and actors in the finest drama, which true law alone has the natural powers to 'produce' to perfection."¹²

The state is the true mimesis, not the false one; it is the supreme theatre, the best show in town, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; it beats theatre at its own game; it is the superior and true show business. Tragedy is redundant, but what about comedy?

Now anyone who means to acquire a discerning judgment will find it impossible to understand the serious side of things in isolation from their ridiculous aspect, or indeed appreciate anything at all except in the light of its opposite. But if we intend to acquire virtue, even on a small scale, we can't be serious and comic too, and this is precisely why we must learn to recognize buffoonery, to avoid being trapped by our ignorance of it. . . . Such mimicry must be left to slaves and hired aliens, and no one must ever take it at all seriously. No citizen or citizeness must be found learning it.¹³

So comedy is necessary to be able to value the serious, its opposite, but its performance should be left to slaves and aliens, free citizens (and citizenesses!) should never undertake it.

"There is an acceptable form of comedy, one in which the moral deficiencies of the agents are made unambiguous, so that an audience is invited to laugh *against* them, with clear recognition of their faults, and not in any sense *with* them."¹⁴

There is only one kind of laughter for Plato: to laugh against. And it appears that in comedy imitation is even stickier than elsewhere.

Imitation, for Plato, is essential for art. Acting presents a particularly tricky aspect of it, as one makes oneself available to all kinds of models, imitating bravery and cowardice alike, sobriety and rapture of passion, and by a fatal tendency the latter tends to be more alluring. But an equally ponderous problem arises with painting, which is merely the production of copies, actually of copies of copies, since the things of which one makes copies are already copies in themselves, copies of ideas. Plato will tackle this at length in book 10, but I cannot go into this. Although the problem is in this case put in impersonal terms—making copies rather than becoming a copy oneself—it is treated with no lesser determination, and the danger seems no less significant.

12. Plato, *Laws*, p. 1484.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 1483.

14. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, p. 82.

There is a mystery pertaining to all this: copies of copies—why all the fuss? Why would such a slight thing as a copy of a copy, imitation of imitation, cause so much concern and passion, even rage? Why would a doubling create peril? If copies and imitations have no proper reality, or a reality so much slimmer and dimmer than the real thing, why worry?¹⁵ Why lose all this time and temper over something so minor, negligible, and even contemptible? The trouble is that the copy, the imitation, has the strange power to affect the thing itself. Imitation cuts both ways; it affects the imitator, one becomes what one imitates, it is contagious, and it spreads by mere contact; one is contaminated the moment one is touched by it. But there is the reverse danger, never quite avowed but constantly in the background, namely, that imitation strikes back, it impinges on the original, it has an impact on it, it changes it, although the original, *eidōs*, is such that it couldn't possibly be changed or swayed. One makes a copy, not even that, a copy of a copy, and the world of ideas seems to be shattered; it has to be firmly defended against any such intrusion. Imitation shapes the imitator, and it shapes the model that is imitated (the two are not symmetrical, but there is the same concern at the bottom). Imitators can do more harm than they can possibly imagine. They can cause havoc merely by replicating. They can harm themselves by something that appears to be an innocent impersonation, a rhetorical artifice, but, more dramatically, they can disturb the order of eternal ideas by making the replicas of their replicas—just as the sophists, those specialists in imitation, can undermine the true philosophy by merely mimicking it.¹⁶

Ultimately, Plato's fear was not that the copy, the imitation, the mimetic double, was but a pale and unworthy shadow of the real thing; his fear was that it was too much like the real thing, too close to it, not separated enough from it, tied to it by an elastic thread that cannot be cut,

15. Jacques Lacan considers this for a moment in book 11: "The picture does not compete with appearance, it competes with what Plato designates for us beyond appearance as being the Idea. It is because the picture is the appearance that says it is that which gives the appearance that Plato attacks painting, as if it were an activity competing with his own" (Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [New York, 1998], p. 112).

16. Paradoxically, the problem that Plato deals with in the *Sophist* is the reverse of that in the *Republic*. Sophists are those who just go through the motions of true philosophy; they create an appearance of being philosophers, yet by merely enacting philosophy they do not become philosophers themselves. However much the sophist endeavors to impersonate a philosopher, he will never become one (although the difference between the two turns out to be much harder to establish than one could possibly imagine). Sophists seem to be immune to mimesis themselves, while masterfully using its powers with the others. The *Sophist* demands a much larger elaboration. Compare with the magisterial oeuvre by Barbara Cassin over the last two decades.

the umbilical cord tying it to its supposed model; hence the model itself couldn't be cut loose from it, tied in its eternity to its passing and ephemeral double. The danger is that they are so much alike that a "naïve observer" could easily mistake the one for the other.¹⁷ Thus it ultimately takes two kinds of *others* for mimesis: the first would be the naïve observer who would take the appearance for reality, unable to tell the difference, as imitation is staged for his naïve eyes. But simultaneously one has to rely on a second Other (deserving the capital O)—the one who knows the difference, who can ascertain that this is a mere appearance, the Other who would guarantee the difference between appearance and reality and can tell them apart; otherwise one wouldn't entrust oneself on the treacherous ways of mimesis. Plato's concern, in a nutshell, is that the two others tend to collapse, that the other and the Other are easily confounded, so his fear would ultimately be, to put it in Lacanian terms, that *there is no Other of the Other*. The other who believes and the other who knows cannot be quite held apart.¹⁸

Is there, at the bottom of it, a mechanism pertaining to magic? James G. Frazer has famously pinpointed two kinds of magic, the imitational one, which works by metaphors, by effigies, substitutes, similarity, analogy, at distance (what befalls the effigy will befall the original), and contact magic, which works by contiguity, metonymy, physical connection (contamination or healing by magic touch).¹⁹ Freud took this up at some length in *Totem and Taboo*. In "magical" thinking imitation has the power to contaminate the distant original, and on the other hand mere contact has the power to contaminate two contiguous entities. "Similarity and

17. See Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2014). It is a presupposed onlooker who is deceived by appearances, mistaking them for reality, an instance of the other who couldn't tell the difference. But believing in the other who believes in appearance produces very real effects.

18. I am leaving aside Aristotle, who presents other ramifications of mimesis. Aristotle's account, which was historically far more influential than Plato's, considers not merely the part of mere imitation but the productive mimesis, which comes to perfect nature. "And generally art partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her" (Aristotle, *Physica [Physics]*, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Hardie et al., ed. Richard McKeon [New York, 2001], p. 250). There is the mimesis that invigorates versus the mimesis that undermines. No doubt this account can appear more plausible and sane, but Aristotle was the great pacifier, the great neutralizer and the great classifier. What appears to be the most "insane" part of Plato's story, his panic in relation to imitation and the havoc it can cause, is actually the most interesting and productive part, pointing to the real that is at stake in mimesis rather than neutralizing the contradiction.

19. See James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, ed. Robert Fraser (New York, 2009).

contiguity are the two essential principles of the process of association,”²⁰ says Freud, instantiating condensation and displacement, metaphor and metonymy as the two basic principles of dream-work. He adds a bit later that they

are both included in the more comprehensive concept of ‘contact’. Association by contiguity is contact in the literal sense; association by similarity is contact in the metaphorical sense. The use of the same word for the two kinds of relation is no doubt accounted for by some identity in the psychical processes concerned which we have not yet grasped.²¹

So there is a basic fact of psychical processes that resides in the contact, *Berührung*, of metaphor and metonymy—two ways of touching touch each other, touching at distance and touching the contiguous overlap; imitation and contact are in contact, but their intersection eludes us. Plato, at the core, seems to espouse precisely this point of intersection and overlap, where imitational similarity, although working at a distance from the imitated model, presents a most powerful contact between the two.

The essential doubling that lies at the bottom of mimesis brings us finally to comedy. There have been many attempts to bring comedy to concept, to single out its common denominator and underlying principle, but comedy tends to have the last laugh at all these attempts. It always has more tricks up its sleeve than theorists can account for. So, with all the caveats in mind let me take up one classical comment found (again) in Pascal: “Two faces are alike; neither is funny by itself, but side by side their likeness makes us laugh” (*P*, p. 34).²² The beauty and the austere elegance of this line is that it tries to pin the comical by the very minimal, just by the mechanism of doubling. It brings it to this core: *one is not funny, two is funny*, but provided that two is the replication of one, its imitation, its likeness, its mimetic double, its similar twin. What happens between one and two to produce the comical effect? Not between one and two, but between two ones that don’t quite add up to two; they are just clones of each other, same and different at the same time. Where there should be difference there is replication, a crack in the midst of the same. Two different faces are not funny, two similar ones are. So ultimately this is neither a

20. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York, 1990), pp. 103–4.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7.

22. “*Deux visages semblables, dont aucun ne fait rire en particulier, font rire ensemble par leur ressemblance*” (Two similar faces, neither of which causes laughter in particular, together cause laughter by their resemblance) (Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 58).

two nor two ones, but a split one, where both parts can neither be counted as two nor made one. The comical object emerges in their very split.²³

Bergson, who wrote one of the grand books on the comical, was enthusiastic about this turn in Pascal. He proposed an extension:

It might just as well be said: "The gestures of a public speaker, no one of which is laughable by itself, excite laughter by their repetition." The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living. Analyse the impression you get from two faces that are too much alike, and you will find that you are thinking of two copies cast in the same mould, or two impressions of the same seal, or two reproductions of the same negative. . . . This deflection of life towards the mechanical is here the real cause of laughter.²⁴

Life doesn't repeat itself; it is in constant change and becoming, a pure *élan vital*, so all repetition must stem from the mechanical, from an inanimate mechanism; it is fabricated, artificial, contrived, for life and nature are not funny. Hence his famous canonical formula: "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," the mechanical imposed on life, life seized by automatism: this is supposed to be the true source of the comical (*L*, p. 49). The weakness, and the productivity, of Bergson's position has been amply and magisterially analyzed by Alenka Zupan i , so I needn't dwell on this. Briefly, the very opposition between the nonrepetitive life and the mechanical repetition and redoubling is insufficient; there is repetition and redoubling at the very core of life, which couldn't be seized and conceived by itself independent from its supposedly mechanical double.²⁵ It is at the crossing point where automaton infringes upon life and constitutes its core that the comical object springs up, or, more precisely, the springing up of the comical object produces in the first place the very split and redoubling into automaton and life, the split that didn't precede this emergence but was occasioned by it. This is precisely at the core of Freud's problem of the death drive, which emerges precise as the thrust for repetition, a compulsion to repeat, the quasi-mechanical at the core of

23. The crucial inspiration for the last part of my paper comes from what I take to be the best book on comedy, Alenka Zupan i , *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

24. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London, 1913), p. 34; hereafter abbreviated *L*.

25. See Zupan i , *The Odd One In*, pp. 111–25.

life and at the same time as the surplus of life, as too much life, more life than one can bear. If we follow this line, then the only really funny thing would ultimately be the death drive.

There is a simple gag that is commonly performed by street comedians in many quarters, which enacts by the simplest of means the mechanism of mimesis. The comedian follows an unsuspecting passerby at some short distance, exactly mimicking his or her gestures, mannerisms, tics, and the way of walking, unbeknownst to the person. The trick always works; it invariably and predictably produces bursts of laughter in the audience. The person is helplessly exposed to ridicule by being merely imitated, and when he or she becomes aware of this replica shadow behind his or her back, it is already too late. This simple trick produces the effect that the person cannot quite recover from it and go on his or her way as before. There was nothing funny in his or her way of walking before; it just had some peculiarities as anyone's walk does, but after being closely imitated it suddenly seems that the walk of this person, after this exposure, appears to be the imitation of the imitation. By having been redoubled it cannot simply rejoin its singularity and coincide with it. It is as if he or she has become a replica of him- or herself. What was replicated was not the mechanical uniformity of walking but its singular inclination, its individual mark, its distinctive idiosyncrasy, so that the singular trait became something replicable, repeatable, reproducible. It seems as if the person has been dispossessed of his or her uniqueness, which proved to be apt for replication. His or her ineffable individuality turned out to be repeatable, for what was imitated was precisely what seemed to be inimitable in it. The individuality, by imitation and redoubling, turned out to be generic—but not quite.²⁶

Bergson insists at length on the difference between tragedy and comedy along the line of the difference between the individual and the generic. Art essentially aims at individuality; the work of art is singular, and only through its singularity can it raise a universal appeal and produce universal effects.

So art, whether it be painting or sculpture, poetry or music, has no other object than to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality

26. One can add that the gag, in its crudeness, is not quite enough for comedy. The comedy would start if the model can assume the new role that was thrust upon him and use it as the lever to strike back at his imitator—such as do something that the other cannot imitate or present a better imitation of himself than the imitator could come up with.

itself. . . . Hence it follows that art always aims at what is *individual*. . . . Nothing could be more unique than the character of Hamlet. [L, pp. 157–62]

Individuality, the real target of art, is the object of tragedy, whereas comedy doesn't aim at individuality but at types and generalities. It aims at the repeatable, not at the individual and unique. It aims at the generic. If one considers the titles of all of William Shakespeare's tragedies, as has been pointed out by a number of authors (including Zupan i), they all consist of proper names, pinpointing individual fates (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, down to *Titus Andronicus*), whereas all the titles of his comedies are generic, be it as a phrase (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado about Nothing*), an occasion (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), or even, self-referentially, a genre, *The Comedy of Errors*. We find types in most of Molière's titles (*The Miser*, *Misanthropist*, *Hypochondriac*, and others), and even where there is a proper name, like *Tartuffe*, it is clear that it is predestined to become a type. This is why the so-called comedy of character suits the comic genre so well, for character is precisely the trait by which everyone is repeatable and generic:

In one sense it might be said that all *character* is comic, provided we mean by character the *ready-made* element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically. It is, if you will, that which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for that very reason, that which enables others to imitate us. Every comic character is a *type*. Inversely, every resemblance to a type has something comic in it. [L, p. 148]

The character is precisely the nonpsychological, the fixed idea, the compulsion to repeat, as opposed to real psychic life. But yet again there is Bergson's inveterate belief in a real psychic life, itself uncontaminated by repetition and iterativity; this is where Bergson and Freud (who roughly at the same time published his famous book on jokes)²⁷ stand at opposite ends (notwithstanding that Freud, who appreciatively refers to Bergson, tried to reconcile their respective theories of the comic).

So comedy thrives on the generic, on types, on stereotypes and clichés, on replication, on repetition, on doubling. One didn't have to wait for Walter Benjamin and for the technical reproducibility of the work of art.

27. Bergson's essay was originally published in 1900, Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in 1905.

Comedy has always already taken mechanical reproducibility for its principle and guideline—not the technical reproducibility of the artwork, but a reproducibility at the heart of the artwork itself as the very principle of its production. One didn't have to wait for reproducibility to undermine the aura, the singular auratic presence (as the story goes); comedy dismantles the aura to start with. Aura? Let's make a copy of it, but within the artwork itself. This is *the basic instinct* of comedy.

Comedy thrives on doubles. Some of the oldest blueprints for comedy, established by a few ancient authors and then endlessly embroidered upon in the great tradition, some of those literally involve the doubles: think of *Maenechmi*, the play by Plautus, which entirely revolves around the career of two twins, exact doubles, whose identity is inevitably and constantly mixed up and produces a total imbroglio, a comedy of errors, and indeed Shakespeare's remake of the Plautus play is appropriately called just that, *The Comedy of Errors*. One person is taken for another on the good grounds that he looks exactly the same, thus presenting the zero point of one of the big resources of comedy, the mistaken identity. The appearance looks like the real thing, but the trouble with the twins is that both things are real and both are appearances of the other, so identity itself appears as mistaken by its very nature.²⁸ One could say: *it is in the nature of identity to be mistaken for identity*. There is a mistake involved in every identity that the mistaken identity only brings to appearance. Or think of Plautus's *Amphitruo* (remade by Molière, Heinrich von Kleist, Jean Giraudoux, and others), where the god Jupiter can only seduce the faithful Alcmene by assuming the spitting image of her husband Amphytrion, while the god's helper Mercury assumes the image of Amphytrion's servant Sosias (the proper name that inevitably turned into the generic French name *sosie* [a double]). There is a double redoubling, with the vintage turn of god assuming the human shape, becoming man's double. And poor Alcmene is at some point faced with two Amphytrions in her bedroom, the real test of her virtue. Or think, at the other end, of Vladimir and Estragon. (Or Hamm and Clov, in a different register. From Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, one should recall at least this one line: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness."²⁹ Beckett himself took it as a clue.)³⁰

28. As the Duke puts it in the play: "One of these men is *genius* to the other: / And so of these, which is the natural man, / And which the spirit? Who deciphers them?" (William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. Charles Whitworth [New York, 2002], p. 175). The comedy is the comedy of genius and the spirit, not of natural men.

29. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London, 1986), p. 101.

30. The problem that I cannot properly treat here is the thin line between the comic and the uncanny. One can see it most clearly with the problem of the double that historically underwent

The redoubling is the minimal *dispositif* of the generic. Something unique is multiplied, imitated, the idiosyncratic individuality is replicated; it ceases to be singular; it is immediately pushed on the way towards the generic. The generic, at the minimal, is what different things have in common; two redoubled entities are already a step towards generalization. What they have in common is a singular trait, which is repeated as singular. This is not a universalization obtained by distilling the common traits from the diversity of already existing entities but rather a generic which is created merely by replicating the singular. Comedy's stance is not realism, in the classical sense of *universalia in re*, the universals inhabiting things (and neither is it nominalism, whereby *universalia* would pertain only to words alone). It is a production of the generic that didn't exist before but that cannot attain universality. It dismantles the singular by redoubling it, but it cannot quite leave it behind by espousing the universal (and hence totalize and unify its elements). Its generic character is as if stuck in between, between the singular and the universal. The two that emerge can neither be reunited in one nor can the two go their separate ways and be counted as two—more than one, less than two; more than singular, less than universal.

By being redoubled the real loses its footing; which of the two is real? The original, by being redoubled, has the tendency to appear as the semblance of its own semblance; it cannot be left unscathed by its reduplication. Plato's fear appears to have been justified; the replica does strike back. Yet, we don't find ourselves in the universe of semblances, the universalized appearance, the proliferation of copies and simulacra. This is, by the way, rather the postmodern way to kill the spirit of comedy. One can propose an extension of Pascal's adage: one is not funny, two is funny, many is not so funny either.

It is not that by redoubling we lose the real, the unique, the singular, now undermined by its imitation; it is rather that the comic object emerges precisely between the two. It is what prevents the two from either being reunited or set apart as independent entities. In comedy one splits into two, and the two cannot be fused into one, but the 'two' that emerges

a dramatic shift. If doubles were traditionally mostly treated as a laughing matter, then the double suddenly acquired an uncanny quality with the emergence of the *doppelgänger* in the romantic era, in the aftermath of the French revolution. The *doppelgänger* started to function as the very embodiment of the uncanny, spectacularly displaying that the same mechanism can function in two seemingly harshly opposed ways. The best accounts of this thin line are Pfaller, "The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic: The Aesthetic Effects of the Thought Experiment," in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York, 2006), pp. 198–216, and Župan i , "Comedy and the Uncanny," *Why Psychoanalysis? Three Interventions* (Uppsala, 2008), pp. 59–75.

is not simply the two of the double, the two similar faces as the minimal device of the comical, but ultimately the two of the split one on the one hand and of the comical object on the other. This object springs up again and again, in the rift of redoubling, but cannot be seized in itself, on its own, and this is what makes comedy of it and propels it forward.

Comedy seems to work at the interstice of the two cases of mimesis that Plato considers. On the one hand, there is the mimesis of acting, where there is the danger that one would turn into what one enacts; on the other hand, there is the mimesis of painting, where one fabricates the copies of a model (that is already itself a copy), thus undermining the authority (the aura) of the model itself. In comedy (at least in the comedy of doubles) there is an actor copying, imitating another actor, or two actors appearing as twin doubles—amplifying the minimal line proposed by Pascal, of the comic of two similar faces. The actors themselves are like copies of copies. Like in the street gag in Paris, the comedian imitates the model, but the imitation strikes at the heart of the model that turns himself into imitation of himself. And since the art of acting is at the bottom that of imitating another, this is like the acting of acting, the staging of the very process of imitation.

In one word, comedy enacts mimesis. It stages its mechanism. If theatre is the double of reality,³¹ then comedy doesn't redouble reality or reproduce it on stage as its ideal or diminished model. Rather, it redoubles itself; it redoubles its own presentation; it mimics itself; it creates its own mimesis, not simply the mimesis of preexisting models in reality. It displays the productivity of mimesis, as opposed to the confines of reproduction, for the generic it constantly creates, and the object that is created on the way, didn't exist before. It possesses a self-reflexive theatricality that is usually absent from tragedy; for tragedy ultimately aims at the real beyond its theatricality, not in it (in line with Bergson's take on the tragic individuality versus the comical generic). Hence comedy has the tendency of spilling over from the stage and imbuing "real life" with theatricality; the doubles start mushrooming in "real life" as the effect of comedy.

Comedy is mimesis in action.

The comic subject is anti-Genesius. If we take Genesius as the model of ideology, then ideology can work only by bracketing off the moment of comedy, by making a jump from the theatrical enactment to inner belief.

31. Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* was written in order to do away with this doubling, to present a theatre more real than reality, not a re-presentation of something, but a present that cannot be re-presented, a present in its nonrepeatable cruelty, but Artaud was precisely not the man of comedy; see Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York, 1994).

One has on the one hand the staging, the acting, the mimicking, as an external compliance and on the other hand, in an immediate jump, the true belief, the conversion, the springing up of truth from a mere theatrical contrivance. The comic moment is in between the two, the staging of the staging itself that produces belief, not only the mere staging nor just the true faith, but also the moment when there is a ghost in the machine, before this ghost turns into a holy ghost. Comedy stages the machine but catches it just before it can yield faith, a machine already inhabited by spirit but not yet turned into faith, or it shows faith that cannot quite free itself from the machine. Genesius was also based on the double, the actor redoubling himself into actor and believer. First the Genesius of mere play, then Genesius the martyr: the latter emerges as the truth of the former. You can see either the one or the other, just as Genesius can only experience himself as the one or the other. But comedy is the staging of both, indiscriminately, relentlessly, and if there is a moment of truth, it flickers between the two.

Is Genesius already a comedy, a vintage comedy at that? A comedy in the making, the archetypal comedy of ideology? (Becoming comedy, to be understood on the model of the Deleuzian *devenir animal*?) What would it take to turn it into comedy? Remove the Christian faith? Perhaps this was the problem with the Althusserian view of ideology from the outset, namely, that one can either see the material ritual of mimesis from the outside or else experience subjectivity with the eyes of ideology after the advent of faith and recognition—either materiality or (ideological) subjectivity. One cannot see the two in one go; one cannot *see double*. Perhaps this is what comedy does; it sees double in what ought to be clearly separated. It sees the actor in the believer, but it also sees the believer in the actor, and precisely by seeing them as a couple, as the double of each other, as twins, it produces the comic effect. It redoubles them; it displays them as the Pascalian two similar faces. There is an object *x* that emerges between the two, neither the one nor the other, nor a separate entity, which has to be obfuscated and excluded if the gravity of conversion is to be maintained, but comedy takes this excluded surplus of mimesis as its lever, its resource, its spring, the moment of its precarious truth.

The *CI* Review

Jonathan Culler. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015. 391pp.

ELIZABETH HELSINGER

Should there be an article, definite or indefinite, before *Theory*? Is this *theory* or *Theory*? This book might perhaps be better inscribed under the title of a talk Jonathan Culler gave not long before the book was published: “What *Would* a Theory of the Lyric Be?”

Culler has always maintained that you cannot set out to write Theory. If that is the case, this book is a prolegomena to a theory (small *t*) of the lyric: a poetics of the lyric poem that he intends to be of practical use to poets, readers, and teachers of poetry. Moving from an analysis of the inadequacies of current theories, particularly those that approach the lyric either as a poem of personal expression pure and simple (a description attributed to the nineteenth century) or as a form of impersonation on the model of the dramatic monologue (the default assumption that has captured classroom pedagogy since the mid-twentieth), Culler offers a redescription that begins from features that these approaches too often neglect. These include much of lyric poetry’s formal patterning (rhythm, rhyme, and repetition as *melos* and *opsis*), its peculiar temporality, and its varied forms of address. This is at once a modest proposal and an ambitious one. It is theory in what Culler describes as the desiring or optative mode of lyric itself (“what *would* a theory of the lyric be?”).

Culler’s point of departure is the G. W. F. Hegel for whom lyric, like music, provides poet and reader the experience of “subjectivity encountering itself” but with the important proviso that the “lyric enunciation” of this subjectivity is “not the expression of personal affect nor the articulation of individual experience, but above all a formal unifying function for lyric” (p. 105). But from Käte Hamburger, whose work extends and modifies Hegel, Culler takes a second postulate critical to his own arguments: that “lyric enunciation” is not “the fictional imitation of an ordinary speech act but . . . a linguistic event of another type”—an event that is closer to that of ritual or reiterated performance (p. 109). Performance, as Culler glosses the term, is what the Greeks meant by *epideixis*: “discourse conceived as an act, aiming to persuade, to move, to innovate” (p. 130); it is here that Culler identifies “the distinctiveness of lyric” (p. 125). Lyric performance, he continues, “succeeds as it acts iterably through repeated

readings," inscribing itself on personal and cultural memory (p. 131). Repeated acts, events, or performances of reading constitute the lyric poem's "functioning in the world" (p. 131). *Theory of the Lyric* is conceived as a strategic intervention: "Criticism must resist the dominance of the fictional, lest the distinctiveness of lyric be lost. Just to redress the effects of this dominant model, we must focus on the ritualistic elements of lyric" (p. 125).

The most interesting results of Culler's focus on lyric as ritual event can be seen in his discussions of lyric temporality and its construction through rhythm and lyric address. Culler leans on a common feature of the poems he examines, their use of "a special nonprogressive present with verbs of action" (p. 287). Pausing over the "oddity" of this lyric present of enunciation, "which is both that of a speaker/poet and that of the reader, who may speak these words also" (p. 294), Culler speculates that this lyric *now*, always anticipating its own iteration in other readings, works to "incorporate events while reducing their fictional, narrative character and increasing their ritualistic feel" (p. 287). Rhythm, as an experience unfolding in the *now* of lyric reading, may thus be "what is most salient in lyrics" (p. 138). Culler understands rhythm as a bodily rather than a simply aural (or visual) perception; it gives lyric "a somatic quality that novels and other extended forms lack" and "enlists us in a process in ways that other texts do not" (p. 138). This leads him to express cautious preference for Derek Attridge's "beat prosody," where identifying rhythmic pulse or beat is preferred to more elaborate schemes of metrical analysis. Culler follows Attridge in arguing that a simplified approach to poetic rhythm offers more immediate access for the untrained to those qualities of verse that distinguish it most sharply from prose. "A greater foregrounding of rhythm as central to lyric," he suggests, "might enable the teaching of poetry to regain some of the ground lost in recent years and also might lead to a different sort of poetics" (p. 173).

Culler is equally interested in how the varieties of lyric address, often combined in a single poem, contribute to the perception of the poem's unfolding in the present tense of reading. Here he expands his 1977 essay on "Apostrophe" to argue that both the frequent use of apostrophe (often to more than one object in the same poem) and the common "I-thou" structure of many poems that directly address another while indirectly addressing the reader help give the poem its feeling of eventfulness. The less ordinary the addressee ("whether a muse, an urn, Duty, or a beloved" [p. 187]), "the more the poem seems to become a ritualistic invocation" in which the reader participates (p. 188).

One might imagine this description of lyric eventfulness invoked in support of a claim for its social or political effects. But Culler—using examples from ancient Greek epideictic lyric, the Renaissance sonnet, Wordsworth's lyrical ballads, and modern "political" poems by W. H. Auden and Robert Frost, read in light of arguments by Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière—concludes that while it is possible to see lyric poems as "contributions to structures of feeling, community formation, instantiation of ideology or its disruption and exposure, subversion or containment," it's always an act of critical hubris to do so. Such claims, however attractive, may look plausible in retrospect but hardly constitute secure prediction; a poem is always at the mercy of the changing terms in which it may be read. "Above all it is the unpredictability of lyric's efficacy and the different kinds of framings to which it is subject," he concludes (with a caution one must admire even when it disappoints), "that make any reflection on lyric and society a process in which the analyst cannot but be humbled and dismayed by the contingency of his or her own discourse" (p. 348).

Challenges to Culler's book will be voiced from at least two directions: first, that there is no such thing as *lyric*—the word, as applied widely in romantic and postromantic criticism and theory, cannot, it is objected, cover the multitude of incompatible practices of writing and reading short poems even within the last several centuries,

much less be used to construct a tradition of objects reaching back to Sappho (who did use a lyre). Culler's book sets aside Virginia Jackson's recent arguments (in her article on lyric for *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, for example) that lyric is a limiting critical fiction, an adjective first used by the Alexandrians for something already a distant memory (poetry sung to musical accompaniment); later applied to a variety of short poetic forms evolved for different occasions and social functions, including songs, odes, and sonnets; and only in the last two centuries repurposed as a noun designating an idealized form of the poetic as subjective poetry of feeling. To this Culler replies that dissolving lyric into incompatible practices doesn't reflect what poets and readers do. It obviates the possibility of comparison. He points to the multitude of intertextual allusions and reworkings as one way in which poets have constructed a lyric genre across historical differences. "The claim is, then, that a broad conception of lyric as genre is helpful for thinking about short, nonnarrative poetry, permitting exploration of its historical tradition, making salient its discursive strategies and possibilities in a range of periods and languages" (p. 90).

A second objection might be raised to Culler's choice of poems—limited, as he warns us upfront, to poems in languages that he knows and that have been "generally recognized" as great lyric poems, from Sappho to John Ashbery. In practice, this means poems in classical and modern European languages. Were this *A Theory of Lyric*, or *The Theory of Lyric*, or perhaps even *Lyric: The Theory*, this would be an important drawback—a truly comparative theory should presumably take account of poetry in Chinese, or Russian, or in the multitude of other Asian, African, and American indigenous or hybrid languages.

How interesting, how convincing, and how disturbing to received ideas are the features to which Culler draws our attention? How useful or how provocative—for poetry, for thought, and for Theory—are his speculations on the forms and conditions of poetic meaning to which these observations lead? *Theory of the Lyric* brings Culler's own earlier, more scattered interventions together with an eclectic selection from others' work in service to what he identifies as a dominant need of the critical and pedagogical present: turning readers' attention to lyric poems as verbal events, not fictions of impersonated speech. His fine, nuanced readings of particular poems and kinds of poems are crucial to his arguments. His observations on the workings of aspects of lyric across multiple different structures are the real strength of the book. It is a work of practical criticism that opens speculative vistas for poetics but always returns to poems.

ELIZABETH HELSINGER is John Matthews Manly Distinguished Service Professor Emerita in English, art history, and visual arts at the University of Chicago. Her research focuses on literature and other arts in nineteenth-century Britain. *Poetry and the Thought of Song* (2015) and *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (2008) are her most recent books. She is currently working on a series of essays on conversing in verse. Helsinger is a coeditor of *Critical Inquiry*.

Hanna B. Hölling. *Revisions: Zen for Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 100 pp.

HANNAH HIGGINS

Hanna B. Hölling's book offers a wild ride through a whodunit of sorts, as she describes in vivid detail her practical efforts to exhibit and understand a single artwork for an exhibition at BGC gallery in the fall of 2015. Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* is, at its simplest, a movie consisting of blank film leader that accumulates traces of dust,

scratches, hair, and discolorations with time and through the process of the film's continuous projection. The original made in 1964 as either a loop or a linear film is lost, and the later original (?) can't be seen. It's too old and brittle. The Museum of Modern Art and the artist's estate have strict rules for how substitute film is used (one at a time per geographical region), even as Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) rents out a video version, and George Maciunas (with Paik's permission) fabricated several smaller loops for handheld projectors in his famous Fluxkits in the 1960s–1970s. For art historians and curators, the matter of who authored an artwork is habitually based on who made the work (the *who* and the *it* in Hölling's whodunit).¹

Hölling was trained as a conservationist, and her detective story is knit together in uniquely concrete terms, even as she seeks to locate Paik in the community of artists and vast avant-garde traditions within which he worked, the evolving tide of video-versus-film-versus-performance artists active at the time and contemporary art theory. The ten quick chapters, the *Revisions* for which the book is named, move at breakneck speed from an overview of Zen in the avant-garde and Paik's background with John Cage, to media archeology (and the strain these particular materials put the notion of the art work under) and a sequence of theoretical chapters toward the end on distributed authorship, process and the idea of originality and authenticity. *Zen for Film*, she concludes, "might be grasped as an event (a nonrepeatable cinematic event), a performance (a performed spectacle, dependent on the length of the viewers engagement), a process (accumulating traces while it is projected), and an object (an apparatus, filmic props, Fluxfilms, and filmic remnant/relic)" (p. 84).

The challenge this opening-up of the object and its authorial framework implies for conservationists is immense. "Rather than assigning regenerative capabilities to conservation," Hölling writes, "the conservator would instigate just another change in the work in its long- or short-duration existence. . . . An artwork's own archive, dependent on the culture of conservation, establishes rules and sets limits on what can be said or made, with reference to the present as well as the past" (p. 85).

As it turns out, Paik's *Zen for Film* is a conspiracy of sorts. The *who* implicates virtually everyone; the *it* undermines many of our collective assumptions about art and media. This begs the question, is it a conspiracy if everyone involved is in it.

HANNAH HIGGINS is professor of art history and University Scholar at University of Illinois Chicago. In addition to articles on the historic and neo-avant-gardes, her books include *Fluxus Experience* (2002) and *The Grid Book* (2009), and an anthology *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of Digital Art* (2012), coedited with Douglas Kahn. She has received DAAD, Getty, and Philips Collection fellowships in support of her research on sensation, cognition, and information across the avant-gardes and contemporary visual and material culture. She is coexecutor of the Estate of Dick Higgins and the Something Else Press.

1. The book might have benefited from a broader understanding of Maciunas's often contested director role relative to the many artists he worked with and tried to control. However, this difference in our understanding of Fluxus, notwithstanding, is not central to the core task at hand.

Alison Landsberg. *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 232 pp.

MARCIA LANDY

Alison Landsberg's new study for "engaging the past" is an amplification of *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformations of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004) with a shifting from prosthetic memory to history. The recent book explores strategies for confronting the past by a spectatorship of enactment expressed through cinematic, televisual, and digital texts.

In the documentary *Milk* an affective encounter is not a matter of passive identification with events and persons but through remediation by emphasizing "the artificial and interpretive aspects of the film as a whole" (p. 46), making the gay rights struggle visible to an audience that "did not live through the events presented" (p. 41). In addressing the dispossession of the Tutsis "and the world's neglect of them" (p. 48), *Hotel Rwanda*, through self-consciously foregrounding the phone as "mediator," addresses the viewer as part of an international community who have been asked to "listen" (p. 54). *Good Night and Good Luck* through fiction and documentary makes visible through archival footage how the freedom of the press is compromised "by corporate interests and sponsors" (p. 59) to bring the viewer into a history of the present.

Despite the "overall academic contempt for television" (p. 61), Landsberg enlists its potential for historical sensibility. In her detailed and expressive discussion of *Deadwood*, focusing on its uses of "crude" language and of physical bodies, aligned to the disjunctive uses of sound, Landsberg argues for a productive tension between sound and visual image, stylization and formalism, distance and proximity that invokes "something more general about the vulnerability of the body and its lack of privacy . . . tied to the experience of a particular place at a particular, definable historical moment" (p. 84). The popular television serial *Mad Men* similarly evokes a social history of everyday life in which historical events interrupt the lives of the characters through deidealized visions of marriage, work, sexism, racism, and masculine competitiveness. HBO's *Rome* through its length and many subplots allows for complex treatment of daily life.

Landsberg's emphasis on the affective and potentially active character of historical "knowledge" derives from Walter Benjamin's observations on distraction and Gilles Deleuze's emphasis on sensuous perception that challenges familiar common sense (pp. 15, 38, 106); hence reality TV becomes another instance of Landsberg's quest for mediation exemplified by iconic historical moments in *Frontier House*, *Colonial House*, and *Texas House* that produce "cognitive dissonance" (pp. 127–28) for the participants and viewers. The select participants become acquainted with contingency based on threatening and contradictory bodily and intellectual encounters that form the basis of an "alternate history" (p. 145).

Exhibits of virtual history involving the Holocaust further exemplify "potentially progressive engagements with the past" (p. 147). *The Secret Annex* and *Witnessing Kristallnacht—The November 1938 Pogroms* are projections of that past onto the present through providing a participant a multifaceted "experience" of people and events derived through movement in the controlled environment. The installations are designed "as a crucial strategy for learning" (p. 167) in which the "viewer" is situated in the "role of a reporter," invited afterward to provide a commentary on the experience. Thus witnessing, according to Landsberg, is a therapeutic experience that "can create the conditions in which past atrocities can become part of a usable past" (p. 176).

The book is carefully structured, sensitively expressed, and the analysis of the various media a contribution to thinking differently about cinematic uses of the past. While some of its claims for novelty in addressing mass culture in relation to history are overstated, in fairness to the *manner* of the texts it discusses, the book appears

designed to reach outside the academy. However, Landsberg's reiteration of the complex statement from Deleuze continues to haunt me, namely: "Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition, but of a fundamental encounter" (pp. 15, 48, 106, 119, 121). Is the force of Landsberg's argument then somewhat diminished by invoking "usability" as equivalent to the Deleuzian encounter? My uneasiness derives from a disconnection between the fortuitousness or contingency of a "fundamental encounter" and the pragmatic turn to "usability." Thus, Landsberg reduces confrontation with the barbarism of the event, returning it to recognition, to a position that is comfortable, safe, and institutional, rather than confronting Benjamin's "moment of danger" (pp. 21, 179) and Deleuze's "forced and broken connection which traverses the fragments of a dissolved self as it does the borders of a fractured I" (p. 145).

MARCIA LANDY is a distinguished professor emerita of English/film studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

Dario Gamboni. *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought*. Trans. Chris Miller. London: Reaktion Books, 2014. 464 pp.

MARNIN YOUNG

In this densely argued and strikingly illustrated book, Dario Gamboni presents a fundamentally new reading of Paul Gauguin's artistic project. His argument rests on two interrelated claims. The first is that Gauguin was consistently concerned with "potential images." A central example is a hidden self-portrait in the negative space between the rocks in the 1888 *Above the Abyss* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay). The artist's production of such cryptomorphs, as well as representations of metamorphosis and more generally aspectual doubleness (in a Wittgensteinian sense), has been hesitantly noted before. But the visual evidence on offer in this book and the subtlety of the author's analysis makes a very strong case that the artist prioritized imaginative perception and visual ambiguity, which, like the forms we see in clouds, "explicitly appeal to the subjectivity of the spectator and interpreter" (p. 11).

The book's second claim attempts to decrypt the artist's comment that the impressionists had searched "around the eye and not at the mysterious centre of thought." Unlike those concerned with optical sensations alone, Gauguin sought instead to demonstrate and to realize in his art a quasi-Spinozist philosophy, one that claimed a continuity of artist and world, art and nature, animate and inanimate things. The two claims in the book are related, and they ultimately appear as one: Gauguin sought to parabolize his philosophy of art and nature—to show what it meant to create art like nature creates itself (*Natura naturans*)—through potential images. "Ambiguity and 'multi-stability,'" Gamboni concludes, "are therefore plastic and psychological means of giving form to a vision of the world characterized by continuity and the permeability of modes of existence—by dynamism and metamorphosis. They are also suited to communicating this vision of the world thanks to the imaginative perception that they require and they thus possess an epistemological or even initiatory value" (p. 344). In these terms, Gamboni has come as close as anyone to grasping the distinctive core of Gauguin's motivations and intentions. By that same token, however, certain major problems of interpretation persist, if not in this art historical account, then in the artistic project itself.

If potential images rely on the spectator to appear, as Gamboni asserts, then it is not clear why the specific images he finds in Gauguin's works are the ones that should matter. Why, for example, would it not be perfectly acceptable, once we spot one

cryptomorph, to see endless numbers of faces, heads, eyes, and so forth in his various works? The simple answer is that claims for potential images require a tempering agent, one that prevents our wildly reading-in: the artist's intentions. Whatever Gamboni believes, this is not something he seems especially concerned to admit. Indeed, while his second claim is fairly clearly an assertion of intentionality, the first is fairly clearly anti-intentionalist. His argument might have been rephrased simply to insist on Gauguin's use of cryptomorphs to convey ideas to his selectively small intended audience; some evidence exists that Vincent van Gogh and others, for example, saw and recognized the significance of such images. And yet, Gamboni's paradoxical argument—that Gauguin achieved his intentions by activating the subjective readings-in of his spectators—is in fact consistent with the artist's stated desire not to create images of nature but to create like nature.

In the end, Gamboni's book makes visible two very different Gauguins. On the one hand sits a rather isolated artist obsessed with controlling the meaning of his picture puzzles, and on the other hand appears an antiartist, who in the deliberate undercutting of his own intentions demonstrates the deeper truth of his philosophy—that his productions are as meaningful as the clouds that pass in the sky.

MARNIN YOUNG is associate professor of art history at Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University. He has published articles and reviews on nineteenth-century French art in *Art Bulletin*, *Art History*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, the *RIHA Journal*, and at *Nonsite*. He is the author of *Realism in the Age of Impressionism: Painting and the Politics of Time* (2015). His current research focuses on space in and around postimpressionist painting.