

# The Power of Comedy

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## Abstract

This article is an attempt to come to grips with an often unexplored facet of human nature, i. e. comedy. Whilst tragedy has received due attention, comedy has often been relegated to the margin as being unworthy of serious debate. In my endeavour to do justice to comedy, I stop awhile at tragedy to show that, though apparently distinct, the two genres have some binding threads in common. Then, I sketch out in chronological order the main theories experts elaborated to explain what it is that makes human susceptible to laughter, laughter being the legitimate child of comedy. Last but not least, I go on to explicate the power inherent in the comedic moment, a moment of healing and critique albeit transient.

**Keywords:** human, comedy, tragedy, theories, laughter, transient

Comedy is often thought of as the antithesis of tragedy, its alter ego. While tragedy commands a universalist appeal, comedy dies immediately upon birth.<sup>1</sup> “The apparent universality of the tragic and the apparent specificity of the comic”<sup>2</sup> are to be reconsidered, thought through and pondered over. It goes without saying that tragedy arouses “pity and fear”,<sup>3</sup> pity for the afflictions of others and fear lest the same fate should befall us. With comedy, catharsis is achieved by and reflected through a homoeopathic response just as it is set in motion through tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Just as tragedy holds people together in grief, so does comedy bringing them together in shared delights<sup>5</sup> by holding others up for contempt, among other techniques. Be it through weeping or laughing, both the tragic and comedic achieve the same effect, that is, “the purification of the passions they arouse”.<sup>6</sup> Both “produce a commonality and a community,

however transient, and...perform an expiatory role in social behavior”<sup>7</sup> that are very much sought and seldom found. We revel in the comic which “inevitably seems to return full circle, to become, once again,”<sup>8</sup> sugarcoated tragedy we wallow in unaware. Once the veil is lifted, comedy “reveals the real tragedies of human existence”.<sup>9</sup> “The comic premise”, as is commonly known, fills “the gap between comic reality and real reality”.<sup>10</sup> The gaps the premise fills up center on conflicts, “and the deeper the conflict gets, the more interesting the premise becomes”,<sup>11</sup> so is the case for tragedy where conflict is inevitable. The difference underlying the two genres lies in the ending they thrust us into. Bakhtin asserts that “humour constitutes a second reality outside the official realm”.<sup>12</sup> He goes on to add that this too multilayered a system of meanings whose final expression is laughter exists “alongside and in opposition to the ‘authoritarian word’ of dominant orthodoxy”.<sup>13</sup> As for tragedy, its final expression is best caught in tears, heart-wrenching emotions and empathy for the fate of the tragic hero whose flaw could be ours because of our shared humanity.

Why do *homo sapiens* or rather *homo ridens*, laughing beings, experience sudden outbursts, outpourings and explosions of laughter? Despite lacking in solemnity, humour should be approached with serenity and seriousness<sup>14</sup> though it is acknowledged that humour loses much in the process. Taken seriously, humour can turn out to be hazardous “to those in power precisely because it is a means by which to remove the veil and expose the emperor’s empty wardrobe”.<sup>15</sup> Approaches exculpating<sup>16</sup> and making light of humour fall flat failing to see that behind the benign, the absurd, lies draped and couched a measure of truth and ambivalence nowhere to be found and excused. Whether truthful or not, “laughter embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it”.<sup>17</sup>

In the literature of humour, three rudimentary theories can be readily discerned: The superiority theory<sup>18</sup> ascribes laughter to feelings of superiority we hold towards others we think inferior, not to say infirm. In laughing out loud about the mishaps of others, we treat them very

much like children, and ourselves as grown-ups.<sup>19</sup> In psychoanalytical terms, we look at a despicable and disdainful alter ego with our condescendingly, superciliously and disproportionately inflated ego. The passion of laughter, as Hobbes states, is nothing but an inadvertent self-worth “arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves”<sup>20</sup> hardly found in others. In Aristotle’s words, comedy is “an imitation of characters of a lower type”,<sup>21</sup> a mimetic parody of a lowly breed. In specific terms, through this display of mimicry, the mimic is said to be the bearer of an indelible anxiety for such a “discourse paradoxically requires the ‘native’ to be both entirely Other and also ‘almost the same’, both incapable of being civilized and also fully available for domestication”.<sup>22</sup> That “mimicry is ambivalent, continually producing splitting, excess, and difference”, if not schizophrenia, empowers it to undermine “the authority of the very discourse that is mimicked”.<sup>23</sup> The comic transpires as the derisive and delirious, the ridiculous and ludicrous, but not quite so. The ambivalence of such laughter resides in its ability to assert and deny, bury and revive for “it is gay and triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding.”<sup>24</sup> The ideal and the real, the spiritual and the material, the heavenly and the earthly are grotesquely upturned and capsized in keeping with the maxim that “laughter degrades and materializes”.<sup>25</sup> Degradation should not be understood as being all annihilating and nihilistic. What cannot be cured cannot be endured and has to be hurled down “to the reproductive lower stratum”<sup>26</sup> to conceive, procreate, and regenerate.

The relief theory looks at laughter as being an overflow and discharge of negative energy.<sup>27</sup> Détente theorists presuppose a direct link between “inner emotional states” and “observable physiological reactions”.<sup>28</sup> As mono-directional as it is reducing laughter to external factors, such a flimsy theory fails to probe into the reasons why the same phenomena may trigger laughter in some but not others. There is more to laughter than the physiological world we inscribe it into. Humour is the end-product of an experienced misalignment between

“what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place”.<sup>29</sup> Hutcheson’s theory of incongruity stands in contrast with the Hobbesian theory of superiority. For Hutcheson, instead of reconfirming the status quo, laughter serves as “a form of debunkery, a deflation of false grandeur”,<sup>30</sup> of superiority and self-delusion. On the same plane of thought, Schopenhauer puts laughter on a par with “the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects it had been thought through”.<sup>31</sup> “Humour”, Weaver elucidates, “is experienced when we perceive incongruous elements, such as the experience of the unexpected” or the [mis]placement of two objects or entities together that do not tick tock.<sup>32</sup> “The illogical juxtaposition” and baffling conjunction or, perhaps I should say, disjunction of “two events, ideas, values, perspectives”,<sup>33</sup> the [f]actual and its [mis]representation or “between expectation and actuality”,<sup>34</sup> is what induces roars of laughter, so to speak, by flouting and breaching “the normal, expected and mundane”.<sup>35</sup> To assume that all laughter is infallibly the result of some incongruity of some sort<sup>36</sup> is to miss the mark. Laughter may be deliberate, if not premeditated, aiming at destabilising that which is taken for granted.

The power jest is invested with in being able to deceive for a while before the illusions it is built upon are dissipated<sup>37</sup> and dispelled is worth taking note of. As Critchley puts it, through mere jocular power and prowess, “humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality”,<sup>38</sup> a reality we may not acquiesce in but one we can grin, giggle, smirk, snigger, snicker, smile and laugh with/at. The power of humour lies not simply in its capacity to liberate and elevate the fettered soul from utter depravity to fully-fledged and blown humanity, but also in the potential it carries of bringing about “a change of situation, a surrealization of the real”<sup>39</sup> in a serialisation of the quotidian. Consensual social contracts are rewritten, rules/roles irreverently transgressed in a reevaluation of, not to say revolution against, pervasive and prevalent norms. Actually, “what makes a thing funny is how it impacts the generally held beliefs of the audience” at the receiving end of the joke.<sup>40</sup> The risk inherent in transgressive

humour is that it might “not expect or even desire a change, for then the fun would end.”<sup>41</sup> No sooner does humour become didactic than it ceases to be. Humour is not only a social outcome, but an outlet critiquing the established order from an insider’s point-of-view. Not all humour is critical of well established institutions. Most of it “simply seeks to reinforce consensus”<sup>42</sup> and when touching on the hierarchisation of societies, it does so in so benign a guise it confers only pleasure and “transient relief”.<sup>43</sup> A human condition, “humour might be said to be one of the conditions for taking up a critical position with respect to what passes for everyday life, producing a change in our situation which is both liberating and elevating”.<sup>44</sup> Humour does not happen in a vacuum but is well dependent for its being and coming into being on contexts which largely enrich its content, contexts it interrogates in its turn. In order to apprehend and comprehend its depth, Hopfl suggests putting it back into context.<sup>45</sup> Douglas argues that “the joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but that it can be identified in the total social situation”<sup>46</sup> from which it initially derives and on which it eventually comments. This commentary, we like to think, targets distinct others we poke fun at to reassure ourselves of our common humanity and “blunt the threats implicit in differences”,<sup>47</sup> in otherness.

“By laughing at power, we expose its contingency”,<sup>48</sup> its effects and defects not so much by offering an alternative but by ushering the spectatorship to picture an alternate world devoid of specters, sometimes “at odds with our normal way of viewing things”.<sup>49</sup> “To satirize life and institutions is to believe in a better mode of conduct”<sup>50</sup> which people fail to live up to, and humor may serve as a gentle and sometimes bitter or angry corrective. Directed at those laughed at, laughter is, as Bakhtin states, also “directed at those who laugh”.<sup>51</sup> It tears off and up the mask; “it is the king’s uncrowning”.<sup>52</sup> Not all humour is corrective of abuse, though. Sexist humour is one such exemplum where members of an ethnic group are invited only to be jettisoned and turned into laughing-stocks.<sup>53</sup> Foreigners are funny<sup>54</sup> and ethnicities are far funnier. “Such humour”, Critchely comments, “is not laughter at power, but the powerful

laughing at the powerless”,<sup>55</sup> who end up at the butt of the joke. This type of reactionary humour, at its worst, does little more than confirm and conform with the manufactured “social consensus”,<sup>56</sup> the coercive consent, and hence needs to be discarded in favour of a truer humour. Its truth lies in describing to us “who we are and the sort of place we live in” and in prescribing how this might change.<sup>57</sup> This humour is nothing numinous but simply luminous with a side to it said to be redemptive and therapeutic,<sup>58</sup> capable of bringing “human beings back from what they have become to what they might be”.<sup>59</sup> The extraordinary thing about humour is that it plunges us ineluctably headlong into our deepest recesses by bringing forth our many amorphous faces and vices. Behavioural and attitudinal patterns attracting little or no attention resurge and resurface by virtue of “a new catalyst”<sup>60</sup> – humour.

### Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Most tragedies have survived up to this day and continue to inspire pathos. One need merely mention in passing a few works of Shakespeare’s: *Othello: The Moor of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*. However, one cannot forget a comedy like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which still attracts theatre directors.

<sup>2</sup> Heather Hopfl, “Humour and Violation”, p. 36. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 252, tr. William Weaver. London: Secker & Warburg, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Heather Hopfl, “Humour and Violation”, p. 39. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Damian P. O’Doherty, “Heidegger’s unfunny and the academic text”, p.184. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Antonio Savorelli, *Beyond Sitcom: New Directions in American Television Comedy*, p.6. USA: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> John Vorhaus, *The Comic Toolbox: How to be funny even if you’re not*, p. 19. Los Angeles: Sliman-James Press, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Pam Morris ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, p. 194. Great Britain: Glossary Edward Arnold Ltd, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Global Race Joking*, p. 2. Great Britain: MPG Books Group, 2011. In *Representing the Unrepresentable*, Allannah Johnston et al speak of “the potential absurdity of taking humour seriously” p. 113. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Allannah Johnston et al, “Representing the Unrepresentable”, p. 153. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Global Race Joking*, p. 8. Great Britain: MPG Books Group, 2011.

- <sup>17</sup> Pam Morris ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, p. 209. Great Britain: Glossary Edward Arnold Ltd, 1994.
- <sup>18</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action*, p.2. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.96.
- <sup>20</sup> Wallace Chafe, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest: The feeling behind laughter and humor*, p. 141. USA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *The Poetics*, p. 11 trans. S. H. Butcher. Easy read Comfort Edition, 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*, p. 51. USA: Oxford University Press Inc: New York, 2006.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 52.
- <sup>24</sup> Pam Morris, ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, p. 200. Great Britain: Glossary Edward Arnold Ltd, 1994.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 206.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action*, p.3. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Herbert Spencer was one of the first theorist to have written a treatise on humour. He has an interesting example illustrating this outbreak of nervous energy: Imagine an audience watching a play and just when the characters are about to reconcile, a goat wanders on stage. I will leave you to imagine the rest.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, p.176. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005.
- <sup>29</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action*, p.3. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- <sup>30</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*, p.34. UK: Wiley and Blackwell, 2009.
- <sup>31</sup> Schopenhauer, *In Every Case*, Vol I, Section 13
- <sup>32</sup> Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Global Race Joking*, p. 18. Great Britain: MPG Books Group, 2011.
- <sup>33</sup> Robert Westwood, "Theory as Joke", p. 49. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- <sup>34</sup> Simon Critchley, "Humour as Practically Enacted Theory, or, Why Critics Should Tell More Jokes", p.18. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Westwood, "Theory as Joke", p. 49. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- <sup>36</sup> Charles R. Gurner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, p.24. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1997.
- <sup>37</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 179. New York: Hafner Press, 1951.
- <sup>38</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action*, p.1. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp.9-10.
- <sup>40</sup> John Vorhaus, *The Comic Toolbox: How to be funny even if you're not*, p. 5. Los Angeles: Sliman-James Press, 1994.
- <sup>41</sup> Michael V. Tueth, "Breaking and Entering: Transgressive Comedy on Television", p. 29. In Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, eds., *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*. USA: State University of New York, 2005.
- <sup>42</sup> Simon Critchley, "Humour as Practically Enacted Theory, or, Why Critics Should Tell More Jokes", p.18. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action*, p.41. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- <sup>45</sup> Heather Hopfl, "Humour and Violation", p. 36. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- <sup>46</sup> Mary Douglas, "Jokes", p.293. In Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*. USA: University of California Press, 1991.
- <sup>47</sup> Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival" p. 97. In Arthur Power Dudden, ed., *American Humor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- <sup>48</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action*, p.11. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- <sup>49</sup> Robert Westwood, "Theory as Joke", p. 49. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- <sup>50</sup> M. Thomas Inge, "What's So Funny about the Comics", p.82. Published with a myriad of essays on the topic of humour in Arthur Power Dudden, ed., *American Humor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- <sup>51</sup> Pam Morris ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, p. 200. Great Britain: Glossary Edward Arnold Ltd, 1994.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 223. In Medieval Ages, clowns were crowned kings in carnivals, but once the ceremony was over, their costumes were travestied, if not torn to tatters.

<sup>53</sup> The Americans would laugh at the French, the French at the Belgians, the English at the Irish, the Scots at the English and vice versa in a vicious cycle.

<sup>54</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour: Thinking in Action*, p.65. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pp.15-17.

<sup>59</sup> Simon Critchley, "Humour as Practically Enacted Theory, or, Why Critics Should Tell More Jokes", p.26. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Stephanie Kosinski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic" p. 91. In Joseph Boskin, ed., *The Humour Prism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*. USA: Wyne State University Press, 1997.

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