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Can we solve the paradox of fiction by laughing at it?

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I have known Pascal Engel for several years and I have always appreciated, in addition to his bright intelligence, his strong sense of humor and his subtle irony. But it was only in May 2010, when I was invited by Pascal to give a lecture in his course on the philosophy of laughter,¹ that I had the opportunity to discuss with him laughter (in all its variants) and philosophy, obtaining useful suggestions for my research – and laughing a great deal.

My starting point consisted in the emotions we feel when dealing with a work of fiction, in this particular case the laughter that some literary or cinematographic works evoke in us. The laughter-fiction relationship seemed to me (and still seems) interesting enough to push me to go to Geneva to talk with Pascal Engel and his students. Why? Because the comic, unlike what happens with tragic works or scary ones, apparently presents no issues. This is what I found fascinating and in need of further study.

Let's think about what happens when we are told a joke. We laugh, and that's it. No one would ever think of asking us "why are you laughing?" or "are you laughing for real?". Unlike other emotions (like sadness and fear),

¹ The lecture, given at Uni Bastions, Université de Genève on May, 4th 2010, was entitled: "L'humour et le paradoxe de la fiction".

in fact, laughter does not seem to establish any paradox² relatively to the fictional stories we call jokes, although they clearly are not real events or objects.³ But if we *really* laugh for something we know is fake, then it is not true that, in order to feel emotions toward an object, we must believe in its existence. Thus the paradox vanishes.

However, it is legitimate to wonder why we have questioned for so long the authenticity and rationality of emotions directed at objects that arouse fear or pity, while instantly recognizing the legitimacy and authenticity of the emotions we feel for the fictional objects and events that make us laugh. Perhaps the reason is simply that, since fear and compassion are negative emotions, and therefore have a *high cost*, we tend to dispense them at our discretion in those situations in which it seems to be actually worth it (i.e. in real situations). Instead, as laughter is always a source of income, we accept it in all its forms (whether it relates to real objects or fictional ones).

From this, we may conclude then that while fear and tears are authentic or justified only when caused by real objects, laughter is always true, regardless of the type of object causing it. But this argument is unacceptable: if we admit that the type of object is crucial to determine the authenticity of the emotions it arises, then we cannot make a distinction according to the type of emotion. Either only real objects can cause genuine emotions – so that both a melodramatic novel and a joke cause false ones – or all kinds of objects (real, fictional, past, dreamed, etc.) can arouse in us authentic emotions (which, of course, vary depending on the type of objects to which they are addressed). The topic of laughter clearly invites us to choose the second option.

Let's briefly recall the subject matter and see to what extent it can be characterized as a good answer to the paradox of fiction. It is a simple *modus ponens*: if we really laugh when we are told a joke, it is not true that, in order to feel authentic emotions, we must believe in the existence of what we are told (as no one believes that jokes are true stories); when we are told a joke we really laugh, therefore it is not true that in order to feel authentic emotions we must believe in the existence of what we are told.

Moral of the story: if instead of considering *Anna Karenina* we had focused on any one joke, it probably would have taken much less to find a solution to the paradox of fiction. Take the following joke:

²Here the reference is the famous paradox of fiction, placed at the center of philosophical debate since the publication of the article by Radford (1975).

³On the importance of laughter and jokes in order to demonstrate the absurdity of the paradoxes arising in relation to fiction, see Ferraris (2009, 77): "Jokes are the shining example of laughter that is completely independent of the truth or falsity of the things described".

A man walks into a pet store and asks to see the parrots. The store owner shows him two beautiful ones out on the floor: "This one is \$ 5,000 and the other \$10,000," he says.

"Wow!" says the man. "What does the \$5,000 one do?"

"This parrot can sing every aria Mozart wrote," says the store owner.

"And the other?"

"He sings Wagner's entire Ring cycle. There's another parrot out back for \$30,000."

"Holy moley! What does he do?"

"Nothing that I've heard, but the other two call him 'Maestro'"⁴

We laugh without thinking about the legitimacy or rationality of doing so (or better, if we ask ourselves if our laughter is legitimate, we will probably laugh even more). This clearly highlights how, in order to feel authentic emotions, it is sufficient to have an object toward which they are directed, without this necessarily being a real object. Of course reality can be full of very real anecdotes that make us laugh and cry, but this does not mean that fiction is unable to elicit authentic emotions. It simply means that reality, understandably, has its share in provoking an emotional response in us.

But what is it that makes us laugh at a joke? What, exactly, is the object or event that makes us laugh? Obviously much depends on the skill of the person who tells the joke, her ability to involve us building a well-structured story, with the necessary pauses, gestures, looks and everything else. Let us assume that our narrator is very good. What's funny about the story of a man who goes into a store to ask about parrots? First of all, there's nothing funny and this already augurs well. The guy enquires about the prices of the birds and the reasons given by the trader to justify them are most striking. But the argument advanced in favor of the most expensive one is the spring that triggers the laughter: it is a fallacy of relevance, more precisely a fallacy *ad auctoritatem* which is an invalid argument in which a thesis is accepted only on the basis of the (alleged) prestige of those who propose it.

There is nothing wrong in invoking the authority of an expert, but it is wrong to use the respect for such authority as the *sole* evidence in support of a

⁴Although it is widely accepted that jokes do not have an author in the proper sense, but are rather just *discovered* – as claimed by Ferraris (2009, 77): "[...] just like myths, jokes do not have authors" – we would like to report the text from which we took the joke because it is smart and funny, managing to set out the main issues and themes of philosophy through jokes and paradoxes. It is Cathcart and Klein (2007, 44).

thesis. Why has the trader decided that the third parrot had to be the most expensive? Because he listened to the other two parrots. What makes us laugh is the fact that the price has not been decided on the basis of some characteristic of the parrot, but only by making reference to the fact that his fellow parrots, already very gifted and talented, call him “Maestro”. It makes us laugh because, obviously, this is not a good reason to justify \$30,000 (without thereby arguing that the less expensive parrots are liars). An important element that characterizes this type of fallacy (as the joke makes clear) is that often the personality to which reference is made so as to justify the validity of an argument does not seem to be a legitimate authority.⁵ That’s why the reasoning of the trader makes us laugh.

So we laugh because of the final answer of the trader to the customer, even though we know perfectly well that neither the former nor the latter exist – let alone the parrots. If we were to outline what happens to us, we could propose something like this, which yet would seem absurd:

X laughs for the answer of the trader and X knows perfectly well
that the trader is a fictitious entity;
Believing in the existence of what makes us laugh is a necessary
condition for the corresponding emotion;
X does not believe in the existence of fictitious entities.

Such scheme seems absurd because whether the trader exists or not is absolutely irrelevant with regard to the authenticity of the emotions we feel. It would obviously be different if the client were our father and the joke, far from being a joke, was a true story: our father could be the customer entering the store and being fooled by the trader to pay 30,000 dollars for a mute parrot. If, after being *robbed* by the trader, our father told us this story, we would

⁵ It is not a coincidence that this type of fallacy frequently occurs in commercials where the only guarantee of the quality of a product is the celebrity spokesperson. Here, of course, it all depends on the type of product you want to advertise and the relevance of the authority you choose. Models are often chosen to advertise beauty products, sportsmen for health products, “beautiful and damned” actors for spirits, etc. and the reasons for these choices are obvious. A model, for example, guarantees for cosmetics and moisturizers because, being beautiful, she is also supposed to have the authority to pass judgment on the validity of these products. The point is that it is unclear what it means to be the most reliable authority to justify the conclusion that has been reached or we want to reach. On what grounds should I believe that this brand of products is valid? Because I am told so by a beautiful model: X is true because P tells me so. But does P really know something of cosmetics, or has she merely been paid to ensure, with her image, the quality of a series of products she knows nothing about? That is the question on which the fallacy *ad auctoritatem* is based.

not laugh so much (although we would still laugh a little bit, we must admit it: maybe we would refrain from doing so simply because it is not very nice to laugh at the misfortunes of others) and we would sue the trader for taking advantage of him.

We laugh so heartily *because* we know it is a joke telling the story of fictional objects and events: their status as fictitious objects, far from making our emotions less authentic, explains and justifies them.⁶ Laughter, and more generally comedy, thus resolves the paradox of fiction and demonstrates its groundlessness.

1. Laughter as a solution to the paradox of fiction

Why did not we think of that before? Why do we concentrate on negative emotions, asking whether or not they are authentic when not directed toward existing objects, when it would be enough to have a laugh to make all paradoxes vanish? In fact, it would have been enough to think of a hypothetical paradox of fiction based on comedy to figure out where to find the solution: just as it is not necessary to believe in the existence of what makes us laugh in order to laugh out for real, so it is not necessary to believe in the existence of what makes us cry in order to cry our heart out. But if the paradox of fiction has no reason to exist as regards comedy, then it is unclear why it would still stand as regards tragedy. And, as we have seen, it would not be a good argument to claim that the paradox of fiction has the right to exist only in relation to tragic works (and this regardless of the fact that the first book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on tragedy, did not go astray unlike that on comedy).

In fact, the problem with the emotions we feel for the non-existing characters of novels or films seems to emerge if and only if we are talking about the so-called "negative emotions". Why cry for someone who does not exist? Why be afraid of a vicious murderer who only exists in fiction? On the other hand, though, when we are told a joke or watch a movie with Mr. Bean, we laugh without questioning the authenticity of the emotions we feel. In the case of comedy apparently no problem arises, although we know perfectly well that even in that case our emotions are not directed toward objects that exist in the world of space and time. But why should we doubt the sincerity of the tears we shed for Anna Karenina while not doubting at all the authenticity of the laughter aroused by Mr. Bean?

⁶On true emotions we feel for fictitious objects I refer the reader to Barbero (2013), pp. 45-58.

We could answer this question by arguing that jokes or comedies do not really cause emotions, but merely states of mind or moods.⁷ The difference between laughter (for Mr. Bean) and sadness (for Anna Karenina) lies in the fact that in the latter there supposedly is what we might identify as a cognitive component, in virtue of which we say that our emotions are directed toward an object, wonder whether it is reasonable to feel emotions for objects that do not exist and ask ourselves if these objects could move us to act or behave in certain ways. It is allegedly under this cognitive component that the paradox occurs in cases of sadness and fear felt for fictitious objects but not in cases in which such objects arouse laughter and joy. This explains, in theory, the reason why there is a paradox of tragedy but not a paradox of comedy⁸ relatively to the existence of fictitious objects.

It might seem like a good solution, but it is not, since it is based on the highly questionable assumption that laughter and happiness are states of mind devoid of cognitive content. What does it mean “to be devoid of cognitive content”? Does this mean that when I laugh at Mr. Bean it is a bit as if I was in a state of euphoria (while when I cry for Anna Karenina, there are characteristics of Anna and the events she is involved in that make me sad)? It really seems implausible. Suffice it to say that if we see a person who laughs out loud on the couch and ask her “why are you laughing?”, she could answer us “for no reason” (meaning “my laughter does not have a cognitive content”) - and then we would rightly think she is euphoric (just as we think that those who cry for no reason are depressed). But if she answers that she is laughing at a Mr. Bean gag, then we will probably think that there is a reason (i.e. an object) for which she laughs: Mr. Bean, in fact. It is therefore not possible to make a distinction between tears and laughter for fictional objects by simply referring to the cognitive content supposedly possessed by the first, but not the second. In fact, as we have seen, laughter also has a specific cognitive content. The person who laughs at the scene where Mr. Bean tries to dive from the trampoline is neither euphoric nor generally happy: she is laughing because she just saw a funny scene with a guy making a thousand grimaces and trying to dive off a diving board.⁹

⁷ The position that laughter is not exactly an emotion but a simple state of mind was defended by Stuart Brock during a series of conversations with him about these topics.

⁸ Later we will see how another paradox can be found in comedy. It does not regard the status of the fictional objects our emotions are directed to (which, as we have seen, is not a problem), but the circumstances for which in comedies, in general, we laugh at the misfortunes of others (which, in normal life, we usually do not do).

⁹ *The Curse of Mr. Bean*: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_bX_jX9O8w.

There is no paradox of fiction in the case of comedy, not so much because laughter and happiness are not emotions, but because they are not negative emotions. Is the *cost* of the emotions that determines the level of ontological concern: this is why sadness and fear raise many issues, while laughter does not (let alone giving rise to paradoxes). If we have to *pay* personally by crying or being scared, we want to know why exactly we despair, while trying to figure out what it means to pity or fear a fictional character and how this is different from feelings we have for real people and situations. Instead, for those emotions that only bring advantages (like the good humor and joy that comedies often give us), we do not bother asking questions and just enjoy them. However, seeing a paradox only where it suits us is never a good move, especially if we are interested in taking into account the issue *parte objecti*: we deal with fictional objects both in comedy and in tragedy, so either we admit that in both cases our emotions are genuine as directed to those objects, or we refuse to regard what we feel in those cases as emotions in the true sense of the word.

I am committed to defending the position that the emotions we feel for fictitious objects are authentic and rational both in the case of tragedies and in the case of comedies (because in both cases we are dealing with fictitious objects).¹⁰ The theory of the object identifies an object (a fictitious object, be it Anna Karenina or Mr. Bean) as the cause of a specific emotion (sadness or happiness), thus enabling us to dissolve the paradox of fiction.¹¹

An emotion, to be authentic and rational, merely needs to be focused on an object (and not, as the fictionalists obstinately assert, an *existing* one).¹² When we laugh at Mr. Bean all we need is to believe that there is an object with certain characteristics involved in events such as to provoke in us emotions like enjoyment and happiness. With these assumptions, it is clear that the paradox does not arise: we believe Mr. Bean is ridiculous for some of his features, but we do not believe that Mr. Bean actually exists (meaning the character, of course, because the actor Rowan Atkinson exists in all respects).

Another possible objection to the idea that the emotions we feel for comedies can be a proof of the groundlessness of the paradox of fiction might consist in pointing out that laughter arises no paradoxes for the simple reason that it is not a serious thing. After all, one does not laugh that often (only children and madmen do it on a frequent basis) and above all it is never really

¹⁰Barbero (2010).

¹¹See Meinong (1904).

¹²See Walton (1978, 1990, 1997).

clear what there is to laugh about. *Risus abundat in ore stultorum*, said those who believed that the outward manifestations of joy and laughter, as well as the body with all its demands, should be silenced so as not to harm the soul and the spiritual dimension of individuals in general. How can we forget that in *The Name of Rose*,¹³ Jorge of Burgos commits the most atrocious crimes precisely to keep the last surviving copy of the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* on laughter and comedy hidden? Of course, there laughter and comedy were condemned only because, if indeed, as Aristotle argued, it was possible to laugh at everything, then there was a risk that one could even laugh at God. It was therefore a moral condemnation of laughter: if you can laugh at everything, then there is nothing absolute, and everything depends on individual choices. However, it is not the moral side of emotions that is discussed here, but the purely ontological side. In this respect, laughing because of a comedy is an emotion just like crying for a tragedy. From an ontological point of view, in fact, laughing at Mr. Bean is not significantly different from crying for Anna Karenina: in both cases we have an object capable of arousing certain emotions in us.

So the fact that laughter has been regarded as a manifestation of the devil (as suggested by the *doctor Mellifluus* Bernard Clairvaux), a sign of stupidity, a loss of control or rationality and so on,¹⁴ is not important for us here, as we are interested in the object of laughter and not laughter itself. Another interesting case is that of the laughing object, which could be seen as a sort of mid-point: what about a laughing statue? The starting point is offered by the famous film *Scusate il ritardo*,¹⁵ in which Massimo Troisi explains why the real miracle would be a Madonna laughing (and not crying). Mind you, an inanimate being (object) such as the statue of the Madonna weeping is already quite a miracle, but the idea that it could possibly laugh would make it – as Troisi says in the movie – much more miraculous.

Why? For three reasons: first, because it is more difficult to *pretend* to laugh than to cry (try to pretend to laugh, if you are not a professional actor it will be really hard, while you can easily pretend to be sad by looking *down*, talking little, etc.). Secondly, because laughter requires more facial changes than crying (which, at most, requires a few tears in the eyes). Finally, it would be a super miracle because while it is assumed that the Madonna may have many reasons to cry (basically the evils of the world and the wickedness of

¹³U. Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1983.

¹⁴For an interesting history of laughter, see Minois (2000).

¹⁵ M. Troisi *Scusate il ritardo*, with M. Troisi, G. De Sio, L. Arena (Italy, 1982).

men), we do not believe that she has that many reasons to laugh (in fact why would she laugh? because she finds us funny? because our lives are more ridiculous than a hilarious joke? Because we are like her and her son, the only difference being that we do not have a fast track to reach the Father?). However, in both cases (of the Virgin laughing and weeping) it would be a full-blown miracle, since inanimate objects, as is well-known, do not have emotions. Nevertheless, if they could, we might assume that they would have emotions in response to (or even just awareness of) those we feel for them, as it normally happens in relations between human beings.¹⁶

The Madonna crying (or laughing) would be a curious phenomenon to be tackled because of its intermediate status between the object of the emotion and the subject feeling it, and yet for many reasons, not least that of common sense (which, especially in philosophy, always comes in handy) I'll discuss it no further. Let us return then to our viewer, who laughs heartily at a Mr. Bean gag, or to refer to a classic of comedy, let's say she is watching a movie of Laurel and Hardy. What is she laughing at? What's so funny in a man breaking through the floor with a simple hop and ending up downstairs?

2. The concept of "humor"

In order to understand what's funny about what makes us laugh, it is necessary to dwell on the concept of "humor". What is the basis of humor? Why do we find something funny or entertaining? What does it mean to say that something makes us laugh? Is there a definition of comical? The question can be tackled from two different points of view: *parte objecti* and *parte subjecti*, because it is one thing to ask what features an object must have in order to be funny, but asking why a person finds something funny or amusing is another thing. However, it is clear that these two distinct levels affect each other. In fact, it often happens that something is funny because there are users that, under certain conditions and in the appropriate context, find it such. The context of use and the awareness of the object to which we address our emotions are basic elements: we can find the features of an object funny only if we believe

¹⁶In this sense Ferraris (2007: 195-196) speaks of works of art as automatic sweethearts, works that pretend to be people: "Thus we account for the specific form of illusion that is common to all forms of art. [...] Artworks are things that pretend to be people, i.e. automatic sweethearts. What do I mean by this? [...] In works, as well as in the Automatic Sweetheart, we are dealing with physical objects that are also social objects, and yet [...] arouse feelings, just as people do when we consider them as such and not as simple functions – except that, unlike people, they do not expect nor offer any kind of reciprocity."

that the object is fictitious¹⁷ and, likewise, we can find something funny only if we experience it in an appropriate context.¹⁸

But what, exactly, makes us laugh at a given object or event? Philosophy has basically given three possible answers: one referring to the absurdity that characterizes some objects and events, one referring to the superiority that the viewer feels towards what makes her laugh, and one insisting on a sense of relief that the object arouses in the viewers. These responses have been formulated in many different ways by philosophers,¹⁹ but we will address them very generally by referring to the *theory of absurdity*, the *theory of superiority* and the *theory of relief*.²⁰

Theory of absurdity. According to this theory, absurdity can be perceived both within the comic element itself and between the world of fiction and the real world. It is a position that has noble origins and that can be traced back to Kant: "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."²¹ This theory finds the essence of what makes us laugh in the lack of compliance with certain laws (logical, moral, etc.) or even with our expectations. This absurdity, however, must be de-

¹⁷ Just think of the following joke, which makes us laugh only if we believe that it is just a joke and not a news story on yet another tragic plane accident: "An Italian, a Frenchman and a German are on a plane that is plummeting. There are only two parachutes. The Italian begins to cry saying that he has seven children, a wife, elderly parents without pension and if he dies it is as if they all died, then prays Santa Rosalia throwing himself on the ground, writhing and crying like a baby. Then he gets up, takes a parachute and jumps off, leaving the other two with the simple phrase 'forgive me, but I have to save myself'. Then the Frenchman asks the German: 'what do we do now?'. The guy calmly opens a bottle of beer and replies: 'No worries, the Italian jumped off with a rucksack'."

¹⁸ For example, if we watched a comedy in the dentist's waiting room we would certainly enjoy it less than if we watched it at home with a couple of friends, comfortably sat in our armchair.

¹⁹For a critical presentation of the main theories that, from Aristotle to the present, have tried to explain the phenomenon of the comic, see Morreal (2009a).

²⁰See Levinson (2006: 390-394). Obviously the theories classified here are the result of the simplification of different philosophical positions. It is also evident that, with deeper explanations, some philosophers might be seen as defenders of a theory different from that which I here attribute to them. For example, Kant could be seen both as a supporter of the theory of relief and as an advocate of the theory of absurdity. In fact, he insists on both the sense of pleasure that invades the viewer when he understands that what he thinks is going to happen will not happen, and on the perception of something absurd in the object that causes us to laugh. Similarly to Kant, many authors mentioned herein may be brought under one or the other theory. Therefore this classification does not claim to be exhaustive and is presented with the sole purpose of broadly exposing the main theories on the essence of the comic.

²¹Kant (1790), First Part, sec. 54.

tected in the object by a subject whose rationality is firm: this explains the link between laughter and intelligence, which clearly highlights the reason why only humans (the rational beings *par excellence*) are able to laugh in the proper sense.

Actually, that funny objects or events should have something absurd about them seems to be neither a necessary (there may be funny jokes that have nothing absurd about them) nor a sufficient condition (many absurd situations do not elicit laughter). One could even argue that, in any case, the funniest jokes are the ones that do have some element of absurdity, but even if it were so, the absurdity would be at best a necessary condition (and therefore fall within the definitions of humor and comical without exhausting them).²²

Then what else do we need to laugh? The absurdity should not simply be detected, but it would also be important that it was appreciated by itself, giving rise to no negative emotions (as in the above-mentioned case in which the joke was about our poor father being fooled by the parrot-seller) and having no potentially harmful practical implications.²³ In any case, the characteristic of absurdity does not seem to cover all the cases²⁴ that we would be willing to place under the category of "comical",²⁵ and therefore we should perhaps look elsewhere.

Theory of superiority. It is a theory that goes back to Hobbes who, in his *Treatise on Human Nature*²⁶ and in *Leviathan*,²⁷ explains the reasons for laughter by

²²Martin (1983), pp. 74–84.

²³A. KOESTLER (1964): 27–63. Here we also find a possible formulation of the paradox of laughter, although a substantially different one from that proposed here in § 3.

²⁴Also, it does not explain the interesting circumstance for which we also laugh the second time: if it were only a matter of perceiving the absurdity, then in theory we should just laugh the first time, when we detect the absurdity and are surprised by it. Instead, it often happens that we laugh several times (when, presumably, the element of surprise is gone) for the same joke or comedy.

²⁵Also, even when we find the absurdity, it is not always clear that this is the main reason why we laugh (for example, this does not explain why there are some people elected to become the protagonists of some jokes), and in fact much also depends on the attitude of the user. One way to save this feature from the many objections is to argue that the absurdity must be a characteristic not so much of the content, but of the structure of what we find funny. See Lipitt (1992).

²⁶"The passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly" Hobbes (1650), Ch. 9.

²⁷In *Leviathan*, laughter is seen as a typical manifestation of the weak, who constantly need to be compared to people below them so as to be reassured about their value: "Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter [...] And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of

referring to the sudden awareness of the user's own superiority, which puts him in a position of strength. In this definition, Hobbes assimilates the positions of Plato²⁸ and Aristotle,²⁹ for whom laughter was just a strange combination of pleasure and malice aroused in the viewer by someone who believes to be better than he actually is and, in any case, is worse than the viewer.

Laughter is thus an emotion of pleasure mixed with pain because in fact the user laughs at the ignorance, flaws or misfortunes of others, thereby proving to be petty and mean. To this perspective also belongs the view proposed by Bergson,³⁰ who dwells much on the great social power of comedy: far from being a mere expression of pettiness, comedy is used by people to criticize society or deviant behaviors, with the aim of stigmatizing and/or defending the conduct of society's members. This also explains why we better enjoy comedy together: it is a social phenomenon that can be fully understood, accepted and enjoyed only in a social context. Laughter is aroused by the perception of certain characteristics that turn any object into a caricature: a sort of inauthentic object that can elicit laughter and derision in us. The viewer feels superior to such an imperfect object, and this acknowledgment of others' imperfections (it is not by chance that we always laugh at people or humanized objects) provokes a kind of pleasure that is naturally manifested in laughter (the comic, thus, often has a *Schadenfreude* victim).

Although this theory is also very convincing, it seems clear that the feeling of superiority cannot be identified neither as a sufficient condition (not all feelings of superiority can be found in our emotional responses to the comic), nor as a necessary condition of the comic (because we might find a joke funny by itself or we may experience feelings other than superiority). Also one could – thus rejecting the theory of superiority – not share the basic assumption of this position, which is that the essence of the comic does not reside in the object judged comical or funny, but in the person considering it such. It appears that the foundation of this theory is some sort of confusion between the genesis and the structure of the comic: it is one thing to speak of the mechanism that is activated in the users causing them to find a particular object funny, but to identify the characteristics that make an object funny is another thing (and between the two levels there must not necessarily be a relationship of depen-

others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and to compare themselves only with the most able." T. Hobbes (1651), part 1, ch.6.

²⁸ Plato, *Republic*, Book III, 389, and *Philebus*, 48-50.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a, 33-38, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127b-1128b.

³⁰Bergson (1900).

dence or emanation, as the theory of superiority seems to take for granted)³¹.

Furthermore, one could object that, even if there is a feeling of superiority in the fruition of the comic, it is very different to laugh at someone ridiculing and almost despising them, and to merely poke fun at someone. Last but not least, this theory makes it difficult to explain the widespread phenomenon of self-irony: my present I does not always laugh at an earlier I (and therefore it does not always laugh at *someone else*), but it often happens that we laugh at what we are *now* (and smile, perhaps, at what we used to be). So let's look at the third and final theory on the comic and its essential characteristics.

Theory of relief. This is the theory³² according to which the comic relieves tension (like a safety valve) by breaking the rules (social, moral, logical, and even plain common sense – such as the rule to be serious) and momentarily releasing the users from their grip. The main proponents of this theory are Spencer³³ and Freud³⁴ who see the essence of the comic in the ability to *free* people from constraints allowing them to vent (for a short period of time) their pent-up energy.

Freud interpreted reactions to comedy in the light of his theory of consciousness and the unconscious: the fruition of the comic is important because it allows for the fulfillment of the drives linked to aggression and sexuality, which are usually repressed. Freud, like Bergson, also notes the social dimension of the comic, claiming that jokes and witticisms require the presence of at least two people to have the desired effect (at least, in fact, one tells the joke and the other laughs). According to Freud, there are two main types of jokes: the innocent – the typical serene laugh after a good joke – and the interested one, i.e. the laughter produced by the pleasure derived from having vented aggressive or sexual energies.

In general, the theory of relief detects the essence of the comic in its effects: the comic is what frees us from the constraints of life, taking away inhibitions and allowing us to unleash our pent-up energy. However, it seems that this position does not work either: referring to the unleashing of repressed energy helps us understand what happens when we have fun, but still it does not tell

³¹Or at least it is taken for granted by the classic presentations of the theory (see Morreall (1998), pp. 401-405; Levinson (1998), pp. 562-567, for which in fact the superiority felt by the public is what properly constitutes the essence of the comic.

³²For a good presentation of the theory of relief, see Morreall (2009b).

³³Spencer (1860). In addition to identifying the essence of the comic, Spencer is also interested in understanding why it provokes the outward manifestation of laughter, venturing in the search of a physiological explanation.

³⁴Freud (1905).

us anything about why this happens. In fact, the position that seems to be more suited to play the role of the general theory of the comic is the theory of absurdity, since neither the theory of superiority nor that of relief seem to have sufficiently broad a scope to play such a role, and also seem to be more focused on users and on the mechanisms that trigger the enjoyment of the comic than on the object as such.³⁵

3. Humor and horror

Let us now move on from the theories that try to explain the essence of humor and focus on a matter concerning fruition *parte subjecti*. For example, think about what happens when we watch a comedy: we normally laugh out loud, sometimes even to tears. How come? A possible answer is that we laugh because what we are watching is very funny. But is it true that *what* we see is really *funny*? Take for example *County Hospital*,³⁶ the film in which Laurel and Hardy go through an odyssey (as they always do): Hardy, poor fellow, was hospitalized with a broken leg. He's visited by Laurel who, because of a stupid accident, nearly kills the doctor getting Hardy early discharged. Then Laurel, to make it up to Hardy, decides to give his friend a lift home but, without knowing it, he is under the influence of a sleep-inducing medicine that he has inadvertently taken in the hospital by sitting on a syringe. So, barely able to keep his eyes open, he causes a new serious accident in which also his friend is involved. In the last scene, when they crash, the audience usually laughs like crazy.

Perhaps it would be worth asking *what* it is we laugh at. Is it funny to see a friend go to the hospital? Is it funny to risk killing him while driving him home because you are falling asleep? No, in fact, put it this way the story does not seem funny at all, and yet when we watch the film we just cannot help but cry with laughter. This is the *paradox of comedy*.

Why do we laugh at things that, if they occurred in real life, would make us sad or at least worried? How is it that we feel a pleasure so great that it turns into laughter when watching or reading about the misfortunes of others? Terrible accidents happen, people risk dying, floors collapse, cars crash, and we laugh. In order to bring out the real paradox, the questions to be considered are the following: 1) why do we seek in comedies what in everyday

³⁵Levinson (2006: 393).

³⁶J. PARROTT, *County Hospital*, with S. Laurel and O. Hardy (USA, 1932).

life we strive to avoid (and which, if it happened, would arouse anything but laughter)? 2) how can we laugh at the misfortunes of others?

First, let us ask whether it is contradictory that, in comical works of fiction, we look for what in real life we try to avoid (vases on the head, pianos on the feet, destroyed houses, etc.). As much as this is a strange behavior, we cannot really call it contradictory, since it is not contradictory to search in fiction for objects and events that we would rather avoid in real life. From this point of view, the conflict is only apparent.

The issue raised by the second question is more interesting: how can we find the misfortunes of others funny? How is it possible to be aware of the seriousness of what is happening to our characters and still have fun seeing their misfortunes? There seems to be a real conceptual impossibility: if it is true that we are aware of their misfortunes, then it is unclear how we could laugh at them. This is the paradox of comedy, which it consists of three theses that are individually plausible but, if taken together, contradict one another:

- 1) Laughter is the manifestation of a positive emotion experienced by the user;
- 2) The characters of comedies often undergo misfortunes of which the user is fully aware;
- 3) The user of comedies laughs and enjoys herself.

The paradox dissolves when we recognize that when we enjoy comedies, our entertainment is not addressed directly (or mainly) to the characters undergoing all those disasters and catastrophic events, but to the narrative *structure* and *style* of composition of the work. Not surprisingly, if the style of the play is poor we do not laugh out loud, but we die of boredom, or worse, begin to suffer along with our hapless characters.³⁷ What is crucial is then how objects and events are presented, what role they play within the broader narrative structure and how the misfortunes described are part of the whole. That is why it is substantially misleading to ask what is the reason why we laugh at all those disasters: the fun we have, in fact, is simply a *function* of the way in which the object is presented within the work as a whole.

Resume the initial question: what is it that makes us laugh in the comedy of Laurel and Hardy? They destroy everything, everything always goes wrong, and yet they make us laugh out loud. It is not so much a question, as Aristotle claimed, of laughing at those who are worse than us (because in

³⁷ Exactly the same mechanism well described by Hume (1757).

this case the paradox of comedy would still stand), but above all, as Hume observed, of appreciating the way in which their stories are constructed and articulated, of recognizing the appropriateness of the chosen style and language. This perfection is what awakens laughter within us, not the misfortunes the protagonists are involved in.

That's why the vision of *County Hospital* keeps us entertained so much: because it expresses a surreal comedy where, according to the classical scheme of comedy, an insignificant episode (Laurel tries to crack a nut with a counterweight that keeps Hardy's leg raised) is the cause of a series of disasters (Hardy finds himself upside down with the broken leg in the air and the doctor is thrown out the window threatening to fall out). Then, according to the classical scheme, Hardy is the one to pay for the consequences of his friend's actions (and in fact is thrown out of the hospital), and Laurel, who is the naïve character *par excellence*, is (as always) amazed by what happened.

Therefore, it is not at misfortunes that we laugh, but at the way in which they are presented. In fact, if the same misfortunes were presented differently or were real, then we would be likely not to laugh at all. Likewise, if the person telling a joke is very good, hearing him talk in a certain way and seeing him make certain gestures will probably suffice to make us laugh, at least initially, regardless of the content of the joke itself. This is the reason why we usually laugh more at jokes than at life: not so much because life is sad, but because jokes are built and told better (on the other hand, when would we ever get an Italian, a German and a Frenchman having to jump off a plane with a parachute?).

A film genre that well illustrates how the structure and style of the narrative are what causes us to laugh *almost independently* from the content are parodies: what about a work that has substantially the same content as another but, through a completely different narrative style and language, has a diametrically opposite effect to that elicited by the original? Think of *Young Frankenstein*³⁸ or *Repossessed*,³⁹ which are respectively the parodies⁴⁰ of *Franken-*

³⁸M. Brooks, *Young Frankenstein*, with G. Wilder, M. Feldman, P. Boyle (USA, 1974).

³⁹B. Logan, *Repossessed*, with L. Blair, N. Beatty, L. Nielsen (USA, 1990).

⁴⁰I am only reporting here examples of film parodies. There are some interesting parodies of literary works too, but I will not take them into consideration since often, behind the parody, they express opinions critical of culture and society, so that they tend to be much more complex than the simple parodies of movies. This is the reason why in literary works it is often very difficult to distinguish clearly the genre of parody from that of satire. Suffice it to say that the literary parody *par excellence* is *Animal Farm* (G. Orwell, Secker and Warburg, London, 1945), which in fact is a satire in which, behind the history of the revolt of the animals in an English farm, lies an allegory of Soviet communism.

*stein*⁴¹ and *The Exorcist*,⁴² where the content is in many ways equal to that of the originals. And yet, they elicit an opposite emotional response in viewers:⁴³ not fear but fun and laughter. The parody is based on the idea of using elements of an existing model and taking them to the absurd, thus inducing the viewer to laugh at things and events that otherwise would make him scream with fear.

This passage from fear to laughter that the style (of parodies, in this case) is able to operate is made possible by two different orders of factors concerning respectively the *pars objecti* and the *pars subjecti* of the fruition. On the one hand, there is an intimate relationship between horror and humor because the fictional objects and events presented by both genres are characterized by similar properties⁴⁴ (think of the classical ones: being chased, being the victim of a disaster, being misunderstood, being unfortunate, etc.). Only, in the former case they terrorize us and make us laugh in the latter. The objects and events that both horror and humor are based on might be in principle indistinguishable,⁴⁵ and yet the emotion resulting in either case would be different, precisely because the user's emotional response is not directed at individual objects and events as such, but at the work as a whole.

Not only is Hume's answer⁴⁶ effective for the comic, but it also allows us to explain some aspects of the relationship between comedy and horror: in fact, if the emotional reaction of the users is not so much caused by fictitious events or objects as such but by their representation in a particular rhetorical frame, then we can understand why the representation of the same object can terrorize us or make us laugh depending on the style or narrative structure adopted. We do not act foolishly if, seeing the actress Linda Blair spinning her head and goggling her eyes, we are terrified in one case (*The Exorcist*) and laugh out loud in the other (in *Repossessed*). In fact, what triggers our reaction is not the event itself (which is the same in both films), but the narrative style and the general structure in which such event is inserted. These are the reasons why we are afraid in one case and we laugh in the other.

On the other side, the one related to the *pars subjecti*, the transition from horror to comedy seems to be favored by a certain similarity between the two

⁴¹ J. Whale, *Frankenstein*, con C. Clive, M. Clarke, J. Boles, B. Karloff (USA, 1931).

⁴² W. Friedkin, *The Exorcist*, con L. Blair, J. Miller, E. Burstyn (USA, 1973).

⁴³ Carroll (1999), pp. 145-160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 147.

⁴⁵ Sometimes it is the same actor that plays the role of the same character in the parody. Think of Linda Blair, who is possessed by the devil both in *The Exorcist* and in *Repossessed*.

⁴⁶ D. Hume (1757).

types of reactions that in both cases contain elements such as stupor and anxiety mixed to pleasure (well summarized in the concept of the “uncanny”).⁴⁷ This may explain why the boundary between the two genres is perceived as thin: we easily move from one emotional reaction to the other by the mere change of narrative register. I will not dwell further on this last point, the implications of which would lead me too far, and I will conclude this essay by presenting one of the rare cinematographic works where actually horror, tragedy and comedy coexist (and the effect on users is understandably explosive): *The Meaning of life*.⁴⁸

The Meaning of Life is meant to represent human life from the moment of birth until death, and does it by changing the style of the narrative so often, and so constantly violating the most basic narrative rules, that it is simultaneously hilarious and horribly tragic. The events narrated are the most varied, ranging from a couple in financial difficulty selling their children for experiments, to a sex education class where the students are forced to watch the teacher have sex with his wife; then two men dressed as tiger cut a soldier’s leg for a joke, followed by two nurses who go to the house of a gentleman and take his liver. Finally we move towards the end by seeing a scene in which a man eats to the point of exploding and then one in which a person sentenced to death personally chooses the type of execution as if he were choosing a pair of socks.

Not only do the objects and events described in this work have all the features that are typical both of comedy films and of horror movies, but the interplay between a change of register and the other highlights how the style and narrative determine a certain kind of emotional response instead of another. From the Humean theory it can be concluded that the user’s emotional response is always directed at the work as a whole (be it comical, tragic or both), which is characterized as an object of higher order that can never be reduced to its constituent objects (and in fact, as we have seen, the same scene with the same actors can make us laugh *and* cry).

As candidly put by the announcer at the end of Monty Python’s film, now that “What [viewers] want is filth: people doing things to each other with chainsaws during tupperware parties, babysitters being stabbed with knitting needles by gay presidential candidates, vigilante groups strangling chickens,

⁴⁷For an analysis of the concept of the uncanny – the feeling that develops when the same object or event is perceived as familiar and strange at the same time – which is at the center of the link between horror and humor, the classic texts of reference are *Jentsch* (1906) and *Freud* (1919).

⁴⁸T. Gilliam, T. Jones, *Monty Python’s - The meaning of life*, with G. Chapman, J. Cleese, T. Gilliam, E. Idle, T. Jones, M. Palin (UK, 1983).

armed bands of theatre critics exterminating mutant goats. Where's the fun in pictures?" It is hard to answer, but with Pascal Engel's help we will surely keep trying.

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