

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Spring 2020 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857570020, DOI 10.7413/18258630080

## LAUGHTER

By David Le Breton

(First published May 31, 2020)

It. *Riso*; Fr. *Rire*; Germ. *Lachen*; Span. *Risa*. Laughter can be an expression of pure joy, of cheerfulness, but also of distress, superiority, hatred, shame, shyness, triumph, mockery, embarrassment, submission, disbelief, disdain, haughtiness, defiance, a desire to keep up appearances, and so on. Some laughs are linked to the jubilation of being alive, of play, of being with others, or being tickled, while others to the relief of escaping danger by a hair's breadth (Le Breton 2019). Under the auspices of humour, laughter takes liberties with the order of things. It marks out an active, critical distance from the world, a way of considering and reflecting on it. It is a play on the iridescent surfaces of meaning, a welcome distance-taking from events. Humour challenges social institutions – the family, politics and moral conventions, among others. In breaking our first impression of things, it connects them to other unexpected and incisive meanings. Humour is a form of felicitous deconstruction, a joyful instruction on the plurality of worlds. It broaches taboo subjects that risk provoking discomfort or outrage: homosexuality, impotence, infidelities... Its playful veneer reduces tensions and renders licit remarks that might otherwise cause conflict.

The comic aspect of a situation or attitude is a sort of rebirth of the "infantile ego" confronting the "adult ego". It arises from a dissolution of expectations and incongruity of behaviours with respect to ordinary civility, thus creating discord between several terms. It combines two incompatible meaning matrices in a way that short-circuits expectations, for example, when someone clumsily misses sitting in a chair or sits on a hat. The comic misunderstanding informs the art of the clown and the burlesque, just as it permeates the actions of the absent-minded and the joker. The class-clown belongs to this register. As a public entertainer, this figure is the modern version of the traditional clowns of many human societies. The comic side of humanity is a celebration of childhood. One's ridiculous other behaves like the child that once was. It is the resurgence of the infantile in the man or woman of today. The Tramp, for example, never integrates the codes of conduct governing civility. He is free from all constraint, centred strictly on himself, always on the edge of distraction and provocation. Like many other comedians, he behaves shamelessly,

pushing others or using unscrupulous means to take their place. He respects no one, whether they be children, women, the elderly, the sick or disabled. It is the revenge of the id on the superego, of the impulsive on the reality principle and civility, without the least sentimentality.

The burlesque subverts social rhythms, presenting characters as though in a state of constant agitation and bound to an acceleration of time, movement, events and gags. The suppressed imagination, which inwardly envisions the worst in order to ridicule people or situations, is given free rein here. Social reality is brutally stripped of its serious outer layer and reality principle by an irruption of the unexpected that lays bare its underlying conventions. Burlesque cinema is an exhilarating subversion of social rituals, in its most unusual and unpredictable form. The seriousness of existence is turned on its head to reveal its humorous flip side. Actors scuffle, struggle, scramble, fall down, chase each other or have cream pies or other projectiles thrown at them. However, the protagonists never laugh because any display of hilarity on their part would reveal the arbitrariness of the situation, the fact that it is deliberate. The realistic effect depends on the protagonists' seriousness. Universal and purely visual, American burlesque cinema brought together a socially and culturally mixed public in the same jubilation. Americans and European immigrants, sharing neither the same language nor the same references, found themselves united around the same hilarious situations.

In the Freudian economy, humour is the pleasure that results from the lifting of a previous inhibitory *cathexis*, satisfying a tendency that would otherwise remain contained. It is a detour that provides access to otherwise forbidden territory. Laughter emanates from an economy of inhibition, from a loosening of moral censure that affects every individual to some degree. It is a socially acceptable way of unleashing repressed psychic energy. It lifts people out of sluggishness and gloom and restores their will to take matters in hand. It is the pleasure of directly confronting psychic content that has been socially repressed. A child's clumsiness can be hilarious, because it reveals the extent to which he or she is still unaware of the social conventions of behaviour and language. Laughter is often born of a radical and involuntary rupture with social familiarities. It is a narrow escape from meaning. An animal adopting human-like behaviour or vice-versa, a muddling of ideas or confusion of gestures, a tone, style, or speech pattern that is at odds with the character or the situation – these are all sources of comic inspiration. It is not only the dirty or soiled that characterizes what is out of place.

Jokes casually expose unembellished truths, reveal the basis of behaviours or situations. Playing on the infinite entanglement of words and meanings, they vividly bring to light unexpected and tell-tale connections between different dimensions of reality, surprising, revealing correlations that inevitably elicit laughter. They invoke an art of the everyday, a sense of timing, a sensitivity to the quality of words used as much as to the personalities of those present. They add meaning to the interaction that makes it more delectable. They play with words, with their meaning and assonance, make language trip over itself. Words become entangled and produce unexpected and hilarious meanings. A sudden shift reveals their double sense, exposing something beyond what was actually said. Jokes introduce an exhilarating retreat from routine expression. They demonstrate that language is constituted of countless layers of meaning.

## ELICITING LAUGHTER

Storytelling is an art of the everyday that relies on a skilful use of language and perception of situations. It requires a theme suited to the moment and interlocutors involved, otherwise it falls flat and elicits nothing more than an indulgent smile in response to many efforts made in vain. Someone preparing to share a funny story or anecdote primes the audience by creating a situation of expectancy: he might stand up or hit the table, or cast a furtive, wide-eyed or inquisitive glance... The amusing utterance is preceded by a series of intuitive rituals. The way a joke or witty remark is delivered counts as much as its content. The voice changes for an imitation, a stuttering, rumbling or accent... The rhythm of speech, the pauses, the pitch, timbre, and intensity of the voice... The narrator embodies his story, throwing himself into the characters implicated in the story. Mimics exaggerate features. Making faces is the surest way to elicit laughter with the least effort, even without the aid of a funny story.

One trick is to recount a hilarious story with a dead-pan attitude that makes the story or punchline irresistible. In his classic *Enjoyment of Laughter*, Max Eastman (2009) presents the "ten commandments" of the comic arts: be interesting, effortless, plausible, unimpassioned, clear, be right with your timing, stay serious, adapt the story to the intensity or length of the comic feature, give good measure of serious satisfaction (find a balance between the serious and the comic in exchanges with others: the constant presence of the comic can become unbearable), redeem all serious disappointments (so that the humoristic tendency prevails over the seriousness sometimes present in the story).

A witty remark or joke cannot be conceived without a public. Laughter is a group phenomenon that emerges, though sometimes by chance, from shared circumstances. Individuals watching or listening to comic material laugh less when they are alone than when they are with others. Solitary laughs are often suspected of dubious behaviour. However, even alone, people sometimes laugh remembering a funny comment or situation, hearing a joke or verbal slip on the radio or television, or reading a passage of a novel on the train. The others present are potential accomplices.

Laughter is less communicative than it is conformist. People sometimes laugh when seeing others laugh, without knowing the cause of the hilarity, but certain there is reason to be amused. Some jokes are old-hat, but that doesn't prevent them from eliciting laughter. Jokes that have been heard many times may have lost their edge, but they are no less effective. A sort of laugh-reflex becomes entrenched, and it is difficult to resist yielding to convention. Laughter is complicity, a source of fluidity in social relations. Contagious in a group setting, it ricochets from one individual to the next, even over something frivolous, because nobody really laughs for the exact same reasons. Immersed in a group where jokes are flying non-stop, it is difficult to resist laughing at each jest, even though in other circumstances, when alone for example, none of these jokes would elicit such hilarity. Not laughing at a witty remark can be met with jeers and even more laughter among members of the group, who now suspect the culprit of not understanding what was said. He is the tough customer, the grumpy foul-mouth, the one who "doesn't know how to let loose" or "doesn't know who to laugh".

The ability to make people laugh is a gift that seeks the counter-gift of the hilarity produced, of recognition for providing moments of jubilation. Hilarity on the receiving end conveys the successful

reception of the humoristic utterance. When unsuccessful, the speaker often feels disconcerted and uncomfortable. The civility of laughter can sometimes be tyrannical. It is hard to avoid laughing without upsetting or offending the person sharing the funny story, joke or remark. The person seeking to entertain others exercises a symbolic constraint on the audience, bolstered by the positive image he is convinced of possessing. But the art of eliciting laughter is an alchemy that is always under threat. The storyteller is never fully assured of success.

People who continually showcase their humour are often easily accepted into groups. Their laughter breaks the ice and creates trust. They are popular because people are rarely bored around them. Their presence is sought out as a promise of enjoyment. The judicious use of laughter or humour is a sociological art that increases a person's popularity and ability to exercise influence over others.

Whether in the context of burlesque cinema or an unanticipated, everyday gag, these situations involve the ironic return of the body, which tends to be effaced in daily rituals (Le Breton 2019). The body emerges unexpectedly due to a blunder or misunderstanding: spilling a dish on a dinner guest, slipping on a banana peel. In burlesque cinema, the irruption of the body is reflected, most notably, in endless pursuits, cream-pie battles, or zany fights, in a sort of jubilant reliving of the carefree universe of childhood, where every excess is possible without consequences. In *Love Happy* (1949), Harpo Marx passes a handkerchief from ear to ear through his head, taking his eyes out of their sockets to clean them. Chaplin's bodily movements are more like waddling than walking, as he swings his cane around in every direction. He can't remain still. He knees bend, his hands are out of control, his head doesn't seem well-fastened to his shoulders, his face only expresses a nervous kind of laughing or smiling, and his joys and sorrows are carried to extremes. He sometimes stares wide-eyed into the camera. His over-sized pants never stop falling down, barely held up by his suspenders. His jacket is half undone. His shoes are well-worn and ill-fitting. He is always clumsy with objects. His impertinence makes him unpredictable, always on the edge of distraction and provocation, irresponsible like a child.

Whether deliberate or born of circumstances, laughter brings about a radical transgression of ordinary social relations. It entails a "degradation" of the people involved. It incites doing the unthinkable and thus goes against good manners. Spectators can vicariously take pleasure in violating the rules, but without risk to themselves, without fear of reprisal.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- M. Apte, *Humour and laughter: an anthropological approach*, New York, Ithaca, 1985.
- M. Bakhtine, *L'œuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.
- H. Bergson, *Le rire*, Paris, P.U.F., 1989 (orig. ed. 1900).
- N. Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- M. Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter*, New Brunswick (NJ), Transaction, 2009 (orig. ed. 1936).

- B. Gaut, *Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor*, "Philosophy and Literature", 22 (1998): 51-68.
- F. Jeanson, *Signification humaine du rire*, Paris, Seuil, 1950.
- D. Le Breton, *Rire. Une anthropologie du rieur*, Paris, Métailié, 2019.
- G. Minois, *Histoire du rire et de la dérision*, Paris, Fayard, 2000.
- G. Mordechai, *What Makes Humor Aesthetic?*, "International Journal of Humanities and Social Science", 2 (2012): 62-70.
- J. Morreall *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Malden (MA), Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- *Laughing All the Way*, Melbourne (FL), Motivational Press, 2016.
- (ed.), *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1983.
- (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1986.
- S. Paillat, *Esthétique du rire*, "Le Philosophoir", 38 (2012): 131-153.
- R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2000.
- R. Scruton, *Laughter*, in J. Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1986: 156-171.
- J. Shaw, *Philosophy of Humor*, "Philosophy Compass", 5 (2010): 112-126.
- D. Sibony, *Les sens du rire et de l'humour*, Paris, Seuil, 2010.

#### HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

D. Le Breton, *Laughter*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2020 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2020/spring/Laughter.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630080.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAE's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the first volume of *ILAE's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects *ILAE's* Spring and the Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

D. Le Breton, *Laughter*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 3, Milano, Mimesis, 2021.