



Genesis of humor's bad reputation and its inadequacy to the fine artsⁱ

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Abstract: The following work sought to explore the basic aspects of the development of thought around humor and how its bad reputation originated and led to the notion of its nature being inadequate to the Fine Arts throughout history. Through a thorough exploration of the state of the art around the subject, this basic research developed a fundamental context for future development in methodology for the analysis of humorous artistic practices.

Keywords: Humor, Fine Arts, Music.

A gênese da má reputação do humor e sua inadequação às belas artes

Resumo: O seguinte trabalho buscou explorar os aspectos básicos do desenvolvimento ao redor do humor e como sua má reputação se originou e levou à noção de que sua natureza é inadequada às Belas Artes ao longo da história. Através de uma minuciosa exploração do estado da arte em torno do tema, essa pesquisa de base desenvolveu um contexto fundamental para o futuro desenvolvimento de metodologias para a análise de práticas humorísticas em arte.

Palavras-Chave: Humor, Belas Artes, Música.

Of all the characteristics and experiences that trespass human life from early childhood until old, humor is undoubtedly one of the most frequent. Even babies who have barely come into this world and are not yet able to speak can certainly laugh at peek-a-boo jests with their parents or at toys like a jack-in-the-box, and some people have so much sense of humor that they make jokes minutes or seconds before their death. Seldom does a human being spend a whole day without facing something humorous, ludic, or comic, and this constant presence in our lives is precisely what makes people question why so little has been thought about this phenomenon. Also, the similarity between humor and philosophical practice is noticeable: Both are able to gaze at the familiar as if it is strange and vice versa, looking at daily life in a process of de-banalization of its trite aspects and putting a magnifying glass over what was unnoticed before (MORREALL, 1987, 2). Such resemblance can make people question why more reflections are not focused upon humor, in comparison to death or politics, presupposing that philosophy has been the noble and dignified filter of intellectual thinking about aspects of human life while humor existed as mankind's low and vile kind of intellectuality or because the majority of thinkers considered it inadequate and rejected the topic without giving it much thought.

To explain what is funny in a joke or a comic gesture, to say why one is laughing, is relatively easy, but if someone asks, hardly anyone can easily explain what makes a

combination of words funny or create a definition that covers all possibilities of humor—or one simply abstains from explaining the cause: “A joke explained loses its fun.” Moreover, humor often has been seen as a topic deprived of seriousness, deviating from society’s ideal, an undesirable feature, hostile, irrational, irresponsible, and incompatible with intellectual activity. Thus, I am going to take a brief look at the reflection upon humor in philosophy to understand the terms used and how that reflection was and is responsible for humor’s bad reputation and inadequacy to the pinnacles of the intellectual and artistic or any activity that judges itself as dignified and noble. By the end, I am going to form a suitable answer providing a basis for the development of a methodology for analyzing humorous music.

Three historic traditional theories contemplate humor and laughter: the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruence theoryⁱⁱ. Their representatives range from Plato to Bergson and more contemporary theorists. Initially, I should make a distinction between humor and laughter. Laughter is the physical result, through muscular contractions of the body and most of the face, of an individual’s state of joy, jubilation, and amusement and may or may not be caused by humor; humor is not the only cause of laughter. Laughing is possible in situations in which humor is not present, e.g., when one finds out that he won the lottery, when people are exempted from any unpleasant obligation, or even when people find themselves in a shameful situation. Although laughter is a phenomenon that results from more causes than humor, the two are often treated as synonyms. Whatever the reason for that may be, find examples is possible, such as from Henri Bergson, who wrote *Le Rire* (The Laughter), which is actually a book about humor. I should also clarify that what people generically refer to today as humor has not always been a unified concept with such characteristics. Therefore, terms like comedy or ludic frequently are used when treating the matter, or the word humor is used as one of the many facets of ludic/comedy/laughable/ridicule/wit/humor, etc.

Until the mid-eighteenth century, for a little more than two millennia of known western intellectual production, roughly everything said about humor and laughter orbited the theory people now comprehend as *superiority*. This included Plato’s *Republic*, Aristóteles’ *Poetica*, Cicero’s *De Oratore*, Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Descartes’ *Passions de l’âme* and was later rescued in a new form by Baudelaire’s *L’essence du rire* and Bergson’s *Le Rire* to fulfill the idiosyncrasies of the social function of humor in France after the solidified practice of aristocracy followed by bourgeoisie. In sum, humor and laughter were used as an expression of superiority over others. Through them, someone would declare his, real or virtual,

superiority in relationship to others, disapprove vices and deformities, and use it as a verbal or gestural method of abuse and attack on someoneⁱⁱⁱ.

Plato and Socrates would describe humor as a pain of the soul and ignorance of itself because one who practices it believes himself to be better than he really is, rejoicing at someone else's failures as a product of envy, and, therefore, it is an unfit and undignified practice for youth in the Republic (PLATO, 1965, 151). Aristóteles would describe humor as a representation of the mediocre and the ridiculous, a type of ugliness, mistake, or unwisdom, and the joke as a form of abuse, and like other abuses, some of them should be forbidden (ARISTÓTELES, 1987, 14–16). Hobbes describes it as a childish self-boast to perceive any flaw in another and an unfit feature of great men (HOBBS, 1987, 20). Descartes describes it as a form of joy mixed with hatred to perceive wrongs and deformities in another and judge the person as deserving of evil. The function of humor would be to disapprove vices and make them look ridiculous and, thus, unwanted (DESCARTES, 1824, 138, 186–188). Baudelaire would condemn the practice as an element inapprehensible of beauty, a moral and literary flaw, a moral and physical ugliness. The critique of Baudelaire is founded on religious tenets, in which, for him, the “comic is a condemnable factor with diabolical origins,” “one of the clearest satanic signs of man and one of the uncountable complications within the symbolic apple” (BAUDELAIRE, 2008, 37, 39–40)^{iv} and laughter, which he treats as an effect of the comic, is the “apanage of the mad, which implies always, more or less, ignorance or weakness” (BAUDELAIRE, 2008, 36). Bergson pointed out the social functions of humor. Not being able to eliminate behavior through violence, humor would take charge of the social gesture of re-establishing the flexibility of life. The function of humor would be a kind of moral corrective because, once a flaw is pointed out through laughter, feeling ridiculous, the person would search for a way to modify his vice, and if he was not able to do that, he would at least try to hide it. The laughter would be responsible for punishing the habits and serving a reminder of what mankind should be. Bergson said that therefore, laughter did not belong to the “competence of pure aesthetics, because it pursues (in an unconscious and even immoral in particular cases) a useful goal of general improvement” (BERGSON, 2007, 15). Laughter would not be an adequate object for aesthetics and would not correspond with the arts, for arts pursue the individual and the comic points out the general. Humor is hostile, but it is a sociocultural need to intimidate through humiliation in order to correct by punishing excesses as a disease does in natural selection.

Therefore, its nature has been, for a long time, connected to hatred, the illegal, the childish, the unworthy, the ignorance of itself, envy, the antisocial, the antithesis of God, and the ruthless corrective of society, and it is natural that, if people place themselves in this exemplar of reflections on the subject, they are driven to judge humor as inadequate to the wise and serious man, an undesired vice. This systematized rejection by the philosophers, under the comprehension of humor and laughter as a demonstration of superiority, is called by John Morreall the *objection of hostility*. If one can comprehend humor/laughter as superiority, this objection would fit perfectly in the same way as if he entered a fight for the sole purpose of having the pleasure of breaking someone's bones and watching his blood spill; humiliating and ridiculing someone for the sole purpose of having the pleasure of feeling better about oneself would be an attitude at least antisocial and maybe as cruel as the first (MORREALL, 1989, 243–249). However, the theory of superiority has its failures and by pointing them out, the incongruence theory emerges, supported by brief commentaries forgotten in Aristóteles, Cicero, and Descartes' texts, about a certain surprise of admiration and frustrated expectancy.

The incongruence theory was initially founded as a critique of the superiority theory and carried as its basic principle the opposition between two ideas, the contradiction, frustration of expectancy, and immediate apprehension of the incongruence in an unforeseen paradox. Built alongside rationalism, this theory, which has spread in many forms throughout Europe, sought to explain humor and laughter through its relationship with logic and in the incompatibilities that could occur between one's aesthetical and logical perceptions of the real.^v This theory was first developed by Francis Hutcheson, a Scottish philosopher from the University of Glasgow. After his death, a book with two posthumous writings was published in 1750, *Reflections upon Laughter and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees*, the first one containing three letters to the author of the *Dublin Journal* explaining why Hobbes was wrong in his theory and how laughter should be explained. He was followed by Kant in *Critic of Judgement*, Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation*, Kierkegaard in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, and Santayana in *The Sense of Beauty*. Albeit, even though the subject gained more qualified attention and the theory seemed to have a good reputation, at least in comparison to superiority, the opinion on humor stayed negative.

Kant would be the first to offer an explanation on why humor is inadequate in the fine arts, saying that the humor would belong more to the pleasant art than to the fine art because it never shows itself in dignity (KANT, 2005, 180–181). Kant attributes a seriousness

requirement to the fine arts and a need to present a dignified content. Similarly, the practice of judging such works should also be done in a serious and dignified way; therefore, fine arts would be deprived of the humorous resource if they wanted to be judged with seriousness.

The incongruence theory brought with it an objection to certain irrationality in the practice of humor and laughter (MORREALL 1989, 249). This objection resides on the fact that through humor and laughter, people would feel pleased with the incongruence of thought, which is conflicting with the idea of maximum importance of rationality from that period^{vi}. The “lack of control” people would find in themselves while being overwhelmed by laughter is also taken into account—and that can be verified in an aversive way since Plato. George Santayana defends the impossibility of feeling pleasure through the degradation or the comic, saying that once people reached freedom without incongruence, they would have a purer and more pleasant pleasure (SANTAYANA 1955, 152). Schopenhauer, on the other hand, describes the situation as the

triumph of the knowledge of perception over thinking which gives us pleasure. It must, therefore, be delightful to us to see this tireless, strict and more disturbing governess, our faculty of reason, by once condemned by insufficiency. In this sense, the semblance, or the appearance, of laughter is pretty close to that of joy. (SCHOPENHAUER 1966, 98)

Even if humor was an irrational activity, why would an irrational activity not benefit people in certain circumstances, or what could be wrong in it (MORREALL 1989, 254)? In spite of that, within the rationalist tradition, the only acceptable position for a mature human being before incongruence would be to eliminate humor. To appreciate it would mean being immature, irrational, masochistic, or all three (MORREALL 1989, 252). Therefore, laughter and humor were left out of noble and intellectual activities, the ones possessed by the purest reason and seriousness.

The relief theory comes in parallel with incongruence. The first signal of it comes in a letter from the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, to a friend in 1709 that was published later in his 1737 book *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times, Sensus communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*. That was followed by Herbert Spencer’s *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects—On the Physiology of Laughter* (1861) and Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* (1905), which were based on an interest in the physiology of laughter, which then uncovers

the physiological and medical character of that theory. The relief theory did not find the incongruence theory good enough because it only explained what conditions could cause laughter and did not give an explanation of what happens to people under these circumstances. It was not preoccupied with what makes people laugh, but why they laugh at certain things and why the human body reacts like this in certain conditions^{vii}.

Although the relief theory did not have a direct objection to itself like the others and even had a positive outlook on humor, it could still fall under the objection of *irresponsibility*. According to Morreall, this objection is based on the fact that humor is an unserious activity. First, the absence of seriousness should not be a motif for an objection; however, it would imply irresponsibility of the individual in rejecting a solution to a certain problem, acting instead childishly and stupidly. This would happen because, as pointed out in many theories, to laugh requires detachment between people and the laughable object and, consequently, they would not have empathy or practical concern for the solution of the event (e.g., if one sees someone tripping over a banana peel and starts to laugh, he will be exempting himself of the responsibility to verify if the person is fine or hurt and to help the person stand up). Thus, the person who laughs at all incongruences is a person who never sought to correct problems or accidents and is not being what is expected of a human being in society.

Humor is an extemporaneous subject that has changed its applications and facets throughout history and according to the changes in culture and society. Its practice is always a topic of debate, almost all of them concerning its adequacy and its hostility toward minorities in aspects of xenophobia, racism, social prejudice, misogyny, antisemitism, bullying etc., and the consequences of it; its irrationality, irrelevance, and inadequacy to noble and dignified areas of knowledge and arts and its association to a certain kind of immaturity, the rebel youth who did not think through his actions, the lack of technique, the amateurism, foolishness, lack of intellectual capacity, and envy of qualified people, and the easy way out of incompetence; and its irresponsibility: A helpless or casual humorist is always seen as inadequate to society or in certain centers and places as someone who does not treat matters with seriousness and, therefore, is always prone to incompetence, disrespect, or failure, someone who disregards social rituals and does not think his actions upfront as making opportunities to hurt others in the process of his lack of attention and liability to society and obligations. Thus, in fine arts, humor has always been a forgotten or ignored subject, and in spite of small and punctual jokes, totally humorous artists or totally humorous works rarely outlived obscurity, and when

they did, like Erik Satie in music or some of Duchamp's works in visual arts, they were always considered amateurs, clowns lacking technique and finesse, or fool rebels feeling themselves superior to the system; or irresponsible and disrespectful in every way to life, culture, and tradition; or all of those at once and, therefore, were never taken seriously. The bad reputation of humor is one of the main causes of overlooking works of art in history. A humorous piece of art never achieved a place as prime art in history, and it is improbable that someday one will. Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q* probably will never have the same prestige as the *Nude Descending a Staircase* or Lautrec's *La Toilette*, and Erik Satie probably will never occupy more pages than Debussy in a history book, although his relevance for music is huge and unquestionable.

A contemporaneous theory of humor does not create a new objection because it is a unification of past theories through the incongruence theory. Morreall recognizes that all three theories form a conductive line, which is a psychological shift caused by laughter in the cognitive plan, as with the theory of incongruence, or in the affective plan, as with the theories of relief and superiority. This change in a person's psychological state should also be received as pleasant and should happen suddenly, so one does not have time to adapt to the new situation. Hence, *laughter* is the result of a sudden and pleasant psychological shift. *Humor* is a sudden and pleasant psychological shift in the conceptual system of an individual. Nevertheless, the purpose of my paper is not to extend myself by discussing the details of a unified theory of humor (see endnote 2). Yet, this is a starting point for any proper methodological approach for analyzing Humorous art, especially music, due to the indeterminate character of its language and its different poetics from more determinate arts such as visual arts and literature.

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ⁱⁱ Due to the nature of this paper, I am not going to make an explanation of each author's theory on humor, but only his position on the value, adequacy, and reputation of humor. A more thorough discussion of what each philosopher thought, wrote, and conceptualized about humor and how humor and laughter are theorized and discussed nowadays can be found in Morreall's books *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983) and *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987). On the same subject but written by a musicologist, Pena, and pondering the questions of humor in music is the work *Satierik Musique: Da natureza da música humorística em Erik Satie* (2017, 68–247). And the philosophers' works that are described and referenced throughout this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to that theory, when people see someone trip and fall while walking, people laugh because they consider themselves superior for knowing how to walk properly; when we see someone making mistakes, we would laugh in disapproval at the equivocal act committed by the other; and they use any deformity (e.g., a really big nose, the lack of an arm, etc.) as an object of punctual or continuous mockery (bullying) of someone.

^{iv} Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

^v According to that theory, humor rises when people experience something that contradicts their expectation of that supposed event. For example, if one was born in the USA and lived there his whole life, he would have a solid notion of how English is spoken. When receiving a

visitor from Jamaica with a very different accent, it is possible for him to find that amusing when first hearing it because it generates a contradiction between two ideas: the one he is experiencing at the moment (aesthetics) and the conceptual framework he has preconceived through past experiences and cultural construction (logic) about a similar action, which is the proper way of pronouncing words in the English language.

^{vi} A classic example of this is the following quote attributed to Count Philip of Chesterfield (1694–1773): “I am sure that, since I have had the full use of my reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh.”

^{vii} According to this theory, laughter would come from a discharge of considerable tension from the nervous system over the muscular system in general. The laughter coming from humor was the pleasure of escaping from the repression of serious feelings, a relief from the harsh feelings caused in the mind by the first estrangement of incongruence. Also, this theory points out the fact that only a merrily received incongruence is classified as humor and generates laughter; an incongruence of danger or anger caused by a situation without previous references would generate only admiration, surprise, terror, or fright, because tragedy and comedy are two facets of the same phenomenon, differing only in reception.