

- 4 The reference here is apparently to the folk jesters known as *al-Muabbizun* (with the indigenous performance form itself known as *Tahbeez*). British Orientalist E. W. Lane who lived in Egypt during the 1820s and 1830s tells about a farce he watched in an Egyptian village. He has this to say about the performance:

“The Egyptians are often amused by players of low and ridiculous farces which are called *al-Muhabbizun*. They are frequently performed in the festivals prior to weddings and circumcision, at the houses of the great and sometimes attract auditors and spectators in the public places in Cairo. Their performances are scarcely worthy of description; it is chiefly by vulgar jests and indecent actions that they may amuse, and obtain applause, (*An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, London: 1890, p. 384).

- 5 Hazem Azmy’s English translation of the play as *A Peace of Women* is currently in progress, under the editorial supervision of Professor Marvin Carlson. Select extracts from the English translation are forthcoming on the website of the US-based *Words Without Borders* (<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org>).

- 6 For a better understanding of this point, see, for instance, Hazem Azmy, “*Salam El-Nisaa le-Lenin El-Ramly: Men El-Nass Al-Moqtabass ila al-Waqeh El-Moltabes*” (Lenin El-Ramly’s Peace of Women: From the Adapted Text to the Confused Reality). *Al-Moheet Al-Thaqafi*.

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## LAUGHING MATTERS REVISITED The Universality and Relativity of Comicality<sup>1</sup>

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1.

Banqueting Olympians aside, gods are no laughing matter. Indeed, how could a perfect being have any sense of humour and what could it be humorous about? It couldn’t even have a hearty laugh at itself. Self-irony seems to be the core of humour: after all finite beings definitely are inferior to themselves. Therefore, if humour is eminently an almost universal human affair, it may be supposed to be intrinsically bound up with our human condition, with our radical finiteness and with our limited powers of self-organisation, with our consciousness and its modicum of self-reference. The sharp consciousness of our finiteness and the magic of our self-referential alacrity could very well be the source, the foundation and even the necessary condition of all comicality and all sense of humour. In other words, some essential conditions of humour and comicality possibly can be ‘derived’ from our human predicament that we too often tend to forget and are nevertheless continuously reminded of.

2.

What must a finite, self-conscious and self-organising entity, for short, a cultural animal such as man, think about himself? For one thing, he must be convinced that he is on the face of it irretrievably futile. For whatever he intends to realise, to think, to feel or to do, whatever indeed he does is inexorably swept away by the irreversibility of time. And if he is no more, for all practical purposes it is as if he had never been. And this is so, precisely because one must do something in order to be: to be is to be on the way to nothingness. Hence, to be alive is to be perfectly heterotelic. Life is -a priori as it were- ‘much ado about nothing’. Such a state of affairs neatly fits in with the definition that seems to be most promising: the theory that comicality is to be found in the surprise induced by the sudden deflation into nothingness of what was thought to be substantial. Otherwise said, the theory of incongruity. For what can be more important than the expectations of life itself? And what can be more deflating than the sudden



realisation of their evident nullity? And yet, no one is seriously or even humorously inclined, one may presume, to consider our predicament as such as being comical, let alone to see it as a hoax. On the contrary, as there is no viable alternative to being alive, such a move seems to be incongruous by itself. Life as such could be comical exclusively for a man completely indifferent to himself or convinced that he could feel quite cosily at home even in the absence of himself. The first hypothesis is an impossibility and the second is a pragmatic contradiction. For short, to conceive of human existence in this way is to have a fictitious sense of humour. Comicality therefore and humour must be finite, limited and well-defined, just like everything else. For us human beings, being alive, some things cannot correctly be laughed at, however generous our sense of humour. And certainly, life and death themselves are such things. What's more: they are the only things of this sort. As long as life is safe or is thought to be so and as long as a modicum of self-referential vitality is preserved, *almost everything may turn out to be comical and the sense of humour may be almost universal.*<sup>2</sup> Otherwise said, in order not to be trivial and consequently insipid, the comicality of things and the sense of humour must pertain to the episodes of life, not to life in its totality. And they must be specific: they must pertain to the accidents of life, not to its essentials and their inexorable and uniform necessity.

However, limitations in space and time and specifications of essentiality and accidentality are questions of opinion, i.e. of cultural choice. They depend on what is thought to be essential and substantial. And indeed, what consciousness makes of what is 'given' is notoriously diverse, even fantastical, intrinsically fallible and more often than not wrong. This seems to be the reason why the sense of humour and the comicality of things are so unevenly distributed in the world and why the domain of laughter seems to be so vast and diffuse as to defy definition. *One man's laughing stock is another's wailing wall.* Certainly, there are limits: for some things thought essential for the preservation of life are not relative or accidental at all. But these apart, specifically cultural or culturally interpreted natural phenomena can become comical in one way or another and can delight our sense of humour if we are not or not too much inhibited by idiosyncrasy, convention, prejudice or if we, generally speaking, are not taken in by what one might call 'cultural enchantment' and its many paraphernalia. The reason seems to be that, although culture as such is a human necessity, cultural variety and even contradiction, to say nothing of self-contradiction, is widespread. Otherwise said, cultural choices, it appears, are mostly made in the air, if not in the mist, and if they are not as frivolous as fashions, to justify them against alternatives is almost as difficult as to find sharp edges on a circle or to put a sphere right side upwards. And yet, we all spend and sometimes waste our life

betting on ways of living which even if they are -generally by definition- more right than others, are often more wrong than they ought to be, even according to their own standards. Indeed, our finiteness, which makes for the necessity of all-round orientation in the world, at the same time makes for an orientation that is inadequate and incomplete, even contradictory in principle. Alternatives therefore cannot, in the last instance at least, be argued out of existence: they merely can be laughed away. And if we are not somehow and subreptitiously a bit naive, the best we can do is to have from time to time a good laugh at ourselves, that is, at our own cultural pretentiousness, hoping not to be caught in the rear by the tragical features that are at the core of all cultural choice and justification. To be culturally justified in a really satisfactory way is like asking how to throw a double six. As far as mathematics is concerned -and mathematics is the paradigm of proof- it can't be done, unless the dice are loaded, as all well-advanced cultures and some others perfectly know. To laugh seems to be as necessary as it is dangerous: it might show us the dice are loaded indeed. In this sense to expose the fraud of philistinism, the arbitrariness, the emptiness and even the intrinsic heterotely of self-invented absolutes, may be the essence of all comicality and humour.

3.

It is possible to show<sup>3</sup> that all finite beings that need theories about or interpretations of themselves and their natural and cultural environment in order to think, feel and act appropriately, necessarily produce views of the world and themselves that are more or less inadequate and incomplete. This isn't a very remarkable observation. Some exceptions, however, may be noted: perfection and fatality are cases in point. But these have to do with events, situations and things in domains that are closed, i.e. isolated from the environment, naturally or artificially, and that are transparent. In such cases expectations are, as it were, automatically confirmed and unexpected events and therefore contrasts are excluded. But these exceptional -formal and abstract- cases of guaranteed systematic efficiency aside, all real life situations are characterised by openness, chance, vagueness, confusion, fusion, and even contradiction. In these cases description, representation and interpretation of the domain are more or less beside the point, unclear, confused, awkward or even simply wrong and accordingly expectations formed on this essentially contestable basis can easily be thwarted, even to the point of complete frustration. This can happen most plausibly for cultural options and their implementations, because these are conceived, organised, interpreted and implemented symbolically. And symbols are queer and volatile entities and can play most ludicrous tricks, ideally and in fact, in the first place on those who really and naively believe that they are, after all, adequate and complete. Even nature, as it is culturally, i.e. symbolically



described and interpreted, has an essential part to play in this game of hide and seek, between what is thought to be the case and what in fact nature and culture prove to be. *What is thought is never exactly and exclusively what it is thought to be*: up to a point it is always something more and less and something different from what, according to theory, it ought to or is expected to be. Consequently, the almost universal, though always partial, disparity between thinking and being gives all that effectively 'is the case' an almost inexhaustible and unforeseeable debunking power. Moreover, cultural options, being incomplete and inadequate in principle, have as such their own debunking potential: what is thought is not only not necessarily what really is the case - 'ita est sicut significat' - but even what one thinks one is thinking is often not exactly what really has been thought. One safely can say therefore that naturally and/or culturally induced and finally self-induced debunking of cultural pretence at large and its ideal of systematically efficient, hence perfect orientation in the world, is the defining feature of the comicality of things and of the sense of humour.

However, as cultural seriousness is unavoidable, the sense of humour cannot be effectual and things cannot be comical in all circumstances without becoming nihilistic. And nihilism is no laughing matter. To see clearly, to sharply see the essential inefficiency and defectiveness of human nature and culture, requires -in order to avoid indifference pure and simple or even sheer malignity- the neutralisation of its dire effects. The futility of our endeavours, the nothingness of their results must be seen to be futile themselves. Otherwise said, the futile itself must be nullified, defectiveness and inefficiency must prove to be innocuous or, at least, they must be considered so: they must be anaesthetised. This can be done in a whole series of ways, but the most prominent and most widespread 'neutralisation-device' is without doubt the playground.

Under *conditions of play* humour can fully develop and effectively exercise its debunking potential. The feast, the celebration of and at the same time the holiday from culture is therefore the proper place for humorous quips. One must be in a festive mood to stand without loss of vitality the miseries of being: jokes about coffins comfortably designed and luxuriously fitted out can properly be told only by and to people who are, one way or another, convinced of their booming health. *The theatre therefore, the outgrow of this festive mood, the place of enthusiasm and contemplation alike, is the privileged milieu of comicality*. Comedy is play, more or less, always and everywhere. To see the comicality of things and to have a hearty laugh, one must be, up to a certain point, detached. Aloofness is a prerequisite to stand the debunking of what, otherwise, is most of the time the pain of our devotion to the seriousness of life. *The sense of humour therefore*

*shows a marked tendency to become the "fine art" of aesthetic distancing*. For it can be highly dangerous and disruptive to speak truly of reality in its very presence. The play's the thing to catch with impunity the futility of pretence. At least, up to a certain point. It is almost impossible to convince people of their cultural and therefore selfmade contradictions: these are, after all, vices in fashion and therefore the virtues they live by. One can hardly expect people to be prepared, let alone to be able to change the cultural options they have lived by simply because they finally prove to be contradictory. Certainly not, when it turns out -as it evidently does- that such change, for better or for worse, is not immune to debunking all over again. Progress and its dubious absolutes aside, cultural options are, all things considered, ontologically inadequate and incomplete, and therefore, if one looks them squarely in the face, the matrix of all ridicule. We cannot be freed from our defectiveness and consequently the best we can do is to be somewhat generous to ourselves and others without being deluded by the cultural illusions we have would like to see endorsed.

## 4.

The subject of neutralised debunking is so vast and the complexity of our cultural options and their possible defectiveness and insufficiency is so enormous, that it is quite impossible in a short space even succinctly to give a fair account of the procedures to implement the sudden deflation of cultural pretence. However, from the general principle of the almost universal disparity between thinking and being, between the context of reality and the context of expectation, some procedures can be 'deduced' which in their ramification and implementation play an important role in the 'construction' of comicality. *These procedures can be ordered in a series evincing, from low to high, their comical potentialities. They are: irrelevance, ambiguity and ambivalence, context-contamination proper, incongruity, absurdity and finally heterotely*. Each of these principles of construction can take different forms, depending on the subjectmatter and the medium they are applied to, and different principles can be combined in a variety of ways. The general scheme however can be surveyed without great difficulty because it is rather abstract and formal. Moreover, it is necessary to point out that the disparity between being and thinking, between initial expectations and results, makes by itself for highly important principles of comicality, that must be combined with the other principles mentioned. Indeed, disparity has a variable degree of depth -i.e. of semantic weight- and a variable degree of extension -i.e. or repetitiveness and systematicity- that directly lead to such comical features as contrast and surprise.



These can explain why the suddenness of deflation is an important element in the efficacy of comicality. To expose the nullity of things, thoughts, events, situations and actions in a flash is a procedure of composition that heightens contrast and surprise. It may be sophisticated, but it need not be: it may simply evince a logical jump that could be filled out. It is wellknown that the flawless perfection of full proof presupposes a closed domain that in itself, as formal determinism, rebuts all comicality. Moreover, by taking us by surprise, the procedure makes it difficult to find some form of defense. We are, so to speak, damned in 'l'esprit d'escalier': defeated formally, at least for the time being. Lastly, even if no sophistry is in place, it allows us to laugh away the revelation of futility as merely said or pretended, which is quite impossible if adequate proof is provided painstakingly and step by step. The jump provides a formal escape and has in this sense an auto-immunising effect: it is not to be taken seriously after all. Its mere brilliance, for the time being, neutralises its dire effect. In an analogous way the required neutralisation is effectuated by the absurdity being explicitly confined to the stage or being isolated artificially by the set-up of the joke. To be convicted of cultural absurdity in matters of importance, to be convicted of one's own idiocy by inexorable proof, may be the utmost in philosophical criticism, but it is, all things considered, a way of arguing that would simply make us miserable, if not aggressive. Comicality and the sense of humour, on the contrary, have a redeeming power we all are urgently in need of from time to time.

## 5.

We have already alluded to the fact that in all real life situations openness is unavoidable. *Taking risks is the only really interesting -and possible- thing to do.* The first and foremost consequence of this state of affairs is that the possibility of unforeseen factors intruding and interfering with the business at hand cannot be excluded. Only death cannot be interfered with. The mildest form of this general phenomenon of implementing disparity within the domain, the mildest form of context-contamination therefore, is the intrusion and interference of irrelevant factors. Elements pop up that have -at least in principle- nothing to do with the matter, but they frustrate the expectations our endeavours imply. All sorts of nuisance are typical for this form of comicality. It simply evinces that it is impossible in practice to have adequate and complete isolation of domain, even if the domain is in itself efficiently closed. It is clear that even in this rather simple case -a mild form of comicality indeed- a great many varieties and modalities are possible, depending on the semantic weight of the subject, the importance attributed to it and the degree of futility and systematicity of the interference. The greater the weight of the matter, the greater the futility of the intruding factor, the

greater the contrast; the greater the systematicity of the interference, the greater the surprise; and the greater contrast and surprise, the greater the nuisance and the greater the final debunking of the initial enterprise. However, that this well-known phenomenon is a very simple case is illustrated by the fact that it can easily make an artificial impression, as if the set-up were somewhat undeserving of belief. In fact, the plausibility of systematic irrelevance and deep contrast is not great, because the context-contamination in question is, on the face of it, external and arbitrary. The implausibility however is gradually reduced when the complexity of the context one is working in, is great enough to necessitate a certain measure of vagueness, internally and externally, i.e. a certain ambiguity and ambivalence, so that the handling of the domain in question loses its overall guaranteed systematic efficiency. In this case boundaries become somewhat unclear or diffuse -a measure of ambivalence- and there's a degree of internal uncertainty -a measure of ambiguity- concerning the efficient handling of the domain. In such a case context-contamination is, as it were, internally and externally almost self-induced: one is indeed losing one's grip on the matter and the domain itself starts fusing with its environment. In such situations, the more or less exaggerated cultural pretence of systematic efficiency, precision of delimitation and flawless or at least appropriate orientation and action, can easily be interfered with, internally and externally, and consequently can be frustrated and nullified in various ways and in different degrees.

*Misunderstanding and the taking of one person for another are examples of this kind of comicality.* In this way, more or less systematically a certain degree of fictitiousness is introduced. If the semantic weight of the matter is poor, its consequences are negligible and the systematicity of the errors made is low, comicality has a tendency to be rather mild in character: the resulting frustration is slight and the final debunking may be amusing. But, contrarywise, disorientation may become so systematic and full of contrast and the inefficiency may be so counter-productive that the result can verge on delusion. If this is the case context-contamination proper has been realised. To misrepresent and misinterpret matters in a systematic way, so that one context in its totality is taken for another, is to make a system of being deluded. It verges on closed fictitiousness and consequently can hardly be called simple ambiguity and ambivalence, even if the delusion is in fact most heavily based upon and effectuated by them. This procedure of comicality can, as all others, easily be combined with the more or less systematic intrusion of irrelevant elements that may help to induce the delusion and moreover explain the continuous surprise comedy often evinces. However, if the comedy is to be a story, the sequence of events must have a certain logic, i.e. the seeming arbitrariness of the intruding



elements must not be arbitrary after all, however baffling they may seem to the comic character itself. The more therefore context-contamination is internally induced, the more plausible it becomes and the more the impression of artificiality -pertaining not only to irrelevancy but to ambiguity and ambivalence as well- disappears. And the more plausibility is reached, the higher the comical possibilities, the greater the contrast, the more baffling it becomes and consequently the greater the effect of the debunking and the nullity of the enterprise. Maybe it is interesting and important to remark that the comicality of systematic delusion, that context-contamination proper and its resulting deflation are, as it were, the exact reverse of what generally is called 'metaphorisation'. Indeed, whereas in metaphorisation the contamination results in a kind of fusion between different domains and is interpreted as being semantically appropriate and informative -if the metaphors are thought to be pertinent- in comical context-contamination, on the contrary, there seems to be a clash between the domains: the fusion does not come off and the attempted metaphor is inhibited and frustrated: in the comic universe metaphorisation seems to be a blatant mistake.

*Comicality is metaphorisation gone broke.* The reason seems to be connected with the fact that metaphor or poetry aren't supposed to be and need not be taken literally, whereas cultural requirements of systematic efficiency evidently imply that one ought to be able to apply in a literal sense the metaphors cultural orientation is replete with. Indeed, the metaphorical character of consciousness and thought is the mark of our finiteness. Inadequate and incomplete as our thinking is, it must provide us with an all-round orientation and consequently it must bring order and clarity in a domain, the domain of all domains that cannot, by any means, be surveyed literally. Therefore, to make sense of the world one must cast a web of metaphors over all that is or can be, in order to give our finiteness its proper place in a world that is too large for our thoughts and too deep for our imagination. But to act and to be one must act and be literally. And this literalness is nevertheless in most cases beyond our ken. To act effectively, the suggestive character of our cultural orientation must be transformed in a set of prescriptions that have enough precision and definiteness to result precisely in this deed here and now and in no other. And this transformation is of necessity a jump that leaves us more or less in the dark, for the simple reason that more often than not there is disparity between thinking and doing. *Hence, however vaguely and metaphorically we may be thinking, we always act literally.* We are exactly what we do -no more, no less- but what we thought we were going to do and what we are pleased to think we have done, is but loosely connected with what is the case: the relation between thinking and being therefore is metaphorical by nature. It is an interface of domains that cannot be bridged systematically in a satisfactory

way, because the required 'adaequatio rei et intellectus' cannot be reached for any finite entity. And, as we have seen, precisely this disparity is at the origin of the possible comicality of things and of our sense of humour. Consequently, if there were such disparity, there would be no metaphorisation, but no comicality either. Both are intrinsically linked.

*Comical persons therefore, such as context-contamination proper produces, seem to be cultural fools -or heroes- that naively suppose that cultural options are or can be integrally and systematically efficient, and consequently they are doomed to be subject to delusion and end up in a world of fiction. Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme after all does poetry in order to talk once and for all prose, that is, in his case, cash. It can't be done without becoming ridiculous, but that's no fault of him: it simply means that he took cultural pretence too seriously, as he dutifully learned to do. Just as morality is most of the time not so much a question of being moral oneself as of taking advantage of the morals of others. Context-contamination however can lose its artificiality completely by becoming eminently and exclusively internal. In this case we enter the realm of incongruity and contradictoriness proper: comicality then is exemplified as the logical or at least unavoidable consequence of the cultural options taken. Such cases are twofold. In the first place it can be formal in character and then it has to do with the phenomenon of self-reference alluded to. Here it is shown that cultural options are by themselves internally contradictory: context-contamination is intensified by self-reference, taken literally and absolutely, and becomes, so to speak, context-implosion. Or the domain proves to be no domain at all: the pretence of absolute order boils down to chaos and the domain explodes into nothingness. That may be, by the way, the reason why philosophy and its crux, the quasi dispute between dogmatism and scepticism, verges on the ridicule. *It may, indeed, be said that philosophy, even great philosophy -just like great tragedy- can be from a certain angle comical: in any case absolutes of all kinds definitely are. And that's the exact moment jokes become dangerously close to tragedy, and accordingly censureship normally sets in. Heterotely or counter-purposiveness is the last and highest form of comicality, bound up by its theoretical core with logical inconsistency and practically intrinsically connected with the inescapable ontological deficiency of all consciousness. This counter-purposiveness is the trading mark of tragedy as well. In such a state of affairs, it seems hard to look steadily at the bright side of things, as comicality requires. Certainly, comicality is lost -as it is in philosophy proper- if everything is at stake, i.e. if life really is in danger and self-reference may be ousted. However, the subtlety, even the sublime character of nature, if not the grace of chance, can be such that in circumstances that pertain to the episodes of life the constitutional**



heterotely of culture, culturally revealed, can nevertheless lead to positive results or at least to neutral ones. The dangers we are confronted with are debunked and futilised. Heterotely itself proves to be futile or even efficient by a quib of nature or by the unforeseen course of events. As if inefficiency could be, in some cases, the most efficient way to realise the goals one has in mind; as if the vices we live by, strange to say, promote the virtues that ought to be. For short, as if heterotely could be efficiency regained. However exceptional and surprising, such things do happen sometimes. Precisely the disparity between thinking and being can make room for efficiency beyond our expectations. To slip on bananaskins is one of the most surprising tactics to win the race, but it is not impossible. However, such cases are rare, at least as far as culturally important matters are concerned: as if history could neutralise its criminals easily. Most cases of this kind therefore are limited to the domain of fiction itself. They are most easily construed, accepted and endorsed on the playground, when we are holiday-minded and have taken leave of reality.

Perhaps *Le Misanthrope* is a case in point. If causality is the cement of the universe, honesty undoubtedly is the cement of society. But Alceste, being one out of ten thousand, doesn't realise that -as far as convenience and social efficiency are concerned- hypocrisy is more successful in the short run than honesty ever can be, even in eternity. Being absolute, he's heterotelic in the extreme. This extremism would boil down to tragedy but for the important fact that the play is and remains undecided and leaves open the possibility of reform. Yet, such reform is not really to be relied upon in this case. For honesty seems to be too essential to be tampered with, as Hamlet knew quite well. With a heterotely of such semantic weight and centrality as *Le Misanthrope* implements, the limits of comicality seem to have been reached. King Lear's fool seems to peep around the corner. Distancing, disinterestedness, play and neutralisation seem to have their limits: beyond them nothing remains but identification. Fiction, whatever its powers of redemption, at last makes way for reality, and reality -as Hamlet knew well- is the graveyard of poor Yorick. It is no easy matter to nullify the effects of heterotely and it becomes highly implausible that it could, in the end, be put upside down for the benefit of all or even for some. *If life effectively is in danger and consequently self-reference cannot be guaranteed any more, if our very cultural identity is at stake, tragedy seems to take the place of comedy.* There is a marked asymmetry between them: tragedy has the last word. In this case our sense of humour, however large and generous, must forsake us, simply because it is beside the point: its object becomes all embracing and gets lost, its point of support fails us. Our flexibility is taken away and the fatality of being weights upon us. Fools and players as well as dandies and philosophers have their inexorable limits: to be mortal is to be serious after all.

## 6.

If neutralised debunking is the core of comicality and the sense of humour, and if it can be shown that debunking can be grounded in and is an outgrowth of the intrinsic inadequacy and incompleteness of all possible orientation in the world, the way seems free for an integrated theory of comicality and humour. Incongruity apart - that has been integrated in our notion of culture as the necessary possibility of disparity between thinking and being- the most conspicuous theories are those of superiority, Bergson's idea of mechanic rigidity and release of restraint<sup>4</sup>. We'll not expatiate on this subject here. More to our purpose in the context of this publication is the succinct illustration thereof provided by *the hilarious play - in our opinion a Molière-like farce- of Lenin El-Ramly: 'In Plain Arabic'*<sup>5</sup>. Generally speaking, the theory outlined above implies that the 'rupture' between thinking and being, in all its variations is culturally universal: this means that the same procedures seem to be required for comicality in all cultural sets: as far as form is concerned comicality is universal. What appears to be specific, even necessarily so, are the cultural semantics upon which these procedures can and are allowed to be applied: their breath and their depth, their scope of application and their degree of importance -their centrality- in the culture under consideration. As these parameters are variable, culturally, socially and even individually, the sense of humour accordingly will be diverse. Now the play in question is an excellent implementation of the procedures of comicality mentioned above. Moreover, although cultural relativity certainly plays a role, the core theme of the piece, namely 'truth' is clearly universal: the consequence is that for outsiders some semantics and hence some comical effects may get lost, but it is nevertheless easy to 'identify' with this core. Moreover it is a fine example of the convergence of form and content. Its comicality is a natural outgrowth of the contradiction and consequent all-round heterotely inherent in the pretence of all the speakers of *Plain Arabic*, obsessively proclaiming the unity of the 'Arab Nation', 'determined' to realise this idea, whereas in fact, from the beginning and almost a priori, they notoriously fail to do so: this apparently most important idea proves to be a fiction that given the 'real' facts quasi automatically and continuously generates its own demise. Indeed, their obsession with 'honour' etcetera -specifically 'Arab' virtues, so it seems- brings it about that in the end all of them even turn out suspects themselves. We cannot go into details in this context. But some observations may be illuminating. The theme of the play is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, for 'Arab culture' as such, whereas the reality turns out to be almost universal hypocrisy.



To make this stark contradiction acceptable -high comedy is not far away- a series of 'fictitious' realities are set up: a play in a play in a broadcast about truth, etcetera or vice versa, set in a London hotel on an important Islamic festive day. *The author continuously plays with this structure in a way that makes of the piece almost a whirlwind of make-belief, misunderstanding and hypocrisy.* In this way substantial cultural debunking is realised in a light-hearted, in an almost weightless manner. This structure moreover allows for a very direct, explicit and even brutal kind of debunking which gives the play its overall farcical character. Last but not least, the dramatis personae are so obsessed with and bewildered by their pretending, that they are in danger of losing whatever is left of their sense of reality. This is reflected also in the 'mythos' told, which is rather chaotic. And so here too, form and content converge. This almost pre-programmed loss of common sense makes the play, its classical aspects aside, somewhat postmodern as well. These remarks may suffice. Suffice it they indicate that a full analysis would, we suppose, confirm the truth and the universality of the principles of comicality proposed.

## 7.

It may be clear by now, not only why *philistinism is a laughing stock*, why philistines have poor sense of humour and why the normality of philistines makes for madness. For it is precisely the result of the endeavour -comprehensible, misplaced and dangerous- to deny the essentials of the human predicament. Kitschy people are continuously trying to convince themselves that they have found an orientation that can do away with the disparity between thinking and being. They think the gap has been or can be closed definitely or that it never did exist in the first place. They tend to believe that dogmatism has a solution, the final solution even, for everything. It is clear that such an attitude simply denies all possibility of humour. Consequently for philistines the sense of humour and the comicality of things are excluded. However, the weird idea of a perfect orientation is simply fake. Hence, instead of closing the gap between thinking and being, it makes it permanent, universal and unsurpassable. By denying its existence philistinism promotes an attitude that is in principle wrong to the point of being incorrigible. Consequently philistines are laughing stock par excellence, *simply because according to them there's nothing to be laughed at.* Culturally interpreted: they take their gods literally. And unhappily for them, these gods do not exist. For they, if they did exist, without doubt would be the most pretentious entities in the world, and therefore comical in the extreme. In other words, philistines think they can throw the double six. But by their own premisses the dice are so loaded, they can't even be thrown anymore: hence, they're in for madness.

It may be clear by now why the sense of humour and *the comicality of things are culturally determined and therefore relative to a certain degree.* Indeed, however clearly and intensely we are convinced of the inadequacy and incompleteness of our thinking, in fact, our acting, our being is always absolute. And precisely because we are limited, we must choose our cultural sets in a non-trivial way, and therefore our being, our life always exemplifies and illustrates some cultural absolutes, which, because we continuously have betted upon them, we cannot in all honesty laugh away. However generous our thinking, we are always dogmatic up to a certain point. And accordingly, our sense of humour is limited. We can easily laugh at the gods we don't believe in; we can perhaps smile at those we live by, if we realise that our beliefs are, after all, inadequate, because even our own gods are really beyond our ken. But it seems quite out of the question to debunk them without more ado. The things we live by cannot seriously be cast away without risking a breath-taking vacuum that may suffocate us. Nihilism pure and simple is the burial-ground of all humour and all comicality.

It has already been suggested that the sense of humour in its more aggressive forms is the most sharp and disruptive way to criticise cultural pretence and inefficiency. And, for sure, playful nihilism is a way of looking at things no form of dogmatism and therefore philistinism can tolerate. There is indeed nothing that can bring cultural and especially political dogmatism more efficiently to the brink of nervous breakdown than the playful and seemingly unconcerned but pertinent jocularly that evinces the total nullity of the cultural and political frame-up. Nothing can be more infuriating for authority than the brilliance of the sudden revelation of it irresistibly crashing down into nothingness by the sheer weight of its own pretence. It is like proving that the problem-solving vitality of pretence is nothing but an intricate and laborious way of committing suicide. To make clear in a flash that the self-styled 'saviours' of humanity are really but suicidal anomalies, must be murderous indeed, and therefore infuriating in the extreme. But philistine fury can be more profitably directed at itself. If the sense of humour proves to be socially dangerous and disruptive, the reason may be that cultural debunking is -certainly in its more aggressive forms- in the first place a revelation of cultural stupidity. And stupidity is generally more heterotelic in fact than humour ever can be. Humour, even sarcasm and cynicism, but kill to resurrect. And certainly, it is not in the power of stupidity and its real effects to guarantee this grace. The dangers of humour, however biting, are innocent after all. Comedy is indicative not only of high intelligence and vital mental agility but also of moral generosity: it makes us laugh, if only to make despair manageable. Lenin El-Ramly's play attests to this.



We tried to show that the sense of humour and the comicality of things are, all thing considered, no laughing matter. We hopefully made it plausible that comicality is at the heart of our human predicament, of our cultural precariousness and of our essential instability. We tried to make clear that on this basis a theory can be outlined that is anthropologically general yet, at the same time, specifiable culturally. And we indicated that the play we took as example seems to confirm the universality of the characteristics of comicality, however specific the semantics turns out to be. Moreover, we have given some idea of its possible integrative force. We have, however, been obliged to skip not only argument but even proof. We had to make jumps all the time, if not 'unlawful matches of things'. We hope they were not really that unlawful and that our suggestions can nevertheless point the way. Articles after all are, if not simply laughing matter, in any case bad intellectual poetry. And, indeed, philosophy most of the time is no more, no less. Consequently, there is, especially concerning theories of humour and comicality, reason for cautiousness, but, as far as humour goes, none for despair. And if, on the contrary, there are such reasons, we hope to have shown they can be laughed away.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is a summary and an extension of "Laughing Matters or Comoedia Naturalis", published in: *Philosophica*, 38 (1986), nr. 2, pp. 5-26.
- <sup>2</sup> Italicizations by the editor
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Karel Boullart, *Vanuit Andromeda gezien. Het bereikbare en het ontoegankelijk*. Een wijsgerig Essay, VUB-Press, Universiteit Gent, Werken uitgegeven door de faculteit van de letteren en wijsbegeerte, Brussel, 1999, 586 pp.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Laughing Matters or Comoedia Naturalis, op.cit.
- <sup>5</sup> Lenin El-Ramly, *In Plain Arabic*, a play in two acts, translated by Esmat Allouba, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1994.

## COMEDY BETWEEN PERFORMATIVITY AND POLYPHONY The Politics of Non-Serious Language

Michiel LEEZENBERG

Everybody knows that Aristotle characterizes tragedy as an (serious?) imitation of a serious (*spoudaios*) action, which achieves a catharsis through pity and fear. It is not at all clear, however, what an Aristotelian theory of comedy would look like. He does characterize comedy as an (non-serious?) imitation of a non-serious or laughable (*geloios*) and ugly action; but through which emotions, and with what ultimate effect? To begin with, he explicitly states that the ridiculous is painless and has no harmful effects; by implication, comedy can hardly function through pity and fear as tragedy does (*Poetics* :1449a35). Leon Golden has argued that on an Aristotelian approach, comedy functions through indignation (*nemesian*) rather than pity and fear.<sup>1</sup> This leaves the question of what comic catharsis amounts to: it may be a quasi-medical purgation; or a kind of pleasure; or a more intellectual clarification, as Golden argues. Moreover, it is equally possible to write a comedy about the lofty people typical for tragedy as it is to write a tragedy about the base characters from comedy: it seems we still have to distinguish serious and non-serious imitations. In the absence of the second book of the *Poetics*, then, and in the wake of the god-fearing monks in Umberto's *Name of the Rose*, we can only speculate; but in any case, as I have argued elsewhere, Aristotle's understanding of fifth-century Greek drama is already very different from what we can reconstruct of that period's self-understanding.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of the September 11 assaults, there is new room for alternatives to the still widespread humanist, depoliticized readings of literature for which Aristotle provides an antecedent or prototype. These humanist approaches treat literature as a quasi-religious sacred sphere in which everything can be said, and which should be protected from social and political interference (witness the attitude of contemporary novelists like Salman Rushdie and Orhan Pamuk). The price for this protected status would seem to be a status of *l'art pour l'art*, or as mere entertainment for private pleasure rather than public education: literature, in other words, is not taken seriously in politics. This liberal-humanist view of literature is to a large extent mirrored in the *prima facie* plausible theoretical notion of fiction as non-serious, pretended language usage.<sup>3</sup> The liberal and