

ENLIVENING SOCIETY:  
LIFE AS ELASTICITY IN HENRI BERGSON'S *LE*  
*RIRE*

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ABSTRACT: We seek to present a reading of Henri Bergson's 1900 work, *Le Rire (Laughter)*. The primary theme of this book is the comic phenomenon, as expressed through the bodily element of laughter. What interests Bergson is the evolutionary role of laughter in social regulation. As the vitalist philosopher sees things, society is perpetually threatened by the danger of rigidity. Society is always in danger of regressing into a machinic, static, rigid state. We laugh at living human beings who behave automatically and machinically. Hence, laughter is a form of punishment, designed to compel individuals to behave more organically. Subsequent authors on humor have extensively critiqued Bergson's rather narrow equation of humor with punishment, drawing attention to the wide variety of comic types. What especially interests us is how *Le Rire* can be read as part of a broader vitalist concern with the maintenance of an organicity always under threat from its own tendencies. Finally, we also interpret Bergson's works written during World War One in light of the author's own commitment to social spontaneity. A close reading reveals an inner tension between the philosopher's conformist patriotic commitment to the French war effort and the general vitalism and universalism of the Bergsonian philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Henri Bergson; Laughter; Organicism; Philosophy of life; Presentism; Social philosophy; Vitalism

THE SEARCH FOR THE COMIC MOMENT

In an episode of the animation show *South Park*, entitled "Sarcastaball" (S16E08), we see an example of what constitutes an intermediate form of comedy, situated between "snowball" and "incongruity" modes of humor. Driven into a fit of rage by new rules intended to make American football safer for children, the

protagonist Randy Marsh is so angered that, out of irony, he goes to the extreme of proposing a nonviolent, Politically Correct alternative to football called Sarcastaball. In this game, players equipped with tinfoil hats and bras hug players on the other team and go out of their way to be nice and kind to one another. The sport becomes a national sensation. Soon mainstream teams also come to play this new, nonviolent, and boring sport. The hilarity here has two primary sources: not only does nobody seem to notice that Randy was actually being ironic from the outset, but his irony becomes pandemic! Soon everybody is speaking with a malicious undertone of unseriousness, about how “enjoyable” this nonviolent sport is, especially compared with the original sport it replaced. Events snowball to such an extreme that it is found that the irony generated by Sarcastaball is just as brain-damaging as the concussions occurring from regular football. Usually, irony is an intentional act of parody, but here the joke has been reversed. The show itself is a commentary upon what can happen when Political Correctness solidifies into a new orthodoxy or closed morality, but on a metalevel it also implies a warning about the social dangers of being too ironic. An excess of bad faith can make truthfulness obsolete, resulting in further accumulations of insincerity, making us all comically rigid. Randy’s irony gets the better of him; being unable to snap out of this stance, we find his personality reduced to a single attitude of mocking petulance. The incongruity results from the disparity between what we think irony is – an intentional act – and its transformation into a pandemic of automatism. Instead of making their derision explicit, the protagonists persist in ceaselessly beating around the bush, with absurd consequences that make the viewer laugh out loud. In the view of one critic, the episode formed the “ridiculously” funny highlight of an otherwise relatively unremarkable sixteenth season.<sup>1</sup> Wherein does the power of the comic lie? How can we grasp what the “funny” is? What made this episode hilarious, and not just amusing? Where is the borderline between the involuntary spasm of laughter and the mere smile? How does one get from the, so to speak, “virgin” grin to the “chad” roar of hilarity? As Liz Sills reminds us, it is of paramount importance to bring a presentist perspective to the analysis of laughter. In her broad-based but nevertheless, incisive critique of most of the literature dealing with the phenomenon of the comic, Sills outlines two divergent strategies. The first is what

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<sup>1</sup> Stives, Jason. “TV Review. South Park ‘Sarcastaball.’” <https://thepopbreak.com/2012/09/26/tv-review-south-park-sarcastaball/>, 2012.

she calls the “Aesthetic”, constituting a retrospective analysis of the various tensions which build up to the moment of comic release.<sup>2</sup> This strategy would correspond loosely to what Bergson calls an analytical view. It dissects laughter, separating the various elements, and then attempting to reconstitute the moment from these components. For example, a study of how jokes are “crafted” would belong in this category. The problem with such a method is that we either get a joke or not; there does not appear to be any middle way. Explanation kills any spontaneity. As the writer E. B. White noted, “humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process.”<sup>3</sup> This position accords remarkably well with the Bergsonian doctrine of the indivisibility of duration. Just as duration cannot be analyzed without ossifying its spontaneity, so the phenomenon of the funny seems to present us with a similar structure of continuity. The second strategy Sills names “Affect”, meaning the entirety of those approaches which “focus on (...) the aftermath” of the moment of funniness.<sup>4</sup> Identifying the vast majority of studies relating to the comic with these two strategies, the author concludes provocatively that such investigations, while revealing much about the prelude and aftermath of laughter, have for the most part failed to unveil the inner being of the comic phenomenon. What is needed is an account of the funny in itself. As Sills writes, “[The Moment] wherein we find The Funny is fleeting, but importantly it is neither before nor after, but purely in the now.”<sup>5</sup> As opposed to an analytical perspective, the phenomenological position advocated here argues for a methodological presentism that refuses to articulate the experience of the moment in anything other than its own terms. But is this really phenomenology? The phenomenological method is reliant upon the description of experience, in as pure a state as possible. What the author seems to be advocating is not merely a characterization of experience, but a thoroughly noumenal portrayal of “the Funny” as it actually exists, in its state of actuality. This certainly is an experiential datum, but it also appears to be significantly more than that. Interestingly, Sills argues that Bergson’s book on the comic, *Le Rire (Laughter)*, while on the whole revolving around consequences of laughter such as greater social cohesion, at certain points does manage to penetrate into the

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<sup>2</sup> Sills, Liz. “The phenomenology of The Funny. A diagrammatic proposal.” *Comedy Studies* 8.1. (2017), pp. 2-12., p. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> White, E. B. and Katherine S. *A Subtreasury of American Humor*, New York, Coward-McCann, 1941, p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Sills 2017, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Sills 2017, p. 5.

noumenal aspect of the Funny ((Moment)). The comical would consist, on Bergson's view, of "absentmindedness"<sup>6</sup> It is this moment that we must recapture, without reducing it to any particular view or slice. Intellect cannot access the entirety of the funny moment, for its power stems precisely from the very absence of comprehensibility. In what then does the Bergsonian approach to humor consist, and more importantly, how does this relate back to presentism?

The comic spirit should not be treated as something inert or static. Just like all durations, the funny is not point-like. The phrase "funny moment" should not mislead us. Sills chooses to bracket [Moment] for a very good reason: this instant is a smudge, an uncertain flowing present, and not a discrete, isolated extract. An investigation that is directed to the reality of the moment itself should imagine the impermanence of ideas in the process of their making. If we are to catch something essential about "the comic spirit", we must treat it "as a living thing", respecting the time it takes, nurturing humor, watching it "grow and expand" (*L*: 2). To laugh is to be uplifted, but this ascent comes at a price. In Bergson's view, laughter is the affirmation of social normativity, a method of punishing recalcitrant and deviant individuals. Funniness comes at the expense of lowering others. It is characterized by "the absence of feeling", and highly emotional souls cannot really have a sense of humor (*L*: 4). There is a type of insensitivity or bracketing of emotion requisite for the maintenance of the humorous stance. All of us have met with an overly sensitive companion, who, being the butt of a joke, could not simply kick back and enjoy the moment. Being joked about is an uncomfortable experience because it implies that somebody else has been able to bracket or even eliminate any positive feelings toward us. The butt of a joke is transformed into an object by the approbation of his fellows. Making a joke about somebody requires that we bracket our feelings and emotions connecting to that person. A good sport is someone who is capable of self-abasement, while the overemotional person simply cannot abandon their feeling and join in the fun, being disturbed by the "momentary anaesthesia of the heart" which occurs under such circumstances (*L*: 5). At its root, laughter is both inherently social and momentary. To laugh alone is a mark of asociality. In a way, it is itself a laughable characteristic or the sign of a psychological pathology. Laughing well

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<sup>6</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, New York, Macmillan, 1914 [1900], p. 146. hereafter abbreviated as *L*.

means to laugh together with others, even at one's own expense. This expenditure of spiritual energy is a worthy consumption if it results in an attenuation of one's social embeddedness. Because of his functionalism, Bergson can be claimed to belong to the school of Affect, denoting those humor researchers who describe the phenomenon of the comic based on its consequences. The example of a man slipping and falling flat on his bottom is a fixture of comedies. In Bergson's view, we find ourselves laughing at clumsy people because of their "lack of elasticity", which results in the transformation of a free agent, equipped with a will, into a deterministically preprogrammed automaton (*L*: 9). Whenever the living starts to behave like a trivial machine, whenever a human displays automatic movements, we have an instance of the comic. Indeed, Bergson gives a concise definition of the latter: all funny objects show "something mechanical in something living" (*L*: 77). At the outset, there is reason for a degree of skepticism regarding such a clear-cut definition. Imagine one of our friends abruptly halting her activities, repeating a single phrase endlessly. In the beginning, we would feel a certain mirth, but after a while, the joke would wear off and the levity could very well turn into something bearing a greater degree of resemblance to sincere concern. There is a fine line separating comedy from horror. The spectacle of life and death transformed into a mechanical process is just as much a hallmark of the horrific as the comic. As John Mullarkey notes regarding Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), the film is horrific not only because of its subject matter (the Holocaust), but also because the "contingency" it portrays, far from describing a state of freedom, is rendered subservient to "the mechanical, the insignificant, and lifeless."<sup>7</sup> Unpredictability makes freedom impossible, for the Jews cannot ever know when they will be killed and in what manner. Death comes randomly, making any preparation impossible. What the various incidents of blind chance in *Schindler's List* show is that the contingent can, perversely, signify the absolute absence of freedom as well as the presence of free will. In the nightmare world of *Schindler's List*, we are shown an ontological truism, namely that "in the long run, chance becomes necessity (inevitably)."<sup>8</sup> All this has bearing on the issue of the

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<sup>7</sup> Mullarkey, John, "Contingent Violence. Bergson and the Comedy of Horrors in *Schindler's List*." in Graham Matthews and Sam Goodman (eds.) *Violence and the Limits of Representation*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 129-145., p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> Mullarkey 2013, p. 133.

comic. If Mullarkey's intuition is a correct one, there is a hidden affinity between comedy and horror. Both of these moments consist in a trivialization of life, a reduction to bare mechanism. They introduce an element of the deterministic, destroying any possibility of dignity. One scene proved particularly transgressive for most audiences. Some people are herded into a shower. This clearly evokes the horrible gas chambers, the method of execution used at Auschwitz by the National Socialists. But instead of being murdered with poison gas, as historically informed viewers may expect, water comes out of the taps. "What is truly distasteful", writes Mullarkey, "is not the event itself (...) but its cinematic portrayal", the apparent trivialization of genocide into a device for entertainment.<sup>9</sup> The scene elicits a sense of relief, which only serves to heighten the anguish, because we already know – in retrospect – what will occur later. And our laughter is all the more disturbing for us. At its greatest intensity, the horrific and the comic coalesce into a denial of life, a negation of movement, a general degradation of free will into mechanism. Historical personages are reduced into puppets for entertainment, transgressing the dignity of both survivors and victims. Spielberg's genius here lies in a diabolical ability to snowball the narrative from light humor to absolute darkness. The snowball as comic technique makes a mockery of the individual's goals, ambitions, desires. Every protagonist morphs into an implement for amusement: "we might just as well think of toy soldiers standing behind one another. Push the first and it tumbles down on the second, this latter knocks down the third, and the state of things goes from bad to worse until they all lie prone on the floor" (*L*: 80). Are the large scale insanities of the world wars and multiple genocides committed during the course of the previous century not, in a perverse way, comical? Had they not occurred, had millions of lives not been ended, had all this been a fiction, the product of a ravaged mind, the reduction of humans to the status of marionettes, manipulated by the flow of events beyond their control, would strike us as laughable. As we shall see, Bergson himself became a philosophical "victim" or "butt of the joke" during the course of the First World War. More on that later.

What is it that makes the automatism displayed by a living body laughable? Bergson's view can be characterized as an "incongruity" theory, as it traces the

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<sup>9</sup> Mullarkey 2013, p. 134.

comic back to an incongruity between the spontaneity of living things or affects, and the “automatism” or “inelasticity” of comic expressions (*L*: 25). Society expects of its members adaptability, flexibility, and self-consciousness. The comic individuals are forgetful of themselves, leading to humorous results. “Rigidity”, writes Bergson, “is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (*L*: 21). The stiffness of an overly fossilized or inert body stands in opposition to what it ought to be like, for society has an interest in keeping its components – human individuals – attentive. It is not accidental that a staple of comedy is the person who has gotten stuck in a particular affect, exposing an incongruity between their environment, which expects different emotional states in accordance with different situations, and the person who rigidly repeats a single attitude. Randy Marsh is hilarious precisely because he becomes trapped in his own sarcasm. Ordinarily, according to our everyday intuition, mockery should be used sparingly. It can result in misunderstandings, as comically represented in Randy’s completely accidental “founding” of the new sport, Sarcastaball, or, obversely, it can also result in offense on the part of those who understand full well that they are the objects of this irony. But society itself can become comical, to the extent that it also gets entangled in a single attitude, as is the case with the social environment which persists in going along with Randy’s unserious affirmation of Sarcastaball, replying in turn with a snowballing series of ironic confirmations, to the absurd point where Randy is abruptly named coach of the Denver Broncos, a real sports team of national fame. The comic art is the practice of bringing a rigidity or automatism to the fore. This often consists in the exaggeration of a latent property that would otherwise go unnoticed. Caricature is the realization of “disproportions and deformations”, and has “a touch of the diabolical” (*L*: 26). Take the case of somebody with a large nose. A skilled caricaturist would highlight an existing feature of this person’s face, to the point perhaps of exaggerating the nose into something resembling a bird’s beak. This reflects a view of the caricatured person’s resemblance to a crow. If audible media are involved, the voice too can be modified to resemble that of the bird, especially if the individual’s voice is high pitched enough in real life. The body is comical to the extent that its materiality prevents corporeality from transfiguration into the lightness of gracefulness (*L*: 29). Obstacles prove too great, the man in the street slips up, landing on his bottom, or Charlie Chaplin’s classic character, The

Tramp, becomes entangled in the factory's machinery. Rigidness is almost synonymous with ugliness. Paradoxically, Bergson the philosopher is himself far from immune to this constitutive clumsiness. In a performative sense, we observe the same rigidity at work in the text of *Laughter* itself. Specifically, we have in mind two particular instances of insensitivity that strike us as both offensive and, because of their rudeness, comical or even parodistic were they present in a contemporary philosophical text. We have in mind first, an instance where Bergson characterizes certain physical "deformities" (those which can be imitated by "normal" persons) as "ridiculous", a blatantly ableist move which we could expect from certain contemporary politicians, but not a respected philosopher (*L*: 23). Secondly, we find the preposterous question, "why does one laugh at a negro?" (Bergson's answer: they look to be unwashed) (*L*: 40). In hindsight, these two unfortunate examples point toward an underlying rigidity in the philosopher's train of thought. Here the *Zeitgeist*, in which neither ableism nor racism were addressed in terms even remotely resembling that of today's more open culture, breaks into Bergson's text, resulting in exclusionary remarks which cannot help striking 21st-century readers as being comically out of touch. The laughable, the philosopher of laughter included, would be anybody who is insensitive to the exigencies of their age. Mechanically and uncritically, Bergson repeats two gestures of insensitivity to others, without in the least reflecting on the social background of such ostracizing beliefs or how complex social forms of exclusion such as ableism operate. We cannot have any idea what a magically resurrected Bergson would think about the concept of ableism, and how it relates to his philosophy, which does stress the active, transformative and powerful nature of life. Perhaps he would see it as a challenge to his ideas which must be addressed. Does an otherwise abled person have an equal right to participate in the elaboration of the *élan vital* together with able-bodied persons, or does an impairment signify a reduction of the intensity of one's creative powers, bringing with it a reduction of rights? The very question is, however offensive it may appear, worthy of debate in a Bergsonian context. Then again, Bergson could simply scoff at the suggestion of this dilemma, dismissing it as a false problem with no bearing on the fundamentals of his philosophy, and move on. Just at this very moment, while writing we attempted a Google search of the phrase "otherwise abled." Whilst typing, we committed an error, resulting in the phrase



“otherwise baled.” The first search result is a 1928 hearing of the United States Congress Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, regarding the topic of “Standardized Bales of Cotton.”<sup>10</sup> Bergson’s inattention to the sensitivities of others has resulted in a clumsiness on our own part! Absurdly, we have confused the word “abled” with the noun “baled.” In Bergson’s defense, one could point toward certain comical characteristics latent in cultural practices intended to shield the sensitivities of vulnerable sections of the population. On our part, we seek to neither condone or condemn social mechanisms of excluding marginalizing usages of language. The world would certainly be a better place without offensive, hurtful modes of communication. But the utopian desire to create a perfect society, inasmuch as it becomes a rigid orthodoxy, opens itself to ridicule. Even the most open of spiritual directions can become comical if it freezes into the solidity of a closed morality. The agonistic culture of self-reflexivity becomes comical the moment it starts taking itself seriously.

#### THE INVASION OF THE MECHANICAL INTO LIFE: *ÉLAN VITAL* AS DEATHBOUND MOVEMENT

The place of technology in Bergsonian philosophy is ambiguous. Nowhere is this more apparent than the case of *Le Rire*. In one sense, laughter results from the degeneration of living, spontaneous vitality into mechanical repetition. In another sense, however, laughter is itself a mechanism for the maintenance of social spontaneity. The comic results from “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (*L*: 37). We expect living bodies to display a type of responsiveness to their environments, but the comic body fails to fulfill this expectation. As Jure Gantar emphasizes, *Le Rire* can be interpreted productively as constituting part of Bergson’s larger project, forming a reaction against the mechanist world view that formed the dominant outlook, until revolutionary scientific developments in the early 20th century such as the formulation of electromagnetic theory by James Clerk Maxwell upended 19<sup>th</sup> Century determinist materialism.<sup>11</sup> Reality is that which is unpredictable. In this sense, Bergson approximates later ideas

<sup>10</sup> United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. *Standardized Bales of Cotton. Hearing, Seventieth Congress, First Session, on S. 872, a Bill to Standardize Bales of Cotton and Requiring Sale of Cotton by the True Net Weight of Bale. May 16, 1928.* Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1928.

<sup>11</sup> Gantar, Jure (1999) “The case of the falling man: Bergson and chaos theory.” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 32.2., (1999), pp. 43-57., p. 46.

prevalent in chaos theory. As Gantar notes, the Bergsonian emphasis on unpredictability for instance became a salient theme of chaos theory. Over the past century ever more scientific models have been built which admit the relevance of contingency and unpredictability. Similarly, the emphasis on the irreducibility of surprise in real processes is a shared concern of Bergson and chaos theorists.<sup>12</sup> How does the realm of the technological play into the Bergsonian analysis of laughter? Firstly, identifying just what laughter is would help us immensely in our task of explication. At the outset, Bergson identified the comic phenomenon as a living thing. This makes it profoundly difficult to treat in isolation from the later *élan vital* (life-force). It is a fact that Bergson did not choose to modify anything in the second, 1924 edition of *Le Rire*.<sup>13</sup> What this suggests to us is that Bergson did not substantially modify his doctrine after *L'Évolution Créatrice* had been published. In other words, nothing prevents us from seeing laughter as a manifestation of the life force, even though Bergson only starts using this phrase in *L'Évolution Créatrice*. But we are on shaky ground, for neither do we have any conclusive proof that laughter can be equated with vitality alone. The comic impression arises whenever the living reaches the cusp of transformation into rigidity. Life is compared with mechanism, to the detriment of the latter, on numerous occasions throughout the book. Bergson's basic premise is that "the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of *a mere machine*" (emphasis mine – A.L., *L*: 29). The implication here is, of course, that the complexity of life transcends the technological dimension, at least insofar as the latter represents a synonym for repetitiousness. Does this make Bergson an anti-technological thinker? This issue is far from simple. Technology represents both an opportunity and a risk. If it helps in adapting to circumstances, Bergson does not seem to mind and even provides in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* a description of the human in explicitly cyborgian terms: "if our organs are natural instruments, our instruments must then be artificial organs. The workman's tool is the continuation of his arm, the tool-equipment of humanity is therefore a continuation of its body."<sup>14</sup> There can be no question therefore of characterizing Bergson as a thinker who would reject the technological reality of humans. The human is first

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<sup>12</sup> Gantar 1999, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Gantar 1999, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. trans. R. Ashley Audra, Cloudesley Brereton and W. Horsfall Carter, London, Macmillan, 1935 [1932], hereafter abbreviated as *TS*, p. 267.

and foremost a fundamentally technological being: we are first *homo faber* and only *homo sapiens* second. What then is the place of technology in *Le Rire* and, more widely, Bergsonism in general? In another episode of *South Park*, (“Buddha Box”, S22E08), we are introduced to a comical invention. The Buddha Box allows mobile phone users to isolate themselves hermetically from their environments. The episode manages to make a dig simultaneously at both the vulgarization of spirituality in its commercialized “New Age” manifestations and the funny consequences of our excessive contemporary reliance upon technology. Large masses of consumers become alienated from one another, all in the name of escaping anxiety. The Buddha Box makes a mockery of mobile phone users overly preoccupied with their phones, to the detriment of personal relationships. Technology becomes laughable when it becomes mechanically inelastic. Steffen Steinert advocates for a normative reading of *Le Rire*, aiming at a sensitivity to the deadening, automatizing effects of technology. If the imperative of Bergson’s affirmation of life is to remain attentive, then technology must be treated with a view to its effects upon attention. The example of the distracted man falling down can be easily contemporized by placing a smartphone in his hand. What Steinert suggests is a Bergsonian sensitivity to attention to life can be brought to contemporary technology studies, by viewing particular technological objects according to their effects on attention. Because of the rigidity and habitual nature of our contemporary behaviors, modified by our ever more artificial environments, it can be said that “technological advancements can turn people into comical figures.”<sup>15</sup> Citing several examples, such as the ironic effect of GPS reducing cognitive ability or the “photo taking impairment effect”, which leads to a reduction in short-term memory, Steinert shows that the Bergsonian emphasis on the socially negative effects of habitual, automatic behavior has relevance in a 21st-century context. That being said, it does not seem that laughter can do anything to prevent the elaboration of an ever more artificial social reality. Merely parodying the machinic does not seem to go a long way to providing people with a way of regaining the ability to concentrate. What Steinert suggests is that our thinking on social issues should never let itself be reduced to a given technological matrix. “Techno-cultural inflexibility”, defined as an automatism

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<sup>15</sup> Steinert, Steffen. “Technology is a laughing matter. Bergson, the comic and technology.” *AI & society* 32.2. (2017), pp. 201-208., p. 205.

of social proportions, can also be considered an object of comedy.<sup>16</sup> The phenomenon of ecological destruction, however, surely darkens our laughter. Where the comic transforms into the horrific, a different temporal quality is attained, a quality that is supremely difficult to treat unseriously. On the face of it, inattention seems a less urgent problem than the genocide committed against nonhuman beings or the ubiquity of pollution. Yet one could always speculate that the disorder prevalent in our ecologies today can be traced back to an underlying distractedness of materialistically-oriented deluded consciousness. Enslavement to the screen represents a comic encrustation upon the human element, a mineralized state waiting for elimination by either Luddite regression or, more likely, replacement by a new, more flexible technology.

After these considerations, we may return to our question. How does laughter relate to the *élan vital*? In the final chapter of *Laughter*, Bergson studies the various forms of character comedy. At this point, the laughable separates itself from mere mechanism, and transforms into something resembling what systems theory calls a “blind spot” This phrase describes an excess which remains unobservable to the observer, but is liable to be noticed by other observers. Suppose we walk into a store and everybody looks at us with a queer facial expression. Some are even attempting to suppress their laughter. We suspect that something is the matter. And surely, upon looking in the mirror at home, we discover some white traces of hair conditioner have congealed upon our hair, leading to the comical impression. Who knows what the substance could be. We laugh at ourselves for our ignorance of our exterior. Intriguingly, Bergson uses the metaphor of parasitism to describe this peculiar type of inattention: “a person is never ridiculous except through some mental attribute resembling absent-mindedness, through something that lives upon him without forming part of his organism, after the fashion of a parasite” (*L*: 169-170). This brings to mind Michel Serres’ characterization of the human entity as the “parasite” of noise.<sup>17</sup> Our lives function in the manner of an environment for the complexity of being. What is Bergson attempting to convey with this rather cryptic passage? Comical stock characters such as Tartuffe are reduced to a single characteristic, which rules

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<sup>16</sup> Steinert 2017, p. 206.

<sup>17</sup> Serres, Michel. *The Parasite*. trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2013 [1980].

tyrannically over their personalities. A fool, a miser, a knave, these are all examples of characters who are infected, as it were, with a single dominant peculiarity. In Bergson's view, society is a natural environment, for it is the generality of life. The comic art is directed at returning us to the flow of vitality, but the comic is itself a strange lifeform that grows, ripens, and adumbrates in its own right. These considerations are important for our task of explication because Bergson resolutely separates the comic from other artforms. If the comic brings us back to life, then art is its polar opposite, for the latter is "a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature" (*L*: 171). Such a scission introduces more problems than it resolves, and is more than a little perplexing. The reason for our puzzlement is that Bergson earlier defines society as a life form, exclaiming that "we cannot help treating it as a living being" (*L*: 44). Insofar as it displays the hallmarks of automatism, society too becomes ridiculous. A machinic society is one that has become stuck in rigidity, procedure and repetition. Pure "nature", on this reading, would constitute something radically different from society, yet both are in and of life. The force of vitality permeates art, society, and humor alike, but their solidarity with it seems to differ in terms of its degree. Art, mysticism, philosophy, and other modes of intuition place us directly within the current of life, while humor and social interaction represent more mediate paths of contact. Alas, Bergson never provides his readers with a clear comparison of these divergent tendencies and in what sense their diversity can be conceptualized. Instead, the reader is left to speculate on their relationship. One recent attempt at a reconstruction has been made by Steven Connor in an, as yet, unpublished conference paper. Because of its repeated emphasis on life, nothing is simpler than supposing that in *Laughter* Bergson is giving an affirmative, positive, "enlarging, humanising, and vitalising" description of the phenomenon of humor.<sup>18</sup> Connor suggests however that such an interpretation involves a misunderstanding. Paradoxically, the ascription of a conformist function to laughter registers the presence of an authoritarian bent in the text that would assimilate all difference to conformity. Social integration is achieved at the cost of pillorying those whose shapes or mental patterns diverge from what is

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<sup>18</sup> Connor, Steven. "Elan Mortel. Life, Death, and Laughter." talk given at Forms of Life, European Summer School in Cultural Studies, Amsterdam, 31 July 2008. <http://stevenconnor.com/elanmortel.html>, p. 3.

considered to be the norm, resulting in a paradoxical “disciplining into flexibility.”<sup>19</sup> The ontological status of laughter, as compared with life in general, is far from clear. While its function is evidently to bring us back to a more intimate connection with the social dimension and therefore into a greater proximity with life, the comic still cannot achieve as deep a penetration in the vital flow as art. It is trapped in between society and the broader current of life. Laughter is at once a mechanism and a spontaneous, vital datum. Bergson never quite seems to make up his mind which one of these characterizations seems to best fit the nature of the comic phenomenon. Strangely, “the tendency of Bergson’s essay is to describe laughter” too “as itself a kind of machinery.”<sup>20</sup> If the comic is a lifeform, then it should, like the *élan vital*, be immune to any type of geometrization but, borrowing from Pascal, Bergson immediately introduces a geometric example when characterizing the comic process: “I see no objection (...) to defining the process by the curve which that geometrician [Pascal] studied under the name of roulette or cycloid – the curve traced by a point in the circumference of a wheel when the carriage is advancing in a straight line: this point turns like the wheel, though it advances like the carriage” (*L*: 37). Does the structure of the durational moment itself not display similar characteristics? The “perpetual present” is a repetition that rotates within the context of its own durational level, constituting the basal guarantee of novelty. This present is the swerve that shifts creation further, lurching it into another modification, and so on. What Connor underlines is that this geometrization implies the latency of a nonliving machinic aspect within the Bergsonian concept of laughter. Despite appearances, the unliving is present beneath life. The Bergsonian life force is isomorphic with Sigmund Freud’s death drive, for both are inherently explosive, shattering the integrity of the organism. The idea of evolution as a discordant, divergent, and chaotic process therefore introduces death into the heart of life, privileging openness even of undoing the integrity of organization.<sup>21</sup> While the life force is the source of organization, its reality transcends any assortment of organs. In this regard, Connor’s diagnosis aligns closely with Claire Colebrook’s provocative suggestion that beneath the idea of creative evolution there is an entropic

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<sup>19</sup> Connor 2008, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Connor 2008, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Connor 2008, p. 11.

movement at work tending towards maximal openness.<sup>22</sup>

The key quote underlining the ambiguity of Bergson's theory of laughter is the following: "involuntarily I laugh" (*L*: 32). Connor seizes on this sentence for a very important reason, namely that it illuminates the in-between nature of the comic. The phenomenon of laughter not only reveals the automatism of the butt of the joke. That much is abundantly clear. What is more striking is that it also divulges the automatism of the laughers.<sup>23</sup> Life, if it is to be regarded as being synonymous with spontaneity, must know nothing of the "ready-made." Flowing, authentic creation is a reality in the making, but on a local level, there are eddies within the flow, transitory vortices where impermanence curls upon itself, swerving like Lucretius' atoms. In such a case, the localized inversion lends the appearance of permanence to itself. In Chapter Two, Bergson deals with the phenomenon of wordplays. This particular type of humor exposes the automatisms latent within a system of language. In reality, especially when it comes to social institutions, there can be no question of cleanly separating the organic from the inorganic, the living from the dead. Just as "there is no pool" without its fair share of "dead leaves floating on its surface", so there we can imagine no language that does not contain repetitions, redundancies, "rigid", "ready-made", "mechanical" elements (*L*: 130). Language and, by extension, other social phenomena are suggestive of an interpenetration of life with nonlife, to the extent that death must be considered as being enveloped by the ascending life force. To be sure, it must be admitted that "nowhere" does Bergson "explicitly" associate "the miniature and parochial explosiveness that characterizes laughter with the more general and generalising big bang of the *élan vital*!"<sup>24</sup> What Connor is attempting to do is expose yet another duality at play in the Bergsonian system. Not only is life opposed to matter, it would seem that there is also a dynamic tension pertaining between laughter and life: "the strange, propagating organism that is laughter is a sort of mimic or parasitic life, an epidemic of mechanism that borrows the diffusive energy of life, while everywhere fixing or arresting it into dead or repetitive forms. It is a propagating

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<sup>22</sup> Colebrook, Claire. "Creative evolution and the creation of man." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48.1. (2010), pp. 109-132.

<sup>23</sup> Connor 2008, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Connor 2008, p. 13.

deadness.”<sup>25</sup> What is striking in this description is that it could just as well apply to our own interpretation of the place of the virtual in Bergson’s philosophy!<sup>26</sup> Is laughter then a virtual life, not unlike memory? What seems to militate against such a view is the momentary nature of laughter. Connor ignores the close alliance between laughter and actuality. The funny is a ((Moment)), an occurrence, an event that cannot be fixed for long. The comic art has its fair amount of repetitions, but nobody finds a stale joke funny. The element of surprise is ignored by this interpretation. Yet we cannot help feeling that the author has hit upon an important inner tension, one which cannot be easily eliminated.

#### REDEEMING THE READY-MADE: BERGSON’S ANTI-UTOPIANISM

A keyword that stands out is the phrase, “ready-made.” As Bergson would have it, the ready-made is an element at once endogenous to living organisms and evolving social systems such as language, while being paradoxically foreign to change. To be “ready-made” means to persist in a finished, completed state. What else could be more foreign to the spirit of Bergson’s doctrine of becoming? No substance can be discerned in being because all that which exists is forever in the making. Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades” come to mind here, for the famous artist found a way of transcending the gap between permanence and impermanence that represents one of the purest artistic renditions of the Bergsonian idea of actuality. Ironically, the “readymade” is an unfinished artwork. It is not even a “work” of art, properly speaking, being situated deliberately outside the dimension of representation. Duchamp characterized one of his last projects, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923), otherwise known as *The Large Glass*, as “definitively unfinished” (quoted in: Luisetti 2008: 81). As Federico Luisetti explains, this element of delay is fundamental to understanding Duchamp’s entire project. The intention here is the extension of postponement, capturing uncertainty while keeping the future open. “Delay”, the author explains, “is the temporal dimension of the

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<sup>25</sup> Connor 2008, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> This theme shall be presented in our forthcoming volume, entitled *Updating Bergson*.



readymade.”<sup>27</sup> We observe nine bachelors gathered around an unapproachable woman, whom they shall never access. Neither libidinal nor epistemological release are possible. The bride is fated to remain untouched. We observe her transmogrifying into a number of “freed forms.” First, she is a “hanging female”, then a “wasp”, then a “milky way” and finally a “meteorological extension.” The movements of the protagonists have been petrified, locked in glass, ossified, their time crystallized. In Duchamp’s words, *The Large Glass* is “a delay in glass.”<sup>28</sup> Is this not the polar opposite of Bergson’s intentions? How is the Duchampian readymade Bergsonian? In Luisetti’s view, Duchamp is a loyal student of the philosopher, for he remains loyal to duration. Fealty to duration means adherence to the qualitative instant. *The Large Glass*, as a non-representational work, makes no pretense to copying movement. Becoming cannot be reproduced in any manner. Instead, Duchamp creates a work that shall remain forever unfinished, encapsulating the flow of duration without killing movement. It is an impossible work: the potentialization of the actual! And yet, the artist has achieved this remarkable feat. In one of his explanatory notes written for *The Large Glass*, Duchamp displays a clear grasp of Bergson’s presentist idea of duration: “—in each fraction of duration (?) all / future and antecedent fractions are reproduced—All these past and future fractions/ thus coexist in a present which is / really no longer what one usually calls / the instant present, but a sort of / present of multiple extensions.”<sup>29</sup> It is the present that matters. Duchamp’s works represent a suspension of the flow of time, forming suspended images which, because of their deliberate incompleteness, succeed in preserving the openness of duration. What the readymade shows is the status of duration as a mixture of the actual and the virtual. The Duchampian logic of delay combines the “powerless past” and the “active present” in a single bloc of duration, revealing the present moment as a heterogeneous multiplicity.<sup>30</sup> The delay is the interval in which time is working to change things. Far from being alien to duration, the readymade brings to light the affinity of endurance with the productive moment of emergence. Bergson has created a philosophy of time which grasps the fertility of the now. What Duchamp and Bergson alike show us is that, to quote Gilles

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<sup>27</sup> Luisetti, Federico. “Reflections on Duchamp. Bergson Readymade.” trans. David Sharp. *diacritics* 38.4. (2008), pp. 77-93., p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> quoted in: Luisetti 2008, p. 84.

<sup>30</sup> Luisetti 2008, p. 83.

Deleuze, “delay itself is the pure form of time in which before and after coexist.”<sup>31</sup>

We must at this point return from these lofty heights to the realm of the ridiculous. Utopianism, if it presents itself in the form of a dogma or a fixed teaching, is laughable. At one point, Bergson makes the following caustic comment: “how profound is the comic element in the over-romantic, Utopian bent of mind!” (*L*: 13). Ideological fanatics of any stripe are ridiculous, insofar as they prove incapable of adapting to their environments. They interpret every eventuality in ideological terms, preventing the perception of nuances or causal connections whose complexity transcends any ideological framework whatsoever. In a masterful analysis, Mary Ann Gillies subjects the protagonists of Joseph Conrad’s deeply disillusioned novel, *The Secret Agent*, to a Bergsonian treatment. All of the characters, from the double agent Adolf Verloc through the police inspectors to the idealistic anarchists organized by the duplicitous spy, stand out for their “lack of spontaneity and their plodding adherence to the recurring rhythms of their lives.”<sup>32</sup> Even the rebels in the narrative are in truth inflexible, incapable of modifying their positions or behaviors, with terrible personal consequences. The participants either support the system, oppose it, or both simultaneously, as in the case of the cynical Adolf, while the unknown narrator too is exposed as being far from impartial. None of the characters ever forms a complete personality. Rather, they are pawns in a greater geopolitical game, whose outcome remains uncertain and, for all intents and purposes, unknowable (for the immediate participants and later students of history alike). It is particularly interesting that Conrad’s novel was inspired by a real event, a botched terrorist attack in 1894 against the Greenwich Observatory conducted by Martial Bourdin, who died when his explosives prematurely detonated.<sup>33</sup> This event, at once comical and tragic, would call attention to the humorous nature of any and all political dogmas. The idea of impartial neutrality is, similarly, also open to question. In Gillies’ view, all fixed positions are open to comical rendition, inasmuch as they remain solid and unmodified. The anarchists Ossipon, Yundt

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<sup>31</sup> Deleuze, Gilles (1994 [1968]) *Difference and Repetition*. trans. Paul Patton, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994 [1968], p. 124.

<sup>32</sup> Gillies, Mary Anne. *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996, p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> Mulry, David. “Popular Accounts of the Greenwich Bombing and Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*.” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 54.2. (2000), pp. 43-64.

and Michaelis, for example, are exposed as “insignificant and mechanical” because “all three persist in their behavior despite their ineffectiveness.”<sup>34</sup> A rational course of action would consist in adjusting one’s actions to functional concerns. The pragmatist idea of truth would hold that an idea is “made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event: the process namely of its verifying itself.”<sup>35</sup> The ridiculousness of an agent stems in large part from acting as if events, exterior processes in the world, had no import upon our ideas. Idealists are ridiculous because they fail to adjust their ideas to their own ecologies, resulting in a bumbling lack of success. A similar difficulty besets conservatives too, blindly following social norms. Real social change results from the actions of those souls willing to lead by example, inspiring countless others to open their hearts, yet prophets of progress must also be equipped with “good sense” as well (*TS*: 195). Ideas which don’t work, attitudes lacking positive results, ideologies that fail to produce workable social forms, perhaps ought not to be followed. A difficulty lies, of course, in how to judge success. Spiritual decay, social inequality, ecological sustainability, and cultural decline can be viewed as being just as important as economic growth or material living standards. One could even speculate that conditions conducive to the ascent of the spirit are worthier than any other of the supposed social “goods.” Perhaps they are worth so much that it would even be worthwhile to sacrifice all else for the achievement of a society in which the largest possible number could become enlightened, free of desire. We remain agnostic and do not wish to prejudice our readers towards acceptance or denial of any single social form. From a Bergsonian perspective, any rigidity, on the part of societies and individuals alike, is an occasion for both critique and parody. No ideal must be taken as absolute. In itself, this does not exclude a non-utopian type of revolutionary thinking. Georges Sorel’s anarcho-syndicalist position, for example, equates utopianism, the positing of an ideal non-capitalist state of things in the future, with the static view of reality critiqued by Bergson, and advocates for a revolution conceived of as constant change. In the Sorelian view, the revolution, far from constituting the necessary culmination of a progress, must be

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<sup>34</sup> Gillies 1996, p. 176.

<sup>35</sup> James, William. *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1975 [1907], p. 97.

rather an immanent movement of the present.<sup>36</sup> As Bergson himself admits, “without a doubt there was a certain accord between my conception of movement and that of Georges Sorel, the greatest theoretician of syndicalism.”<sup>37</sup> Such a type of anarchism would stand in complete opposition to any dogma, creed, or fixed idea, but it would be an exaggeration for us to equate Bergsonism with any other “ism.” Even the most flexible and indeterminate of revolutionary ideals can become solidified and comically unresponsive when used without discernment. Trivialisation results from the drying up of the soul. The personality of the fanatic, partisans of “liberty” included, is like plaster which has dried prematurely before the statue could be completed. Misshapen, the lines of the face are fatally flawed, her grimace fixed in place, her indignation permanent, her fists raised to beat upon the table, her mouth opened to scream invectives at the representatives of power. But the words of the utopian, because they are recognized by others as products of dogma, fail to be taken seriously. The mute words of the impotent idealist are like so many pebbles thrown on a freeway. Their chances of making a fuel tanker truck explode are minimal. The odds are there, but such a revolution will probably not be televised.

#### “EVIL FOR EVIL”: THE INCONGRUITY OF SUPERIORITY

Does Bergson give a “superiority” account of laughter or an incongruity-based view? The former would best be exemplified by Thomas Hobbes, who states in Aristotelean fashion that “the passion of laughter proceedeth from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laugheth. Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated.”<sup>38</sup> The second position we have already outlined above, being the view that the source of laughter must be sought in some surprise which contradicts our expectations. Bergson can be said to combine the two views in a hybrid theory of the comic, although the posited superiority of the laughter concerning the

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<sup>36</sup> cf. Giglioli, M. F. N. “Glorious Instants, Perpetual Recurrences. Georges Sorel, Vilfredo Pareto, and the Dismissal of Progress as a Political Category.” in Cecile Lawrence and Natalie Churn (eds.) *Movements in Time. Revolution, Social Justice and Times of Change*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, pp. 199-211.

<sup>37</sup> quoted in: Grogin, Paul (1988) *The Bergsonian Controversy in France 1900-1914*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1988, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes. Volume IV*. London, John Bohn, 1840., p. 46.

person laughed at is, on a more fundamental level, but a manifestation of the power of society writ large. Life cannot tolerate inflexibility within itself. The functioning of a society depends, for its efficiency, upon the maintenance of what Bergson calls elsewhere attention to life. Its members must remain enchained to vitality if they are to perform their functions effectively. Hence, “it is the part of laughter” to snap people out of their isolation, to “reprove” their “absentmindedness”, connecting them back to the social dimension (*L*: 134). But if the relaxation of attention is damaging to cohesion, why does it occur in the first place? Attachment to life comes by way of effort, whereas relaxation is natural. There is a distinct asymmetry at play here, which is never addressed in explicit terms by Bergson himself. The creation of a form of intelligence, identified here with human beings, which is capable of reaching an almost complete detachment from life in a contemplation purified of profane elements, is ascribed to “a fit of absentmindedness” on the part of nature, and things are left at that (*L*: 154). To his credit, Bergson imagines what an intelligence unlimited by pragmatic interests could look like. On the Bergsonian view everyday perception is a selection from a vast multiplicity of sense data. The brain is a narrowing of the cosmic mind. Action does not necessitate a constant accessing of memories, hence the brain is a selection mechanism sifting through information, separating data which is useful for the performance of actions from the rest of the undifferentiated mass. A purely contemplative form of thinking, on the other hand, an intelligence not compelled to perform any activities whatsoever, would “fuse” all the elements “into one. It would perceive all things in their native purity” (*L*: 154-5). The attainment of such a degree of spiritual ascension requires not effort but relaxation. Few are capable of letting go, unmooring themselves entirely from their social contexts. Paradoxically, detaching ourselves from life and reaching the unmediated immediacy of relaxation is far from uncomplicated. Simplifying one’s inner states, liquidating the individuation of one’s thoughts, is profoundly difficult, requiring a supreme effort of attention. Who among us has proven capable of thinking about nothing whatsoever? Deliberately simplifying our consciousness is an endeavor that requires practice for those who are trapped by their attachments. But occasionally, it comes easily, relaxation floods the personality, all desires washed away. The comic is the punishment for inattention, the call of life taking us back from our dreams and solipsistic reveries. Society beckons, responsibilities await. In a word, depression sets in. Philip Merlan has argued that the entire narrative

of *Laughter*, Bergson's best optimistic intentions notwithstanding, is fundamentally pessimistic regarding the prospects for the freedom of the individual. On this reading, the "life of the spirit" inheres in a "servile state", intelligence being the slave of the life force.<sup>39</sup> What Bergson's functionalist interpretation of laughter reveals is that, despite our ambitions for emancipation, society will always be more powerful than the individual. Those looking for a happy ending are sure to be disappointed by the contents of this book. As Bergson remarks somewhat sourly in the concluding remarks, "there is nothing very benevolent in laughter. It seems rather inclined to return evil for evil" (*L*: 194). But that is just the way society and life work, being forced to operate mechanisms for keeping their components together. After all, a society that falls apart is not a pleasant sight, as many concrete examples can attest. Is the occasional humorous opprobrium of others really that much of a price to pay for sociability? For Merlan, what is problematic, even pessimistic in the Bergsonian depiction of social life is the evident inability of intelligence to become fully detached from its immersion in the collective dimension. The member of a society, Bergson states, "must avoid shutting himself up in his own peculiar character"; introverts or other poorly adapted persons face the risk of "a snubbing", committed with the intent to humiliate (*L*: 135). Laughter, in other words, puts the servants back in their place. And this has disturbing ramifications for Merlan, as this would imply that being a good member of a society necessitates the betrayal, humiliation, and belittling of those who would strive for freedom: "in laughing we do betray our fellows and take sides with our master against him."<sup>40</sup> In this case, the master is the impersonal, anonymous power of life itself. Against the pessimists as well as various other enemies of society, Bergson upholds that we are obliged to live, and the needs of this life necessitate living in a social form that keeps us riveted, shackled to life. But this assertion faces two key objections on Merlan's part. Firstly, we are under no obligation to remain alive. One can choose suicide, leaving bodily imprisonment behind. Secondly, if intelligence is capable of diverging in unnatural directions, thanks to the "absentmindedness" or forgetfulness of life which made contemplative forms of thinking possible, then why not persist in remaining detached? Bergson himself, as we have seen, near

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<sup>39</sup> Merlan, Philip. "A Certain Aspect of Bergson's Philosophy." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2.4. (1942), pp. 529-545, p. 537.

<sup>40</sup> Merlan 1942, p. 538.

the end of *Laughter*, admits that such a sensibility, in the form of an artistically or spiritually oriented intelligence which does not limit itself in any manner, is far from impossible. He does not give any good reason for not detaching ourselves from the stream of life. There is no sound moral reason to prevent ourselves from floating away into detachment. The person being laughed at can simply say, “what care I about the gaiety of others?” Such a perfect detachment of intelligence from its environment would be a form of solipsistic self-awareness. But if nature does not prevent it, such an effort of relaxation cannot be inhibited. In Merlan’s view, nothing in Bergson’s train of thought averts us from “seeing in Nature, Life” or “Society as far as it represents Nature, something evil, or at least inimical toward us.”<sup>41</sup> If this be the case, if society is a malignant force ignorant of the interests of its members, or even actively preventing them from achieving enlightenment, it is perfectly rational to seek for a certain degree of detachment from the rest of society. The great ascetic traditions are based on an analogous intuition. It should also be noted that in more secular settings, universities too are mostly situated outside of major urban conglomerations. Unwillingness to adapt ourselves, identified by Merlan with a *will to detachment*, can be maintained even at the expense of appearing funny. Ridicule is a small price to pay for someone intent on enlightenment.

How can one respond to Merlan’s accusation of social determinism leveled against Bergson? One obvious rejoinder would be that the rigidity of society itself can also become an object of laughter in turn. Because of its collective nature, nobody can form a monopoly upon the power of laughter. Slipping through fingers like grains of sand, the comic displays a plasticity which cannot be wholly integrated into the social form. Like the relation of the *élan vital* to the organized body, laughter seems to represent something broader than the particular society that instrumentalizes it, so as to stabilize its endogenous functions. When the operations of society get too smooth, this unproblematic functioning threatens to degenerate into monotony. Laughter then becomes a way of reintroducing discord into a system, resulting in a punctuated equilibrium, conducive to further social advances and innovations. For Bergson, the “automatic regulation of society” is just as laughable as the inattentive man slipping on a rock (*L*: 47). Citing the example of customs officers asking shipwreck survivors “if they had anything

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<sup>41</sup> Merlan 1942, p. 544.

to declare”, Bergson highlights that laughter can serve subversive goals too (*L*: 46). Oddly, Merlan makes no mention of such examples, which undercut any overly simplistic interpretation of Bergson as an inveterate conformist. The upshot of what we may call laughter’s double-sidedness, its utility as an instrument of both systematic stabilization and subversion, is that society has an interest in maintaining its own plasticity. An overly repetitive social form represents a betrayal or, better yet, a travesty of what this dimension of existence should be. Those who remain stuck in their occupations, such as the customs officers, are laughable, but so is a society that sticks people in place. Treating a living thing like an object bears the hallmarks of ridiculousness, but dangerously, such a relating also threatens to transform living things and persons themselves into objects of humiliation. The dignity of the individual is lost when treated in the manner of a toy soldier. For all that, humor cannot only be about the humiliation of others. The momentum of self-abasement plays a role which is also emphasized. At its root, the comic seems reliant upon a reduction of the living to the status of a mechanism, but couched in trivializing terms. *Schindler’s List* is disturbing, because we know from our study of history that during the Holocaust groups of humans were, unironically, reduced to mere numbers. It would take a depraved intelligence indeed to fashion a parody or comedy out of such unpromising material. Humor must leave our customary reactions unrealized. Ordinarily, a person behaving like an inert object would strike us with something bordering on terror. The reason for this uneasiness is related to the time it takes for an act to transform from the comic into the horrific. Bergson introduces the example of bumbling clowns to underline his point that laughter is the product of “the momentary transformation of a person into a thing” (*L*: 57). Few commentators seem to have noticed the crucial importance of the “momentariness” of this transformation. We maintain the thesis that Bergson, despite all appearances to the contrary, is a presentist and an actualist, duration being a qualitative moment that is not pointlike in nature, displaying the hallmarks of an indivisible yet heterogeneous flow. Time for Bergson is not a succession of states; rather, it is given as a flow, effective in the context of *its own now*. The comic is not a state, but a qualitative moment, a singularity differing from other durations. It consists of the moment wherein the living morphs into the inorganic. Bergson introduces the example of circus clowns, bumbling and



falling about, to illustrate his point. When observing clowns, we see them becoming ever more repetitive. Gradually, these bodies are transmuting into objects, to the stage where the colliding clowns come to resemble “large rubber balls hurled against one another in every direction” (*L*: 59). The performers are trying to make the audience believe, through a method of suggestion, that they are in fact figurines or wooden masses of matter, falling all over the place without purpose. Despite the semantics of gradualism, it is the moment that matters, when inexplicably, we find that the performers have indeed succeeded in making themselves appear to constitute nonliving, causally determined objects. Bergson compares the process of clowning to hypnotic suggestion. The audience has to be distracted to make the illusion succeed. By “a certain arrangement of rhythm, rhyme and assonance, it is possible to lull the imagination, to rock it to and fro between like and like with a regular see-saw motion”, until the consciousness of the observer is sufficiently softened, rendered capable of receiving the vision (*L*: 61). None of the clown’s actions appear to be successful, but this is precisely the distraction at work. Diabolically hidden underneath the appearance of failure, an entirely deliberate transformation of consciousness is being enacted. Skilled clowns extract successful performances out of their vividly portrayed fictional failures in a manner similar to the way alchemists synthesize gold from feces. The clown is characterized by “a special competence for failure.”<sup>42</sup> By behaving clumsily, a good clown is capable of reaching into us. This uncanny talent for penetrating into the affective depths of the audience is undoubtedly one reason why the figure of the clown is so menacing for some. Popular fiction abounds with evil clowns, preying on the weaknesses of underage minds. Stephen King’s *It* portrays precisely such a manifestation. Through acts of what may be called intuition, *It*, a cosmic evil force manifesting itself in the form of Pennywise the Dancing Clown, accesses the minds of those it haunts, exploring their individual weaknesses and fears. The evil clown is a hypnotizer who uses the skill of intuition for malignant purposes. Clowning involves what can be described as “deep-tissue persuasion”, mobilizing an intuition that creates a sympathetic connection between audience and performer, resulting in corporeal responses on the part of

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<sup>42</sup> Weitz, Eric, “Failure as Success: On Clowns and Laughing Bodies.” *Performance Research* 17.1. (2012), pp. 79-87., p. 80.

audiences.<sup>43</sup> In other cases, the end product is a phobia that insinuates itself into the life of a child. Either way, productivity is there. The art of the clown is a transgression of boundaries, producing either comic or phobic affects, resituating the human form in the proximity of objects, giving a momentary impression of rigidity and automatism.

To count as funny, the transformation of the human into a machinic entity must be uncertain, filled with ambiguity. Does all humor necessarily reinforce social norms, however? It would be all too simple to equate Bergson's position with an all-encompassing social determinism or functionalism. As the example of the laughably overzealous customs officers trying to extract tax revenue from shipwreck survivors shows, society itself can become the object of laughter. Enid Welsford's characterization of humor would, roughly contemporaneous with Bergson's study, on first impressions seem to be more in line with our everyday manner of thinking about the funny. In her view, rather than connecting us back to society, comedy constitutes a "momentary relief from the pressure of sympathy and fear."<sup>44</sup> Is laughter then detachment or attachment, relaxation or effort? Such a view appears to contradict Bergson's definition of the comic as amounting to an, admittedly, mild form of punishment or admonition. How could we align these two perspectives? Bergson's position is more complex than it seems. Laughter mobilizes tension and detension simultaneously, for the tense moment of ridicule coincides with what Bergson has called "the anaesthesia of the heart", the relaxation of our sympathy with others. But the art of clowning has been defined precisely in terms of intercorporeal sympathy between performer and audience! Here Bergson seems to run into a self-contradiction, for he is constrained to admit, unsettlingly, that laughter evades all definition. The audience has to sympathize, to some extent, with the clown to make his gags work. And obversely, it is a fact of experience that laughter does relax us, apparently resulting in a reduction of attention to life, and not its accentuation. Humor would be a poor way indeed for society to concentrate the awareness of its members if all it results in is a relaxation of their consciousness. We suspect that the function of laughter therefore cannot lie in the reattachment of the

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<sup>43</sup> Weitz 2012, p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Welsford, Enid. *The Fool. His Social and Literary History*. London, Faber & Faber, 1935, p. 51.

members of a society to the collectivity. The explanation simply does not work. In a critique of Bergson's theory of laughter, Susanne Lippoczy Rich highlights illuminatingly that "laughter (...) is controlled by the parasympathetic nervous system and is a movement toward relaxation and restoration."<sup>45</sup> The physiology of laughter points toward its affinity with the Bergsonian account of dreaming, rather than reattachment to social norms. If anything, the eruption of the Funny ((Moment)) involves a momentary lapse of collective functionality. The comic constitutes an event that disturbs the smooth operations of the cogwheels of the prevailing communal machinery. As relaxation, the funny allows us reprieve from our concerns. There is also an inherently innovative dimension to comic performance. The genuinely funny must include an element of "defamiliarization", halting or postponing the gradual "drift toward cliché" which endangers all comic genres.<sup>46</sup> What Merlan's critique of Bergson misses is that comedy can be productive of both subversions and reinforcements of the status quo. Merlan equates "inattentiveness to life" with "the phenomenon of death", also implying a connection between the contemplative mode of intelligence and distance from vitality.<sup>47</sup> Does absentmindedness necessarily imply a real negation, or may it be thought of in more positive terms? The terms "negative" and "positive" alike are products of deluded consciousness. Certainly, if life is a corollary of attentiveness, as the Bergsonian doctrine holds, then it can be said that living corresponds with a degree of interest in one's own life. Somebody who has lost all interest in persisting will find it more difficult to keep on existing. Depressives are prone to suicide. But just as the depressive can see no reason for being, so the vast majority living unproblematically does so for the most part without needing to have a reason. *To exist requires no reason.* This is the gist of Bob Plant's brilliant and insightful article, "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter." The author begins with a situation which is itself humorous. The moral philosopher, R. M. Hare recounts in an autobiographical essay the case of a young Swiss exchange student who, upon reading a copy of Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* (containing the famous phrase, "nothing matters"), comes to feel that life is

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<sup>45</sup> Rich, Susanna Lippoczy. "Ridicule and rut reactions: some problems with Henri Bergson's *Laughter*." *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research* 2.3. (1989), pp. 257-264., p. 262.

<sup>46</sup> Weitz 2012, p. 84.

<sup>47</sup> Merlan 1942, p. 540.

completely without meaning. To exist is absurd because no reason for existing can be discerned. By the time Hare intervenes, saving the boy from delinquency, a range of concerning behaviors have manifested: the guest “had started smoking in his room, taking long solitary walks in a nearby field, and refusing to converse at dinner”, all highly concerning.<sup>48</sup> Hare’s solution is to suggest to the discouraged youth that great existential questions are unimportant, and philosophically too vague to be resolved. Instead of asking unanswerable questions, they should be decomposed into more modest ones. The example itself is a funny one, for three distinct reasons: (i) the student’s exaggerated response to the Camus novel, even taking up Camus’s pastime of smoking; (ii) the mere fact that the written word had such a sudden effect on the oversensitive young man; (iii) and thirdly, the affected, comically restrained scholarly reaction of Hare the philosopher, acting almost as a living parody of overly rigid analytical philosophers. In brief, Plant identifies multiple incongruities at work in the example.<sup>49</sup> By treating the problem as a joke, Plant does not for all that sidestep the issue at hand, which is the status of absurdity. Is there any meaning residing in life waiting to be discerned? What is the meaning of life? The absurd would be a position that answers in the negative. Taking Bergson to task for ignoring the ability of radical laughter to transcend our implication in a socio-pragmatic dimension, Plant argues for an emancipative reading of humor as a relaxation which can break the stranglehold of false problems upon our consciousness.<sup>50</sup> Hare’s mistake, which makes him comically inept as a carer of souls, lies in supposing that the great questions of existence – why are we here, and for what purpose? – can be explained away through a revision of language. Deconstructing broad-based existential problematics is an eminently rational mode of analysis, but in certain cases, analysis is simply not up to the job. Building on Thomas Nagel’s insights, Plant agrees that the human being is characterized by a duality. On the one hand, we take ourselves seriously, pursuing various plans and desires. On the other hand, however, as intelligent beings “we have always available a point of view outside the particular forms of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Plant, Bob. “Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter.” *Philosophy* 84.1. (2009), pp. 111-134., p. 112.

<sup>49</sup> Plant 2009, p. 113-4.

<sup>50</sup> Plant 2009, p. 129.

<sup>51</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, Canto, 1991, p. 14.

This reduction of serious issues to objects of mockery can alleviate our present state. Approaching sweeping existential questions with “irony” instead of “heroism or despair” can help us preserve our mental integrity when faced with the threat of the absurd.<sup>52</sup> Instead of spitting in the face of existence, cursing the world for creating us in the form of suffering beings, Plant suggests a liberating laughter which admits the status of the human as the animal that “cannot help repeatedly asking unanswerable questions.”<sup>53</sup> Analysis represents an evasion of this fundamental circumstance. A liberating laughter is radical, because it reroots us in our condition, while nevertheless propelling us into a state of grace which is more than the human condition. The ability to step back, and view even our own, most intimate states in a disinterested manner, is an opportunity to practice the art of detachment. Humor can serve as the motor of *enlightenment*, making our spirits less weighty.

Is Bergson’s theory of humor itself rigid, even to the point of making it comical? In the 1934 comedy, *Strictly Dynamite* (1934, dir. Elliott Nugent), the character Moxie, played by comic actor Jimmy Durante, reads aloud a passage ostensibly from Henri Bergson’s *Laughter*: “Apart from intellectual content, actuality also heightens duty effect, to wit.”<sup>54</sup> The incongruity here is obvious for anybody familiar with Bergson’s work. This drivel cannot originate from the concise, clear passages of *Laughter*. It is a parody, a caricature the goal of which is twofold. Not only does it point toward a supposed lack of clarity in Bergson’s philosophy, this nonsensical depiction also makes a mockery of “Bergsonian” as a pseudo-intellectual fashion. Moxie adds sarcastically, “you know boys, he’s got something there.”<sup>55</sup> Bergson himself has been made the butt of a joke, but the film itself is deliberately constructed in the manner of a parody, ripping on a particular style of slapstick comedy which had become tiresomely repetitive by the mid-1930s.<sup>56</sup> It is also significant that by this date, Bergson’s philosophy had lost much of its popularity, not being cited as frequently, the philosopher himself having retired from public life due to painful rheumatism. Like all good

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<sup>52</sup> Nagel 1991, p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Plant 2009, p. 133.

<sup>54</sup> quoted in: Ortolano, Scott. “In Plain Sight: Strictly Dynamite, Modern Comedy, and the Hidden Legacy of Henri Bergson.” *The Explicator* 73.4. (2015), pp. 320-324., p. 322.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Ortolano 2015, p. 323.

caricatures, this depiction does work, because it exposes an underlying inflexibility at the heart of Bergson's theory of humor. Of course, semantic matters interest us less than the substantive content of this philosophy. Is a characterization of the Bergsonian view as being too rigid to account for the breadth of humorous phenomena justified? Does what we may call the "relaxation view" have a place in Bergson's philosophy of the funny? Towards the end of his study, Bergson speaks of a special mode of the comic, "comic absurdity." In cases such as Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, the comical achieves an affinity with the dream, resulting in a "general relaxation of the rules of reasoning" (*L*: 187). Everyday pragmatic involvements are exposed as shallow. When topsyturvydom becomes the norm, as in absurd comedy, the inversion results in a trivialization of the normal. Instead of reinforcing our embeddedness in the generality of social life, beneath our insertion a greater chasm opens, rendering the serious unserious, shrinking our significance toward an approximation with nothingness. What makes a great existential comedy film such as *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* a masterpiece is its ability to transport us to a state of disinterest regarding ourselves, to a point where the most profound problems of life are lightened of their weight.<sup>57</sup> The inevitability of death, the tyranny of contingency, the depressive ubiquity of uncertainty, laughter dissolves all of these. Instead of defiance, a Bergsonian view of the absurd would correspond to an opening of consciousness to the ambience of excess. In the dream state, we frequently notice a "crescendo", a "weird effect" which grows, ripening until it overthrows logic, reasoning, hurling us into a parallel world in which intelligence and insanity ceaselessly interpenetrate each other (*L*: 189). The comical, once it achieves the degree of absurdity, blends with the dream, functioning as an infinitely elastic net, catching the depressive before it can drag us down to the Hell of insomnia and angst. Absurd comedy is weird, insofar as it produces a detachment from our pragmatic selectivity. The absurd is the lack of an answer which functions as a triumphant admission of our inability to come to

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<sup>57</sup> Commenting on Bergson's theory of humor, contemporary philosopher Graham Harman contends that "good comedy identifies deeper, more genuine, more unshakable automatisms, whereas mediocre comedy deals only with superficial caricatures that belong to a person only accidentally" Harman, Graham. *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, La Salle and Chicago, Open Court, 2005, p. 133. On such a view, the absurd could be said to constitute the height of comedy, for it reveals the underlying emptiness and meaninglessness of existence.

terms rationally with the cosmic absence of meaning. A humorous response is all that we have left, when confronted with the great unanswerable questions. What Bergson's account ignores is that humor can be reflected onto ourselves. Instead of inevitably ending in ridicule of the other, the pure ((Moment)) of the funny deflects the functional imperative of life and the vital interest. We are capable of becoming disinterested, not intent upon maintaining our mental attachment to life. This should not leave a sour taste in our mouths. It would be a mistake to call such a position "pessimism." J. W. Scott, in a piece highly critical of Bergson's project, argues that *Laughter* constitutes a negative moral teaching, with pessimistic implications. As Bergson writes toward the end of *Laughter* in one of his concluding remarks, "the more society improves, the more plastic is the adaptability it obtains from its members" (*L*: 199). It does seem as if the philosopher is attempting to excuse society and life of their crimes against the human spirit. The butt of the joke must suffer, because this is what guarantees the plasticity of society. Scott takes the equation of social life with adaptability to be destructive of all systems of morality, alleging that by representing the goal of social integration in dynamic terms, Bergson opens the door to unrestrained "moral relativity."<sup>58</sup> The idea of the good would consist in the permanence of change. A good Bergsonist would be somebody willing and able to modify their positions, abandoning if need be even their most cherished ideals or moral principles, so as to guarantee their changeability. The Bergsonian morality would consist in a single absolute principle, "be adaptable", but the introduction of impermanence into the realm of moral ideas makes any adherence to such a moral system impossible.<sup>59</sup> In a word, *always modify yourself*. Scott does not essentially dispute Bergson's equation of humor with social pressure, instead taking issue with the positing of maximum changeability as the ultimate goal of social life. Does incorporating impermanence into our morality make living well impossible? Is the ceaseless shifting of moral standards capable of "squandering" all ethical values, as Scott suggests? Not if we remain true to the moment.

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<sup>58</sup> Scott, J. W. "Ethical Pessimism in Bergson." *The International Journal of Ethics* 24.2. (1914), pp. 147-167., p. 164.

<sup>59</sup> Scott 1914, p. 165.

## FROM CONFORMISM TO DIVINE LAUGHTER

So far we have managed to identify three distinct theories of humour: superiority, incongruity and what can best be characterized as “relief” theory. An obvious problem with all of these is that they are all theories, and none of them deal with what occurs during laughter. Bergson attempts to set things right by describing the function of the comic, but in the end, it too revolves around a consequence of the laughable. A body which has become rigidly mechanical is ridiculous, but this opens Bergson to the objection he himself levels in *Creative Evolution* against Herbert Spencer’s evolutionism. The mistake lies in treating the end product of a process as an explanation of the process leading up to the manifestation of this very product. Seeing evolution as the realization of a function is not a very Bergsonian manner of approaching phenomena, because it consists in treating things as if they could ever be in a finished state. If the Bergsonian doctrine could be summarized in a single sentence, it would be the following: see all things *sub specie durationis*. When sensitized, all views show change. There is a good case to be made that in *Le Rire*, Bergson appears to have forgotten his own methodological strictures, and treats the comic as if it were reducible to a social function. From its, at times, humiliating consequences, Bergson infers that laughter as a whole should be considered “a kind of social ‘ragging’” (*L*: 135). Is this view justified? More specifically, can laughter be specified into a single function? A suspicion nags us, the weird intuition that perhaps laughter relates to any type of function or structure, even the sum of all functions, in much the same way as the *élan vital* relates to organized bodies. Simply put, there could be imagined a form of laughter which transcends any social dimension. The deep laughter hinted at by Plant would be the kind that laughs away not only our problems, but also our very subjectivity. Scott describes an example culled from one of Thomas Carlyle’s works, that of a God laughing cruelly at the petty struggles of suffering and striving human beings. In *Sartor Resartus*, itself a parody of German Idealism, we read, “God must needs laugh outright, could such a thing be, to see his wondrous Mannikins here below.”<sup>60</sup> From where does the intuition of a divine laughter originate? One could say that the absurd idea of a God laughing at humans stems from an incongruity between their subjective illusions of free will and their determined nature, a chasm separating their

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<sup>60</sup> Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus, the life and opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, London, Saunders & Otley, 1838, p. 186.



intentions from reality. If God is all-encompassing and everything follows the intentions of an almighty deity, then the individual is transformed into a puppet whose acts are predetermined. The duelers described in the text become mannequins, dolls or, to return to Bergson's example, toy soldiers pushed around by forces outside of their control. A laughing God is also a trivialization of the ostensible seriousness of religious matters. As Lammenais asks rhetorically, "who could picture Christ laughing?"<sup>61</sup> In a Christian cultural context, we imagine God as caring for the fate of His creation, tending to the wellbeing of his flock, as it were. The figure of a deity laughing at humans killing one another in duels or wars represents an almost obscene inversion of the God of Love worshipped by Christians. But many cultures incorporate "trickster gods" in their "pantheons." Some divinities have a deceitful, sinister and humorous aspect, such as Seth of the Ancient Egyptians or Eshu of the Yoruba.<sup>62</sup> The latter is particularly compelling, being not only a god of deceit but also of communication, in this sense resembling the Greek Hermes. There is a lesson to be learned from the embodiment of truth and untruth in the personage of a single deity. The Yoruba know that which we in the West, beset as we are with constant worries relating to "fake" news, have yet to understand: all communication inevitably incorporates an element of deceit. In Carlyle's example, there is a double incongruity at work, the sheer power of a monotheistically conceived God trivializes all our secular concerns, while the figure of a laughing God also contains an endogenous imbalance between what we, at least in a monotheist context, would expect from a divinity, and what His comically minded variant delivers. Instead of love, this God chuckles at the worries and ambitions of humans, reducing them to playthings of chance. Like a child playing with toy soldiers, this scornful God knocks some down while elevating others to victory, based upon nothing more than a whim. There is also superiority at work here, the toy soldiers can do nothing against their child-tyrant, except maybe stabbing him accidentally with their inconsequentially small bayonets. Relief is, arguably, absent from this example, for there is nothing comforting for us as humans in such an image of reality. It would be patently uncomfortable to find ourselves living in such a

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<sup>61</sup> Lammenais, Hugues Felicité Robert de. *Esquisse d'une philosophie. Tome III*, Paris, Pagnerre Éditeur, 1840, p. 371.

<sup>62</sup> Davies, Erik. "Trickster at the Crossroads. West Africa's God of Messages, Sex, and Deceit", <http://www.levity.com/figment/trickster.html>, 1991; Te Velde, Herman. "The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster." *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 7. (1968), pp. 37-40.

world. But for the divinity, one can argue that treating intelligent living beings as playthings could help soothe his anxiety, arising from the absence of real playmates. The monotheistic God lacks partners in creation. Beset with loneliness, the sole preoccupation of Carlyle's laughing divinity would be playing with individuals until they all fall down, and the curtain closes on creation. A depressing thought, if there ever was one. Why do we nonetheless feel that a deeper form of laughter is also possible? In a word, what makes a divine mode of laughter possible? In a passage, Friedrich Nietzsche, writing of the "new philosophers", gives the following definition of a divine laughter born from misanthropy: "such philosophers are cheerful and that they like to sit in the abyss below a perfectly clear sky: they need different means from other men for enduring life; for they suffer differently (namely, as much from the profundity of their contempt for man as from their love for man). - The most suffering animal on earth invented for "itself-laughter."<sup>63</sup> Such an antisocial mode of laughter transcends our connection with others. But is such a position available to finite beings?

On Georges Bataille's view, a divine laughter can be attained, but this would be laughter of a curious kind. In his *Inner Experience*, Bataille recalls feeling a sense of disappointment with Bergson's *Laughter*, one that approximates our sense of dissatisfaction with the work: "reading it irritated me - the theory seemed to me to fall short (for this reason, the public figure disappointed me: this careful little man, philosopher!) (...) the question - the meaning of laughter (...) remained hidden."<sup>64</sup> For Bataille, the Bergsonian theory of the comic remains unsatisfactory, precisely because its progenitor is too careful. There is more at work in this somewhat taunting description than a personal attack (although it is hard not to view the phrase "careful little man" in anything other than derogatory terms). Rather, Bataille's concern relates to the dangers of carefulness as method. Any philosophical treatment of a phenomenon risks evading the ((Moment)). Hence the need for a type of laughter which reconciliates us with nothing whatsoever. Instead of mere contentment, divine laughter would be the obliteration of integrity, effacing not only the butt of the joke, but the trickster as

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<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York, Vintage Classics, 1968 [1901], p. 516.

<sup>64</sup> Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988 [1954], p. 66.

well. As Jeremy Biles notes, “whereas Nietzsche is able to laugh despite this sympathy for the hero, Bataille’s laughter is aroused precisely because of the identification with the hero.”<sup>65</sup> Bataillean laughter is more than social regulation, existentialist defiance of meaninglessness, or even the cold comfort of evading life’s big questions by either breaking them down into smaller ones or even denying their relevance altogether. This laughter is at once a sacrifice of meaning and a gesture of sympathy which transports us into complete union with the sacrificial victim. Along with meaning, we ourselves also descend, collapsing like the man slipping on the street. “The putting to death of God is a sacrifice which, making me tremble, allows me yet to laugh, for, in it, I succumb no less than the victim”, writes Bataille.<sup>66</sup> If in Bergson’s case laughter involves a lockdown of the organism, through an anaesthesia of the heart, Bataille advocates for the polar opposite viewpoint. At its extremity, the comic represents a breakdown of barriers, a melting of bodies into unity, one among many different forms of transgression, such as “heroism, ecstasy, sacrifice, poetry, eroticism.”<sup>67</sup> Comic performance, for example, can be viewed in such sympathetic terms. Here we do not wish to reconstruct the entirety of Bataille’s theory of laughter. One reason is that Bataille, as opposed to Bergson, does not present anything approximating a coherent theory. Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen has done an excellent job of extracting a distinct theory of laughter from Bataille’s texts. In itself, such a project is somewhat ambiguous, for the upshot of Bataille’s entire approach to this phenomenon lies in the admission of impossibility. It is impossible to create an adequate philosophical or theoretical treatment of a phenomenon whose reality transcends all approaches. A theory of the funny ((Moment)) is doomed to remain a mere theory. Another reason we are constrained to refrain from a full reconstruction of Bataille’s idea of laughter is the particularity of our interest. Specifically, what interests us here is what account, if any, does Bataille give of the *moment* of laughter and how this can supplement, or even complete, Bergson’s philosophy of the comic. A divine laughter is joyous, but also malicious, to the point of killing both subject and object. As Borch-Jakobsen writes, “laughter

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<sup>65</sup> Biles, Jeremy. *Ecce Monstrum. Georges Bataille and the Sacrifice of Form*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> Bataille 1988 [1954], p. 154.

<sup>67</sup> Bataille 1988 [1954], p. xxxiii.

kills.”<sup>68</sup> This declaration is already suspiciously oversimplistic. What could this mean? Some individuals have probably died from laughing too hard, but clearly it cannot mean that laughter is deadly! Many of us alive at this moment have had hearty laughs, and lived to tell the tale. This “murderousness” imputed to the funny by Borch-Jakobsen and Bataille alike is a synonym for its power of trivialization. Laughter sacrifices seriousness, ripping open pretensions to greatness. Commenting upon Nietzsche’s remark quoted above, Bataille notes in *On Nietzsche*, a parodistic book that reminds the reader of some of Nietzsche’s works, written in the form of aphorisms, that through the “immanence of laughter, Nietzsche liquidated in advance that which still linked him (...) to vulgar forms of transcendence.”<sup>69</sup> Instead of connecting us back to society, this type of laughter would enact a separation that is liberating for the solipsist. This alienation provides openness for the subject, elevating itself above and beyond its surroundings. Rather than smoothing the process of adaptation, making the individual more malleable to society’s designs, this type of divine laughter introduces a disinterestedness that transforms us into an ego. In Nietzsche’s case what is at stake is a break with the dominant Judeo-Christian morality of his time, but more generally we can speak of any set of social institutions. When we learn to relate mockingly to the dominant system, whatever it happens to be, we open ourselves to flight. Our gayness reduces conventional meanings to ash, our joy erupts out of us, in a conflagration of merriness. The summit of the funny ((Moment)) is the state wherein we laugh without having to know the reason for this sudden volcanic eruption. After realizing our entrapment, the tragic nature of our predicament, being intelligent beings stuck in suffering, vulnerable bodies, we have no option left but to continuously strive, sacrificing the hope of a final meaning. No liberation is more complete than a realization of an abode here. This would be an adaptation which delivers us over to the rolling, adumbrating moment: “I don’t give a damn about the future: I suddenly burst into infinite laughter!”<sup>70</sup> Bergson’s mistake on this reading would consist in maintaining a characteristically philosophical degree of restraint. To quote Borch-Jakobsen, “he

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<sup>68</sup> Borch-Jakobsen, Mikkel. “The Laughter of Being.” *MLN* 102.4., (1987), pp. 737-760., p. 740.

<sup>69</sup> Bataille, Georges. *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2015 [1945], p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> Bataille 2015 [1945], p. 48.

persisted in making of it the object of his reflection, instead of letting himself be overcome by laughter, in that place where nothing counts any more.”<sup>71</sup> Living for a protracted period of time as if nothing mattered is a difficult feat, a luxury available mostly to drifters, hobos, saints, and generally those who live a life close to the edge of society. For the vast majority of us, laughter is nothing but a moment. Yet this supremely pleasurable qualitative instant is one worth living for. Even if we rarely taste the divine, a single faint touch of an infinite fruit can fill our duration to the brim.

The challenge is to participate in laughter from within. Bataille presents us with a notion of humor which differs radically from all the other theories we have outlined here for the reader. What makes it of interest is, above all else, its consequential presentism. As Bataille writes, “laughter hangs suspended, it doesn’t affirm anything, doesn’t assuage anything.”<sup>72</sup> The purest form of laughter would be instantaneously enlightening. A laughter that is extended into a future, or even worse, preserved for remembrance and recall, cannot be genuine. It is an affected, and therefore falsified type of laughter. Eruptions, of their very nature, cannot be forced. The advent either arrives or fails to come. Authentic laughter is a case of either/or, its arrival leaving no doubts: “spontaneous laughter, without reserve, opens on the worst and maintains in the worst (death) a light feeling of wonder (at the devil God, blasphemies, or transcendences! The universe is humble: my laughter is its innocence).”<sup>73</sup> Bergson does not deny that laughter displays the hallmark of spontaneity, for “it goes off spontaneously and returns tit for tat. It has no time to look where it hits.” (*L*: 198). Nonetheless, between these two views, a qualitative difference can be discerned. Bataillean/Nietzschean laughter targets every certainty. No meanings are safe from this infinite cheerfulness. Conformity gives way to the absence of any grounding. Social imperatives are reduced by the revelation of the underlying emptiness. Instead of merely piercing others, bringing them back in line with society’s own interests, as the malicious, socially encoded “functional” Bergsonian mode of the comic does, Bataillean divine laughter is characterized not by what it does, but how it dies. Everything is put to death, that is, trivialized, by the funny ((Moment)). Every

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<sup>71</sup> Borch-Jakobsen 1987, p. 741.

<sup>72</sup> Bataille, Georges, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone, Venice: Lapis Press, 1988 [1961], p. 101.

<sup>73</sup> Bataille 2015 [1945], p. 68.

being melts away, for the funny leaves nothing intact. Nothing matters, but that does not bother us. What appears to constitute a negation is affirmation, a Zen Buddhist style inversion of meaning into a state wherein meaning and meaninglessness coalesce. As Borch-Jakobsen writes eloquently, laughter for Bataille consists in “a certain *affirmation* of nothing at all.”<sup>74</sup> Statements such as the following make no sense in and of themselves, gaining their import from a paraconsistent logic extraneous to their semantic content: “impalement is laughter.”<sup>75</sup> How could this be? Is it not madness to ascribe a comic nature to this unbelievably brutal medieval form of execution? The comic, at its greatest intensity, knows nothing of proportion. One could speculate that this is one reason why comedians are always getting into trouble. Humor contains something inexhaustible, being irreducible to particular social conditions. The humorist impales social mores, melting conventions, forever struggling to prevent the onset of cliché. Performers who have character know when to retire. The moment of retirement, ideally, coincides with the point where performance slips into clichéd repetitions. The comic art is a constant struggle, to both skewer everything in society, while remaining true to the imperative: *affirm* nothing. Bataille’s prose shows us a way of relating to reality that gives the luxury of disinterestedness back to us. Most of his most famous works were written during the bleakest years of the Second World War. *On Nietzsche* specifically functions as both a mystical tract and a war diary, with certain entries relating contemporary events alongside the author’s reveries. We read, for instance, of bombings cutting of “communications with Paris”, then on the same page, of the “disarming hilarity” of it all, laughter in the face of anguish revealing “the emptiness of nonsense of everything.”<sup>76</sup> This book is being written in the shadow of an international pandemic, the long term consequences of which we cannot yet envision. Is laughter really adequate to the gravity of our contemporary situation? What changes after the funny moment is over? Nothing really, at least not much. Our situation is as grave as it was before the roaring, seething, erupting bodyquake of pleasure. Was there ever an age in which everything was alright? Suffering is the law of terrestrial existence. But laughter, with its power of

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<sup>74</sup> Borch-Jakobsen 1987, p. 743.

<sup>75</sup> Bataille 2015 [1945], p. 74.

<sup>76</sup> Bataille 2015 [1945], p. 128.

trivialization, contains a tendency that may be extended, amplified to a heightened level of intensity. At its summit, laughter is a symptom of our fallen or samsaric condition of being, and a limitless acceptance of this imperfection, leading to the explosion of our finitude. The negative, inverted into itself, shatters into a non-dual singularity. As Borch-Jakobsen would have it, “sympathizing’ with the one who founders tragically, the divine laughter dies of laughter and laughs at dying.”<sup>77</sup> When we laugh spontaneously at the absolute lack of proportion which is impossibility, then a conjunction with this lack of possibility becomes achievable. The imperative is to make room in our spirit for the advent of this enlightening laughter. All terrestrial fetters are shattered, none of the social imperatives survive this conjunction with unplanned spontaneity. It bursts out, an inexhaustible series of absurd gestures, signifying acceptance of any and all developments, unravelling the rule of reason. Nothing whatsoever, that is the object of our affirmation. In a moment of mystic rapture, Bataille writes of actively desiring to be struck by lightning, locating a feeling of desirelessness when confronted with such a fantasy of sudden death: “I’m intoxicated by not wanting anything and not having assurances. (...) I feel lightened of the concerns that gnaw at life. (...) A tiny thing – or nothing – intoxicates me. A condition of this intoxication is that I laugh, principally at myself.”<sup>78</sup> The summit is the fall, and the fall is the summit, the point wherein the pinnacle of the skybound pyramid meets the depth of earthbound nothingness. The perfect inversion of laughter, this is self-irony, self-deprecation, the laughter of the solitary human being. Nothing is made any longer, except the investigation of an inexhaustible series of developments. The living is revealed as a plaything, the vital a paint thinly coating the unspeakable emptiness of becoming’s relentless drive. Divine laughter delivers us over to disinterest. “Sovereignty resides in the fall”, in the unlimited conjunction with our fallenness, in the embrace of contingency, in the dissolution of our will in the heat of infinite love, the abandonment of inveterate forcefulness in a union without recompense.<sup>79</sup> Any particularity can only represent a pale, faded simulacrum of this intuition relating the absolute emptiness of being. Proficiently mastered, the art of self-irony softens the will, until nothing palpable

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<sup>77</sup> Borch-Jakobsen 1987, p. 752.

<sup>78</sup> Bataille 2015 [1945], p. 69.

<sup>79</sup> Borch-Jakobsen 1987, p. 752.

is left. Like a blender mashing tomatoes into a frothy juice, divine laughter shatters closure, opening the heart to the current of a love that transcends even the principle of life.

#### WAR AND LOVE: BERGSONISM'S ENCOUNTER WITH SOCIAL RIGIDITY IN WORLD WAR ONE

How does Bergsonian philosophy fare, when compared with the demands of mystical love? By combining these two outlooks, Bataille's mystical idea of divine laughter and Bergson's functionalist approach to humor, we can hope to salvage Bergsonism from its unfortunate historical connection to particularity. The stakes are far from trivial. In this essay, we have chosen to deal not only with Bergson's tract on laughter, but also seek to discuss a more controversial aspect of his philosophy, namely his patriotic speeches delivered during World War One. Despite their later date, these texts are of relevance to our discussion for a very simple reason. Their vehemence is intriguing, for it exposes a rigidity in Bergson's entire philosophy which threatens to make its author no less comical than the clumsy man falling on his bottom in the street. The reason that these brief lectures are threatened by the specter of the comical is their incongruity, even incompatibility with the rest of the Bergsonian *oeuvre*. In brief, they are by far his clumsiest writings. Were we presented with them, without the name of their illustrious author attached, we would not recognize these mediocrities as even belonging to the list of Bergson's works. And yet, if we are to present a balanced treatment of Bergsonian philosophy, its comically rigid aspects too must be brought to light. And nowhere is Bergson more intransigently rigid than in the collection of lectures published as *The Meaning of the War*. The very title is a misnomer. How could a war have meaning? Surely, violence in the name of lofty ideals cannot justify large scale murder. The issue is of interest, because military metaphors permeate many of Bergson's works. In his book on the philosophy of life, *Creative Evolution*, Bergson compares life to an exploding artillery shell.<sup>80</sup> And *Laughter* contains a depiction of unthinking toy soldiers being manipulated by an

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<sup>80</sup> The evolution of life, Bergson tells us, "proceeds rather like a shell, which suddenly bursts into fragments, which fragments, being themselves shells, burst in their turn into fragments destined to burst again, and so on for a time incommensurably long. We perceive only what is nearest to us, namely, the scattered movements of the pulverized explosions." Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, New York, Random House, 1944 [1907], p. 109.



intelligent player, a disturbing vision that, in retrospect, proves haunting to anybody familiar with the events of World War One, where millions of mostly young men were manipulated by generals and politicians into colliding with each other, just as mechanically as toys, robbed of their dignity and often their very lives by geopolitical forces completely outside of their control. In his introduction written to the English translation, Herbert Wildon Carr is insistent – almost apologetically so – that the contents of the book have “a much deeper meaning” than an expression of patriotism on the part of a philosopher.<sup>81</sup> (Carr 1915: 12). But Carr fails to really bring out what this more fundamental level could be, besides an opposition of “mechanism” with “life.” In a surprisingly vulgar manner, Bergson identifies Imperial Germany with artificiality and mechanism. The Prussian “mechanical” administration of the German Empire works “with the regularity of a well-appointed machine.”<sup>82</sup> Less surprisingly, considering that Bergson was a proud French patriot, France and her allies are connected with the spirit of open morality. The German war machine forms an almost perfect self-referential mechanism, but this inelasticity will prove to be its undoing, for the French are animated by a more broad-based, universal connection with the life spirit. Writing in reference to the mobilization effort, Bergson states in no uncertain terms that the French are morally superior to the Germans, for they have universal justice and morality on their side, as distinct from their enemies who have sold their souls to the machine:

At the cry of outraged justice we saw, moreover, in a nation which till then had trusted in its fleet, one million, two millions of soldiers suddenly rise from the earth. A yet greater miracle: in a nation thought to be mortally divided against itself all became brothers in the space of a day. From that moment the issue of the conflict was not open to doubt. On the one side, there was force spread out on the surface; on the other, there was force in the depths. On one side, mechanism, the manufactured article which cannot repair its own injuries; on the other, life, the power of creation which makes and remakes itself at every instant. On one side, that which uses itself up; on the other, that which does not use itself up (*MW*: 37-8).

In attempting to legitimate the struggle of one imperialist power against

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<sup>81</sup> Carr, H. Wildon. “Introduction.” in Henri Bergson. *The Meaning of the War. Life and Matter in Conflict*, trans. H. Wildon Carr, London, T. Fischer Unwin, 1915.

<sup>82</sup> Bergson, Henri. *The Meaning of the War. Life and Matter in Conflict*, trans. H. Wildon Carr, London: T. Fischer Unwin, 1915, hereafter abbreviated as *MW*., p. 19.

another, Bergson relies on a moralising appeal to universalism, while being himself clearly biased in favour of a particular side. The first impression which strikes the reader is the clumsiness of this line of reasoning. No proofs are given of why French trench warfare or machine guns should be more in sync with the vibrancy of life than German trench warfare or machine guns. What Bergson is implying is that France will inevitably beat Germany in the end because, despite its military inferiority, for various cultural and historical reasons it has a privileged access to the universal that German nationalism does not. Matter is, in the end, subservient to the power of the human spirit, “moral forces” have revealed themselves to be “creators of material force” (*MW*: 37). Try as it might, the most militarily skilled of superpowers cannot defeat a nation that is capable of allying itself with the hidden, immaterial and occult powers that actually shape history. Idealism is capable of mobilizing more resources than mere national pride or any other such particularity. The appeal to the universal will always trump brute force. The irony is that for all his apparent universalism and rejection of the principle, might is right, Bergson himself falls into both particularism and advocacy of what amounts to an affirmation of the strength of the will. Mark Sinclair has argued forcefully in a recent article that the birth of the war texts lies in a basic defect of Bergson’s entire philosophy. Bergsonism in general thinks of the will “as a self-grounding, self-asserting, and self-augmenting voluntary force”, hence it is liable, by its very nature, to be utilized for war mobilization.<sup>83</sup> The reason Bergson was able to weaponize, so to speak, his philosophy in such a vulgar and nationalist fashion must be sought in the very structure of his thought. Sinclair’s insinuation is not a light one, and exposes a serious aporia in Bergsonism, if we admit its relevance. We share Sinclair’s contentions regarding the texts themselves. They are inexcusable, for several reasons. For one, Bergson makes several claims which are, to put things mildly, questionable to say the least. He ascribes a destructive alliance between industry and the military to Germany, completely ignoring that something approximating a military-industrial complex came into being in Great Britain, France and other similarly industrialized imperialist nations of the time.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the mobilization of general

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<sup>83</sup> Sinclair, Mark. “Bergson's Philosophy of Will and the War of 1914–1918.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77:3. (2016), pp. 467-487., p. 470.

<sup>84</sup> Sinclair 2016, p. 472.

categories such as “life” and “universal justice” in favour of a particular belligerent reduces these phrases to mere foils. Beneath the cloak of universality, we find discover the self-legitimation of particular power interests at work. Bergson states explicitly that France’s “cause is that of humanity itself” (*MW*: 44). By propagandistically conflating the national interest with that of an abstract “humanity”, the philosopher acts in the manner of an apologist for the French power elites, consciously ignoring national egoism when it manifests itself in his own country.<sup>85</sup> What drives Sinclair’s analysis astray is his confusion of the “will” with the life force. Sinclair seems to hold, for reasons we cannot fully fathom, that the Bergsonian *élan vital* represents a placeholder of sorts for some type of subjective willing. The power of life, on this reading, would correspond to the effort of will.<sup>86</sup> Such a subjectivist view does not accord with what the current of life is supposed to be, being a presubjective multilevel ontological level of duration which permeates any type of living thing, human and nonhuman alike. The author himself admits that the “philosophy of will” in question is not that of ontology, nor that of sympathetic intuition or artistic creation.<sup>87</sup> Referring haphazardly to a few moments where Bergson ascribes mastery to the act of creation, mostly taken out of context, Sinclair fails to provide an adequate interpretation of just what a criminalized, war-mongeringly masculinist “Bergsonian philosophy of the will” might look like. Instead of a clear, concise rendition based on the facts of the matter, we get what amounts to nothing more than a parody: “Bergson’s philosophy of life as creation is – at bottom, *or at least in one of its versions* – a philosophy of the will as a self-propelling and self-constituting power, a power wholly at one’s command, a power that can and should be intensified.”<sup>88</sup> Never does it seem to occur to Sinclair that it is precisely the self-organizing nature of the *élan vital*, the latter being *autonomous even in relation to human subjectivity*, that prevents it from any all-encompassing instrumentalization. Bergson’s error lies not so much in the promulgation of a philosophy of the will, but rather in his infidelity to the moment. Were the attempt to connect the war writings back to Bergsonism to ever meet with success, the

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<sup>85</sup> Sinclair 2016, p. 473.

<sup>86</sup> Sinclair 2016, p. 476.

<sup>87</sup> Sinclair 2016, p. 479.

<sup>88</sup> emphasis mine – A.L., Sinclair 2016, p. 481.

incongruity between them and the entirety of Bergson's works would be eliminated. But then we would be obliged to treat these, arguably, distasteful writings seriously. And this is what we refuse to do. The spirit is not compelled to accept the primacy of matter. Neither is it under any compulsion to accept the necessity of political resolutions. With the exception of the war years and the Holocaust era, Bergson never took anything remotely resembling a political stand.<sup>89</sup> Being political is as compulsory as being religious. Those who laugh at the sky can afford themselves the luxury of treating lightly that which others insist so vehemently on taking seriously.

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<sup>89</sup> On his deathbed, Bergson professed his commitment to a deep spiritual sympathy for Roman Catholic Christianity, but nonetheless did not baptize himself out of solidarity for the Jewish people being oppressed by the Nazis at the time.

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