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MA Contemporary Art Theory
Dissertation

**I Don't Know Why But Fish are Just Funny:
Figuring the Event of Humour**

1.

We're in a quiet suburban street. Some politely trimmed hedges half-conceal a row of semi-detached houses behind them. Bay windows stand serenely looking out onto the safe familiarity of the leafy neighbourhood. A couple of cars are parked nearby. Nothing, we imagine, ever really happens here.

Now we're zooming into an upstairs window – soon we'll be able to see behind the mock-Tudor façade. Music begins (the effect presumably intending to cement the feel of a serious documentary narrative, but the tinny orchestral backdrop succeeding only in sounding camp). We cut to the inside of a small room: the furniture and the wallpaper are 1960s in style. A figure huddles over a table, writing. Surrounded by sheets of paper, dressed in a distinctly eighteenth-century television period-drama brown suit, he is utterly engrossed in what he's doing. A voice over begins to speak in an upper-class English accent:

This is Ernest Scribbler, writer of jokes. In a few moments, he will have written the funniest joke in the world. And, as a consequence, he will die laughing.

The man stops writing. Then, with a jerky movement – and all the time with his mouth dumbly hanging open – he sits back to read what he has just written. A smile slowly spreads across his face, which before long develops into uncontrollable hysterical laughter. He staggers to his feet: his body now violently rocking back and forth as his laughter builds to a crescendo. Then suddenly he stops, collapses theatrically to the floor, and dies. The sober mock-serious voice-over continues:

It was obvious that this joke was lethal. No one could read it and live.

The scene continues. A woman, presumably the man's mother, enters the room (although of course, this being Monty Python, the “woman” is actually – and for no particular reason – a man dressed as a woman). She sees her son dead, gives a short comically high-pitched cry of horror then approaches his body, weeping. Brokenly she notices the piece of paper in his hand, picks it up, and reads it between her sobs. After a short pause she suddenly breaks into hysterical laughter, and very quickly she too falls down dead.

Next we cut to a scene on the pavement outside the garden of the house, where a news reporter (who also speaks with an upper-class English accent) is giving his report:

This morning, shortly after eleven o'clock, comedy struck this little house in Dibley Road. Sudden, violent comedy. Police have sealed off the area, and Scotland Yard's crack inspector is with me now.¹

That is not the end of the scene, but you get the picture. Laughing at a joke, of course, doesn't normally result in death. In terms of our immediate physiological well-being humour is generally a pretty risk-free phenomenon. Naturally there are instances where laughing and joking are deemed wholly inappropriate activities, the partaking of which can be seen as disrespectful and socially forbidden, and the guilty party considered liable for reprimand. Think for instance of the sniggering of schoolboys, abruptly interrupted by a teacher's familiar admonishment of "would you like to share the joke with rest of the class?" In more severe cases the humour can even be deemed dangerously transgressive and threatening to a particular social, religious or political order. As Milan Kundera vividly recounts in his novel 'The Joke' – a semi-autobiographical tale of the unfortunate fall of a young Czech intellectual after scribbling a witty remark on the back of a postcard – an innocent jest can have life-changing repercussions under a communist regime. Indeed if the ruling power is sufficiently tyrannical, then the laughter might very well result in physical hardship or even death through punishment.² But this death-by-humour would remain the result of an after-effect of the joke; an effect, that is, of its impact on the social world: the offensively dangerous nature of the joke causally leading the comedian-offender to be killed by the audience-offendee. Neither the joke itself then – nor its partner in crime, laughter – are inherently killers.

But nevertheless some sort of destruction does occur in the moment of humour. Whilst it doesn't quite reach the fatal intensity of the Monty Python killer joke (laughter is not, as we colloquially say, "a matter of life and death"), there is contained within the comic the potential for an explosive rupturing of sense. As we shall see, in the event of humour the world – if only for an instant – can mean differently. Cognition-swaying, reason-faltering, thought-disarming, representation-lifting, world-deviating, object-indetermining, consciousness-interrupting, rationality-shaking – there are innumerable ways to figure the philosophical event of humour. Yet somehow it still manages to remain elusive to thought. But even so, to butcher Nietzsche's words, if in trying to catch these insights into humour on the wing and fasten them in words, we end up with a uselessly flapping corpse of barren explanations, we can be happy that we at least tried to

1 Based on a transcript of the Monty Python sketch 'Funniest Joke in the World', [accessed online at <http://www.jumpstation.ca>]. *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, first series, BBC television, October 1969.

2 See Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle*, for a discussion of the varying degrees of tolerance and intolerance of satirical jokes under communism.

catch this particular parrot. Perhaps we might even discover that it isn't dead after all; perhaps the pet shop owner was right: it's just resting.³

2.



Why did Erwin Wurm, in his work 'Telekinetically Bent VW-Van', choose a classic Volkswagen camper van to bend, rather than any other kind of camper van, or any other kind of car? It's a fun and cultish vehicle for sure; we associate it with counter-culture, hippies, drugs, long character-building journeys across vast continents, the freedom of the open road, and so on – all of which adds up to world where things can very easily become a little warped. “A telekinetically bent VW camper? Yeah, sure – but that's nothing to what I saw on my trip last night!” That kind of thing. The world of VW camper vans we could say is, at the very least, a flexible one. But what is more significant in the context of Wurm's work, and what makes the piece so arresting as a physical manifestation of the imagined telekinetic act, is the simple and familiar “there-ness” of the vehicle

3 Nietzsche: 'Sigh. – I caught this insight on the wing and quickly took the nearest shoddy words to fasten it lest it fly away from me. And now it has died of these barren words and hangs and flaps in them – and I hardly know any more, when I look at it, how I could have felt so happy when I caught this bird.' Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §298, p. 169.

The 'Dead Parrot Sketch' is of course one of the most well known of Monty Python's routines. The sketch is based on the following scenario: a customer (played by John Cleese) is exasperatingly trying to demonstrate to the shop owner (Michael Palin) that the parrot he's just bought – a “Norwegian Blue” - is, in fact, dead; the shop keeper, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary, maintains his conviction that the bird is not dead – that it is in fact “resting”. *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, first series, BBC television, October 1969.

Palin has remarked: 'Norway is funnier than a lot of other countries, which one has to remember [...]. Like fish are funny, for some reason: haddock, halibut. We used fish a lot in Python, I don't know why they're funny but they are extremely funny, whereas many of God's creatures aren't so much. Birds weren't particularly funny – we used them every now and again – but fish were funny.' Palin, quoted in David Bradbury & Joe McGrath, *Now That's Funny! Conversations with Comedy Writers*, p. 77.

as an object. The paradoxical condition of the absurdity of the bent-camper-van gesture is that in order for the gesture to be comprehensible as absurd its object has to be at the same time comprehensible as part of a reality of non-absurd everyday things. That is to say, for something to be able to be made absurd requires, as a necessary condition, that that thing itself already exists – fully, tangibly, graspably – and in a non-absurd way. The camper van, in order to bend its way into unreality, must first be utterly grounded in the real.

Although the production of this particular style of VW camper van largely ceased in 1974 (when a newer, lighter and more efficient model was launched), it is still a ubiquitous sight on roads everywhere. So whilst the older model remains alive in the sense that it has a very real and contemporary presence in the world (it is far from a defunct piece of motoring history), it is no longer alive in the sense of continuing to undergo the periodical refinements and improvements of design characteristic of a contemporary vehicle. The classic Volkswagen camper van is thus insistently present in the world as a real yet unchanging thing – its form is stable. It is this that makes it such a fertile vessel for a being-made-absurd. A more modern vehicle, in contrast, would exist too indistinctly. The contemporary camper van is in a sense not yet sufficiently formed: its aerodynamism, its newness, its insistent “you haven't seen this before” quality would, if Wurm had opted for that instead, all too easily obscure the gesture – the intended absurdity of the bent chassis becoming indistinguishable from a mere design prototype.

Wurm's camper van makes us smile. It makes us smile, not because of any originality or inventiveness of its design (or at least not solely because of that) – but because of its absurdity. It makes us smile because, for no logical reason, it breaks a rule: it breaks up the normal order of things, the way things should be in the world. In 'Telekinetically Bent VW-Van' then the logic of the world seems to have gone astray. The world itself seems to have tripped over, or is perhaps drunkenly staggering home. But don't worry, world, Wurm's piece seems to say; lie down in the back of the van. Sleep it off. Everything will be okay in the morning.

3.

Philosophers have been grappling with the subject of humour for about as long as they've been grappling with any of their other more “serious” subjects. Meditations on humour and laughter have consistently formed part of the philosopher's general all-encompassing world-view: since antiquity diverse observations, insights and speculations on humour have peppered the writings of

the great thinkers. From Plato warning us that the guardians of his ideal state should not waste precious time and energy indulging in laughter, via Schopenhauer finding hilarity the inevitable failure of reason to account for the irrationality of the world, to Bergson positing that what is most funny is when a man appears to resemble a machine – philosophers cannot seem to resist the urge to explain the joke.⁴ More recently however a narrower discipline of “humour studies” has emerged and has developed into its own academic specialism. The discipline, which borrows its intellectual tools from a variety of fields, approaches its subject from numerous angles, each attempting gallantly to account for this strange and elusive phenomenon under its own intellectual auspices. Sometimes the attempt is to analyse the cognitive, psychological and physiological mechanics of laughter; sometimes it is to account for the societal impact, historical development and cultural specificity of the joke; sometimes it is to discuss the use of the comic in art and literature. If proof were needed that humour scholarship had arrived as a discipline we could simply take a stroll through the university periodicals library, where, in between walls of archival anthropological, linguistic and psychoanalytical material, we might stumble across such a soberly titled publication as 'Humor: The International Journal for Humor Research'.⁵

Three main theories of humour provide a base for contemporary scholarship: superiority theory, relief theory, and the theory of incongruity. Whilst the emphasis shifts from study to study, the basic theories themselves remain intact as a kind of originary language from within which, or in relation to, any new insight must be articulated or positioned (even outright rejection is in this sense a form of engagement). Briefly, the standard theories of humour can be characterised as follows.

The first, superiority theory, is perhaps the least relevant to this study. Based on the idea that laughter occurs primarily as a result of a feeling of superiority to someone else, the archetypal example often put forward is the Hobbesian delight we find at seeing someone slipping on a banana skin. Although perhaps not representing humanity at its most noble, as Baudelaire wittily reminds us in his 'Of the Essence of Laughter', the thought process is a familiar one:

I don't fall, I don't; I walk straight I do; my footstep is steady and assured, mine is. You won't catch me

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- 4 Plato writes for instance in *Republic*, III: 'Men of worth must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less should we allow such a representation of the gods.' Quoted in John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 4. Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation*, notes that: 'It must therefore be diverting to us to see that strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency.' Quoted in Morreall, p. 103. And Bergson, in his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, posits that humour essentially derives from, as he puts it, the 'mechanical encrusted upon the living.' Bergson, p. 84.
- 5 Now having been published for some twenty years, the quarterly *Humor: The International Journal for Humor Research* was, in its own words, 'established as an international interdisciplinary forum for the publication of high-quality research papers on humour as an important and universal human faculty.' As quoted by the journal's publisher, Walther de Gruyter [accessed online at <http://www.degruyter.com>].

being stupid enough not to see where the pavement ends, or that there is a paving stone in my way.⁶

We laugh at someone then, according to superiority theory, at the instant of realisation that we are better off than them.⁷

Relief theory, on the other hand, does not stress any such moment of awareness, but finds instead its most convincing ally in Freud's theory of the unconscious. Laughter, in this view, is seen as a kind of involuntary discharge of psychic energy. Given his basic therapeutic interest in encouraging patients to confront the shadowy and underhand activity of their innermost minds, Freud, as we know, was led to develop a systematic theory of the unconscious. By positing a conflict between the id (the fully unconscious realm of mind which desires to act according to instinctive drives and impulses) and the super-ego (the fully conscious moral realm of mind which desires to act in accordance with societal or parental rules), Freud was able to assert that a mediating function must therefore be being performed by the ego. The ego, in other words, has to seek an equilibrium between the pushing and pulling of unconscious pleasure-seeking drives and conscious filtering and censoring mechanisms. This structural theory of the unconscious has of course been on the receiving end of countless critiques, both from a philosophical standpoint and in terms of its applicability to psychotherapeutic practice. But purely as an aid for the attempt to figure the laughter-response of humour, the simple idea that there exists both hidden and non-hidden material in the mind – and that there is considerable interplay between them – remains immensely useful.

Apart from his renowned interest in dreams, one of Freud's favourite sites for the investigation of unconscious workings of the psyche was the joke, and laughter in general. In his book-length study 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious', Freud develops a relief theory of humour which tries to explain the laughter response through the framework of an interplay between conscious and unconscious. The book deals with a variety of sources of laughter, but the most paradigmatic instance is the case of the sexually oriented joke. It barely seems necessary to provide an example at this point, but here is one anyway:

“Is the doctor at home?” Asks the patient in a bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor's young and pretty

6 Baudelaire, *Of the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts*, p. 146.

7 An arresting, if not entirely plausible, evolutionary theory for laughter of this nature is relayed by John Morreall in his *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Laughter, so the theory goes, evolved from a time before the development of language. When, in primitive times, the danger of a particular attack had passed, a tribesman would let out a roar of triumph – a vocal signal to his kin that they could relax. His roar was a cry of delight at a threat that had been defeated; in other words, just like in modern laughter, the primitive man was expressing his realisation of superiority. Morreall, p. 7.

wife whispers in reply. “Come right in.”⁸

Given that, according to Freud, the ego has to strike a fine balance between the instinctive drives of the id and the socially responsible suppressions of the super-ego, it is not hard to see how such a joke disturbs the equilibrium. Freud's theory, put simply, is that the psychic energy normally expended in the suppression of inappropriately sexually oriented thoughts (such as illicit sex with the doctor's wife), suddenly, in joking, becomes superfluous, and as such needs to be discharged. For Freudian relief theory then, the bubble of the censoring super-ego is seen to be pierced by the sharp word-play of the joke, and its explosive discharge is what fuels the resultant laughter.⁹

Finally, and perhaps most useful for our purposes, there is the theory of incongruity. Unlike the more psychologically oriented superiority and relief theories, incongruity theory sees humour instead as a cognitive process – as having to do with our intellectual apprehensions of unexpectedness, illogicality, or inappropriateness. Laughter, in this view, is generated by a sudden interruption to the normal flow of things, since, as Pascal put it: 'nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees.'¹⁰ The theory has become the most salient amongst humour analysts largely due to its having the widest applicability – the occurrence of humour in both instances above for example can both be accounted for using incongruity. Baudelaire's man tripping over a paving stone could be held as comic simply because of our surprise at the sight of a man falling (the incongruity of “a man has fallen over” compared with the knowledge that “a man doesn't usually fall over”); and equally the humour of the doctor's wife joke could be posited merely as a result of an unexpected slippage of meaning (the incongruity of the intended “is the doctor at home to treat me?” compared with the understood “is the doctor at home to catch us having sex?”).

An early articulation of the theory finds itself nestling (apparently somewhat incongruously)

8 Joke cited in Mark C Weeks, *Laughter, Desire, Time*, p. 383. Weeks's interest is not however in the applicability of a simple Freudian relief-theory (laughter as expression of libidinal force) that would seek to explain the resultant laughter at such a joke purely as a consequence of the subversion of a social taboo concerning adultery. Instead he aims to develop a theory of humour as an interruption of temporality. 'The problem is that laughter's significance relates to the subversion not just of meaning (which may be meaningful as absurdity anyway) but of the desire and temporality through which meaning is produced. Its significance is crucially temporal – and even more baffling, is concerned with the end of time. [...] [L]aughter is [...] the pleasurable collapse of that peculiar self-propagating tension in desire/deferral (drives and inhibitions) which makes us the uniquely voracious temporal beings we are.' Weeks, p. 394.

9 It is an irresistible image, but its usefulness has been questioned by such humour theorists as John Morreall. In his *Taking Laughter Seriously* Morreall is critical of Freud for being somewhat vague about what inhibitory psychic energy actually is. 'If Freud wants to explain laughter in joking as the release of “saved” inhibitory energy, in short, he should first explain just what this kind of energy is and how we might measure, or at least detect, it. Until he does so, claims like the above that “the hearer of the joke laughs with the quota of psychical energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis” will not have much explanatory value.' Morreall, p. 30.

10 Pascal, quoted in John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 16.

right at the end of the 'Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement' section of Kant's 'Critique of Judgement'. Whilst Kant's own particular examples of jokes may well have become too problematic to provide any real clarification (one for instance involves an Indian man portrayed as a fool at an Englishman's dinner table), he does nevertheless make some insightful remarks about humour in general. The following is particularly relevant in this context:

Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). Laughter is the affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.¹¹

In other words when we expect something to happen and then something else unexpectedly happens, our “understanding” is in a sense disappointed: the anticipated act of cognisance cannot in fact be performed. The incongruity has thus in a sense unhinged the cognitive process. And provided this momentary triumph of absurdity has not caused us any lasting distress, we are compelled to laugh in response to its cunning. Kant here then offers an early articulation of the essence of incongruity theory. And indeed his is a formulation which, with only minor refinement, can still be used as the basis for an analysis of virtually any instance of humour.¹²

4.

How then might we begin to figure this cognitive rupture? We are not, of course, talking here of the vertiginous feeling of losing one's mind. To be the unknowing butt of a practical joke (“why has no-one else in the office come to work today in fancy dress?”) is not particularly funny – not, that is, until afterwards, when the prank has revealed itself as such. When someone tells us a joke we recognise it as a joke: armed with this knowledge we enter an appropriate frame of mind in which its sleight of hand can amuse us. Any incongruity in humour – that is, any momentary deception of our cognitive capacity – is necessarily relative, for without our ability to relativise the incongruity we simply perceive it as wrong, weird, or confusing. When André Breton provocatively writes that the 'simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd,' he is overstatedly

11 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §54. 'Comment', p. 203.

12 Notable exceptions can be found in the laughter occasioned by tickling, or by sheer joy. It is debatable however whether these are instances of “humour” at all; at the very least it can be concluded they fall outside the scope of a discussion such as this whose main concern is to figure humour as a rupture of sense.

highlighting the necessity of such relativisation.¹³ For Breton is speaking here of a purely hypothetical act. The lack of comprehension that would greet the act if it were ever actually carried out would derive – philosophically speaking at least – from an absence of contextual insulation. For if we do not contextualise Breton's statement then it sounds like an incitement to mass murder; similarly, if we do not contextualise a joke then it sounds like incomprehensible nonsense. Both the absurd world of the joke and the absurd world of surrealism need their own relativising frames in order to protect any unwitting victims from senseless consequences.¹⁴

So the unhinging of ordinary cognition caused by incongruity in humour is consensual. But that does not imply any reduction in its impact. For as Simon Critchley puts it in his book 'On Humour', a joke:

suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarised, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal [...]. Humour brings about a change of situation, a surrealisation of the real.¹⁵

Regardless of any acquiescence, it is a fact that if our conceptual system has been violated, then the way we conceptualise things must have altered. The abrupt movement from one state (the real) to another (the sur-real) has a jolt-effect on our thinking. Our perspective changes, and the world ceases to “mean” in the customary way. When, in the explosive moment of the joke, the ordinary becomes the extraordinary, our understanding of the given situation is thrown into a new configuration: conventional thoughts are replaced by unconventional thoughts. The effect of an unhinging of cognition in other words is that the stagnating cage of habitual thought is surreptitiously lifted. The thought-rupture subtly changes the possibilities for thought: new thought is thus able to emerge.

At this point things start to become reminiscent of Lyotard's use of the notion of “paralogy”. In his 'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge' Lyotard describes how paralogy – which literally means bad or false reasoning – has, in his view, been the driving force behind some of the most exciting advances in recent science. Such areas as chaos theory, fractal mathematics and quantum physics derive their strength by focussing on paradoxes and anomalies contained within existing theories. The discovery of quantum physics for example was based on an exploration of the “anomaly” that the standard laws of physics cease to work at a sub-atomic

13 Breton, quoted in Michael E Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, p. 33.

14 Mary Douglas in her essay *Jokes* makes a similar point from a slightly different perspective. Considering the bizarre excrement throwing greeting rituals of the Dogon tribe in Mali, West Africa, she wonders whether the anthropologist simply has to take it on trust whether a joke is being made: 'When people throw excrement at one another whenever they meet, either verbally or actually, can this be interpreted as a case of wit, or merely written down as a case of throwing excrement? This is the central problem of all interpretation.' Douglas, p. 148.

15 Critchley, p. 10.

level (and that those laws can only be replaced with probabilities about the movement of particles). By teasing open fault lines of illogic residing in conventional theories, advances such as these have been able to form radical breaks with what was previously conceivable within their fields. Rather than being bound by the supposedly universal and immutable scientific principle of reason, scientists armed with paralogical thought have been able to exploit the fertility of a more capricious route.

With paralogy Lyotard is positing a kind of mismatch between reason and unreason. There can be no reconciliation. Like the opposing worlds of the real and the sur-real, each effectively plays its own game according to its own rules. Reason simply cannot account for unreason. What happens in the surreal world simply cannot make sense according to the logic of the non-surreal world. Such an understanding of radical discordance also finds itself at work in Lyotard's related notion of the "differend", which he defines as:

A case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both of the arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend as though it were a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them.¹⁶

The concept of the differend is primarily employed by Lyotard as a means to highlight the unjustly hegemonic existence of grand-narratives, particularly as they have occurred under – and have come to define – modernity. Since, he argues, anything falling outside a dominant narrative can only seek acceptance within the rules of that dominant narrative, there is always the very real risk that it will simply fail to gain that acceptance (due to the fact that under the alien terms of the dominant narrative it may inadvertently appear weak, irrelevant, or false). This is then the "wrong" that Lyotard speaks of, when a damage is accompanied by a loss of the means to prove the damage. The task of the postmodernist, he urges, is to break free from this antagonistic-hegemonic model, and instead to find an alternative. 'What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps,' stresses Lyotard, 'is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.'¹⁷

The cognitive rupture instigated by the incongruity of humour can easily be understood along similar lines. The "alternative world" that we inadvertently slip into in humour is irreconcilable with the world we normally inhabit; it plays by its own rules. That is why it seems incongruous. But although the logic of our world is incompatible with the "logic" of an absurd

¹⁶ Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, quoted in Simon Malpas, *Lyotard*, p. 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

world, the existence of one does not negate the possibility of the other. It cannot; for otherwise there could be no apprehension of – and concomitant laughter at – their incongruity. To attempt the foolhardy task of fully accounting for humour according to the rules of rational discourse is therefore to inadvertently subsume the irrational under the rational, and hence to commit a “wrong” to the irrational. Such a move effectively denies the existence of humorous incongruity. What is needed instead, and what Lyotard's differend-thinking implores us to do, is to bear witness to both worlds and to relish their discordance.

5.



Great writers, says Deleuze in his short essay 'He Stuttered',

Make language take flight, they send it racing along a witch's line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of continuous disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation. This exceeds the possibilities of speech and attains the power of the language, or even of language in its entirety.¹⁸

How might such a dynamic characterisation of the disruptive potential of literature illuminate our understanding of an event of humour? In envisaging laughter as a response to an apprehension of an incongruous juxtaposition of one thing and another, we seem to be led quite naturally to an image of a clash between two states of affairs. In the case of Erwin Wurm's camper van for instance, the clash is posited between (a) the state of affairs in which camper vans are straight, and

¹⁸ Deleuze, in, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 109.

(b) the state of affairs in which camper vans are bent. There is a tendency to think such examples of incongruity in terms of a rigid dichotomy between the two states – between (a) and (b), between, in this case, the “normal” and the “absurd”. The transition from one state to the other tends therefore to be understood as a conceptually clean-cut categorical jump. But what if, taking a different approach, these states of affairs could be thought of not as categorically fixed realms, but instead as momentary manifestations arising from a pre-phenomenal state-of-affairs flux? To employ such an approach would be to begin a move towards a figuring of humour through an ontology of becoming.

It does indeed sound promising. But before we arrive there we will need to travel a little further along the underground. It'll probably take a moment or two, so maybe we should try to think of a few jokes on the way.

What do you call a man with a spade in his head?

Doug.

What do you call a man without a spade in his head?

Douglas.

Why is a strange woman dancing so manically in front of us?

No, that one wasn't a joke. This is real. What is she doing? Apart from a slightly overweight man in a suit, who in any case is too engrossed in his paperwork to look up, it's just us and this lunatic alone in the carriage. We too are also tempted to pretend that we haven't noticed her; but it's too late, she's caught our eye. She's coming right over. Now she's taking her trousers off, performing some kind of ridiculous dancing strip. Oh no. All the time the train is swaying from left to right, but that doesn't matter: the woman's dance “routine” seems adaptable enough to incorporate any involuntary staggering and stumbling into its repertoire of moves. Just when her strange dance seems to be escalating out of control in a frenzy of pathetically inelegant swinging, spinning, kicking, waving and punching, the train pulls into the next station and she calmly gets off. What was all that about? We exchange glances with the businessman. He doesn't seem overly concerned: he's obviously witnessed this surreal intrusion before.

Deleuze concludes the passage quoted from above by picturing language as being roused in poetry: language, he writes, starts to 'roll from left to right, and to pitch backward and forward.'¹⁹ His emphasis is on movement and growth; in the same essay Deleuze variously describes language as being made to “boom”, to “take flight”, to “grow”, to “bifurcate”, and to be sent “racing”. All of which stand in opposition to language remaining in what he calls a state of “equilibrium” (even

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

the characterisation of non-movement here is dynamic – equilibrium after all is merely a balance-point between forces). But however elegant it may be, the vocabulary is more than a mere stylistic trope; what Deleuze is really trying to do here is to give form to his basic premise that the world “is” movement. That “life” as such has – and is – the potential to differ. Empirical differences, in Deleuze's ontology, are expressions of difference as such. “Night” and “day” for example, should not be understood as different in kind; for their empirically observable difference (one is dark, one is light) is in reality an effect of the earth's turning, of the day-night cycle – of an effect of the continual change that constitutes life, or, in other words, of difference as such. Whilst a conventional ontology might understand night and day as a conceptual duality, as distinct and opposing ideas – Deleuze sees them instead as “becomings”, as variations originating in an underlying flux. To begin to think the world as consisting of non-differing eternal entities would therefore be an ontological mistake resulting from a confusion between a static and a dynamic conception of a state of affairs. Or put slightly differently, as Deleuze and Guattari do in 'A Thousand Plateaus', one has to be clear about the difference between constant as non-variable and constant as treatment-of-variable:

We were wrong to give the impression at times that constants existed alongside variables [...]. For it is obvious that the constants are drawn from the variables themselves [...]. Constant is not opposed to variable; it is a treatment of the variable opposed to the other kind of treatment, or continuous variation.²⁰

A constant in a sense then is simply a momentarily frozen variable; although at a given instant its continuous variation may appear to have ceased, it still retains its potential to become differently. What is important to recognise is that for Deleuze no singular instance of constancy equates to a generalisable, universal, or eternal constancy. There is always within phenomena the possibility to change.²¹

In the apprehension of a humorous incongruity then there is, in this understanding, no longer an apprehension of a jump from one state of affairs to another (that is, from one non-variable to another non-variable), but an apprehension of one state of affairs “becoming” another (one treatment-of-variable becomes another treatment-of variable). Now the incongruity laughter-response is not caused by the jolt of a categorical leap from one state to another – from a determinate state we recognise as “normal” to a determinate state we recognise as “absurd”; it is

²⁰ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 114.

²¹ As Deleuze puts it in *Difference and Repetition*: 'the constants of one law are in turn variables of a more general law, just as the hardest rocks become soft and fluid matter on the geological scale of millions of years.' Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 2.

caused instead by one state unexpectedly becoming another – by normality's fleet-footed ability to become absurd. Instead of humorous incongruity as jarring juxtaposition of one thing with another, we now have humorous incongruity as deviant flight from one state to another.

When the young Swedish artist Klara Liden performs her bizarre public dancing piece 'Paralysed' on the underground she is in a sense embodying such a potential for variance inherent in the apparent stability of everyday codes of behaviour. With such a dizzyingly confrontational act, she is doing more than simply disregarding socially established rules of public conduct: more than a simple refusal of normality, Liden's gesture serves to reshape, or as Deleuze would have it, to “deterritorialise” normality. Its success moreover is wholly reliant on its absurdity. For if it is to retain its capacity for deterritorialisation, Liden's performance must not be diluted by irony; its deviancy must remain profoundly incomprehensible, it must not be interpreted as a clever metaphor (“of course what Liden's absurdity really represents is...”). Liden's act must not ascend to a level where it can attain an ironic distance to itself: it must not strive, in other words, for the transcendental viewpoint necessary to distinguish between the twin spheres of apparent meaning and genuine meaning at work in irony.²² No, it must remain at the level of non-meaning, on the plain of nonsense, as it were – for this, remember, is an ontology of immanence. We must not fall back into the trap of thinking Liden's behaviour through a dichotomy of rationality and irrationality.

The incongruity between “normal” behaviour and Liden's behaviour is however still intact, necessarily – for otherwise there would be no humour. But the way the discrepancy has arisen, and the way in which we can conceive of the relation between its parts, has altered. Instead of a picture of two realities – one real and one unreal – crashing into each other, we can, thanks to Deleuze, think in terms of just one dynamic reality, endowed with the ability to mutate into either of what we habitually describe as the “real” and the “unreal”. Liden, therefore, can be seen to have opened up an alternative world from within her own world. Her newly fashioned world of freakish behaviour is simply the ordinary world (the only world) made different. What we take from Deleuze is the point that although there is only one world – or rather, that there is only “world” – it doesn't necessarily have to be the way it is. Just like Deleuze's “witch” effect of literature on language, the jolt-effect of humour impels the world into a delirious becoming-

²² Deleuze writes in a similar vein in *Difference and Repetition*: 'The first way of overturning the law is ironic, where irony appears as an act of principles, of ascent towards the principles and of overturning principles. The second is humour, which is an act of consequences and descents, of suspensions and falls.' Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 6.

See also Claire Colebrook's *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* for an extended treatment of the incompatibility of transcendental irony with a Deleuzian philosophy of immanence.

other.²³ Here Liden is that witch figure: her insane dancing on the train does to normal behaviour on public transport what, in Deleuze and Guattari's eyes, Kafka's writing does to language. Just as Kafka had the ability to 'make language stammer, or make it "wail", [to] stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities,'²⁴ Liden's comic deviancy has the potential to do the same to normality.

6.



Just before the train pulls in to Charing Cross Station there's a moment when the oppressive South London landscape suddenly opens up. The endless walls of the drab flats, office-blocks and warehouses lining the route of the city-bound journey abruptly come to an end just before the river. It's always the same: the initial glimpse of green space, sky, and then suddenly there it is: the Millennium Wheel. Or rather, The British Airways London Eye: "a source of pride for the whole country as well as the capital" (or so says the website at least). But it is pretty impressive: the sheer size, the structural elegance, the computer age design of the glass pods. Despite the annoyingly corporate transparency of its official title the London Eye is generally seen as a "good thing".²⁵ So

23 For references to the witch effect, see for instance the passage from *He Stuttered* quoted at the beginning of this section, and also *Literature and Life*, in which Deleuze asserts that literature 'opens up a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language nor a rediscovered patois, but a becoming-other of language, a minorisation of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch's line that escapes the dominant system.' Deleuze, in, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 5.

24 Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 115.

25 See for instance architecture critic Steve Rose's recent article *Love at First Sight*. 'London is full of buildings that are admired and adored, but the Eye has achieved a different magnitude of success altogether. It is arguably the great architectural statement of our time. There are very few people who don't like the eye. [...] Research carried out [recently] showed that support for the Eye, both in the local area and across London, stood at 85%.' *The Guardian*, August 31 2007 [article accessed online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk>].

what in that case would motivate the young English performance artist Richard Dedomenici to write it a letter of complaint?

'Dear London Eye,' begins his letter, addressed to The British Airways London Eye offices based at the nearby County Hall:

I am a big fan of your observation wheel, so it is with regret that I am writing to inform you of what I fear may be a vulnerability in its construction.

My concern is that if a little C-4 explosive were wrapped around the base of each of the main back-stay cables and detonated, the resultant loss of tension would cause the entire wheel to topple into the Thames. Such an attack could catch your security unawares, given the easy access to the compression base.

Please could you write back and explain what measures are in place to prevent such a scenario from taking place? Then, perhaps, the nightmares will stop.

'I await your swift reply,' implores Dedomenici.²⁶ But really, we suspect, he has already prepared himself for disappointment.

Such a gesture is again one which gains its humour from incongruity. Letters of complaint, and the factually earnest tone in which they are written, are a recognisable part of normal "serious" life. The threat of terrorist bomb attacks too, and their accompanying security issues, are also, sadly, a familiar part of contemporary city life. There is nothing incongruous about those parts of the letter. But in contrast to such readily accepted material we also are invited to consider the fanciful image of the Millennium Wheel "toppling" into the Thames, and are in addition confronted with a slightly too-well-thought-out identification by a slightly too-well-informed member of the public of the risk of a "C-4 explosive" being detonated at the base of each "main back stay cable". The general tone of the letter, we could thus surmise, is plausible, whilst its details are not. It is the jarring of the plausible with the implausible therefore that, according to incongruity theory, is what generates the humour. But just how stable are these categories of plausibility and implausibility? Are they in any sense being dislodged here? Can the humour itself challenge their incontrovertibility? Can a joke, that is, actually change the world?

Mary Douglas, in her essay 'Jokes', initially suggests such a view. She begins with the bold claim that:

The joke [...] affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective.²⁷

²⁶ Letter as reproduced in Dedomenici, *Intelligence Failure*, p. 28.

²⁷ Douglas, in, *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*, pp. 150/51.

The joke shows that what we think about the world is not necessarily what has to be thought about the world. In humour the doors are burst open to reveal an alternative world-view. But unfortunately the excitement generated by this realisation is short-lived: for when the laughter subsides, the doors tend to swing shut. The momentary liberatory jolt of the joke has an unfortunate caveat: it is, as Douglas admits, 'frivolous in that it produces no real alternative.'²⁸ Given this concession it could be argued (somewhat defeatedly) that if all a joke does is to temporarily think the world differently, then no matter how seductive the alternative world-view, it simply remains an alternative world-view. We might well be excited by the realisation that an accepted pattern is arbitrary, but if the incendiary potential of that realisation is not accompanied by a further impulse to act on it, then nothing changes. Waking up one morning having dreamt of a mass of beautiful flowers flourishing in our back garden, we might well be inspired to sew some seeds; momentarily then, our dream will have become a reality – but unless we maintain the effort, unless we keep pulling out those stubborn weeds from the ground, our fledgling flowers will inevitably wilt and die. Habitual world-views – however arbitrary we realise them to be – are very much like weeds: their roots run deep.

It is a rather disheartening attitude that denies the existence of any genuinely subversive potential inherent in humour; but all the same it is an argument that needs to be considered. Umberto Eco, in his essay 'The Frames of Comic "Freedom"', does exactly that. By offering a critique of what he calls "hyper-Bakhtinian ideology", Eco refutes some of the more inflated claims made through the uncritical application of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the Carnavalesque. In 'Rabelais and his World,' Bakhtin famously posits the existence in the Middle Ages of two spheres of life: firstly the official one, which he describes as 'monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety'; and secondly that of the carnival, which he imagines as 'free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything.'²⁹ His basic picture is of an individual split between two polar opposite and mutually exclusive realms of existence. The carnival for Bakhtin, moreover, is more than simply an enjoyable occasion; it contains within it an implicit critique of the official order. As a chaotic melting pot of Rabelaisian transgression and excess, the carnival is understood as a disruption to "normal" codes of behaviour (which for Bakhtin are representative of the reifications of an alienated society).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁹ Bakhtin, quoted in Blair Scott Franklyn, *Towards a Theory of Postmodern Humour*, p. 93.

Eco begins his analysis positively enough, acknowledging that in carnival we are 'liberated from the fear imposed by the existence of the rule,³⁰ and that 'we can commit any sin whilst remaining innocent,³¹ but this he does not equate to revolution:

Transgression theory [...] is unfortunately false. If it were true, it would be impossible to explain why the most repressive dictatorships have always censored parodies and satires but not clowneries; why circus is innocent; why today's mass-media, undoubtedly instruments of social control [...], are based mainly upon the funny, the ludicrous, that is, upon a continuous carnivalisation of life.³²

The reason, for Eco, that such “clownery” is permitted is that it at no stage threatens any rules; if anything its transgressive activity actually serves to restate and strengthen the very rules it is alleged to subvert. As we have seen, humour based on incongruity requires a familiarity with the norm that is being flouted. The success of a verbal joke, for instance, lies in the ability of its punchline to wittily confound an expectation; but if a joke teller has to first explain to the listener what would “normally” be understood – that is, if the teller has to tell the listener what expectations are going to be confounded before then going on to confound them – then the joke will inevitably lose its edge and fail. Given this observation we can appreciate Eco's point: in order to enjoy carnival, he is arguing, we must already understand and respect the rules and rituals that it violates; we have to, as he puts it, 'feel the majesty of the forbidding norm.'³³ To enjoy its excess, we have to understand it to be excess. If as its prior condition comic transgression requires us to have such reverence for the rules that it breaks, then it simply makes no sense to say that comedy in any way liberates us from them. Humour at this point seems to have been rendered rather ineffectual: for humour to be humorous at all, we seem to be saying, it must jettison any pretence towards subversion. So if Dedomenici's letter did indeed aim to effect any change in its critique of a paranoid and over-cautious terrorist fearing culture, its satirical parody of an over-zealous consumer-rights militancy, or even its straight-forward criticism of a security oversight by London Eye, then it would have to readily admit defeat. For, according to Eco's theory, these critiques would have been rendered impotent simply by virtue of the presence of humour in Dedomenici's gesture. All of his targets must remain intact – necessarily so, for otherwise we would find no cause to laugh at Dedomenici's clownish transgression.

If, however, we were to think of the subversive potential of humour not purely in terms of transgression, of rules to be broken, but instead as something which can disrupt the very basis of

30 Eco, p. 2.

31 *Ibid.* p. 3.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.* p. 6.

those rules, then we might arrive at a more promising understanding. For this we would need to understand humour as capable of playfully mixing up liberatory and conservative counter forces, with the effect of shaking the rational grounds on which rules are built. We would need, in other words, to understand humour as rupturing sense. Looking again at Douglas's characterisation of the joke in this light, we can see that its “frivolity” need not now be a limitation; for although Douglas concedes that despite its displacing of a particular world-view the joke remains too frivolous to articulate an alternative, it does, she argues, nevertheless generate 'an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general.'³⁴ As a consequence of this, continues Douglas,

perhaps the joker should be classed as a kind of minor mystic. Though only a mundane and borderline type, he is one of those people who pass beyond the bounds of reason and society and give glimpses of a truth which escapes through the mesh of structured concepts.³⁵

By escaping those structured concepts, by passing beyond those bounds of reason – by, in other words, being frivolous – the joker can become genuinely subversive. The frivolity of the joke should not be seen as a counter to its subversive potential, but as the very condition of its destabilising potency. The joke's frivolity and the joke's capacity for subversion are, in other words, one and the same thing. Humour therefore can be neither characterised as inherently liberatory, nor as inherently conservative, but rather as having a functionality dependent upon an animated reciprocity between the two. The success of a joke in general (the degree of laughter it generates) could therefore be said to depend largely on the degree of intensity of that interplay. The mistake is always to try to pin humour down and extract from it an “opinion”. In laughing at a joke we are not asking what it stands for, demanding to know its politics, but simply revelling in its indeterminacy.

Given such an understanding of humour, we can now assert that it is the ambivalent interplay of plausibility and implausibility that forms the basis of the witty appeal of Dedomenici's work. The fact that we are never entirely clear what “position” his work genuinely takes is of no consequence. This uncertainty need not be perceived as an unfortunate flaw of the artwork, a missing piece of information that might hopefully be found in the exhibition catalogue – quite the contrary; we are simply led to appreciate the role of the indeterminacy in generating the work's humorous nature. When Dedomenici himself explains how 'humour allows me to be vague about my targets,' since, as he asserts, 'people tend to switch off from overtly political messages,' he is

³⁴ Douglas, *Jokes*, p. 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

voicing exactly this same strength of non-disclosure.³⁶ The real subversive power of humour, contrary to what we might imagine, does not in fact derive from any directly discernible critical stance. Such specifically targeted satirical humour relies, as we have seen, on an implicitly accepted understanding of what constitutes “plausible” and what constitutes “implausible” – the humour of its incongruity merely serves to reinforce pre-given notions of what is “good” and what is “bad”. Satire is funny not because it changes our opinion, but because of the (witty) way it reinforces what we already think. But if, rather than being a simple vehicle for an expression of an external politics (subversive or not), humour does have the potential to be genuinely subversive in itself, then it does so at a more abstract level. The real power of humour lies in its ability to destabilise the very categories of plausibility and implausibility, to introduce uncertainty, to disturb the very incontrovertibility of our perceived notions of “good” and “bad”. The real power of humour, in other words, lies in its ability to disrupt sense.³⁷

7.

Around 1998, in a research laboratory at the medical school of the University of California, Los Angeles, a neurosurgeon by the name of Doctor Itzhak Fried was undertaking an investigation into the causes of epilepsy. Using a sixteen year old girl prone to severe seizures as a case study, his team were busily conducting an experiment designed to investigate the effects of electrical stimulus to various parts of the cerebral cortex. By passing a small current via the tip of a tiny electrode into specific points around the girl's skull, and by noting any resultant variance in activity, they hoped to develop a better picture of the whereabouts of epileptic activity in the brain. To their surprise however, when the scientists applied a low voltage to one particular spot, they found that the girl would begin to smile. And when a higher voltage was applied at the same spot, the girl would laugh wholeheartedly. Each time the experiment was repeated the results were the same. “You guys are just so funny, standing there in your white coats!” – she would exclaim; before the scientists too would start to crack up, unable to remain unaffected by her contagious

³⁶ Dedomenici quoted in Rhodri Marsden, *Oops, he did it again*, unpaginated [accessed online].

³⁷ Such a destabilisation is at work in what Donald Kuspit has characterised as “post-modernist wit”. In an article, *Tart Wit, Wise Humour*, Kuspit contrasts the “less serious” wit of postmodernism with its “solemn” Modernist counterpart (which is characterised by the likes of Marcel Duchamp's use of humour in attacking bourgeois attitudes): ‘Post-modernist wit has no belief system, but shows the interplay of belief and unbelief. The ultimate coolness, after all, is neither to believe nor to disbelieve, but to study the way belief and unbelief work together – how one inevitably evokes the other.’ Kuspit, p. 99.

laughter.³⁸

Without wishing to show undue disregard to the obvious importance of such a neurological discovery of a “laughter centre” of the brain, what is most interesting in our context about the story is its sudden change of register. Beginning as a straightforward description of earnest scientific endeavour, the anecdote describes a somewhat farcical collapse of laboratory-experimental objectivity. Whatever cool professional distance once separated the impartially observing scientists from their teenage case-study suddenly evaporates over a shared joke. The authority of the clear and rigorously hypothesised rationale underpinning the scientists' experimentation is undermined. More generally speaking, it could be said that the smooth and reliable running of reason – a traditional assumption of the scientific method – has once again been derailed by an un-reasonable jolt of humour.

Such a faltering of reason can also be seen to be at work in the experience of the sublime. The response of laughing at a joke may not at first sight appear to have much in common with the giddy feeling of awe we experience in a confrontation with the vast, stormy unboundedness of an ocean. And equally, the absurdist premise of a Monty Python sketch would not immediately seem to promote in us that same mixture of wonderment and terror we associate with standing over a Caspar David Friedrich-esque mountain scape. But at the level of cognition – or as Kant has it, of “understanding” – there can be seen to be significant similarities. Indeed Kant's own writing suggests as much; for if we look again at the chapter on humour in his 'Critique of Judgement' quoted from earlier (once again ignoring the dodgy jokes about Indians), we find the following observation:

It is noteworthy that in all such cases the joke must contain something that can deceive us for a moment. That is why, when the illusion vanishes, [transformed] into nothing, the mind looks at the illusion once more in order to give it another try, and so by a rapid succession of tension and relaxation the mind is bounced back and forth and made to sway.³⁹

Such a description of the mind's state of agitated oscillation in humour initially brings to mind another more well known Kantian figure: that of the so-called “free-play” of imagination and understanding presumed to be at work in a subject's judgement of beauty. There is present a similar sense of the mind – in the absence of a determinative concept – having to be somehow more playful and animated in its attempts to account for its object. But what is even more striking

38 The story received widespread coverage at the time in the popular science press, including for example in such journals as *Nature* and *New Scientist*. The account given above however is based on Christopher Turner's in his 2005 article *Tears of Laughter* in *Cabinet: A Quarterly Journal of Art and Culture*.

39 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §54 'Comment', p. 204.

about Kant's description of the swaying back and forth of cognition in humour is the way it resonates with his understanding of the cognitive activity of the mind in an encounter with the sublime (or at least, as we shall see, as Lyotard understands it). In both humour and, as will become clear, the sublime, reason appears to be engaged in a cyclical bid at intervention.

As construed by Lyotard, the Kantian sublime is an instance when an object is so absolutely large (for example a mountain or a desert), or so absolutely powerful (a storm at sea or an erupting volcano), that it simply exceeds our ability to picture it. In his seminal essay on Barnett Newman 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', Lyotard writes that the sublime 'can only be thought, without any sensible/sensory intuition, as an Idea of reason.'⁴⁰ That is, although the object is too large to take in, we can still apprehend it by virtue of the capacity of our reason to conceptualise it as "infinite". In other words,

the faculty of presentation, the imagination, fails to provide a representation corresponding to this Idea. This failure of expression gives rise to a pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented.⁴¹

A gap opens up: the perceiving subject's faculties, as a consequence of a confrontation with the sublime, become disconnected. Standing before an awesome and terrifying expanse of nature, a rupture occurs between what the subject can see and what the subject can think, and as a consequence the mind is propelled into a cognitive frenzy. The subject's perception is initially overwhelmed by such vastness; reason then steps in with a confident assertion of the concept of the infinite; the senses, momentarily rallied into seeking evidence for such a concept, once again begin to flounder and soon become overwhelmed (unavoidably so, since the infinite, being an idea of reason, can never be contained within a "presentation"). And so the cycle continues. An expectancy is repeatedly generated by reason, but each time it is left inevitably unfulfilled. The apprehension of the sublime is thus figured by Lyotard as a perpetual swaying of cognition between the two poles of understanding and non-understanding. Having arrived at this picture of a Kantian "agitation" of mind Lyotard is thus able to draw out the following implication:

This agitation is only possible if something remains to be determined, something that hasn't yet been determined. One can strive to determine this something by setting up a system, a theory, a programme or a project – and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating that something.⁴²

40 Lyotard, in, Benjamin (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader*, p. 198.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 197/98.

The sensation of the sublime, we could say, following Lyotard, is caused by an indeterminacy of thought. Or rather it is caused by the swaying of cognition initiated by this indeterminacy. In the sublime, cognition is in a sense “grasping” at its object, repeatedly trying but essentially failing to determine its object. If it ever did finally succeed in its attempt at determination, that is, if it ever did satisfactorily understand its object, then the sensation of the sublime would simply disappear: there would no longer be any agitation of mind, merely straightforward cognition. This is how thought normally occurs. Under ordinary non-sublime conditions thinking does indeed tend to be determinate, thought does tend to be directed towards objects held unambiguously in place by the system, the theory, the programme, the project. Things are normally quite uncomplicated and predictable in this way. But as we saw with our discussion of paralogy, sometimes such reasonably structured thought is not always the most advantageous. Sometimes thought does indeed need to step out of its determinative shackles: sometimes thought needs to become unbounded again. Sometimes thought itself can become a hindrance.

Which is pretty much what Lyotard is getting at when, in his essay on Barnett Newman, he declares that: 'that which we call thought must be disarmed.'⁴³ The statement is an imperative to encounter Newman's work in the most direct way possible – without, that is, the hindrance of understanding, without the distracting question of “what” it is we are looking at. Lyotard, in other words, wants our encounter with the painting to take on the properties of an event. The economy of expression of Newman's work as we know makes it ideally suited to the purpose. The paintings, large in size (sometimes several metres across), are typically covered almost entirely in one flat colour; except, that is, for the addition of one or more of Newman's famous “zips”: narrow vertical strips of colour running from the top to the bottom of the canvas, cutting the expanse of background colour into two or more sections. And that's pretty much it. Nothing is depicted, there's no expressive brushwork, there's no narrative, no interest in process – nothing, in short, that we could conventionally refer to as “subject matter”. So almost by definition then we are forced to abandon the question of “what” it is we're looking at. That which we call thought – or at any rate that which we call hermeneutic thought – would appear to have been disarmed for us. It is by virtue of this, for Lyotard, that we become attentive to the very occurrence of the painting – to what he (momentarily slipping into a Heideggerian idiom) refers to as the *Ereignis* of the painting: the “it happens” that comes long before any possibility of the interpretative “what happens”. In attending to the event of painting we are appreciating that, as Lyotard simply puts it, 'here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that's what is sublime.'⁴⁴ To

43 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

44 *Ibid.*

encounter the event of painting, in other words, is to encounter painting in its sublime indeterminacy.

Standing before the Newman painting, confronted by a uniform field of red cut into only by a single narrow strip of orange, our cognitive capacity starts to falter. There is just nothing here to grasp hold of, to understand. We just cannot fit this big dumb stripy flat red painting into any form of systematic thought. In his essay 'Newman: The Instant' Lyotard gallantly attempts to provide us with a description of exactly this faltering of reason:

What can one say that is not given? It is not difficult to describe, but the description is as flat as a paraphrase. The best gloss consists of the question: what can one say? Or of the exclamation "Ah". Of surprise: "Look at that". So many expressions of a feeling which does not have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition (and in the work of Newman): the sublime. It is a feeling of "there" (*Voilà*).⁴⁵

The encounter with the sublime is a side-stepping of reason: it is an encounter with the inexpressible, the non-articulate, the unrepresentable. The sublime, Lyotard's stuttering passage suggests, resides in the *voilà* moment of the "happening" of the paint; but such a circuitous attempt at verbal description is bound to fall short, for as Lyotard admits, the painting 'as occurrence or event,' is quite simply 'not expressible.'⁴⁶

Returning finally to humour, we can now appreciate its close connection with the sublime. As we have seen, the unhinging of cognition effected by a humorous incongruity effects a kind of rupture between what is presented and what is understood; as Kant describes it, laughter at a humorous incongruity is triggered by the sudden absence of a sensible object (the absence caused by an expectation suddenly being transformed into nothing). The mind, in trying to grasp for this absent object, is impelled into a state of agitation. This is the experience of humour. Similarly, when a painting denies us the solace of recognisable meaning, when it side-steps all our existing cognitive and interpretative structures, our thinking begins to flounder. Without the stability of a determinate understanding our cognition is impelled back and forth, repeatedly attempting to assert its authority, but lacking the grounds on which to do so. This is the experience of the sublime. Both humour and the sublime, therefore, can be thought with a figure of an agitated mind struggling to come to terms with an indeterminate object. Humour and the sublime, in other words, can be thought as arising from a faltering of reason.

⁴⁵ Lyotard, in, Benjamin (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader*, p. 241.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

8.



'I'm so pleased we've found a little place where we feel at home, where time goes by really slowly,' says a man in a rat costume to a piglet. The piglet grunts twice.

'Can you understand me?' He asks, addressing the piglet. 'Do this,' he urges, making a grunting sound, 'if you can understand me.' The piglet again grunts twice.

'No,' he explains, 'twice means "no", once means "yes".' The piglet grunts once.

'See, it's not so hard,' says the man in a rat costume, gesturing positively towards the piglet with his furry hand.

The piglet grunts twice.

Later we see that the man in a rat costume has been joined by a companion: a man in a bear costume. They are sitting down on a patch of rough ground somewhere in the countryside. It is evening. Between them lies an upside-down tortoise, shell to the ground, legs hopelessly kicking in the air. The man in a rat costume speaks first:

'He's turned over on his back. Looks cross.'

'Awful,' agrees the man in a bear costume, 'at everyone's mercy like that.'

'Shall we turn you over?' Asks the rat.

'He can't speak,' points out the bear, before turning the tortoise over.

'How kind you are. I'd have done that too.' Says the rat, admiringly towards his bear-disguised friend.

'Small effort, big payoff!' Shrugs the bear. The tortoise begins to slope off.

'Bye mate,' says the rat, waving at the tortoise. 'Look how pleased he his. He can hardly believe it.'

'Good job we're here,' agrees the bear, nodding.

'Let's do it again sometime,' suggests the rat, still looking towards the tortoise.

'Makes you feel good,' agrees the bear, staring into the distance.⁴⁷

The scene ends.

Fischli and Weiss's film 'The Right Way [*Der Rechte Weg*]' is full of such playfully bizarre scenes expressing a childlike innocence and wonder at the world mixed with a knowing adult scepticism, undercut by more than a hint of male bonding. The “bear” and the “rat” are not in any way convincing as animals; in fact their ludicrous costumes are barely able to conceal the personalities of the two artist-actors underneath. Endless moments of mock-epiphanic wisdom litter the film as the fake rat and the fake bear journey their intrepid way deeper and deeper into nature's wilderness. We see the animal explorers cooking over a camp fire, stopping for a swim in a mountain lake, befriending a piglet – before finally, in the film's unforgettable climax, making primitive music with sticks and horns on a hilltop overlooking a misty expanse. What kind of a world is this being presented here with such a strange mixture of humour and melancholic sincerity? Perhaps it is simply the case that in following the fake rat and the fake bear as they journey their way into the murky wilderness of the forest, we inadvertently stumble upon a Heideggerian clearing.

Proust's account in 'À la recherche du temps perdu' of a first visit to the theatre implicitly throws light upon Heidegger's seemingly contradictory summation that 'truth, in its essence, is untruth.'⁴⁸ In the novel, the young narrator recalls his immense surprise at the democratic arrangement of the seats:

I even enjoyed it inside the auditorium; since learning that all the spectators looked at the same stage, unlike what my childish imagination had long pictured, I had supposed that so many people must make it as difficult for each of them to see as it is when one stands among a crowd; but now I realised that, because of the layout of the theatre, which is in a way symbolic of perception itself, each person has the impression of being at the centre.⁴⁹

47 Based on a transcript of Peter Fischli and David Weiss's 1983 film 'The Right Way [*Der Rechte Weg*]' in Fleck, Sontgen, & Danto, *Peter Fischli David Weiss*, pp. 122/23.

48 Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, p. 179.

49 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 2, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, p. 20. Lyotard has also used the structure of the theatre as a means to figure the relation between what he refers to as the “fact” and the “witnesses' account” (the latter being 'a narrative activity transforming the fact into a narrative'): "This way of posing the problem of history poses a theatrics: outside is the fact, external to the theatrical space; on the stage is the narrative unwinding its dramatics; hidden in the wings, in the flies, under the stage, in the auditorium, is the director, the narrator, with all his machinery, the fabbrica of narration. The historian is supposed to undo all the machinery and machination, and restore what was excluded, having knocked down the walls of the theatre. And yet it is obvious that the historian is himself no more than another director [...].” Lyotard, quoted in Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, p. 10.

To his contentment he had found that the experience of drama in the theatre was not at all like the experience of real-life drama he might have witnessed on the street. The spatial set-up of an auditorium does indeed contribute to this impression; for it is a fact that in order for the fictional events portrayed on stage to be sufficiently convincing (or “realistic”), there cannot be any intervention by the audience. The paradox is that the more realistic a play, the more separate it must be from the “real-world” of watching spectators. That is to say, the illusion of (realist) theatre is maintained by the audience's own effective absence. Ideally, the spectators should at no time during the performance be made either visibly or audibly aware of each other's presence. It is by virtue of the arrangement of the seats, and perhaps also through the use of lighting, that the stage remains visible at all times whilst the spectators largely disappear into the background. Similarly, it is by virtue of the silence conventionally maintained by spectators during a theatrical performance that the actors' voices are able to occupy, as it were, “centre stage”.⁵⁰ What the realisation of Proust's young theatre-goer serves to highlight therefore is that the very legibility of theatrical representation (in realist theatre at least) is dependent upon a certain selectivity of experience. For what allows for the communicability of the on-stage drama is its being set-forth from the midst of everything present in the theatre – off-stage and on. In realist theatre everything off-stage – that is, everything that does not constitute the drama itself – must remain invisible in order for the drama itself to be legible as theatrical drama. Or to put it another way: in theatre the visible depends on the invisible for its visibility.

And so to the formula “truth is in essence un-truth”. What Heidegger is getting at here is the basic idea that anything that can be understood, conceptualised, pictured, posited, thought – is always only half the story. To arrive at a clearing in a forest, however much better we might think we can see there, is, for Heidegger, to arrive only at a partial clearing. Startled perhaps by the sudden blinking glare of the sunlight, we forget to look (or simply cannot look) back at everything that remains outside of that clearing. Hidden within the opening up of the clearing is a corresponding withdrawal into the shadows.

The truth of disclosure for Heidegger is not something we can ever fully reach; the most we can do is to appreciate its partiality. As he puts it in 'The Origin of the Work of Art', 'truth does

⁵⁰ Although, interestingly, this silence on the part of the audience is often broken by laughter; a fact recognised by Proust's young narrator: '[...] just as I was looking forward to the beginning of the play, a couple of bad-tempered men came walking across the stage, raising their voices enough for everyone in that thousand-strong audience to make out every word, whereas when two customers start scuffling and shouting in a small café, you have to ask the waiter what they are saying; but at that same instant, in my surprise that everyone else was paying polite attention to them, all sitting submerged in unanimous silence, the surfaces of which was now and then broken by a ripple of laughter, I realised that this rude pair of intruders were the actors, and that the short play called a curtain-raiser had just begun.' Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 2, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, p. 21.

not exist in itself beforehand, somewhere among the stars, only subsequently to descend elsewhere among beings;' rather, it is 'the opposition of clearing and concealing.'⁵¹ It exists then, inasmuch as it can be said to “exist” at all, in what he characterises as the “strife” between these two states; between unconcealment and concealment, or, to use another Heideggerian duality, between “world” and “earth”. World, we might thus be tempted to say, is the bit we can see, and earth the bit we cannot. This, Heidegger warns us, is fine up to a point, as long as we bear in mind that world and earth aren't so easily separable:

The world is not simply the open region that corresponds to clearing, and the earth is not simply the closed region that corresponds to concealment. [...] World and earth are always intrinsically and essentially in conflict, belligerent by nature. Only as such do they enter into the strife of clearing and concealing. Earth juts through the world and world grounds itself on the earth only so far as truth happens as the primal strife between clearing and concealing.⁵²

The world, we could say, is the on-stage drama; whilst the earth is the “machinery” of the theatre: the auditorium, the audience, the stage itself – the invisible support that makes the visibility of the drama possible. The existence of one is fundamentally dependent on the unseen existence of the other. They are ontologically inseparable.

A further understanding of this simultaneity of unconcealing and concealing is given by Heidegger in his exploitation of the double-meaning of the German word “*Riss*”. In German *der Riss* means a crack, a tear, a scratch, a rift; but it also, particularly in the form of *Grundriss*, refers to a plan or a design in drawing. Heidegger as we know will often exploit the etymological significance of such apparently innocent homonyms in order to shed light on what he sees as the restrictions language places on what is possible to be thought (as he succinctly puts it elsewhere, 'language speaks, not man. Man only speaks when he fatefully answers to language'⁵³). So the fact that in German the word for “tear” has a connection with the notion of a “groundplan” is far from arbitrary for Heidegger. Their shared etymological origin is what allows him to posit the strife between world and earth as a kind of blueprint:

Strife is not a rift [*Riss*], as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other. This rift carries the opponents into the provenance of their unity by virtue of their common ground. It is a basic design, an outline sketch [*Grundriss*], that draws the basic features of the upsurge of the clearing of beings. This rift does not let the opponents break apart; it brings

51 Heidegger, p. 186.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

53 Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, p. 96.

what opposes measure and boundary into its common outline.⁵⁴

The rift between world and earth does not therefore simply separate what we can see and what we cannot see, rather it delineates the unity of visibility and invisibility. Once again the truth of disclosure can be seen to be at work in the simultaneity of unconcealment and concealment.

Art has a privileged position in all of this for Heidegger because of its ability to stage the strife: because, that is, of its ability to be 'the saying of world and earth, the saying of their arena of conflict.'⁵⁵ A work of art, such as van Gogh's painting of a pair of boots – to use the example given in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' – can thus become a site for the happening of truth. We see the strife played out before us; that is, we see what we normally always see, but we also see how it clashes with what we normally do not see. The painting depicts a pair of sturdy, well-worn leather working boots. There is nothing remarkable about that, we might think. They are after all exactly the kind we might imagine wearing (or at least imagine a late nineteenth century peasant wearing). But that is exactly the point for Heidegger: for when such things as boots are worn, they in a sense disappear into their functionality (they become mere "equipment"). They are no longer particularly the object of our thoughts – we simply use them. We are not concerned with their "existence" any more, since what really concerns us is the field that needs to be ploughed. But in a painting such as van Gogh's they can reappear; the boots can be wrenched out of their occlusive usefulness, their unconcealing equipmentality. Consider this excerpt from the evocative passage in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in which Heidegger describes the boots he imagines being worn by a peasant woman:

In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles stretches the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrate the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. [...]⁵⁶

None of this poeticism however is likely to have been particularly present in the mind of the peasant woman – all she is concerned with is the work that needs to be done in the field. For her the boots are just boots. She merely wears them. They are simply an aid to her task. But we on the other hand, via the painting, are confronted with their equipmentality. Heidegger concludes the

54 Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, p. 188.

55 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Truth*, quoted in George Pattison, *The Later Heidegger*, pp. 161/62. Heidegger is specifically referring to the poetry of Hölderlin here, which he regards as exemplary in this respect.

56 Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, p. 159.

passage:

This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.⁵⁷

The key words here are, of course, “world” and “earth”. From the perspective of the peasant woman's “world” (the work that needs to be done) the boots are effectively invisible – they, in their equipmentality, are hidden in the “earth” (the realm of things she does not think about). But from the privileged perspective opened up by van Gogh's painting we are able to witness this falling-into-invisibility of the boots: the painting is thus able to unconceal their equipmental being. Or as Heidegger has it, 'world and earth in their counterplay' are able in the artwork to 'attain to unconcealment.'⁵⁸ That is not to say that the world or the earth are laid out before us as truth in themselves, just that the painting gives us access to the truth of the conflictually interdependent nature of their strife.

We arrive then in Heidegger at a figure of the relationship between world and earth as one of conflict, of combative interplay, of occlusive switching. Something is revealed; something else is hidden. 'Truth is un-truth, insofar as there belongs to it the reservoir of the not-yet-uncovered, the un-uncovered, in the sense of concealment,' is Heidegger's appropriately opaque summation.⁵⁹ All is not as it seems. Time then perhaps to return to our friends the fake rat and the fake bear for some light-hearted relief? Well yes, provided we remember that the comic world inhabited by Fischli and Weiss's rat and bear is itself distinctly shadowy. We might well be laughing here, but what's really going on? What is it about this bizarre spectacle of two grown men dressed as animals journeying into the mountains that triggers our laughter? Is it that the assurance of our customary sense of what is real and what is unreal has been undermined? Is it that our normally reliable cognitive grasp of truth and falsity is faltering? We can't simply be laughing at a pair of clowns performing for the camera: for the most part the action is too sedate, too ordinary. Neither can we be laughing simply at the incongruity of animal behaving as man, or vice versa, for the hilarity is too sustained – the novelty of that gag would surely wear thin (the meandering filmic journey lasts almost an hour). And we cannot be laughing either at pure absurdity, at the warped spectacle of two men in animal suits chasing a piglet (although at times this is very funny). No, it must be more complicated than that: for somehow the conversations are too believable, somehow the sincerity too insistent, somehow the whole scenario seems too weirdly familiar. What is it then

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 159/60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Truth*, quoted in Pattison, p. 52.

that keeps us laughing? A mixture of all this?

Possibly, but perhaps we might gain a greater insight into the cause of the swaying of reason at work in Fischli and Weiss's weird and funny film by thinking it in terms of a Heideggerian world and earth. For if we can agree that the rat and the bear's adventures are taking place somewhere obviously beyond the frontiers of our normal everyday world, and yet at the same time agree that they are nevertheless taking place somewhere insistently very familiar, then we will have already begun to imagine a place where truth is also un-truth. As Heidegger has it, there is no "reality" as such – there is only world and earth. There is only the perceived "reality" of that which is habitually disclosed to us and that which is not. But if these customary unconcealments and concealments were to be given a sufficient jolt, shaken, banged, tossed about, whirled around, then we would be left with a thoroughly unfathomable "reality". The fake rat and the fake bear inhabit such an indistinct region where familiar rationality is mixed up with warped ineffability; their strange world keeps jumping in and out of the clearing. This is a world that has become unfixed – that it is falling and rising in and out of the shadows of that other more indistinct, barely comprehensible region of "earth". Truth as unconcealment is never absolute for Heidegger, it is a matter of degrees. Like a landscape seen in the eerie half light of dawn, or a tree emerging from within a perilous mist, truth is never fully disclosable. The opening and closing of world and earth, the play of truth and untruth, the mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar – all of which is set into relief by the bickering of the rat and the bear – perhaps that is the source of our inexplicable laughter.

In one particularly poignant scene we see the rat cartwheeling around in a forest clearing, joyous, exhilarated, savouring what it means to be alive. The bear meanwhile sits brooding deep in the shadows of the nearby trees. The rat at this moment is solely concerned with his own world: he is presently blind to the bear's existence. The bear, we could thus say, lies in the unfathomable darkness of the other side of the clearing. For Heidegger a great work of art can cause the counterplay of world and earth to attain to unconcealment. What he neglected to add was that this attaining to unconcealment can also be extremely funny.

9.

Laughter is thus neither a presence nor an absence. It is the offering of a presence in its own disappearance. It is not given but offered: suspended on the limit of its own presentation.⁶⁰

60 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, p. 383.

Laughter, as Jean-Luc Nancy thus intimates, is always one step ahead of us; it is always beyond our grasp, always out of our control, perpetually disappearing round the corner of the corridors of rational enquiry. But still we know it. We have all laughed. We all do laugh. It is important to us. In the life of the professional comedian however, laughter is more than important: it is essential. It is the stuff of sustenance; the source of the comedian's very livelihood. The makers of early silent film comedies knew its value only too well – so much so that they went as far as devising a sliding scale for the intensity of the audience's laughter. James Agee in an essay 'Comedy's Greatest Era' describes the fascinating precision with which the likes of Buster Keaton approached their art:

In the language of screen comedians four of the main grades of laugh are the titter, the yowl, the belly laugh and the boffo. The titter is just a titter. The yowl is a runaway titter. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure knows all about a belly laugh. The boffo is the laugh that kills. An ideally good gag, perfectly constructed and played, would bring the victim up this ladder of laughs by cruelly controlled degrees to the top rung and would then proceed to wobble, shake, wave and brandish the ladder until he groaned for mercy. Then, after the shortest possible time out for recuperation, he would feel the first wicked tickling of the comedian's whip once more and start up a new ladder.⁶¹

The facilitation of laughter in such hands is truly a craft. When it comes off, as we know from experience, it appears to do so with effortless grace. Reduced to helpless laughter, we are manipulated – defencelessly succumbing to the comedians' sleight of hand, we are kicked in the backside, distracted from above, shouted at from below, splattered in the face with a custard pie. The sublime slapstick of the great stars of silent comedy seems to run rings around our ineffectual attempts at orderly cognition. We are besieged by laughter. Laughter breaks through our defences. Resistance is futile.

But how exactly could this figure of comic capitulation be thought? What if we were to align it with the Freudian relief theory of humour that we have already seen? Would we, in drawing out the philosophical implications of such a theory of containment and release, be then able to account for the explosive transience of laughter's disappearing presence? Hopefully yes; but first we need to investigate further the Freudian picture.

In 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' Freud writes:

We should say that laughter arises if a quota of psychical energy which has earlier been used for the cathexis of particular psychical paths has become unusable, so that it can find free discharge.⁶²

61 Agee, quoted in AO Scott, *Falling Down Funny*, [article accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com>].

62 Freud, quoted in Samuel Weber, *Laughing in the Meantime*, p. 696.

This is the basic picture of the laughter response according to relief theory. Applied to the specific case of the joke, an understanding is arrived at in which a linguistic or visual sleight of hand is seen to cause a certain inhibitory force in the psyche to slip; and as a result of this slippage some underlying psychic energy is thus rendered superfluous and released through laughter. As we saw earlier in the example of the doctor's wife joke, these kinds of inhibitions are often related to libidinous drives normally kept in check by the censorship of the super-ego. In such jokes the resultant laughter is simply the discharge of normally pent up libidinous energy: it is fuelled by what Freud terms 'the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis.'⁶³ But what precisely does Freud mean here by "cathexis"? And what does it mean to "lift" an "inhibitory" cathexis? Generally speaking cathexis is understood to refer to a concentration of mental energy in one particular channel. A cathexis can occur anywhere from the id (for example the cathected mental energy that constitutes the libido) to the superego (the cathexis of mental energy that works to suppress instinct). Normally, the cathected force of the libido is countered by the cathected force of sexual inhibition: they are in a state of equilibrium. But in humour this equilibrium is disturbed. In the doctor's wife joke for example, the sexually inhibitory cathexis is made – by virtue of the joke's semiotic sleight of hand – to capitulate to the force of the libidinal cathexis. In other words the joke has the effect of de-cathecting an inhibition – of "lifting" the inhibitory cathexis.

The word "cathexis" itself is based on the Greek "*kathexis*", meaning "retention"; it was in fact coined by Freud's editor and translator James Strachey as an English translation of the original German word *Besetzung* (a noun coming from the verb *Besetzen*, "to occupy", "to fill"). As Samuel Weber points out in an essay on Freud's theory of humour 'Laughing in the Meanwhile', this is significant since, having no meaning aside from its psychological use, the English word lacks the rich connotations of its German equivalent, and thus proves far less enlightening. *Besetzung*, argues Weber, 'suggests a military occupation, the subjugation of an enemy, the overcoming of resistance and the like.'⁶⁴ And instead of dryly describing the joke's lifting of this occupation a "decathexis", Freud's German word *Entsetzung* is far more suggestive: not only 'because it signifies "relief": as when a beleaguered garrison or an occupied (*besetzten*) fortress is relieved, or when a siege is lifted,' but also, 'less benignly perhaps, when a office-holder is relieved of the functions of office.'⁶⁵ Cathexis and decathexis, instead of remaining somewhat dispassionate abstractions of a pure psychological process of containment and release, are thus

⁶³ Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, quoted in Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 29.

⁶⁴ Weber, p. 697.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

brought to full and evocative life. To think the laughter response through such vital and urgent figures as the siege and the heroic liberation is to do justice to the explosive excitement characteristic of the phenomenon itself.

Laughter we could say then is a surge of exhilaration. And like intoxicating rush of excitement at the raising of the flag of heroic liberation, laughter occurs at the precise moment that the inhibitory cathexis is lifted. But where exactly is cognition at this moment? Where, we might ask, is the laugh-er in the moment of laugh-ter? In Freud's understanding a thought is a mental representation; to think a coherent thought therefore means to form a stable representation. For Freud, in other words, the existence of a coherent thought is predicated on the establishment of a stable cathexis. In order for a coherent thought to occur, some kind of order must be imposed on the otherwise anarchic chaos of raw mental energy constitutive of the so-called "primary process". In contrast, during the moment of laughter all this unbounded psychic activity is given a free reign. Weber sees a profound implication in this, for:

the establishment of any stable cathexis depends on an inhibition, i.e. upon an arresting or countering of the tendency of the primary process to shift wildly from representation to representation. In this sense, what is "temporarily lifted" in the joke process, and what constitutes the condition of laughter, is not simply the cathexis of a particular representation or set of representations, but the inhibitory counter-force that is the principle of representation itself as construed by Freud.⁶⁶

In the intoxicating explosion of laughter therefore, all inhibitory counter-forces, all representations, all thoughts collapse. Discursivity is thus ruptured; cognition once again has been derailed.

At this point the familiar Lyotardian refrain that "that which we call thought must be disarmed" re-emerges. For, we ask, is this momentary relief from discursive thought not exactly what Lyotard was calling for in his urge to become attentive to the event, to the *Ereignis*, to the "it happens" of painting? In the nebulous wake of the burst of laughter there has indeed been found a place for such exhorted indeterminate thought. Lyotard's emphatic affirmation of the "I don't know what" of thought would here seem to have found an aide. Consider this passage in his 'Peregrinations':

Thoughts are clouds. The periphery of thoughts is as immeasurable as the fractal lines of Benoit Mandelbrot [...]. When you feel like you have penetrated far into their intimacy in analysing either their so-called structure or genealogy or even post-structure, it is actually too late or too soon.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 699.

⁶⁷ Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, p. 5.

Lyotard wants us to see that representation-based thinking operates as an oppressive cage fashioned in such a way as to ensure that each thinking of a thought is in fact a re-thinking of a thought. Under the representational regime, that which is plucked from the cloud-like indeterminacy of genuine thought must be subsumed under an already existing representation, beaten into the shape of a lifeless generality. 'Every emergence of something reiterates something else,' insists Lyotard, and therefore 'every occurrence is a reoccurrence.'⁶⁸ The vitality of thought, in other words, is stifled. This is the curse of discourse, the imprisoning matrix of language, the suffocating determinacy of understanding. This is what needs to be overcome. This is precisely the discursive hegemony shunned by Lyotard in his formula: 'place oneself in the flood of clouds, disappoint the call for knowledge, disavow the desire to grasp and appropriate thoughts.'⁶⁹ It is also, if we follow Freud, what is kept in place by the inhibitory cathexes of the psyche. But there the similarity ends; because unlike the virtually immovable hegemonic structures of discourse, these cathexes can, with seemingly effortless ease, be made to evaporate by the joke.

So, laughter disarms thought. But is that really all we can say? Must our grasp of laughter disintegrate in a cloud of elusivity? Well yes, in a sense, it must; for if the very genesis of laughter lies in the mind's thought-generating cathectic organisation being completely lifted, then there really isn't very much left for thought to do. Laughter would seem to be a wholly extra-cognitive affair. An account of the mere physicality of laughter would find no difficulty with such a premise, for cognition need play no part in a purely physiological understanding of the violent exhalation of air from the lungs caused by a sudden movement of the diaphragm; but for an attempt to figure laughter as a response to humour, cognition must surely be seen to be lurking somewhere. Whilst it is true that laughter disarms thought, it is not true that thought can therefore be removed from the equation completely. For the derailment of thought is only momentary: it is only a split second lapse in the normal discursive flow of things. The cathexes, remember, have only been "lifted". Soon enough they will fall back into place. For Freud the cleverness of the joke lies in its ability to "divert" attention: 'it is only a question here of keeping an increased cathexis of attention away,' he writes.⁷⁰ Consciousness, he implies, is somehow being "held away". Whilst this is admittedly a cunning piece of trickery on the part of the joke, it cannot last: the cathexis will sooner or later push its way back (we don't laugh for ever, after all). The mind tickled by humour seems to be a battle ground – the conscious and the unconscious push and pull, the inhibitory

68 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 10. Although having been, as Lyotard puts it, 'translated into my idiom,' the formula is based on a saying in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (a Zen treatise): 'to say many things brings many troubles, to say few things has little force.'

70 Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, quoted in Weber, p. 700.

cathexes rise and fall, thoughts form and disperse. We momentarily lose ourselves in laughter, but then the pendulum begins to swing back: an awareness of what is happening begins to form in our minds. I'm laughing! At a joke! Normal rational cognition falls back into place. Our understanding of the joke can thus be seen as after the fact, retrospective, earnestly following in the wake of the punchline's stealthily incongruous trickery. 'While we are beginning to wonder what was wrong with the reply,' writes Freud, 'we are already laughing; our attention has been caught unawares.'⁷¹

10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 702.



Laughter hangs in suspense, laughter leaves the one who laughs in suspense. It cannot be maintained at a fever pitch: attempts to sustain laughter result only in heaviness; laughter hangs in suspense, affirms nothing, alleviates nothing.⁷²

Or so wrote Georges Bataille in 'Le Coupable'; obviously he hadn't at the time got round to seeing Mike Marshall's latest show at Tate St Ives. For if he had he might have encountered Marshall's video 'The Earth is Flat'. The piece is set in a desert in Egypt; it's not one of those exciting Laurence of Arabia type deserts though, where the beautiful sweeping lines of the golden dunes are silhouetted against the magnificent azure blue of the sky. No, this desert looks rather flat and brown. Marshall himself describes it as 'the most mundane piece of desert I have ever seen.'⁷³ And we would have to agree: the only interesting thing about it is that it's deserted (which it would be, really, being a desert). There's nothing here, living or dead – if we tried really hard we might be able to pick out a patch of ground slightly lighter in its shade of dull brown than the normal dull dull brown; but apart from that, there's nothing.

In the video the artist is running across the desert, towards the horizon. The artist is the one holding the camera, so it's a pretty bumpy journey for us. And since the horizon doesn't noticeably seem to be getting any closer, we could be in for quite a long and tortuous ride. Luckily for us though, Marshall is telling jokes whilst he's running: reciting them from memory, endlessly, joke after joke after joke.

Why is six afraid of seven?

Because seven ate nine.

What do you call a fly with no wings?

⁷² Bataille, *Le Coupable*, quoted in Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Laughter of Being*, p. 151.

⁷³ Marshall, quoted in Kathryn Rattee, *Mike Marshall*, p. 106.

A walk.

Why do Cows have Bells?

Because their horns don't work.

What's the difference between ignorance and apathy

I don't know and I don't care.

What do you call a sheep with no legs?

A cloud.

Why does Luke Skywalker know what you're getting for Christmas?

Because he can feel your presence?

What do you call a fish without an eye?

A fsh.

And so on, and so on. He just keeps running, and running, and running. And we just keep laughing, and laughing, and laughing. And really, we just don't know why.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Jokes taken from a transcription of 'The Earth is Flat' in Mike Marshall, *Mike Marshall* [Ikon Gallery exhibition catalogue], pp. 77-79.

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