

Can M. Evrenol

03409164

HA557

The Sublime, The Disgusting and The Laughable, Thematics in Art & Visual

Convener and Seminar Leader: Dr. Michael Newall

Essay 02– “Is it ever wrong to laugh?”

The question ‘is it ever wrong to laugh?’ inevitably delivers a highly philosophical phenomenon. While it is a very subjective matter to spot what is laughable and what is not, it is a fact that ‘the laughable’ is commonly perceived as opposing to being serious or fundamental. Yet this common belief is strongly challenged in the last century. Furthermore, laughing and being humorous has reached a considerable legitimacy in the last century, parallel to the breakdown of the rigid conventions in art. However, this legitimacy does not change the fact that the question ‘is it ever wrong to laugh’ still stands very subjective. In the second half of the 20th century, a consequential criticism emerged against the exploited legitimacy of the ‘low-art’ and ‘laughing matter as the central narration’, paradoxically resulting in the same age-old argument of humour being an aesthetic quality or not.

This essay aims to examine the ‘the laughable’ in modern and contemporary art to enlighten the phenomenon behind the question ‘is it ever wrong to laugh?’. Through the three general theories of humour (superiority theory, incongruous theory, release theory), the post-modern and surrealist puns, this essay mainly argues that the question ‘is it ever wrong to laugh?’ is ultimately parallel to ‘is everything art?’.

The first logical answer to shout out may be ‘yes, of course it’s wrong to laugh in some situations’. For example, it would be totally unacceptable to laugh at a funeral or during a national anthem. The laughter at such a situation would be associated with utmost disrespect for what others hold up so very highly. Ted Cohen in his book, *Jokes, Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, states that all jokes are conventional (hence laughing is conventional). He explains that a joke can work only with certain audiences with certain backgrounds. It may be argued that some very simple jokes are universal and can be appreciated by any kind of audience. However, the universal joke does not exist. Even the most simple, basic jokes require some basic background notions (Cohen comments that at the very least, “the audience have to understand the language of the joke”¹). Putting this fact behind, one can argue that everything in life is conventional. Cohen’s statement does not really deliver what is exceptional about humour and laughing. There is more to laughter being associated with disrespect than just being conventional.

It is a fact that laughter releases endorphins in the body, elevating the person to a happier mood. In the web page of American Cancer Society, it states: “although there is no scientific evidence that laughter can cure cancer or any other disease, it can reduce stress, promote health, and enhance a person’s quality of life. Humor has physical effects because it can stimulate the circulatory system, immune system, and other systems in the body... The physical effects of laughter on the body include increased breathing, more oxygen use, and higher heart rate. Many hospitals

¹ Cohen, Ted., *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, University of Chicago Press, p.12 (1999)

and treatment centres have set up special rooms where humorous materials, and sometimes people, are placed to help make people laugh... Humor has been used in medicine throughout recorded history. One of the earliest mentions of the health benefits of humor is in the book of Proverbs in the Bible.”²

These facts further complicate the phenomenon of laughter being associated with anti-seriousness and lack of discipline.

Analyzing the role of humour in art proves to be the key element to understanding the phenomenon of laughter; what do people laugh at; what causes laughter. There are three general theories of humour. First of the three theories is ‘superiority theory’. Philosopher Tomas Hobbs states that it is the feeling of superiority that causes laughter. Hobbs believes that the comparison of one’s self to an inferior is the core of humour. While this is partly true, it is not true if generalised. It is just one of the three theories. Noel Carrol in his book draws attention to the fact that “often laughter, especially comic laughter, arises when we find ourselves to the butt of a friendly joke. So superiority is not a necessary condition for comic amusement.”³ The second theory, incongruity theory, states that laughter is “an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”⁴ The spontaneity and irony are essential to this theory. “It is the juxtaposition of incongruous or contrasting objects, events, categories, propositions, maxims, properties and so on.”⁵ The third theory is the release theory; Sigmund Freud theorised that “humour is essentially a device which gives pleasure by enabling one to express repressed thoughts or emotions.”⁶

The three theories of humour are dependent to each other. None can be true alone. Examples of each approach can be observed in the modern and contemporary art. The role of humour in art is ultimately relevant to the phenomenon of laughter since art is the mirror of human culture. The modern and later post-modern art basically challenged all the rigid conventions and regulations, elevating the concept of art to a much broader perspective where ideally everything can be art.

‘The laughable art’ is a very recent concept in the history of mankind. The rigid conventions and the strict discipline of art was almost a taboo until art slowly started to become independent in the 18th century. Art was a tool of propaganda; for religion and later for nationalism. In Islam, painting and sculpture were considered as a sin. In Christianity, art was slave to the church until the Renaissance. The idea of ‘art having no standards and no specific aim’ was inexistent (Both religious authorities still interfere with art today). Andre Bazin states that

“when Rome began to subjugate Greece, art went into slavery. The early Christians employed it as a means to propagate their doctrines. The oriental idea of teaching by parables spread in their community, and we find the art of the catacombs enslaved to the new mysticism which arose on the Pagan ruins. The gorgeous monstrosities of Byzantium were also made a serf to religion. At last, in the twelfth century, we find the Art of Italy developed into a national art, but still a slave to the church. Beautiful

² *Humour Therapy*, American Cancer Society

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/ETO/content/ETO_5_3X_Humor_Therapy.asp?sitearea=ETO

³ Carrol, Noel., *Horror and Humour*, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol.52, no.2 (1999) p.152

⁴ Keith-Spiegel, P., *Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues*, The Psychology of Humour: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues, Goldstein, J. & McPhee, P., Academic Press, New York. (1972)

⁵ Carrol, Noel., p.153

⁶ Freud, Sigmund., *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Pelican Books, Middlesex (1960)

things were done, but alas, the great men of that period had to paint to order, to paint what are called the works of imagination, in other words untruths; and what was the consequence? A surfeit of madonnas, annunciations, presentations, massacres and other subjects, which are diametrically opposed to true art.”⁷

When the artworks are opposed to what we call true art today, it is not possible to speak about humour since humour makes one feel superior, juxtaposes things which are not normally associated together and releases tension. It doesn't sound like a suitable tool for oppression.

The first art works, which involve humour and reached masterpiece status, contained visual and abstract puns; the works of the Surrealists. As humour got involved, so did the issues of ‘was it meant to be funny?’, ‘who perceived it funny?’ and ‘who perceived it as not funny?’. Salvador Dali's fame is universally recognised but his compositions do not universally evoke feelings of amusement. One may perceive Dali's visual puns as unexciting, dull and not funny. Are Dali's paintings not evoking feelings of amusement because they are not funny? Were they meant to be funny? Or were they meant to be exciting? They should have definitely been meant to be exciting; at least exciting for Dali; otherwise he would not produce them. But it would be wrong to come to the conclusion that Dali's paintings are over-rated, based on the fact that they are not funny.

One might claim that Magritte is less popular than Dali but definitely more funny. Does this decrease the art value of Magritte's works? Is this the reason why Dali is more popular? Or is it because, as Matthew Collings puts it, “teenagers and uneducated revere him (Dali) because of his sensationalism and love of detail”⁸; and that Magritte's “painting style is old style and he seems like a real artist; although nothing like it exists in traditional art; it is a sign style, flat like posters or ads – ads in the 1930s”⁹? And what about the ads of the 30's, is it wrong to laugh at them? Is it suitable to laugh at Andy Warhol? Is Piero Manzoni's work, *Artist's Shit*, funny? More importantly, is it wrong to laugh that some of the cans, with Manzoni's excrement in them, actually exploded due to corrosion and expanding gases after Manzoni died at the age of 29?

It seems that the phenomenon does not get any easier or less subjective when ‘the laughable’ is analyzed. On the other hand, a majority of the society seems to find it easy to judge and condemn some ‘post-modern low art’. Interestingly, this majority mainly involves the middle-classes. It was a matter of celebration, a century and a half ago, when art became accessible to lower classes with the invention of the photograph; now the middle classes condemn the artists. In 1976, Carle Andre's minimalist low-sculpture work, *Equivalent VIII* - which consists of 120 perfect bricks, piled in a rectangular order – was accepted to Tate Modern in London. The voice of the middle-class, *Daily Mirror*, which at the time is labeled as ‘Europe's Biggest Daily Sale’, was seriously concerned with this work and alarmed its readers. In capital block letters, which covered the one third of the front page, it said; **WHAT A LOAD OF RUBBISH**. Philip Mellor notified his readers: “A top art gallery was under fire last night for spending taxpayers' cash on... a pile of bricks.”¹⁰

This is where the two parallel phenomenon of ‘is it ever wrong to laugh?’ and ‘is everything art?’ coincide. *Daily Mirror* certainly believes that *Equivalent VIII* is

⁷ Bazin, Andre., *The Ontology of The Photographic Image*

⁸ Collings, Matthew., *This Is Modern Art*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London (1999) p.241

⁹ Ibid p.206

¹⁰ Mellor, Philip., *WHAT A LOAD OF RUBBISH*, *Daily Mirror*, no.22,410 (Feb.16 1976) front page

not art. At the core of post-modern art lies the blur between low-art and high-art. This blur elevates art to a greater meaning; a universal, truly independent identity. Today the consciousness of ‘everything is not art’ but ‘everything *can be* art’ has become the norm (or ideally it has become the norm). It is the way something (or nothing) is presented that gives that something (or nothing) an art value. On the other hand, Daily Mirror might seem to believe that *Equivalent VIII* is not even low-art and there’s something seriously wrong here which involves a considerable amount of the taxpayer’s money – which is a strong argument point. Should one blame photography and post-modernity for bringing art to everyone’s access? Is it honest to expect all the taxpayers to appreciate the low-art of *Equivalent VIII* or the high-art packaging of *Artist’s Shit*?

This last question shares the same basics with the question of ‘is it wrong to laugh at the explosions of the cans of *Artist’s Shit*?’. It’s certainly the destruction of a unique artwork and some curators find themselves in a much unintended situation. Is it disrespect against them to laugh at this situation?

During the research of this essay, the most laughable thing amongst the sources was the first two pages of Matthew Colling’s book. On the left page is a photograph of Collings with a friend sitting on a boat. It’s a very ordinary photograph taken by a simple camera (it’s even too simple, the pixels are easily visible). On the right page, the title of the book, in black letters over the white page says “THIS IS MODERN ART”. Was that intended to be humorous? Or was that intended to be an artistic composition?

This essay might be blamed for asking question after question and virtually circling around the issues. “Humour is a complex and ambiguous thing that cannot be easily defined by any single theory. Degradation, incongruity and tension release all help to partially explain humour. However, none of these explanations alone can explain it completely. Humour is multi-dimensional and, depending on content and social context, may cause multiple and diverse effects amongst the initiators and recipients.”¹¹ The truth is the ‘circling around’ matters more than the answers. Answers are highly subjective are conventional. Hence they are irrelevant. Just like enjoying a post-modern artwork, the narration is the feeling one will have when circling around these questions. Using humour as a central value does not decrease the legitimacy or art value of a work today. Ideally it would be the best if everything could be art (when it is presented as such) and people didn’t perceive laughter as disrespect under any circumstances. Unfortunately, it is apparent that it is a utopia, along the same lines with ‘freedom of speech’. It is a sad fact that the number one global crisis of February 2006 was the ‘Danish caricatures of Muslim prophet’... After all, it seems that God overestimated himself when he created man.

¹¹ Fatt, James P.T., *Why Do We Laugh – Humour*, Communication World , International Association of Business Communicators, COPYRIGHT 2004 Gale Group, (1998)

Bibliography

Bazin, Andre., *The Ontology of The Photographic Image*

Carrol, Noel., *Horror and Humour*, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol.52, no.2 (1999)

Cohen, Ted., *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, University of Chicago Press, p.12 (1999)

Collings, Matthew., *This Is Modern Art*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London (1999)

Freud, Sigmund., *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Pelican Books, Middlesex (1960)

Keith-Spiegel, P., *Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues*, The Psychology of Humour: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues, Goldstein, J. & McPhee, P., Academic Press, New York. (1972)

Mellor, Philip., *WHAT A LOAD OF RUBBISH*, Daily Mirror, no.22,410 (Feb.16 1976)

Internet sources:

Fatt, James P.T., *Why Do We Laugh – Humour*, Communication World , International Association of Business Communicators COPYRIGHT 2004 Gale Group Oct (1998)

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4422/is_9_15/ai_53290972/pg_2

Humour Therapy, American Cancer Society

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/ETO/content/ETO_5_3X_Humor_Therapy.asp?sitearea=ETO