

The Barriers to a Critical Comedy

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ABSTRACT:

The political valence of comedy is difficult to determine. It appears often to mock figures of authority, but ideology also relies on comedy to create an investment in the ruling social structure. This essay argues that comedy has no inherent political leaning. We must determine the politics of comedy by analyzing how the conception of the social order that it produces. If comedy creates an image of the social order as a whole, it has a conservative function. But if comedy reveals the incompleteness of the social structure, it functions as a critical comedy that plays an emancipatory role in political struggle.

Keywords:

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Class Struggle at the Carnival

Comedy feels subversive. It disrupts the flow of everyday life and often calls social authority into question. If comedy didn't upset our usual way of thinking, it would fail to be funny. When I tell an unfunny joke, the lack of humor coincides perfectly with the degree to which it fits within accepted conceptions of the world. The comedian who asks, "Why can't you write with a broken pencil?" and responds, "Because you can't handle it properly," will have a short career as a comedian because this joke isn't a joke at all. It simply recounts the accepted answer that coincides with our conceptions about pencils and writing. In order to be funny, comedy must entail some challenge to accepted thoughts and associations of thought. The comedian who asks, "Why can't you write with a broken pencil?" and answers, "Because it is pointless," may not have a longer career than the first comedian, though this one at least stands a better chance. The pun on the word "point" will not lead to world revolution, but it does encourage the listener to reflect on why one writes rather than simply accepting the givens of the situation. This is why so many theorists of comedy attribute an inherent emancipatory quality to it.¹ Even in its most banal form, comedy is freedom.

Comedy liberates us from the constraints that govern our

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¹ Just to name a few: Mikhail Bakhtin, Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley, Robert Pfaller, and Alenka Zupančič.

everyday life, and even if we don't view it as radically egalitarian, we nonetheless associate it with a form of freedom. In comedy and jokes, we can say what would otherwise be impermissible in polite society. As long as we do so in the form of a joke, we can tell our bosses how we really feel about them and openly undermine their authority. Comic films can provide a thoroughgoing critique of American foreign policy even during wartime. Stanley Kubrick was able to make *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) during the middle of the Cold War, despite its explicit critique of American leadership at the time. Stand-up comedy routines can offer a scathing political commentary that otherwise exists only in extremely marginalized venues. When we hear this mockery of political leaders or satire of cultural icons, the association of comedy with subversion and critique appears almost self-evident. The tone of comedy, in contrast to tragic seriousness, doesn't permit the solemnity of entrenched power figures to remain undisturbed. Those in power fear irruptions of comedy as challenges to their authority. Comedy seems to be class warfare by indirect means.

The image of comedy as class warfare finds its most vehement spokesperson in the figure of Mikhail Bakhtin, who sees this conception of comedy articulated in the work of Rabelais. In his works, Rabelais focuses on the carnival, a time of comedy in which festival and laughter displace everyday life. The comedy of the carnival derives from the inversion of social relations that occurs during this time. Those in power become the equals of the lowest members of society as a temporary suspension of social hierarchy ensues. Usual life transpires through firm distinctions between different classes and rules that sustain these distinctions. But comedy reveals these distinctions to be illusory and permeable.

Bakhtin understands that carnival is only a temporary suspension of societal hierarchy and that this hierarchy returns after the carnival, but nonetheless the comedy that takes place during the carnival has an inherent radicality to it. Bakhtin goes so far as to claim that the forces of oppression can never mobilize comedy and laughter on their side. Laughing creates a sense of equality between those who are laughing and those who are being laughed at. Bakhtin writes, "laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands."² According to this conception

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² Bakhtin 1984, p. 94.

of the comic and its effect, authority requires seriousness and is actually identified with seriousness. When authorities engage in comedy, they are implicitly undermining their own authority and taking the side of the people, even if they aren't aware of this. Authority operates through fear, but comedy liberates us from fear. When we see the comic underside of authority figures and experience them being mocked, we cease to fear them. Whatever the terror that authorities would inflict on us, if we respond with laughter, we undermine its power to oppress.

The problem with Bakhtin and his conception of laughter is that he never had the chance to see *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976).³ In this film of the revenge of a high school outcast on her fellow classmates, we see clearly how laughter and comedy aren't straightforwardly associated with emancipation. Carrie (Sissy Spacek) is the subject of mockery throughout the film, and this mockery comes to a head at the high school prom, where popular students find great amusement in dumping pig's blood on her from a pail hanging in the rafters. Their laughter in this scene is an index of Carrie's humiliation and oppression. There is nothing liberating about it, and it does not disturb their authority at the school. Even the unpopular students join in the mockery of Carrie. Laughter, after all, can serve as "an instrument to oppress and blind the people." Carrie soon avenges herself on them, but the comedy that they find in the act of dumping blood on her stands apart from this vengeance (which is itself not at all comic).

The treatment that Carrie receives in De Palma's film is familiar to anyone who has witnessed racist, sexist, homophobic, or anti-Semitic jokes. These jokes emanate from a position of social authority and work to enhance the authority embodied by those at the top of the social hierarchy. They offer the enjoyment that comes from the act of excluding rather than the mockery of authority. When we see figures of authority derisively mocking and laughing at the downtrodden or the excluded can have no doubt that the valence of laughter and comedy is not as clear-cut as Bakhtin imagines it to be.

Even when authorities mock themselves or allow themselves to be mocked, it is not always evident that this mockery subverts their authority. Pretensions of comic subversion often fail to subvert at all. Comedy can assist the authorities in cementing their authority just as

³ Bakhtin just missed it. He died in 1975, and De Palma released *Carrie* in 1976.

easily as it can undermine that authority. There is, in short, no inherent political valence to the comic act. Sometimes comedy can function in a critical way, but it can just as easily function conservatively. The question is how we can determine what makes particular forms of comedy critical and what makes other forms conservative.

Our tendency is to look for the political valence of comedy in either who creates the comedy or who is its object. If the source of the comedy is a figure of authority, we assume that the comedy functions conservatively because authorities don't intentionally undermine themselves and remain authorities. Jokes constructed by social outcasts, on the other hand, seems ipso facto critical. On the side of the comic object, the political situation is reversed. If the object of the comedy is someone already excluded from the social order, we believe that the comedy is conservative insofar as it preserves the exclusions that constitute the social order as it is constituted. No one believes, for instance, that the racist joke or the comic sketch about the homeless challenges existing social relations. And when a joke targets a political or economic leader, it seems inherently critical.

Oftentimes, the type of subject and the type of object coincide: either the figure of authority finds comedy in mockery of the excluded, or one of the excluded tells a joke undermining symbolic authority. One can easily imagine a business leader recounting a racist or a sexist joke or laughing at satirical depictions of the excluded, just as one can also imagine a group of servants laughing at the foibles of the upper class families that they serve. In both cases, the political bearing of the subject and object of comedy line up exactly.

But this method for evaluating the politics of comedy doesn't hold up under close scrutiny. Complications quickly ensue. The marginalized can tell jokes at their own expense, as we see with many Jewish jokes. The joke that recounts a waiter at a diner coming to a table of Jewish woman and asking, "Is anything OK?," has a Jewish source and a Jewish target. Equally, authority figures can tell jokes that genuinely challenge their own authority. This occurred when President Obama, asked why he had stopped smoking, joked that he was afraid of his wife. In these cases, the source and the target are the same, which makes it difficult to judge these jokes politically in terms of the source and the target.

There is, however, are even more significant problem with type of evaluation. The trouble is that the group of servants laughing at the foibles of the families that they serve doesn't necessarily undermine

their libidinal investment in the authority of these families. It can easily augment the investment. In a similar way, the temporary toppling of social hierarchy can ultimately reinforce this hierarchy.⁴ This is why we must look elsewhere for a way of judging the politics of comedy.

Since seemingly critical comedy can have a conservative effect, the evaluation of comedy must examine not just its source or object but take into account its effects. We can identify the difference between the comedy of critique and conservative comedy through the effect that the comedy produces on both its source and its object. The radical potential of comedy lies in the specific way that it disrupts our everyday lives and our everyday understanding. The everyday persists through the sense of wholeness that undergirds it. Events follow one after another without disjunction, and subjects relate to each other without antagonism. But comedy has the ability to reveal division or splitting where we perceive wholeness, and when it sustains this revelation, it functions successfully as a critical comedy or a comedy of critique. The comedy of critique exposes the incompleteness of the social order and of the subject who exists within this order. In the comedy of critique, both the source of the comedy and its target appear divided internally, and it is the emergence of this internal division that enables us to laugh while also facilitating critique.⁵

But the comedy of critique is not the dominant manifestation of comedy. When comedy subtends a sense of wholeness in either the subject or the social order, it functions conservatively and helps to entrench a belief in the intractability of social authority. The difficulty with analyzing comedy is that even comic moments that seem to disrupt social authority often play the role of stealthily supporting rather than undermining its power. It is not enough to look for authority being mocked. Conservative comedy is far more prevalent than the comedy of critique.

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4 To be fair to Bakhtin, he understands that the temporary suspension of social hierarchies can serve to reinforce these hierarchies, but he nonetheless clings to the idea that comedy and laughter themselves are inherently liberatory. This is the fundamental point of contention.

5 Robert Pfaller sees the act of emphasizing division as characteristic of all comedy, not just the comedy of critique. He writes, "Comedy is based on this simple, sobering position of materialism: It recognizes the fundamental *decentering* of individuals who perform always see themselves as subjects, as centers." Pfaller 2005, p. 264.

The Comedy of Social Exclusion

Most comedy buttresses social authority through sustaining the exclusions that make it possible. It creates the image of a social whole that acquires its wholeness through the exclusion of an excess. Wholeness is not inimical to exclusion but depends on it because the exclusion provides the external point of reference that enables the structure to define itself as a whole. There is no wholeness without an exclusion, and the task of conservative comedy is one of constituting the wholeness by way of the exclusion.⁶ It draws attention to the excluded element and derives humor from its excesses. A large portion of American entertainment is rife with images of black comic excess created for the purpose of creating the image of American society from which this black is excluded.

In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle identifies what he calls the coon as the primary figure of racist comedy in American society. Though there is just as much racism in uncle toms or black mammies (two other figures that he identifies), it is the coon who exists for the sake of laughter and who, for that reason, proliferates more than the other racist figures.⁷ According to Bogle's description, "Before its death, the coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language."⁸ Bogle's description implies a sanguine view of this figure's demise, but an examination of the history of recent Hollywood films reveals that he spoke too soon, that the comedy of the coon lives on, even if its manifestation is not so blatant as the depiction of a lazy buffoon in the silent film *How Rastus*

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⁶ Jacques Lacan's concept of male sexualization has its basis in the logic of the whole and the exception. The universe of men subjected to castration emerges through the exclusion of one man who is not subjected to castration. The universe of women, in contrast, has no wholeness because no one is not subjected to castration. The lack of an exception makes it impossible to create a whole.

⁷ In his *Bamboozled* (2000), Spike Lee constructs a long montage sequence from Hollywood films and television shows the varying racist deployments of blackness. Though we also see a few instances of dramatic rather than comic racism, the primary focus of Lee's montage is the creation of the coon figure and its ubiquity. One can see traces of the coon in almost all of the other figures: even though the hypersexualized black buck is menacing, he is also somewhat ridiculous and thus somewhat a coon.

⁸ Bogle 2001, p. 8.

Gets His Turkey (Theodore Wharton, 1910). In early films such as this one, the coon is the sole focus, and this is what has changed in more contemporary appearances of this figure.

The coon is often now the sidekick to a white hero and provides comic relief from the central drama. This is the case in a series of action films from the 1980s onward. For instance, in *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), New York police officer John McClane (Bruce Willis) finds himself isolated in a Los Angeles skyscraper battling criminals who have taken hostages and are robbing the building. Overweight local officer Al Powell (Reginald Veljohnson) receives the call to investigate, and when we see him receives the dispatcher's call, he is in the process of buying multiple packages of Twinkies at a convenience store. Instead of eating watermelon like the traditional coon, he eats Twinkies, but the effect is the same. The film mocks Powell for his excessive weight and eating habits, and after he arrives at the skyscraper, his status as a coon figure becomes even more evident. McClane drops the body of one of the criminals from a high floor in order to alert the unknowing Powell to the criminal presence in the building. When the body strikes Powell's car, the criminals begin shooting at Powell as well, and he drives his car wildly in reverse while screaming until he ends up in a ditch. This image of Powell in the careening car confirms the coon status that the introduction to him buying Twinkies first suggests.

The *Lethal Weapon* series of films often places Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) in the coon role (though it also gives him a serious role in the drama as well). The comic focus on the coon reaches its apex in the opening scene from *Lethal Weapon 4* (Richard Donner, 1998), in which Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Murtaugh face a heavily armed shooter in the middle of a city street. Riggs convinces Murtaugh to strip down to his underwear and flap his arms like a chicken in order to distract the criminal while Riggs shoots him. Murtaugh doesn't steal chickens like classic coons but instead acts like a chicken. And after Murtaugh engages in the comic display, Riggs informs him that he had Murtaugh do this only for his own amusement (and that of the spectator) rather than for the stated intention of distracting the criminal. Riggs' admission is important for the spectator's comic pleasure because it reveals the inutility of Murtaugh's buffoonery. The coon performs simply to humor the spectator, not to accomplish any aims within the narrative.

The type of comedy doesn't die out by the 1990s but continues in the 2000s and 2010s with *Rush Hour 3* (Brett Ratner, 2007) and *Ride*

Along (Tim Story, 2014). In all of these films, the coon figure is a police officer, which is not coincidental though it seems contradictory. If the coon marks social exclusion, the cop is, in contrast, an insider. But the coon as police officer is humorous because it shows that even when this figure is fully ensconced in the social structure, he never really belongs, and his exclusion constitutes the social structure as a whole.

Laughing at the excluded outsider in order to produce a sense of wholeness is the primal form of comedy. It persists not due to a lack of knowledge or progress but because it enables spectators to believe in society as a substantial entity without any cracks. The excluded coon figure obscures the social order's traumatic incompleteness. When we laugh at the coon, we assure ourselves that it is possible to belong to the social order, even if we ourselves do not.⁹

Faking Critique

While it is easy to identify the conservative function of the coon figure and comedy that targets the excluded, it is more difficult to see this same process at work in comedy that targets the authorities. Nonetheless, the comedy of the carnival falls directly into this same category. Forcing the king to walk naked down the street while wearing a clown mask during the carnival seems to undermine the king's authority by showing a lack of authority within the appearance of authority. But this performance can easily buttress the king's authority. This type of comedy renders the king comic, but it does so by demonstrating to spectators that even this comic spectacle cannot disrupt the authority of the king. The king shows that he has the ability to appear as a lacking subject in order to prove that he isn't. In this sense, there is no political difference between laughing at the king in the carnival and laughing at the coon on the screen. Critical comedy might arise if the scene goes too far and begins to slip beyond what the king had authorized. But medieval carnival, for the most part, sustains the wholeness of the figure of authority, and this gives it a conservative function.

One modern equivalent of conservative comedy of the medieval carnival is the White House Correspondents' Dinner, a banquet where authority openly mocks itself. This annual event requires the

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⁹ It doesn't really matter is spectators laughing at the coon figure identify with the coon or not. The point is that his exclusion produces the image of the social order's wholeness. This wholeness is the great ideological deception, both for those who believe that they belong to it and for those who are excluded from it.

president to speak before the White House correspondents and other invited guests, and the speech always involves a series of jokes at the president's own expense. The comic object is authority itself and its failures. For instance, after the invasion of Iraq on the pretext that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, George W. Bush feigned a search for the never-discovered weapons in front of the audience, looking under the podium and all around him. This joke undercut the very basis for the Iraq War and used comedy to confirm critiques that he had launched the war under false pretenses. It was a genuinely funny joke, and we can't simply dismiss it as failing to achieve the status of comedy. And yet, this self-mockery did not undermine Bush's authority because it positioned him, as the teller of the joke, as a substantial authority. The White House Correspondents' Dinner is an authorized space, like the medieval carnival, and the jokes that emerge from it remain within that space unless they manage to disturb its fabric by violating the conventions that sustain the space. One laughs at the excessive war fought over what didn't exist, but while laughing, one remains within the symbolic structure that justified the war and made it possible. Laughing at Bush's self-mockery is just an extension of writing columns defending the decision to go to war in the first place.

But even when the comedy doesn't come from the president himself, it still can serve the very authority that it mocks. In addition to toppling the power of authority, comedy can provide a site for this necessary disobedience without threatening the structure of authority. It suffices to look at Robert Altman's classic film *MASH* (1970) to see how comic subversion actually enables a social structure to function more effectively than seriousness. The film contrasts comic figures Hawkeye Pierce (Donald Sutherland) and Trapper John McIntyre (Eliot Gould) with serious officers Major Frank Burns (Robert Duvall) and Major Margaret Houlihan (Sally Kellerman). Burns and Houlihan exhibit devotion to the army and its authority, while Pierce and McIntyre use comic acts and statements to undermine this authority. They disdain rank, steal military property, make gin in their tent, devise various pranks, and joke throughout their surgeries. This earns them the enmity of Burns and Houlihan, who attempt to have them punished for their antics. But in the end, Altman shows Burns, made irate after Pierce and McIntyre broadcast his nighttime tryst with Houlihan over the camp loudspeaker, taken away by the military police in a straitjacket. In the film, the comedy of Pierce and McIntyre triumphs over the seriousness of Burns and Houlihan.

Altman clearly intends his film as a critique of military authority and a celebration of the subversiveness that Pierce and McIntyre exhibit. Their comedy challenges military authority and discipline as it manifests itself in Burns, Houlihan, and other high ranking officers. In addition to their comic struggle with this authority, Altman shows the banality and ineptness of this authority. The commander of the hospital, Colonel Henry Blake (Roger Bowen), shows more interest in fishing than in the war, and General Hammond (George Wood) is concerned about playing and wagering on a football game, not about furthering the war effort.¹⁰ As Altman reveals throughout the film, military authority does not operate as a serious source of disciplinary power but consistently proves ineffectual and distracted.

The problem with this attack on military authority lies in the relationship between the comic subversion and the war itself. The humor that Pierce and McIntyre generate does not hasten the end of the war or spur broader challenges to the war's objectives. Pierce and McIntyre actually help their unit to work efficiently. The strict obedience of Burns actually disrupts the functioning of the military hospital far more than the antics of Pierce and McIntyre. The latter enable the other members of the hospital staff to work amid horrible conditions and inconceivable trauma while still maintaining a psychic equilibrium, which is why the authorities tolerate their behavior. Just as a sports coach tolerates and even tacitly encourages locker room pranks, the military leaders turn a blind but knowing eye to the comic subversion perpetuated by Pierce and McIntyre. The seriousness of Burns would thwart the hospital's functioning, while the comedy of Pierce and McIntyre make this functioning possible.

Pierce and McIntyre do not align themselves with military authority, and the film also eschews any such alignment for the spectator. But at the same time, we see that the effect of their comedy does not change attitudes toward the war or hinder the ability of anyone to serve in the military. They evince a dislike for the war and the carnage that it entails, but their comedy provides but an interlude that creates a coping mechanism for the carnage. In this sense, Pierce and McIntyre exhibit precisely the defects of Bakhtin's carnival as a political strategy.

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10 The football game that concludes *MASH* completely disrupts the narrative movement of the film. This indicates the discontinuity between narrative and war: though we believe that authorities begin wars in order to vanquish the opponent and reach the end, the film reveals that there is no real desire to end the war but rather an enjoyment of its prolongation.

Their humor, even when it targets military authority, does not disturb that authority. By publicly broadcasting the tryst of Houlihan and Burns that they listen to via a hidden microphone, they create a situation that results in Burns being sent away and Houlihan losing her hard edge, but in the end, they play along with authority and organize a football game with General Hammond's team. Though they recruit a former professional player who helps them to upset the General's team, this defeat doesn't create any realignment of the authority structure nor does it interrupt the war effort. The film counts among Altman's failures because its comedy never successfully hits the target at which it aims.¹¹ But this type of comic failure is not unusual. It is even more common than the blatant conservative comedy that employs the coon figure.

The Comedy of Critique

It is tempting to claim that conservative comedy is not really comedy, that the failure of comedy to challenge the ruling order indicates an absence of authentic comedy. This is the position of Alain Badiou, among others.¹² He insists that comedy "tells of the other side of signification, it inflicts wounds for which there is no cure." In light of this definition, Badiou concludes, "What is clear is that for the moment there exists no modern comedy," though he does not rule out the existence of the occasional "funny play."¹³ By differentiating comedy from the mere "funny play" and thereby preserving the inherent critical status of comedy, Badiou effectively lets comedy off the hook. The act of defining conservative comedy as an absence of comedy doesn't solve

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11 Altman may be the most inconsistent filmmaker in the history of cinema. He made several unqualified masterpieces, like *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *The Player* (1992), and *Short Cuts* (1993). But he also made several complete failures, including *Popeye* (1980), *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994), and *Dr. T. and the Women* (2000).

12 Alenka Zupančič offers her own distinction between authentic and inauthentic comedy. She writes, "False, conservative comedies are those where the abstract-universal and the concrete do not change places and do not produce a short-circuit between them; instead, the concrete (where 'human weaknesses' are situated) remains external to the universal, and at the same time invites us to recognize and accept it as an indispensable companion of the universal, its necessary physical support. The paradigm of these comedies is simply the following: the aristocrat (or king, or judge, or priest, or any other character of symbolic stature) is *also* a man (who snores, farts, slips, and is subject to the same physical laws as other mortals). The emphasis is, of course, precisely on 'also': the concrete and the universal coexist, the concrete being the indispensable grounding of the universal." Zupančič 2008, p. 30.

13 Badiou 2008, p. 233.

the problem of comedy's political bearing. It merely transposes this question into a different domain and requires that we pose it in a new form. The question becomes, "What differentiates comedy from the funny work?" But this remains the same question.

Badiou's response is that genuine comedy exposes and undermines figures of authority. He cites as examples the Priest, François Mitterrand, and John Paul II. He understands that comedy must offend, but he always envisions it offending figures of power rather than the excluded. This becomes, for Badiou, the definition of comedy. The vehicle for this subversion is a character that Badiou calls "diagonal." The diagonal character reveals that the identity of figures of power is a purely discursive identity, a symbolic fiction in which we have invested ourselves and from which we might disinvest. The diagonal character is, for Badiou, the sine qua non of comedy and the key to its subversive power.¹⁴ But the diagonal character is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a critical comedy. As the example of *MASH* illustrates, conservative comedy can easily employ the subversion of those in power, and at the same time, the comedy of critique can target those who are excluded.

A comedy of genuine critique must reveal that the social authority itself is not simply a discursive entity but necessarily lacking. It must show the social order and the subject itself as incomplete. The problem with most comedy is that it hides a secret investment in the wholeness of the authority that it mocks or in the position excluded from this authority. The comedian wants to preserve the idea of a substantial existence, to preserve some ground for identity. The comedy of critique adopts a position of enunciation without any such ground.

It is possible for authority figures to do this and thus subvert their own authority, just as it is possible for those among the excluded to identify with the wholeness of authority and create comedy that reinforces it, but it is much more difficult. The difficulty lies in the authority figure's refusal to abandon the symbolic identity that authority confers. Authority grants the figure of authority status within the symbolic structure and confers wholeness on this authority. As an authority, one matters, and everyone within the symbolic structure offers recognition to the figure of authority. By abandoning the authoritative

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¹⁴ In the preface to his own series of plays *La Tétralogie d'Ahmed*, Badiou notes the necessary status of the diagonal character and claims that his creation Ahmed is an exemplar of this position. He writes, "a 'diagonal' character ... has always been a major condition of comedy." Badiou 2010, p. 18.

position of enunciation, one also abandons this recognition and joins the mass of the excluded. In doing so, one incurs ostracism, vilification, and even condemnation. One is divided against oneself. This is why so few in authority are able to take this step in the direction of a genuinely critical comedy. Critical comedy, authored by an authority figure, costs this figure its authority.

The trajectory of comedy relative to the authorities that it mocks is directly parallel to the trajectory of Hegel's philosophy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's gambit in this work is that critical analysis will demonstrate that whatever appears a substance (or a self-sustaining independent whole) suffers from the same division that the speaking subject endures. This is why he claims in the preface to the *Phenomenology* that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*."¹⁵ By grasping that substance is always subject, Hegel doesn't abolish authority as such, but he shows that there is no substantial authority, which means that the power of authority is always tenuous. Like Hegel, comedy enables us to confront the division within authority and gain purchase on it. This is the critical function of comedy in its relationship to authority.

Vice President Dick Cheney was a figure of great authority during the presidency of George Bush. Though Bush often played the clown, Cheney was always the serious leader, the one willing to endorse torture in pursuit of enemies and to evince authoritativeness. One of the great comic instances of the early 2000s centered around him precisely because of his serious demeanor and sense of imperturbable authority. On February 11, 2006, Cheney went quail hunting with an acquaintance, Harry Whittington, a 78 year old man. While aiming for a bird, Cheney accidentally (and non-lethally) shot Whittington in the face and neck region. The comedy of this event stems from the position in which it places Cheney. Rather than being a figure of rigorous authority, he instantly becomes a bumbling fool who shoots a fellow hunter instead of the proper target. Even the most solid authority figure can reveal himself as a divided subject who can't shoot straight. The incident received expansive coverage and comedians devoted much attention to it because it disrupted the authority of an authority figure.

But we can't simply confine the target of critical comedy to figures of authority. There is also a critical comedy that mocks the

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¹⁵ Hegel 1977, p. 10.

marginalized and oppressed. Though it seems hard to stomach, such comedy can be just as critical and perhaps even more so than the comedy that mocks authority. This is what Charlie Chaplin accomplishes in his films, and through mockery of the marginalized Little Tramp, he calls the system that marginalizes the Little Tramp into question. One doesn't laugh with the Little Tramp against the social order when he is unable to keep up with the speed of the assembly line in *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936); one laughs at him. But by showing the split within excluded figure, Chaplin eliminates any possible idealization of the excluded.

Why *Duck Soup* is Funnier Than *Monkey Business*

The importance of authority for comedy seems to reside in the opportunity that law provides for transgression. If we didn't have authority, we wouldn't have comic incidents that involve defying social authority, such as the moments in *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) when the Delta Tau Chi fraternity defies the college authority represented by Dean Wormer (John Vernon). The wild activities of the fraternity have a comic effect because the authority exists for the fraternity to transgress. The toga parties, the drunkenness, the sexual openness, and open defiance of Dean Wormer constitute the comedy of the film. The fraternity is comic because it thwarts the efforts of the law to control it. This defiance is the source of the film's comedy, and Dean Wormer's authority is the background against which this defiance operates. As *Animal House* illustrates, social authority establishes the order that comedians can subsequently undermine. But the comic importance of authority actually extends further than its establishment of the rule that comedy disturbs.

Authority itself is more comical than its transgression because the authority's self-division is the condition of possibility for its transgression and thus logically privileged. Many slapstick comedies focus on those outside social authority who find themselves constantly besieged by the authority's excesses. This is the case with films like *Animal House*. Of course, one can achieve sublime comedy outside social authority, but even *Animal House* relies on the internal splitting of the authority itself. Without this splitting, the transgression of the law would not have any comic potential. The comic priority of social authority relative to its transgression becomes evident if we contrast two of the early Marx Brothers comedies made at Paramount, before the departure of Zeppo from the group and before the move of the other

three brothers to MGM.¹⁶

Monkey Business (Norman McLeod, 1931) is the third Marx Brothers film and the first to be made directly for the screen (that is, not transformed from a stage version).¹⁷ Most of the film takes place on a ship where the brothers are stowaways. In an opening sequence, they sing in the barrels where they are hiding in the cargo hold, and much of the film's running time involves them subverting hiding from the ship's authorities and subverting the ship's captain. Like the Delta Tau Chi fraternity in *Animal House*, the brothers occupy a position outside social authority during the entire film. They generate comedy in the film through their defiance of this authority, which begins with them hiding in barrels and continues with them running throughout the ship, creating havoc while avoiding the crewmembers chasing them.

One of the highlights of the film involves the brothers trying to pass through customs. Because they are stowaways on the ship, they lack the proper documentation for entering the United States. Each brother tries to use the passport of Maurice Chevalier, but the customs officer, as one might expect, refuses to accept this false identification. This refusal occasions a physical defiance of this authority figure, and he ends up with custom stamps on his bald head. At every point in the film, the brothers are on the outside of the law, and their victims are the legal authorities who try to reign them in. Their defiance shows that the authority doesn't have authority over them.

While there are funny moments in *Monkey Business*, the film as a whole fails to sustain its comedy in the way that the other films of the Marx Brothers do. There are only a limited number of ways to flout authority onboard a ship. Because all the comedy lies in authority's transgression, the film never exploits the potential comedy of the authority itself. The captain and the customs officer are simply foils for the jokes of the brothers, and they never themselves become humorous. The comedy of disobedience that *Monkey Business* employs leads to the repetition of the same types of gags, and this repetition renders the film

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¹⁶ Though there are some memorable scenes in *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935) and *A Day at the Races* (Sam Wood, 1937), it is clear to most viewers that the first five films made at Paramount constitute the Marx Brothers at the height of their comic genius.

¹⁷ Their first two films were originally stage plays that the brothers performed on Broadway. But even the later films written directly for the screen suffer from the same stage-like quality that hampers the first films. There is a no marked formal difference that emerges in *Monkey Business*.

the weakest of the Paramount films.

The position of the Marx Brothers in *Monkey Business* atypical. In each of their other Paramount films, at least one of the brothers himself occupies a position of authority. In *The Cocoanuts* (Robert Flory, 1929), Mr. Hammer (Groucho Marx) is a hotel owner, and Jamison (Zeppo Marx) works as his assistant, while in *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930), all four brothers occupy established social positions, with Groucho playing the famous explorer Captain Spaulding. *Horse Feathers* (Norman McLeod, 1932) follows this dynamic, as Groucho plays a newly appointed college president, Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff.

In *Animal Crackers* and *Horse Feathers*, the figure of authority reveals its self-division. The former depicts Captain Spaulding (Groucho Marx) insulting the wealthy Mrs. Rittenhouse (Margaret Dumont) in almost every one of his interactions with her, despite the attention and hospitality that she lavishes on him. At one point, he tells her, “Why you’re one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen, and that’s not saying much for you.” Minutes later, he offers her an insurance policy that will provide for her, he says, “in her old age, which will be here in a couple of weeks now, if I’m any judge of horse flesh.” In these representative lines, Spaulding compliments Rittenhouse but immediately transforms the compliment into an insult. Despite her wealth and status, Rittenhouse endures these types of insults throughout the film, and they have the effect of revealing authority, in the figures of Spaulding and Rittenhouse, at odds with itself.

Horse Feathers begins with Quincy Adams Wagstaff being named the new president of Huxley University. At the ceremony, Wagstaff appears with his professorial gown open while smoking a cigar. His opening speech to the faculty and students shows disdain for the usual trappings of academic authority. Though he is the new university president, he openly admits to privileging football success over academic success, and he unleashes a kidnapping plot in order to ensure a victory over the rival university.¹⁸ Wagstaff shows that the university president doesn’t have the substantial authority that we would ordinarily attribute to this figure.

It is not coincidental that in the final and most successful Paramount film, *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933), Groucho not only plays

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18 The football game in *MASH* directly alludes to the conclusion of *Horse Feathers*, which lampoons college authorities by illustrating how a football game is much more important than the college’s academic mission. In Altman’s film, the football game trumps the war effort.

a figure of authority but the ultimate authority—the ruler of Freedonia, Rufus T. Firefly.¹⁹ The contrast between *Monkey Business* and *Duck Soup* is extreme. The comedy in *Monkey Business* derives from excessively defying authority, while *Duck Soup* produces comedy through embodying authority. The status of *Duck Soup* as the masterpiece of the Marx Brothers is now secure, and it depends largely on the role that Firefly plays relative to his own authority.²⁰ As the newly appointed leader of Freedonia, he reveals this authority as excessive and at the same time as lacking. This coincidence is apparent from the moment of his first appearance. When the patriotic “Hail Freedonia” plays for him to be introduced as the new leader, he doesn’t initially show up at all. The song repeats in order to prompt him to appear, and again he is absent. Here, the film creates comedy through the excessiveness of the introduction—its booming sound and its repetition—and the absence of any figure to embody the authority.

After the repetition of the anthem, the film cuts to Firefly still in bed, and we see him quickly dress. When he does finally make an appearance in the great hall, he doesn’t enter in his assigned place. Instead, he slides down a fire pole and stands next to a soldier. As “Hail Freedonia” repeats once more, he is in line to greet the leader instead of being in the position of the entering leader. When Mrs. Teasdale (Margaret Dumont) finally locates him, rather than acting like an authority, he begins with the comedy routine, telling her to pick a card from the deck that he has. He then proceeds to assault Teasdale with a series of insults about her weight, her relationship to her deceased husband, and her position relative to himself. The comedy of Firefly in this scene depends on his status as the new ruler of Freedonia. His position as an authority reveals the self-division of that authority.

When Firefly doesn’t act like a figure of legal authority despite occupying this position, he acts both as a lacking subject and as an excessive one. His absence from his own introduction reveals that he doesn’t fully identify with his position as a social authority, but his behavior with Teasdale shows him acting excessively within this

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19 All of the brothers except Harpo occupy positions of authority in *Duck Soup*. In addition to Groucho playing the ruler of Freedonia, Zeppo plays Firefly’s assistant Bob Roland and Chico plays the Secretary of War Chicolini.

20 This was not the case when *Duck Soup* originally appeared. It did not fare as well as their earlier films in terms of box office receipts or critical reception.

position. Authority is funnier than its transgressions because it necessarily brings these two positions together. The genius of *Duck Soup* is placing a figure who clearly doesn't fit within the law as the authority. The disjunction between Firefly's actions and his symbolic position is nothing but the disjunction of social authority itself. But making this disjunction comically evident is always difficult because comedy relies on the social bond for its effectiveness.

The Fundamental Barrier

No one laughs alone. Even if one watches a funny television show at home without anyone else present and manages to laugh, the laughter implies the presence of others who join in. When we laugh alone, we imagine others who would also see humor in the events that we witness, and without this social dimension, it would be impossible to enjoy comedy. The social dimension of comedy is evident in the contagiousness of laughter. When we see others laughing at some unknown incident or joke, we often spontaneously laugh ourselves, even though we have no idea about the source of the humor. This contagiousness and our inability to laugh alone reveal that comedy exceeds us as subjects or forces us to exceed ourselves. When we laugh, we laugh beyond ourselves and amid others. This is why those who praise laughter and comedy focus on their inclusionary quality. Laughing subjects want others to join in their laughter. In the experience of comedy, the cliché "the more, the merrier" holds true.

Comedy is inherently social and brings people together, while tragedy isolates the individual's opposition to the social order. Even those who reject social convention in a comedy, like the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* who withhold sex from their husbands, do so for the sake of social betterment (putting an end to a costly war), and those who don't act for the sake of the society, like Socrates who spends his time ensconced in idle philosophizing in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, are revealed as fools by the comedy. Comedy lifts the subject out of its private life and engages it in the social world, even when the subject experiences this comedy alone.

In his discussion of comedy and laughter, Henri Bergson goes so far as to view laughter as the revenge of society on the individual who steps out of line and disobeys the unwritten rules of the game. Comedy, as Bergson sees it, is the antithesis of revolt. It recoups those who stray by offering them humiliation as the recompense for their attempts to separate from the society. He says, "it is the business of laughter to

repress any separatist tendency. Its function is to convert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with."²¹ Bergson adopts a relatively sanguine attitude toward this social repression of separatism, but he does characterize laughter as a process in which "society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it."²² The social dimension of comedy leads to inclusion, but this inclusion has, as Bergson's description suggests, a supereogic quality to it. A laughing group puts an intense pressure on others to join in with the laughter.²³ It is precisely this tendency that aligns comedy with the power of the social order as such and the image of its total authority. We laugh together because comedy punishes individual transgressions.

The inherently social nature of comedy blunts its critical edge. Though it can criticize the pretensions of individuals who locate themselves outside of the social order or in a transcendent position relative to this order, it most often does so in the name the substantiality of the social order. When laughing, one feels as if one belongs, and this sense of belonging to a whole is the antithesis of critique. This wholeness depends on exclusion, and this exclusion manifests itself just as much as the sociability of the comic.

If no one truly laughs alone, then it is also the case that there is no joke at which everyone can laugh. Comedy demands not only inclusion but also exclusion. Though comedy can include the object of the joke within the comic sphere, there must be someone excluded from that sphere, someone who doesn't get the joke or whom the joke necessarily marginalizes. If the joke did not exclude anyone, it would not be funny. This is the fate that all attempts to create an inoffensive humor necessarily suffer. Comedy that doesn't offend someone ceases to be comedy.

But the fundamental stumbling block to a comedy of critique

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²¹ Bergson 1956, p. 174,

²² Bergson 1956, p. 187.

²³ The failure to join in leaves one at risk of exclusion, which is the reverse side of comedy's general inclusivity.

is not that it must exclude. It is instead the illusion of wholeness that derives from comedy's specific amalgam of inclusion and exclusion. The comedy of critique cannot allow any entity to escape unscathed. Neither the source of the comedy nor its target nor a third party can retain the illusion of wholeness. Comedy brings together the disparate, but if it is to be critical, it must do so in order to show that all wholeness finds itself constantly beset by the disparate. If we laugh together, we must at the same time recognize that we are already apart.

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