

6. Relief Theories

There are some similarities between Incongruity Theory and what is sometimes called Relief or Release Theory. The latter tend also to see laughter as born of contradictions, for instance, but they relocate that contradiction in the self rather than in the joke. Such theories are characterised by the notion that laughter involves the individual relieving pent-up energy, or letting-off steam.

6.1 Herbert Spencer: Nervous Energy

The British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) is usually cited as the first person to formulate a relief theory of humour. He was particularly interested in finding ways to link nineteenth century scientific discoveries with philosophy, and his theory of humour draws heavily on the discourse of biology. Spencer is interested in how the perception of an incongruity becomes transformed into laughter. He thought that it is associated with the release of nervous energy, and he illustrates his theory quite succinctly with an example about a goat intruding on a love scene in at the theatre. It is worth quoting this in detail:

You are sitting in a theatre, absorbed in the progress of an interesting drama. Some climax has been reached which has aroused your sympathies—say, a reconciliation between the hero and heroine, after long and painful misunderstanding [...] And now, while you are contemplating the reconciliation with a pleasurable sympathy, there appears from behind the scenes a tame kid, which, having stared round at the audience, walks up to the lovers and sniffs at them. You cannot help joining in the roar which greets this *contretemps* [...] it is readily explicable if we consider what, in such a case, must become of

the feeling that existed at the moment the incongruity arose. A large mass of emotion had been produced; or, to speak in physiological language, a large portion of the nervous system was in a state of tension. There was also great expectation with respect to the further evolution of the scene—a quantity of vague, nascent thought and emotion, into which the existing quantity of thought and emotion was about to pass. Had there been no interruption, the body of new ideas and feelings next excited, would have sufficed to absorb the whole of the liberated nervous energy. But now, this large amount of nervous energy, instead of being allowed to expend itself in producing an equivalent amount of the new thoughts and emotions which were nascent, is suddenly checked in its flow. The channels along which the discharge was about to take place, are closed. The new channel opened—that afforded by the appearance and proceedings of the kid—is a small one; the ideas and feelings suggested are not numerous and massive enough to carry off the nervous energy to be expended. The excess must therefore discharge itself in some other direction; and in the way already explained, there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter.³⁵

The emotion produced by the drama creates tension within the nervous system of the spectator who had certain expectations about how the scene was going to develop: the build-up of tension was created by the anticipation of what he believed would happen next. The expectation is qualified, however, when a goat walks on to the scene, creating incongruity. The qualification means that the spectator no longer needs the nervous energy that had been created by the tension, and so that nervous energy is re-routed, and discarded in the form of laughter.

Spencer sought a physiological explanation for laughter, then, and his hydraulic energy model looks a little quaint in the twenty first century: his biological references seem rudimentary and naïve.

35 Herbert Spencer, 'The Physiology of Laughter,' *Macmillan's Magazine*, March 1860, 452–466 (461).

There are other problems with his theory too. For instance, laughter for Spencer is always a result of lowering our expectations, as with the bathetic image of the goat undermining the emotionally charged scene in his example; in other words his theory implies that laughter is always a consequence of descending incongruity, where something elevated is replaced by something trivial. His thesis doesn't really account for comic incongruities that work in the other direction, where something trivial is replaced by something of great consequence. There are many instances of the latter. One example might be the closing scenes of *The Simpsons* episode, *Fear of Flying*. In this episode Marge reveals that she has a fear of flying, and the show concludes with Homer, having finally coaxed her onto a plane, reassuring Marge that the various take-off sounds she can hear are perfectly normal; in the middle of his reassurances, however, the plane crashes into a swamp:

Homer: Don't worry about a thing, honey. I'm going to help you through this.

[He and Marge sit down; some noises occur]

Those are all normal noises. Luggage compartment closing...crosschecking...just sit back and relax.

[Shot from outside the plane]

That's just the engine powering up...that's just the engine struggling...

[The plane drives off the runway into a swamp]

That's just a carp swimming around your ankles...

Marge: Mmm...³⁶

Here incongruity is created between Homer's reassurances and the reality of plane crashing into a swamp, and laughter occurs at the point when the plane crashes. This would appear to be an example of ascending incongruity, where something trivial is replaced by something massively significant. So how do the trivial, ostensibly insignificant reassurances of Homer build the tension necessary for a release

³⁶ *Fear of Flying, Simpsons Episode No 114, Writer., David Sacks., Director., Mark Kirkland, First broadcast November, 1994.*

of nervous energy in Spencer's terms? Nevertheless we laugh. There *is* descending incongruity here too of course—but this comes *after* the plane has crashed into the swamp and Homer says, 'That's just a carp swimming around your ankles;' this is a brilliant comic understatement that creates another potential laugh. Both the ascending incongruity and the descending incongruity are funny, but Spencer's theory only seems to work for one.

Creative Writing Exercise

Create two comic scenes, one with descending incongruity where something elevated is replaced by something trivial, and one with ascending incongruity, where something trivial is replaced by something immensely significant. The former is easier, but the latter is possible.

6.2 Sigmund Freud: The Unconscious

There are problems with Spencer's theory, then, and it is of interest now principally in the extent to which it was adapted by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud takes Spencer's Relief Theory of laughter and reworks it in line with his own model of the human psyche and his view that laughter helps us release psychic energy, as opposed to nervous energy.

Freud addresses various causes of laughter and argues that all help regulate psychic energy. The reasons for the build-up and release of this psychic energy depend on the type of amusement. Laughter created when jokes address taboo subjects, for instance, constitutes a release of the energy that would otherwise have been used to repress those taboo feelings. Freud also argues that laughter occurs when comedy provides an escape from the demands of rational thought: the latter demands more psychic energy than comic irrationality, so jokes provide pleasure by offering freedom from the constraints of reason. Other causes of laughter can involve the release of energy caused when a seemingly serious situation turns out to be trivial (a view very similar to Spencer's notion of descending incongruity), or when more than one concept is combined in a single comic idea. In Freud's

words, the pleasure that jokes produce, ‘whether it is pleasure in play or pleasure in lifting inhibitions, can invariably be traced back to economy in physical expenditure.’³⁷ So like Spencer, Freud thought that humour helps us manage energy, but for him the mind is the source of this energy.

Freud made a distinction between ‘innocent’ jokes and ‘tendentious’ jokes; the latter are those which draw on taboos, and arguably it is Freud’s discussion of this kind of joke that has been the most influential aspect of his work on humour. Andrew Stott, discussing Freud on this topic, explains his views in the following way:

The need for [tendentious] jokes is a response to social expectations, as the norms of etiquette usually prevent us from directly insulting others or broaching taboo subjects. By touching on these difficult topics, the joke does important work, as it alleviates the inhibition of the joker and addresses the taboo while also keeping it in place. Laughing is the audible signal that the energy required for ‘cathexis’, the accumulation of energy around an idea, has been lifted and can now be dispersed in a pleasurable fashion (Andrew Stott, *Comedy*, 139–140).

Taboo feelings—those relating to sex or violence and things that civilised society find unacceptable—are usually repressed; in other words they are kept in the unconscious. This repression requires psychic energy, but when we allow these topics into our conscious mind through joking we no longer require the energy we’ve been using to repress them: this superfluous energy is jettisoned in the form of laughter. Consider the following joke:

A man boards a flight and finds himself seated next to a beautiful woman. They exchange brief hellos and he notices that she is reading a book. He asks her about it and she replies, ‘It is a book about sexual statistics. It claims that American Indians have the longest average penis size of any men in the world,

37 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 189.

and Polish men's penises are the thickest in diameter. By the way, my name is Amanda. What's yours?' Without hesitation he replies, 'Tonto Kowalski, nice to meet you.'

Firstly, reflect on this joke in terms of what we know about incongruity. We can easily identify an incongruity and a resolution here: there is a discrepancy between what we expect the man to say at the end (a conventional name), and what he actually says (a name combining both of the 'well-endowed' ethnic groups). Also the incongruity is resolvable because the name, Tonto Kowalski, relates to and unites the statistics Amanda has referenced; plus it uses names which crudely connote the relevant ethnic groups: they are familiar enough to be what Jerry Palmer would call 'a little bit plausible'. It is also compatible with the way a man might try to impress a woman who he wants to get to know more intimately. Arguably, however, this incongruity-resolution feature is not enough to account for the full force of the humour. Imagine changing Amanda's book to one about wealth: the richest men are American Indians and the most generous are Poles. The punch line—Tonto Kowalski—would be just as incongruous, and the incongruity would be resolvable and plausible in a similar way, but it wouldn't be as funny as the original. Freud might argue that the original is funnier because it relates to sex, a taboo topic. For Freud, such tendentious jokes are inherently funnier than innocent jokes. The pleasure derived from an innocent joke does not have any real purpose or aim, and comes solely from the technique of the joke itself. For instance, in the innocent version of the Tonto Kowalski joke, the punch line would only be mildly amusing in Freud's scheme: it would still enable some saving of psychic energy because the two concepts of wealth and generosity are combined and contracted in the single idea of a man called Tonto Kowalski (it takes less energy to think about one thing than two things). However, this saving is meagre compared to the tendentious version. The latter is funnier because it has an ulterior motive: it is also acting as a vehicle for a desire that we are compelled to repress. As a result there is double the pleasure in the tendentious version: we enjoy the condensed punch line, but we also enjoy the lifting of inhibitions that the joke's subject permits.

In order to get a better sense of how Freud's theory of tendentious jokes applies here we need to create an audience. Imagine that the scene presented in the Tonto Kowalski joke is a real life situation in which Amanda isn't attracted to the man sitting next to her on the plane. For the man's Tonto Kowalski quip to work in Freud's terms there would need to be three people involved: the joke-teller, the butt (Amanda), and a third party audience. The joke-teller needs an audience because he does not save psychic energy simply by telling the joke: if this was possible then we would be able to tell jokes to ourselves, and laugh at them. The joke requires an audience because the audience's laughter validates the joke: they become complicit in the tampering with social codes, and thereby legitimise it for the teller. This sanction enables the release of energy; also, because laughter is infectious, the audience's laughter is likely to stimulate laughter in the joke-teller, and thus he can derive pleasure from his own joke.

Creative Writing Exercise

Consider the following joke:

A psychiatrist was conducting a group therapy session with three young mothers and their small children. 'You all have obsessions,' he observed. To the first mother, he said, 'You are obsessed with eating. You've even named your daughter Candy.' He turned to the second mom. 'Your obsession is money; again it manifests itself in your child's name, Penny.' At this point the third mother got up, took her little boy by the hand and whispered, 'Come on, Dick, let's go.'

Try to write an innocent version of this joke. Start by experimenting with different obsessions and names for the children. When you have arrived at a version that you feel retains some humour, try to identify where the humour lies, and how Freud might account for it. Now have a go at writing another, different tendentious version. Change the mothers to fathers if that offers more possibilities. Did you find it easier to write a tendentious version, and was this version funnier?

6.3 Freud and Play

It was seen above how Schopenhauer saw a link between the pleasure of humour and the defeat of reason, and Freud's theory is similar in

this sense. For Freud the pleasure to be derived from humour can lie in its ability to usurp rational thought; he felt that jokes recreate the pleasure of childhood play that adults lose as they mature. Consider these words from Peter L. Berger:

Wit can be employed as a form of rebellion against authority. Most political jokes have this function. But Freud argues that there is a deeper rebellion; that against reason. This implies a kind of infantilization, a return to what Freud calls the 'old homestead' of childhood in which wishes come magically true and in which playing (including the play with words) makes up much of life. Joking is, in a way, becoming a child again for a few moments, and that in itself is a source of pleasure.³⁸

To a degree, every example of humour can be viewed as an act of transgression against the authority reason, with the irrational world of humour offering temporary relief from the demands of the adult world. In this way it is also possible to account for the pleasure derived from the nonsense and absurdist humour discussed above. Freud's notion of psychic economy suggests that irrational thought requires less psychic energy than rational thought, and the excess finds a pleasurable release during childish humour. This pleasure is a guilty one because of the pressure the adult world exerts on us to toe-the-line and behave like grown-ups, but Freud suggests that jokes can offer a way of making such childishness acceptable in adult life; a joke can provide what might be termed a rational context for irrational behaviour, thereby legitimising conduct that would otherwise be unacceptable.

When you come to consider the vast amount of jokes that address taboos of various kinds, and the enduring appeal of childish humour, it is easy to see why Freud's argument might have some mileage. There are many problems with his ideas however. One difficulty with his theory of tendentious jokes, for instance, has to do with definition: it is often hard to distinguish them from innocent jokes. For one thing, whether or not a joke would be deemed offensive/

38 Peter L. Berger. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1997), 56.

taboo must depend partly on interpretation. Also Freud's theory seems to imply that the more taboo a subject, the funnier it will be, but this is not necessarily the case. Most comedians are aware of the concept of crossing the line with a joke, and if a joke addresses a taboo of sufficient magnitude then it's likely to create outrage rather than laughter. However, the problems with Freud's theory are more fundamental than this: the main issue has to do with the crucial fact that his hydraulic model of the psyche, with its economy of psychic energy, is simply not provable.

Pause and Reflect

Consider some of the ways in which humour can be rebellious. How might humour work to challenge authority, and what examples of this can you identify?

6.4 Mikhail Bakhtin: Carnival

‘Against the assault of humour nothing can stand.’
—Mark Twain.

Despite the weaknesses of Freud's theory, he has had a huge influence on those who strive to theorise humour. This is particularly so for people interested in the relationship between humour and authority, and the ways humour might help us live with authority by acting as a safety valve. Some suggest that humour is essential for enabling people to let off steam, and maintaining the status quo. Certainly at a psychological level Freud felt that jokes play a part in upholding psychological equilibrium:

the euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy—the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life (Freud, *Jokes*, 302).

For Freud, joking becomes a way of returning us to childhood and relieving us temporarily of the burden of adulthood; in other words, joking serves a useful function because such relief keeps us in psychological health. In this sense, parallels can be drawn between Freud's thinking and that of the Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). In his book, *Rabelais and His World* (1941), Bakhtin developed the concept of carnival and the carnivalesque, which has been very influential, particularly among literary critics. He discusses the characteristics and social function of medieval carnivals such as the Feast of Fools. In catholic countries like France and Spain feasts of this kind were associated with a period of revelry that precedes Lent: the big party before the fasting. Bakhtin noted that carnivals featured behaviour that would otherwise be socially unacceptable, allowing ordinary people to mock figures of authority: dignitaries could be parodied, including the clergy and the monarchy. Standard codes, conventions and laws could be suspended for the period of the celebration, and carnivals effectively turned the traditional social hierarchy on its head.

The humour found in carnivals is characterised by grotesquery, scatology (toilet humour), anti-intellectualism, colloquialism, an emphasis on the body, and general excess: it is a form of humour that works against all notions of authority, including the authority of reason, taste, and piety. Carnival humour is very much the people's humour in that it proclaims the voice of the ordinary folk in opposition to the powers-that-be. Here is Bakhtin discussing the dissenting spirit of carnival:

one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.³⁹

Voices that are normally suppressed by authority have full reign during

39 Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans, Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA:MIT Press, 1984) 10.

the carnival period, and we can see how this relates to the notion of letting off steam through laughter. Where Freud's theory deals with the benefits of humour for the individual psyche, Bakhtin is interested in how this worked in social terms, and the ability of carnival to function as a social safety valve. Bakhtin was not particularly concerned with modern carnivals like contemporary *Mardi Gras* as these are more like spectator events where people watch a procession of other people, without being truly involved. For him a true carnival is one where people play an active part: an opportunity for ordinary people go out on the streets and assert their collective identity and values:

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 255).

Bakhtin was very interested in how the spirit of carnival registers in literature, and as the title of his book suggests, he focussed principally on the French writer Rabelais (1494–1553), whose work was full of carnival humour. For Bakhtin, carnivalised texts can challenge the controlling, dominant voice of authority by juxtaposing the high culture that represents that authority, with the earthy, base comedy of carnival. In this way texts have the potential to become sites of opposition to the dominant ideology.

Pause and Reflect

Can you think of any examples of carnivalesque comedy in modern humour? What form does it take, and in what sense does it challenge authority?

It is possible to find elements of carnival humour in many texts, including modern popular comedy. Again *The Simpsons* might serve as an example. The show is full of grotesques (Barney, Homer, Mo), and it teems with low humour. Homer and Bart both exhibit carnival characteristics: they're both anti-intellectual, for instance, going

out of their way to be unsophisticated, and both challenge authority in numerous ways: Bart is in conflict with his teachers, and with his sister Lisa and her status as a model child. He defies the codes of behaviour that she embodies, just for the sake of it. Likewise Homer rebels against all that his neighbour Ned Flanders represents; Homer hates him even though there's no obvious reason to. In many respects Flanders is the perfect neighbour, but that's exactly why Homer dislikes him; he embodies a standard that he himself can't match. Homer's carnival humour challenges the authority of that standard. Homer is at his most extreme and disgusting (and morally dubious) when he's trying to get one over on Flanders. Often this takes the form of him trying to reduce Ned to his own level: in one episode, for instance, Homer takes Ned to Las Vegas, gets him drunk, and married to a hooker; in another he tries to ruin his business. Homer does disgraceful things—but carnival is happy to be disgraceful; there are no limits to which it will go in order to debase, deflate, undermine, challenge, and ridicule. While the viewers may feel that Ned is in the right morally, it's Homer who most people are behind on an emotional level, chiefly because Homer's dissent is funny. However, it is notable that in most *Simpsons* stories Homer eventually gets his comeuppance in some way: his wife Marge will make him feel ashamed of himself, for instance, or he'll be publicly humiliated. This is important because, while the rebellion and disorder associated with carnival is attractive, it is also anti-social. As much as people may like it, they are also wary of it. They may be temporarily drawn to the lack of responsibility associated with carnival, but they wouldn't want it to last because disorder and chaos are incompatible with social stability. So after the carnival everything returns to normal again, and the status quo is re-established. When carnival becomes a feature of literature or popular narratives you often find that it's countered in this way: there's frequently a qualifying force that reins it in. Society is nothing without order, structure, even hierarchy. So just like real carnivals, the carnival spirit in narrative frequently deals in transient relief, ending with a reestablishment of the status quo.

Creative Writing Exercise

Create a character who does everything to excess, but doesn't care. Try imagining them in different situations where restraint and decorum are demanded (Churches, restaurants, museums, etc.). A wealth of comic possibilities should suddenly present themselves. As you experiment you may happen upon interesting ideological pressures and prejudices that can be exposed via your carnival character. For instance, imagine a character that eats to excess in a context where it is unseemly to gorge oneself: this has comic potential, of course, but notice how the implications of such behaviour will differ if you changed the gender of the character.