

Comic Theory and Perceptions of a Disappearing Self

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In a review for *Variety* of the film *Pool* (2009), directed by Mika Omori and set in Thailand, Russell Edwards notes the obvious similarity of the film in tone and narrative to Naoko Oigami's *Megane* (2007) and *Kamome Shokudo* (2006). (In fact two actors, Satomi Kobayashi and Masako Motai, take leading roles in all three films.) Observing a characteristic comic element, which he describes as "Zen-flavored humor," he claims this is a comic tone independent filmmakers internationally try, often unsuccessfully, to achieve. Edwards doesn't explain exactly what he means by the term "Zen-flavored humor," yet granting that it is an American perspective on the subject, the term does make a certain intuitive sense insofar as there are indeed numerous comedies, perhaps especially coming out of Japan, in which the humor tends towards minimalism, a kind of semiotic subtraction, and even silence, often identified, rightly or wrongly, with the term "Zen." These are films which, while they maintain the comic as a core element, traverse only sporadically, and even then perhaps very lightly, the territory of "conventional" comic imagery and pacing. In short, there is a type of film comedy, not confined to Japan but finding numerous examples here, in which the comic functions not in alliance with libidinal emancipation (as per Freudian or pseudo-Freudian accounts of laughter) and not in the service of chastisement through ridicule (Bergson). It is closer to what a Modernist writer with a particular interest in Asian philosophy, Herman Hesse, refers to as "laughter without an object" (181). Nor is this kind of comedy exactly imbued with that hyper-dynamic spirit of carnival celebrated by Bakhtin and so commonly alluded to in studies of comedy over the past couple of decades. There is a sense in which nothing happens, and that may be the point insofar as there is one, but how do we make sense of the role of comic laughter in that context?

This nexus of the comic and absence may be no less radical or liberating than the semiotic excess, speed and provocation more often associated with comic texts, and it presents a challenge to scholars of culture. It poses questions to those of us with a special interest in the way the comic and the laughter response operate because this kind of comic experience is not well explicated through the canonical theoretical frameworks. I'd like to discuss this here, exploring how scholars from South and East Asia (specifically Japan, Thailand and India), alongside western scholars, may provide angles of approach particularly well suited to interpretation of such comic texts. I should say that my purview and intention are not limited to this geographical area, however, though I believe the present context is an excellent starting point. I mean to say that it is not just a matter of applying certain ideas emerging from Asian cultures to the study of Asian cultures (though that is perhaps long overdue in the area of comedy) but that perhaps those ideas might usefully be applied to cultural production and consumption in other countries too.

Let me emphasize that the association of the comic with absence which I've mentioned is not exclusively a Japanese phenomenon but is discernible in film comedy, and comedy in general, from other cultures. In English, what is sometimes called "whimsical humor" is perhaps the closest approximation to Edwards's use of "Zen humor." One could even speculate whether there is a sense in which a certain absence resides—naturally silently—at the heart of all comic experience as it revolves around (even when it doesn't actually break into) the laughter response. If there is a point at which comic theory coming out of the European tradition approaches an articulation of this it is when it proceeds from the common notion of a sudden disruption of discursive momentum to the proposition of an attendant subversion of subjective temporality. It is at that point, I want to suggest, that certain so-far understated elements of both Asian and Western conceptions of the phenomenon approach each other. I want to tentatively explore here how the two might be integrated through a time-based theoretical model of comic laughter in order to provide a useful conceptual tool for analyzing comic texts, firstly perhaps in Japan and Asia, but elsewhere too.

The theoretical line coming out of Europe which would appear to be the most pertinent here is the most general and abstract: incongruity theory, the idea that laughter is generated from what humor theorist and linguist Victor Raskin terms "competing

scripts” of understanding, apart from any meaningful content or subtextual intent (even if meaningful content does also happen to reside in the comic text). It is put most succinctly by John Morreall: “Though a release of hostile, sexual, or other feelings may be involved in some cases of humor, the essence of humor lies in the enjoyment of incongruity” (*Taking Laughter Seriously* 47). It is quite important to be clear about this, because it is often the subject of confusion in discussions of comedy: Moreall is not saying that comic texts are inherently meaningless—often they do carry meaning of some kind, whether explicit or subtextual—but that the laughter itself is not primarily (even though it may be enhanced by) a response to that meaning; rather it is the collision of conceptual frameworks, the incongruity, which generates pleasure in what Morreall terms a “psychological shift” (*Taking Laughter Seriously* 39). John Paulos describes it, somewhat more dramatically but somehow appropriately, as a “cognitive catastrophe.”

There is a reasonably solid consensus among humor theory specialists these days that incongruity is at the very least a key element in comic laughter in a way that an underlying social motive such as ridicule is not. Indeed, ridicule, marking a divergence of behavior from a supposedly common, standard or superior frame of reference, can be seen as an over-specification of the general principle of incongruity. Incongruity theory also alleviates the problem posed by solitary laughter to theoretical approaches focused on a communicative function or otherwise socially determined functions of laughing. However, incongruity theory does leave problems unsolved: Why doesn’t incongruity always cause laughter or even strike us as comic? Why exactly should a certain incongruity elicit the sudden pleasurable eruption associated with the laughter response? And anyway, what does Morreall mean by that vague term “psychological shift”? Understanding that psychological shift will bring us, I believe, to a better understanding of so-called “Zen-flavored humor,” and it is here that the addition of some Asian voices to the dialogue on the subject of laughter may be of help.

A prominent Japanese scholar on the subject of humor in Japan, Inoue Hiroshi, has recently been exploring the sense of psychological transition we may experience when we laugh. It is intuitively comprehensible to most of us, I gather, that we can feel after a good spontaneous laugh somehow different from how we were just a few seconds before. One of Inoue’s questions in his work *The Power of Laughter*

[warai no chikara] is this: What happens to us mentally in between, in the initial eruption and inside the experience of laughter? This is an excellent and important question, I believe, although difficult to verify and make sense of, which is at least in part perhaps why it hasn't received more attention up to now. Inoue suggests that with a deep spontaneous laugh we can feel as if the mind is evacuated, and with this we may experience a sudden dissolution of the self (212). I should point out that even if this conceptualization has a certain Japanese feel to it, there is nevertheless good evidence that what is being described is not a uniquely Japanese experience. The American literary critic Samuel Weber makes what would seem to be a related observation, writing that after the initial burst of laughter “we ‘come to’ and find ourselves engulfed by laughter” (703). It is as if for a moment we disappear and come back. Anca Parvulescu's work on laughter cites Georges Bataille observation that in an intense bout of laughter, “I became in this Nothingness” unknown,” adding that “The ‘I’ that tells the story was not quite there when the laughter burst” (Parvulescu 84). In more mundane terms, I think this is what the American comedian Milton Berle was referring to when he said that “Laughter is an instant vacation.” We don't actually go anywhere in laughter, of course, but we may experience a departure and return somehow because the mind is momentarily “vacated.” Inoue actually uses the kanji for vacancy and absence to describe this psychological shift. When I suggested to him that I sensed a Buddhist element at this point in his writing, he replied that he was influenced by the twentieth century Japanese philosopher and Zen scholar Kitaro Nishida.

Interestingly, the Thai scholar Soraj Hongladarom, in a paper titled “Language, Reality, Emptiness and Laughs” delivered in Europe in 2008, draws a similar connection between laughter, incongruity and the experience of mental evacuation, and relates it directly to the Buddhist heritage. He concludes that within certain instances, “One laughs... as an integral part of, an expression, of Emptiness itself” (19). Placing this notion in a religious historical context, Hongladarom addresses the issue of the apparent antipathy expressed towards laughter in some ancient Buddhist texts, including the canonical Tripitaka. With reference to admonitions against laughter—along with other manifestations of, or incitements to, merriment—he argues that in the context of guiding monks it was, and perhaps still is, prudent to censure behaviors such as laughter and dance which would distract students and practitioners from their practice. He remarks, however, that in the Lankavatara Sutra,

“which is about the doctrines of Mind Only and Emptiness,” the Buddha “laughed loudly and most vigorously” (6-7), suggesting that laughter may possess a profound connection with a sublime, or near-sublime, experience of mental evacuation.

I have come across statements made by Osho, the twentieth century Indian philosopher and interpreter of Buddhist texts, which are notably similar to those of both Inoue and Hongladarom. In a discourse on the Dhammapada, Osho claims that “when you laugh, suddenly laughter is there, you are not. You come back when the laughter is gone. When the laughter is disappearing far away, when it is subsiding, you come back, the ego comes back. But in the very moment of laughter you have a glimpse of egolessness” (*Dhammapada*). I should note that although his work has in recent years been accorded greater credence and respect, especially within India, Osho was a controversial figure in his time; yet, his voice, however provocative, is clearly not alone. As Hongladarom implies, the still popular figure of the laughing Buddha, Hotei or Putai, cannot credibly be regarded as a distortion of Buddhist philosophy, being rather an inscription of a particular aspect of a long philosophical heritage unfolding across an enormous geography. Naturally, there is under those circumstances no shortage of diversity in Buddhism and the ambivalence towards laughter is no anomaly. Actually, both Conrad Hyers in *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (54) and Morreall (*Comedy, Tragedy and Religion* 117-23) remark a complexity in the history of Christian ecclesiastical attitudes regarding laughter too, in which case playfully inclined Franciscans may be seen as very distant cousins of those who have seen a role for laughter in Zen schools. Still, Hyers and Morreall (drawing substantially on Hyers’s work, I think) both regard Buddhism as on the whole much more amenable to laughter philosophically.

Michael Clasquin, in his essay “Real Buddhas Don’t Laugh: Attitudes towards Humor and Laughter in Ancient India and China,” suggests that a difference between ancient orthodox Buddhist attitudes to laughter and those of more recent times, particularly with the emergence of Zen sects, may be due to the different conceptualization of laughter. He suggests, in short, that while ancient Buddhism tended to view laughter in terms of a communicative function, as ridicule with an implication of superiority/inferiority, later Zen is more disposed to perceive it through what we now call incongruity theory: “What is clear is that incongruity, not superiority, is the basis of the widespread use of humour in Zen Buddhism” (113). Clasquin is unable

to provide a convincing theory of why and how that difference may have evolved, but I think the more recent insights offered by Hongladarom and Inoue concerning the connection between laughter and emptiness are helpful in this regard. I would put it this way: superiority/ridicule theories view laughter, despite it's being a preconscious response (and in that sense similar to a sneeze or yawn), as primarily a form of signification, thereby overinvesting comic laughter itself with meaning, depth and weight, a criticism made by aesthetic theorists such as Jauss (125); incongruity theory tends to view laughter (even where it is produced by wit) as a product of a collapse of discursive momentum, a kind of semiotic subtraction by mildly catastrophic excess, which is more compatible with notions of emptiness. This is a step forward, I think, but as Inoue points out, the exact mental process by which incongruity might lead to an experience of vacancy needs further theoretical explanation (234). To that end, incorporating time into the model is probably indispensable, I believe.

Osho's pronouncement concerning the disappearance of the self is explicitly connected to a sudden and dramatic subjective temporal disruption in which past and future tenses disappear. According to this view, then, a collapse of subjective time is attended by something akin to a dissolution of the self: with the disappearance of the future and past, the self, which is constructed from the sweep of durational consciousness—the accumulation of memory, the marshaling of desire (futuraity)—dissolves. Osho claims that laughter, though momentary, and rarely regarded as such, is a kind of mental short-circuit and instant trapdoor opening onto immediacy, an ontological “nowness.” In other words, the “cognitive catastrophe” created by the collision of conceptual matrices in the comic event dislocates temporal consciousness and thus the self or ego formed out of durational being in time. To some, the idea that the ego could so easily, if only momentarily, be annihilated by a comical trick of time is inconceivable, perhaps anathema, yet within the thought of others coming from a cultural background imbued with Buddhism it seems not so remarkable. The Zen master Dogen remarked many centuries ago that being does not exist in time, but is time: “Time is existence, existence is time” (quoted in Loy, 19). It might then be inferred that a dissolution of subjective time, through the temporal trapdoor of laughter, might, for a moment, dissolve one's being. Professor Inoue, though he doesn't mention time explicitly, appears to discern this phenomenon in his observation that in laughter—through the ochi or “fall” enacted in the punch line—the subject/object separation is annulled, leading to what he perceives as non-dualistic

“original and pure consciousness.” Since I am not a practicing Buddhist of any school in either the Theravada or Mahayana traditions, nor a scholar of Buddhism, I am in no position to affirm or deny that some original purity might be regained in the moment of laughter. All I am confidently able to assert at this stage of my research is that a sense of absence is noted by some Asian scholars, that it finds vague and sporadic articulation in the West, and that the subjective experience of time is probably implicated in one way or another.

The idea that subjective time is dislocated in laughter is not entirely absent in western thought on laughter. This temporal aspect has been very much underrepresented in theoretical and critical literature, yet because time itself has become increasingly a subject of study and social concern, the situation is changing. Recently, Attardo and Pickering have begun investigating the related issue of comic timing, which they describe as being “in serious need of further research” (233). But most of the ideas on some temporal disjunction in laughter itself have come from outside the humor specialist community. The British sociologist Michael Billig, in attempting to resuscitate a narrow Bergsonian approach to laughter, reluctantly concedes that “There is a constant but barely discussed element in previous laughter theories: the assumption of a sudden break in time” (116). The American philosopher Lawrence Kimmel writes that “Laughter is a release, however brief, from time” (176) and goes into some depth on the phenomenology of the experience. Another philosopher, Simon Critchley, observes “the peculiar temporal dimension of jokes” and that “Humorous pleasure would seem to be produced by the disjunction between duration and the instant” (7), but isn’t able to tell us much more about it. Weber, who I earlier referred to, discussed the difficulty of articulating this break in time in the essay “Laughing in the Meanwhile” as early as 1987, writing that the laughing body “is far more difficult to assimilate to an economy and to a temporality of representation” (706).

I have been exploring the temporal aspect of laughter for over a decade, and I think there is resistance to thorough recognition and incorporation of this perceived temporal lapse from humor scholars with vested interests in existing approaches that omit or severely diminish the temporal dimension. There is a dearth of ideas about what might be done with this idea. Pragmatically speaking, it simply isn’t as readily productive of research material and publications as elucidation of the

content of humorous texts and the overtly communicative dimensions of laughter itself. On top of that we don't have a broadly accepted and sophisticated vocabulary for discussion of subjective temporality. A further, and rather provocative, explication of the apparent shortfall might be that there remains, despite postmodern and poststructuralist broaching of the issue, an underlying cultural anxiety and suspicion of absence which is activated by notions of collapsed time and selfhood.

It may be no accident that possibly the earliest, and still one of the most insightful, descriptions of laughter's subjective temporal effect is furnished by a philosopher who engaged more deeply with Asian thought than most European thinkers of his time. In The World as Will and Representation, Arthur Schopenhauer views the cognitive catastrophe of laughter as affecting a sudden dislocation of the conceptual apparatus which keeps humans, uniquely among animals, trapped in time. In laughter, he writes, we return for a moment to the immediacy of what he calls "perception," which he contrasts with human "conception." While perception exists in a permanent present, conception is "the medium of the past, the future, and of seriousness... the vehicle of our fears, our repentance, and all our cares" (280). In short, Schopenhauer is saying that the cognitive catastrophe releases us from time and all the problems that come with it. No future, no worries; no past, no regrets. Laughter does this not by distracting us, diverting our attention, like entertainments or hobbies or other preoccupations, but more directly, immediately, and profoundly, by subverting the temporality of consciousness. Schopenhauer ascribed little value to this experience, associating it with a return to a lesser and explicitly "animal" mode of being, yet his description of the temporal mechanism involved in laughter does accord with the suggestions made by a few Western scholars and particularly with the Indian Osho's description of the phenomenon.

Let me briefly discuss what might be some implications of this notion of a subjective time slip producing a momentary sense of evacuation or disappearance in laughter. Unfortunately, I don't have space here to demonstrate in depth or specificity how it might be used. But as a kind of hint through the example I referred to at the beginning, let me say that when we are watching, and particularly when we are studying, one of those films with so-called "Zen-flavored humor" we can through this model more concretely understand what is being referred to—not just a mood, but a temporal experience in which the rhythm and perhaps underlying philosophy

of the film as a discourse not just in but about time is intimately connected with the laughter experience. Laughter, in this type of comedy, is an integral part of the transformation of the audience's experience of time, which in turn broaches a different way of being in the world.

It may also help us to move beyond the overdependence upon well-worn narrowly based and yet broadly applied theoretical frameworks still commonly adopted across cultures in the approach to comedy. In the same way that Freud had a problem dealing with nonsense humor in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, the dominant models of the comic and laughter in cultural studies struggle with humor that seems to be inclined towards what I've referred to as semiotic subtraction. It is not, or at least not primarily, ridiculing: it is more simply, and yet more profoundly perhaps, aiming to reset one's being in time, or being as time, and so in relation to the world. In short, the temporal approach to the absence and creation of a space or pause in laughter may open up aspects of the comic experience that have been underexplored.

Finally, I want to suggest that the common prejudice that laughter belongs to a world of exaggeration, acceleration, unbound desire and proliferation is based largely on a confusion of the laughter response with a comic atmosphere which it (laughter) suddenly, if only momentarily, decompresses. Laughter is not the ribaldry of a joke, but the end, and the raison d'être of the joke as such; laughter itself is not a carnival, but a dislocation of durational—that is, serious—temporality which, as a safety net of temporal delimitation, allows the carnival to exist. My point is that laughter has probably always contained a certain absence in a sense, and some scholars of Asia seem to be particularly adept at identifying this aspect. It may also be the case that certain Asian artists, including filmmakers, may be particularly adept at integrating this “unspoken” aspect of laughter and the comic into their work, although this requires much more study. Still, as I say, the implications are broad, I think.

Let me conclude by noting that my intention in publishing this work-in-progress essay is to gather feedback and helpful suggestions for the advancement of my research project on this subject. I will over the next year or so be delving into the discussions of subjective time by philosophers such as Husserl and Deleuze (both of whom develop Bergson's thought on the subject) with the aim of developing a

conceptual framework for dealing with the subjective temporal experience of laughter in a way that Bergson—surprisingly, given his important work on subjective time—never did. Any thoughts or suggestions you may have would be greatly appreciated.

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