**HUMOURING AGGRESSION**

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This paper has its origin in research on festivals in Central Italy, focused on the themes of body, territory and aggressive/competitive dynamics. The comparisons between two festivals in particular alerted me to a potentially interesting angle by which to view the role of humour in relation to festivals and political life. The main line of inquiry follows links and a possible progression from movement and rough and tumble play, to humour and aggression. Issues of ambivalence and fluidity are explored in relation to these and a connection between the natures of festivals and humour. A possible link between territorial motifs and humour emerges.

The paper is constructed along the following lines:

* An eclectic approach seeks to bring together different ideas and perspectives much the same way as humour does, shifting the boundaries of thinking along different disciplines.
* By looking at festivals in the light of theories of humour it may be possible to gain some understanding of both festivals and humour's function. The affective links between these, body, territory and intellect are highlighted.
* Laughter is viewed as a homogenous response to an invasion of territory be it bodily or intellectual.
* A further element considered is the interplay between two levels of existence, using Winnicott’s terms: playing and reality
* The relative levels of safety or threat present or perceived give the difference between these two levels, highlighting what may trigger shifts between ritualised, socially contained expressions of aggression and actual conflict.
* It follows that the possibility for trust is fundamental to how festivals and cultural experiences where aggressive dynamics are played out may allow these a containable expression or unleash the possibility of social unrest

The complexity of humour cannot be contained in a short paper, the following is only a sketch of a particular aspect and perspective. More research into the affective nature of humour and laughter has plenty of potential, but will have to wait for the time being.

**Theories of humour**

The link between humour and aggression is not a new idea. It is contained in the oldest, so called ‘superiority’, theory of humour, proposed by Plato, Aristotle and later Hobbes. It is useful in explaining much ethnic humour, usually focused on mockery of a neighbouring group or nationals. The other main theories are concerned with relief and incongruity. Freud is the main exponent of the ‘relief’ theory, which sees laughter as pleasurable because the release of pent up nervous energy offers relief from having to contain or repress psychic activity. The incongruity theory has been elaborated in different ways among others by Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. This highlights the element of surprise created by a felt incongruity between what we expect or are led to expect and what actually happens, rendering a situation, assertion or joke funny (Critchley, 2002, p.2-3). Bergson’s (1956) theory of humour can be classed within the superiority theory, by relating humour to aggression, yet stands alone in expressly relating humour and laughter to issues of fluidity and movement in particular. Bergson points out how inflexibility of movement at different levels, physical, emotional or conceptual results in the ridiculous. The examples range from typical banana skin gags and physical exaggeration of traits, the stuff of political caricature, to obsessional character traits. Inflexibility or lack of fluidity is in his view principally characterised as ‘Something mechanical encrusted on the living’. This connects to his previous better known work on quantitative, homogenous and qualitative, heterogeneous issues.

**Festivals and humour**

The association of humour and rites, of festival and laughter is not a new idea either. Douglas (1975) and Bakhtin (1984) are two eminent exponents of the usefulness of linking these aspects. Relief theory may explain why Carnival in Rio de Janeiro helps people to live in a society with one of the most unequal distributions of wealth or why the Romans provided ‘bread and circus’ in order to keep their nearest unemployed citizens happy, after they had lost their jobs to cheap labour in the colonies. Having fun takes our minds off unpleasant realities. Entertainment has long been known to be a powerful weapon for government. Yet this release of repressed affective flows is also expressive and, by expressing the repressed, transgressive by definition. So, while allowing people the possibility to partake of laughter and aggression through cultural events and entertainment may allow relief from their repressed build-up, it also gives it a stage where this can be exercised. If sufficient pressure is built up festivals can become the ideal *loci* of resistance as the work of Le Roy Ladurie (1979), Stallybrass and White (1986) and Scott (1990) among others testify. It is in the relation of socially constituted elements that we must turn for understanding, rather than reifying one aspect or another to find absolute values within them. Ambivalence maybe the only thing we can be sure of and it is this underlying ambivalence, which we are impelled to impose some order to, which I will attempt by briefly sketching some possible connections between body, play and humour and concepts of fluidity and structure as possible foundations for an understanding of the role of the social expressions of such elements.

**Towards an affective theory of humour and laughter**

‘Laughing is, in essence, a movement that produces a sound’ (Provine, 2000, p.4)

Thinking about the theories of humour and laughter briefly sketched above I found myself thinking about differences in more than one direction. The difference between humour and laughter seemed worth pondering over to begin with. There is a cause and effect relation between humour and laughter. We laugh in response to finding something funny. What we find humorous however is a movable feast. Humour is fluid and loves contrasts. The smoother the passage between contrasting images or ideas the funnier things will appear. Humour loves mixing up difference. Humour is a heterogeneous and dynamic phenomenon. Laughter is not. Laughter is a paradoxical phenomenon, whose acoustic profile is so stable, in spite of its sometimes wild appearance, that its recorded sound is much the same played forwards or backwards. Laughter is produced by chopping a single exhalation of breath, thus subdividing it into regularly spaced stacks of frequency bands. The image is of a series of evenly spaced sonic beads on a string, whose only variation is in volume as the breath runs out (Provine, 2000, p.56-62). Laughter is a homogenous phenomenon tending towards stereotypy (ibid p.63). Provine’s approach was inspired by ethological studies, whereby laughter could be regarded ‘as an aesthetically and sonically impoverished "human song"’ (ibid p.7). Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) notion of the refrain and of balance between static and dynamic tendencies (Bergson, 1986), or in other words fluidity and structure, come to mind. The balance here is created by an acoustically stable, homogeneous and stereotyped reaction to fluid and heterogeneous humour. But laughter itself, to return to my first statement, is a paradoxical phenomenon, in that while being stable in structure it is nonetheless explosive and eminently bodily (Critchley, 2002, p.7-9). Laughter could be characterised as a controlled explosion, with potentially paralysing consequences. In the worst (or should one say the best) of cases laughing hard takes the breath away, muscle tone is affected and the whole body is so convulsed it hurts. A steady but possessing rhythm takes over the body and is able to take over others’ bodies too in a dynamic of contagion.

Laughter is bodily not only in its manifestation, but also in its possible causes. Laughter is triggered not only by humour, but also by tickling. What is most striking about tickling is that it cannot be easily self-induced. It is hard to tickle oneself, for it to work it requires otherness. For it to be pleasant it requires consent. We need to feel comfortable with the territorial invasion of our bodies for the excruciating effect of tickling to be enjoyable. Furthermore a balance of power and a sense of fair play are required for it not to stray into the torture end of the spectrum. One has to know when to stop or how to modulate the stimulus or one might lose one’s tickle partner’s often ambivalent co-operation.

Most philosophers so far have purported laughter to be a quintessentially human capacity. This is not apparently so. Panksepp’s (1998) studies in affective neurosciences have identified laughter responses in animals. Though animals’ laughter lacks vocalisation it also involves a steady rhythmic panting (Provine, 2000, p.79). In Provine’s view (2000, chapter 5) it is the freeing of the breath from participating in four-legged locomotion, through the involvement of chest muscles in weight bearing movement, that allows both laughter vocalisation and speech formation. Humour likewise appears to be possible, though this is still disputed, for higher primates (ibid, p.94-95). However humour is not a bodily but an intellectual capacity, which requires the possibility for classification and symbolic representation to be present. Examples of simian humour (Provine, 2000, p.94-95) and early childhood humour attempts all appear to involve deliberate misclassification: using the wrong name or the wrong object. My little sister, having learnt the name for ears, made up her own and derived evident pleasure in tantalising the rest of the family with it, when reminded of the right name. It became a game, which brought amusement, once we had cottoned on to the deliberateness of the mistake. My son, aged two, was immensely delighted at raising a laugh by wearing a pair of gloves on his feet and an overcoat on his otherwise bare body on a very hot day, managing deliberate inappropriateness in several directions at once.

To put it briefly humour is an intellectual capacity that triggers a bodily, sometimes hard to control response. This capacity is based on the ability to perceive qualitative differences and juxtapose them. Mixing chalk and cheese in a safe setting.

**A matter of perception-Trust and Play**

Life is a confusing business at the best of times, and some of the first things we must learn to distinguish are ‘friend or foe’, ‘good or bad’, ‘right or wrong’. Perception of difference is the basis for safety and morality in life. It is the beginning of abstraction and classification. But it is also the foundation of the capacity for humour. One important distinction that has to be available is the distinction between playing and reality. This brings us to a brief exploration of the issues of play and its relation to aggression. In children laughter occurs primarily in play.

One of the most basic forms of play in both animals and humans is rough and tumble play (Panksepp, 1998), characterised primarily by a contest of bodily strength and agility. Literally this could be seen just as tickling was earlier as a bodily territorial invasion based on consent and on the trust that whatever damage suffered or inflicted will be relatively mild. Repeated play partnership is based on a relative balance of strength between the partners, whether actual among children or in the case of unequal partners, such as child and parent for instance, based on the willingness not to exercise superiority beyond mere display. Thus it satisfies the desire to experience and express one’s dominance potential within a paradoxical framework that is at the same time actual, the contest and physical contact is real, and symbolic, it is not fully actualised. Failing to adhere to the symbolic level of the power interaction is what can make things end in tears rather than laughter. If an uneven balance of power is experienced as too real, things switch from pleasurable playing to unpleasant reality. Usually the loser feels anger and frustration, which may be expressed in tears or an escalation into real conflict. The winner who has stepped outside the boundaries into actual victory may laugh. This is an aggressive laugh, Hobbes’s laugh of superiority. In play fighting as in actual fighting, however, the action unfolds on body as territory or in Panksepp’s words ‘…the premier sensory system that helps instigate and sustain normal play is touch’ (1998, p.289).

The relation between playing and reality has relevance to the ambivalent potential of cultural events. According to Winnicott (1991) play is a transitional space, neither internal nor external, yet putting into contact aspects of internal and external milieus. In his view ‘There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences’ (1991, p.52).

**Mind the gap-Body and mind territories**

Humour and laughter are vehicles for emotional release and/or ways to control or elicit emotional responses. In my view humour is based on the perception of qualitative differences and functions by defying the boundaries of socially constructed conceptual territories. It is the awareness of otherness and difference that elicits laughter whether it be through tickling and rough and tumble play or through word play based on ambiguity or ridicule and exaggeration of power and ability differentials as in ethnic jokes. Developmental studies of humour clearly link early aggressive tendencies in children who later show heightened capacities for humour (McGhee, 1979, p.195). Is it any wonder that humour and aggression have long been seen as deeply linked?

The gap or difference is highlighted, whether it be a matter of incongruity or of power differentials. Morreall points to the importance of what he defines as ‘psychological "shifts"’, understood as ‘*sudden* changes’ (1983, p.39, his italics). His main formula for characterising laughter in general is that ‘Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift’ (ibid). This in his view occurs at different levels: emotional, sensory, perceptual or conceptual. My own way of framing this would be to view these as territorial shifts, which maintain a non-threatening quality. Using one of Winnicott’s definitions of play: ‘Playing can be said to reach its own saturation point, which refers to the capacity to contain experience’ thus for the shift to be pleasant it must remain at a level of experience which can surprise without being too disconcerting or alarming.

**The social functions of humour and aggression**

There is a high level of connectivity in humour. Bergson (1956, chapter 1) was the first to clearly state the social nature of laughter. Laughing together quickly creates solidarity. Sharing humour is to share the same conceptual territory. Humour can expand our narrow definitions and expose their arbitrary nature, making it possible to conceive of different boundary outlines or reinforce existing ones. Humour is the fluidity of mind across different territories, both aggressive in the way it can define in and out-group boundaries and, in its readiness to defy and redraw boundaries of all kinds, liberating because of it.

Beyond fun and laughter, however, things can end in tears. The difference is given not by the danger of aggression, but the level of its repression or quoting Winnicott again: ‘…if society is in danger, it is not because of man’s aggressiveness but because of the repression of personal aggressiveness in individuals’. This brings me to a final reference to some of the research that led me to these thoughts. One of the festivals under scrutiny has been the Palio of Siena (Crociani-Windland, 2003), a medium sized city in central Italy. The Palio itself consists of a wild horse race in the city’s main square, run twice a year. The horses run on behalf of the wards or *contrade* into which the town has been subdivided since 1729. The race tradition can be traced back to the 1100’s, though its present form dates back to the 1500’s and its normative constitution was settled in 1721. The rules for the race are extremely lax by modern standards: the horses win with or without jockey, the jockeys whip each other and each other’s horses, bribery is a standard part of the proceedings and highly competitive and aggressive dynamics are able to be discharged through the event. The result in political and social terms is to allow a highly cohesive fabric to the city. The integrating potential of aggression is fully harnessed, without repressing it, by the system evolved over centuries, which has been used politically to create a highly consultative urban democracy, founded on the federation of the seventeen wards, really city states within the city, each having its own administrative headquarters and officers. What appears to be working in Siena is what I would call a ‘humouring of aggression’, which acknowledges territorial and aggressive tendencies without being too alarmed by them. This fosters an atmosphere of critical trust between civic administration and citizens. Crime and mental illness levels are low.

A final word to Winnicott (1982, p.204): ‘At origin aggressiveness is almost synonymous with activity’. Movement and aggressiveness go together. Bergson’s essay on laughter clearly points us to the fluidity that is the essence of humour. Perceived ‘shifts’ across different actual or conceptual territories are at its heart. These create a qualitative ‘plenitude’, which elicits the out-breath vocalization we know as laughter. This offers relief from a relative fullness of experience, which is nonetheless still within the bounds of containment. Humour’s proximity to aggression lies in its relation to movement. Movement and aggression, play and humour all deserve a place in the political map.

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