

## Comic Noise and the Textual Surface

The “comic field” is so vast that the formulation of something like an encompassing “theory of the comic” seems a virtual impossibility. Eco playfully suggests, in *The Name of the Rose* (466), that Aristotle wrote a discourse on “comedy” to follow that on “tragedy” in his *Poetics*, a discourse which then was lost. But even if there were such an Aristotelian comic theory we can safely assume that it would hardly have been all-embracing. It would have inevitably lacked a sufficient degree of abstraction; Aristotle’s theory of “the tragic” is already quite limited in scope compared to his logical, metaphysical and epistemological theories.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche gives us a rather different theory of the tragic in *The Birth of Tragedy* and nowhere a coherent theory of the comic, yet ironic and (self-) parodic modes permeate Nietzsche’s writing. The perspective of the Zarathustrian “overman” could almost be described as one that does not quite “take the world seriously” except for the fact that this is also a perspective (that of eternal return) that *does* take this life (this world) very seriously—since there is nothing *more* than this.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this comic mode is also a tragic one precisely because it transcends the bounds of any theories that may try to encompass it. Perhaps the indefinite “expansiveness” of Friedrich Schlegel’s dark-romantic “absolute transcendence of irony” shares something of the Freudian *thanatos*, death-wish; this most and least “serious” of all perspectives, one which therefore calls into question the very meaning of “seriousness,” might just be that of looking down on (or back at) life from the vantage point of death.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One might compare the search for a unifying theory of the comic to Kant’s quest in his critiques for the *condition of possibility* of a certain form of judgment. The Kantian quest also cannot fully “succeed”; we can only reach “back” to what we intuitively *presuppose*, not what we *know*, as that (e.g. the capacity to be “amused”) which makes possible all judgments that “x is amusing,” “x is comical.” (Perhaps a Kantian comic theory might be developed along such lines.) Naturally enough, Kant speaks of laughter only in the third critique (thus making it an “aesthetic problem”), which is famously more ambiguous than the first two—on the validity of scientific knowledge and of pragmatic, ethical judgments. While “laughter” is more often discussed in relation to Kant’s “sublime,” which goes beyond the rational limits of “beauty,” Kant actually mentions it in his treatment of the latter.

<sup>2</sup> In *Zarathustra* we have the “Spirit of Levity” (“lightness” in both senses) over against the “Spirit of Gravity” (“heaviness” in both senses): “He who will one day teach men to fly will have removed all boundary stones [...] and he will rebaptize the earth—“the light one” [*die Leichte*], “On the Spirit of Gravity” [*Vom Geist der Schwere*], Kaufmann 303-04, KSA 24, 242; “O Zarathustra: whoever would kill most thoroughly, *laughs*” [*wer am grundlichsten todtten will, der lacht*], “The Ass Festival” [*Das Eselsfest*], Kaufmann 427, KSA 24, 392. Nietzsche describes eternal return (in one of his formulations) as the perspective that sees life’s (the world’s) constant Becoming (*only* never-ending *Becoming*) as if it were *Being*; hence (in a sense) we get Kundera’s notion of an “unbearable lightness of being.” See also Eco (*The Name of the Rose*): “But William laughed only when he said serious things, and remained very serious when he was presumably joking” (425); “[A]n African alchemist [...] attributes the creation of the world to divine laughter [...]: ‘The moment God [...] burst out laughing light appeared, at his second laugh appeared water, and on the seventh day of his laughing appeared the soul [...]’” (467).

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche and to a degree even Freud—whose ultimate “pleasure” (release of tension) is our death and thus return to the “pre-organic state” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*)—are responding to the tradi-

The vastness of the comic field is immediately clear when we note that it contains comic absurdity (the shock of radical incongruity) as well as the humor of irony and parody. Irony seems (looks) somehow more “vertical,” a matter merely of difference in “tone” or “perspective” (that of not taking seriously); absurdity is a much more violent shift in horizontal perspective, a violent disruption or rearrangement of the textual surface. To begin from the notion of “textual surfaces” which then get disrupted—perhaps a single horizontal surface (incongruity of the absurd) or the vertical gap or relationship between two surfaces or levels (self-difference of irony)<sup>4</sup>—may indeed be a promising way to approach a more general theory of the comic, but how do we define “text”? Can we really distinguish the textual from the extra-textual? We normally assume real-world events (as in slapstick comedy—seeing someone slip on a banana peel) are extra-textual and pictures, films, spoken and written language are “textual.” Yet this distinction is too simplistic. For instance, where do we place cognitive (rational) thought or the “psychic economy” with which Freud is concerned? In one sense such an economy—or thought itself, especially if we think of it as occurring in or through language—is already textual. Similarly, even “communicative acts” (speech acts) between/among persons within the larger society can be regarded as textual; this is one sense in which we can speak of the “social text.” But what of those real-world, purely physical events which we witness every day? Are not these also textual insofar as they occur within the larger meaning-system, “text” or “context” of a socio-cultural system, independently of which we could not even understand such events, for instance, could not interpret certain events as being “comical” or “serious”? Thus when we reflect on comic “textuality” we need to consider the problem of specifying this term’s meaning, given the possibility that we never get “outside of text.”

Or perhaps “textuality” is only a more recent manifestation of an underlying instinct for, or drive toward, the comic. Irony and parody are clearly present in the most sophisticated of literary texts; “postmodernism” may even be defined in relation to the problem of irony, parody, pastiche and textual “playfulness.” Yet on the other hand (or at the other extreme) the comic is an issue for anthropologists who study primates and early humans. It is widely thought, judging from current human and primate behavior (see Koller 9-10), that the ape-man may have exulted over the

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tion of Fichte and Hegel, to that problem of irony as a function of “absolute subjectivity” with which Friedrich Schlegel (“Irony is the form of paradox,” Critical Fragment 48, 6) and Kierkegaard (irony as “infinite inwardness,” see Solomon 17, 18, 24 on Kierkegaard’s conception of Faith in relation to notions of “truth as paradox” and “the absurd”) are also concerned. The scope of the “comic” has then to accommodate the absolute inwardness (subjectivity) of the “Romantics” (entailing, for Kierkegaard, God Himself as Absolute Subject and as the Absurd) as well as explicitly “objective,” empirical-psychological and socio-political (satire and parody are inevitably socio-political) viewpoints.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze says that “*humor* is the art of surfaces and of the complex relation between the two surfaces” (*Logic of Sense* 248). See the concluding discussion.

enemy he has just killed (or seriously injured) by looking up at the sky, beating his chest or waving one or both arms, baring his teeth and releasing a joyous howl of laughter as if to say, “I have conquered,” “I have survived”—the ecstatic cry of a pure *joi de vivre*, joy-of-life, life-energy, life-flow, *jouissance*. And laughter, precisely as a primitive (and Darwinian, Nietzschean, Freudian) expression of the human life-force, of *survival*, is indeed a necessary key for any attempt to unlock the mystery of the comic effect or comic experience.<sup>5</sup> Yet here the question immediately arises: if we normally think of laughter as the (human) response to a comic stimulus, can we also begin from laughter in our attempt to understand the nature of that stimulus? Furthermore, do we locate the comic “effect” or “experience” in closer proximity to the initial stimulus or to the response, laughter? The mystery of the comic “sense” (feeling, experience, effect) is closely tied up with that of laughter itself, yet laughter is a clearly biological phenomenon, a function of the human lungs, trachea and mouth.<sup>6</sup> Thus the primitive, anthropological and biological basis of “the comic” extends back and down into the pre-human strata of the animal kingdom, perhaps even beyond primates to cats, dogs and other mammals.<sup>7</sup> (Do dogs laugh? If so, how and especially why do they laugh? Or even birds? Or fish?)

It seems that any attempt to establish a comprehensive theory of the comic must account for both textuality (the textual surface) and laughter as explosive life-force. While acknowledging, then, that it may be impossible to actually achieve a unified, coherent and comprehensive (totalizing) theory of that “comic field” which is both textual and pre-textual—which apparently includes in its domain the novels of Jane Austen and Umberto Eco alongside the bestial shrieks of Neanderthals—I will present here the preliminary sketch of just such a comic theory. It strikes me that “noise” as understood in cybernetic (information, communication) theory and in non-linear dynamics (chaos theory), particularly as these two theoretical domains are combined in the theory of Michel Serres, might catch the sense of laughter as an explosive,

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<sup>5</sup> Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* (I.54, 224) says that we must begin from laughter as “comic effect” to understand the comic “cause,” itself (also) physiological. This cause “must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reflex effect of this upon the mind [...] as a mere play of representations bringing about an equilibrium of the vital powers in the body.” See note 17.

<sup>6</sup> It is precisely laughter’s apparent “lack of biological function” that leads scientists to give it a psychological function, to tie it directly to the “semantic structure of humour” (Mulkay 100). But the “life-force” theory of the comic sees laughter’s biological function as *survival*. See Mulkay (96) on Koestler.

<sup>7</sup> Also: how and why do we and they cry? What is the relation between laughing and weeping? (See Plessner.) If the probable basis of laughter in human and mammalian aggression seems more relevant to the “scorning” modes of satire and parody than to the more “refined” irony and absurdity of Austin, Beckett, Nabokov or Eco, we assume that it is nonetheless secretly at work in the latter. While Bakhtin’s carnival is more clearly a socio-political scolding modes of the comic, Nietzsche (in discussions of the overflowing energy of the “overman,” that is, of “will to power,” in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*) and Bataille (in portrayals of “the sovereign” in *Inner Experience* and *Visions of Excess*), in effect ground their encompassing (yet radically immanent) “metaphysical” (if not indeed “ontological”) mode of “taking/not taking seriously” in primitive and violent human societies.

bodily life-force and also allow for a certain sort of model of the textual surface. Serres interprets the chaotic disorder of physics, out of which order self-organizes and back into which it merges, as the “background noise” out of which sounds and meanings arise and back into which they dissolve. Inasmuch as this is a (non-linear) dynamic model we are taking this noise as an actual force, a self-transforming (perhaps self-disrupting) *energy*; inasmuch as we are speaking of the transformation of *meanings* we could be said to have a “textual surface.”

Serres is also relying on a cybernetic model of communication which may facilitate the “inclusion” of social theories of the comic. In this model, the communication between A and B (directly or by electronic means) must keep background noise to a minimum to maintain the clarity of the “signal” (communicated meaning); yet this signal may theoretically reach (through a form of entropy) a state of hyper-order (hyper-rationality, tautological redundancy) called terminal equilibrium. To avoid reaching this state of “information death,” in which all noise has been eliminated, we must regenerate the flow of meaning (communication) by introducing again into the system a minimal amount of (background) noise. Thus noise *renews* or *regenerates* the system (text, economy), just as in virtually all comic theories the comic effect involves the *restoration* of order or balance within a certain economy. Furthermore, the double-textual force of the comic in the classical Bergsonian and Bakhtinian (socio-political) as well as, arguably, Freudian (psychological) theories may be understood as in effect *exaggerating* and so *inverting* the (now oppressively) rational order of a psychic/social text by way of restoring it (through the comic effect) to a “normal” order which is nonetheless a “renewed” normal order; this suggests that Serresian dynamic by which hyper-rationality (hyper-redundancy) returns us (*via* a form of inversion) to a chaotic disorder which can once again “normally” *self-order*.

Therefore the interpretation of the “comic effect” (and of laughter itself) as a form of noise on the Serresian model might seem a promising approach to the formulation of a more comprehensive comic theory. Nonetheless, in my Conclusion I suggest that we may need to combine Serres with Deleuze, who speaks of a pre-linguistic or proto-linguistic corporeal “inner noise” and of “humor” as a “relation between two surfaces.” That is, we might need a Deleuzian notion of the simulacrum, of *virtuality*—Deleuze in effect “projects” Nietzschean forces onto a “metaphysical surface”—to complete our more obviously dynamic Serresian theory of the comic.

#### Incongruity, Bisociation, Double-Textuality

Koller (7) lists four “macrotheories” (encompassing theories) of “humor.” These are based on superiority, relief, ambivalence and incongruity. As for the first:

By degrading others, one can elevate one's own status and so conquer all opposition. Plato was aware of the contempt persons felt [for] others' ignorance, vanity or hypocrisy. By "showing them up" for their shortcomings, humorists and their audiences would demonstrate their superior knowledge, insights, backgrounds, and abilities. Those targeted as butts of jokes were such types as the miser, the glutton, the drunkard, or the authority figures who abused their power. Aristotle also approved of treating that which was base and ugly as the laughable object or butt of humor. [...] Thomas Hobbes [...] postulated the "sudden glory" that came over the earliest hominid who stood in triumph over the body of a fellow creature who had tried to defeat him in bloody combat. [...] Anthony Ludovici followed this Hobbesian perspective when he suggested that laughing is a way to show one's fangs in celebrating triumphs over enemies.<sup>8</sup> [...] Henri Bergson's classic, *Laughter* [...], followed the superiority theory closely by observing that there is much humor that has the avowed intention to humiliate, shame, or correct one's neighbors. (9)

While various modes of comic mockery, as in parody and satire with their "socially corrective" functions<sup>9</sup>, immediately suggest themselves, I prefer to begin from laughter (as "comic response") and the anthropological viewpoint of Hobbes and Ludovici. It is not clear whether smiling (note 5) and laughter were at first (primate/early human) "celebratory" displays, or displays of the aggressor in attack-mode and/or of the "attacked" in response-to-attack (counter-aggressive) mode. It seems either could have been the primary (earlier) function; perhaps the aggressor laughed as if to say, "soon I will be celebrating victory." But at some point primates/proto-humans started smiling/laughing as displays of "mock aggression." This may have first been the "conciliatory" response of a potential victim to a real threat, but even so it would have been in effect saying, "I don't want to fight you" by *mocking* the battle-cry (laughter) of the aggressor. Thus we have the complex switch into "play mode" already in apes and probably even "lower" mammals. The precise nature of the

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<sup>8</sup> Apte notes (245): "It appears, then, that in the evolutionary process leading from nonprimate mammals to primates, and finally to *Homo sapiens*, the meaning of the teeth-baring display broadened. While it was originally a part of the mainly defensive or protective behaviour mechanism, it became a signal of submission and nonhostility. [...] Among primates, the bared-teeth display overlapped with the lip-smacking display, while human smiling appears to have resulted from the combination of both, very nearly replacing the latter."

<sup>9</sup> On one view (e.g. Hutcheon's), while satire points to the "real world" and thus has a socio-political critiquing function, parody (like irony) is inter- or intra-textual: one text "makes fun of" another, but this need have no connection to the real world or to society. The humor of parody and irony is purely "textual." But again, it may be hard to draw a clear line between this sort of "literary" textuality and the (inter-)textuality of society itself, of the interaction between/among individuals and social classes. Thus too irony may become sarcasm, but the line between social and pre-social textuality is hard to draw.

relationship between this “switch” and the necessity of conciliatory responses to real danger is not fully clear; nor is the relationship clear between young (especially male) animals’ (and humans’) love of “play” and the need for war-training—a connection most obvious in such human sports as wrestling, boxing, rugby and American football. In any event, at some “point” smiling and laughter came to be primarily understood as signs, not of aggression or playful and conciliatory mock-aggression (those these primordial meanings may still lurk beneath the surface), but of friendliness:

“[...] in primate society, actions very similar to laughing and smiling are actively employed as signals of friendliness by participants. As Bateson and Fry noted in the course of their earlier studies of “the play frame,” primates are also able to use such signals to indicate that their actions are not what they might appear to be. In particular, facial grimaces are employed as a signal of mock-aggression. It is clear that apes, as well as humans, can distinguish playful hostility from the real thing and can respond appropriately. Thus, even in primate society, actions closely akin to smiling and laughter are part of a conventional sign language that is used to regulate interaction and to play with the distinction between reality and unreality.” (Mulkey 99-100)

Any discussion of the superiority theory inevitably brings into play essential elements of the comic which will recur (with variation perhaps) in other comic theories. Koller’s second “macrotheory” is that of ambivalence:

In the ambivalence theory of humor, there is a struggle between opposing emotions or feeling-states, a type of love-hate, attraction-repulsion commingling. On the one hand, there is some appreciation for social structures or functions, and on the other hand, there is a strong desire to object to these same structures or functions.<sup>10</sup> [...] [I]ndividuals seek to expose those cultural qualities that are filled with sham, pretense or false pride but never quite reject all the benefits that flow from being conventional and “proper” (8).

Apparently this ambivalence is primarily in the “comic intent”—the comedian mocks certain social structures and functions but always “restores” the normal society at the end—rather than the “comic effect” in/on the minds of spectators. This latter ambivalence may be more properly a concern of “incongruity” theory. But the focus

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<sup>10</sup> Koller uses as an example here the Marx Brothers’ mockery of high-society manners and tastes in the film *Night at the Opera*: there is inter-textual parody perhaps as well as extra-textual satire (note 9)—or there is the dialogism (double-voicedness) of Bakhtinian “carnival”—but the “normal order” (as too in Bakhtin) is always restored in the end.

here on the comic target (society) and comic intent (mockery) suggests that ambivalence theory is really part of superiority theory. One also wonders about the possible derivation of this ambivalence-of-intent from the essentially ambivalent role of laughter—as aggression/conciliation, serious-mode/play-mode—in primitive societies. Now instead of aggression we have “serious” subversion (rebellion, revolution) and instead of conciliation we have a “merely playful” subversion which has never seriously doubted that ultimately the normal “order” will be restored.<sup>11</sup>

Koller summarizes the macrotheory of “relief”:

A number of scholars see humor as a release from restraints or controls, whether they are physiological, psychological, or social restrictions. Herbert Spencer cited the physical relief persons discover when they grasp the contrast between that which is solemn and that which is trivial. Sigmund Freud [...] pointed to the pleasure made possible by being free from keeping forbidden behavior or thoughts repressed and away from one’s conscience or social censor. Harvey Mindress [...] identified humor as liberation. To be liberated, unchained from the bondage of social conventions, sets up the mood of receptivity toward humor. Poking fun at the social systems that dampen the spirit for self-expression [...] delights those [...] that have suffered too long from these suppressions. (8)

Again we sense the residual presence of socio-politically-based comic theory (i.e. superiority/ambivalence theory). Yet “relief” is explicitly a psychological term; we are dealing here with the comic “effect,” and laughter is often seen as a direct expression of comic relief/release, the release of excess psychic energy. Kant assumes in his *Critique of Judgement* that to understand the comic we must really begin from the physiological “affection” of laughter, and claims: “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *“Laughter is the affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”*<sup>12</sup> (I.54, 223, Kant’s emphasis). We get a variation on this theme in Freud’s discussion of *Witz* (jokes, wit, humor) in *Jokes and the Unconscious*; his theory, set within the context of a comic “freedom from repression,” centers on the restrictive nature of “rational thought” within the psychic economy. Freud’s key point here is that we expend a certain amount of energy in “thinking rationally,” and/or “thinking morally,” that is, thinking according to (logical, social, moral) *rules*: various forms of comic disruption (as in word-play and

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<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin’s carnival in a sense plays between these modes but ultimately is not serious, restoring order.

<sup>12</sup> “*Das Lachen ist ein Affekt aus der plotzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts.*” *Erwartung* has also a sense of “waiting,” “suspense.” For laughter as the clearest “ground,” see note 5.

absurdity) break down these rules, or allow us to break “out” of them; the energy we thus save (by “not needing to think rationally/morally”) is then that of the “comic effect,” now expended as laughter.

Kant and Freud, then, both combine relief theory with what is called *incongruity* theory. Some form of incongruity—for Kant the disproportion between the Understanding’s “expectation of sense” and the actual nonsense (absurdity) of the “representation,” for Freud the shock of disruption of the normal psychic “order” by the “comic text”—serves as comic stimulus, triggering comic release. Koller’s fourth macrotheory, the theory of incongruity, presents new problems and complexities and so will be discussed at much greater length:

For many investigators of humor, its nature is best explained by juxtaposing two or more conceptualizations that do not seem to fit together, but, in the mind of the humorist, are compared and contrasted [...]. [...] Luigi Pirandello wrote that humor is essentially a feeling for the opposite. Arthur Koestler characterized humor as being a matter of bisociation of form and function [...], a distortion of realities. Many humorists agree that humor consists of looking at things from “a different angle,” a perspective not often used [...]. [...] [Yet] Arthur Schopenhauer noted the pleasure many derive from finding *unexpected connections between ideas*. [...] In sum, incongruity theory finds *similarity or a connection between dissimilarities*. (7, my emphasis).

If indeed the key comic function, according to incongruity theory, is “finding unexpected connections between ideas,” “similarity or a connection between dissimilarities,” it seems there are two levels (or kinds) of incongruity here. On the first level we have the incongruity of/between elements within a single system, discourse, text; on the second level we have the incongruity of/between this incongruous or “comic text” and that other, unified or “serious” text from which all “differences” have been removed, even if this second text is actually the first one viewed in another way, as “connected” or “unified.”<sup>13</sup> Thus this concept of “incongruity” is fundamentally ambiguous. We might have expected it to refer to the “already-disrupted” text, for instance, a “linguistic” text which presents an already-disrupted order of *langue* (in Freud’s theory of puns/word-play and absurdity/unexpected connections), or a “social” text which presents an

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<sup>13</sup> Just as the comic text is the serious one “viewed from another angle,” that is, as being “incongruous.” A “feeling for the opposite” (Pirandello’s definition of “humor”) leads to the same bifurcation between first-order difference (in- congruity) and second-order difference. Indeed the underlying logical issue here (not yet specified as a “comic” problem) goes back to ancient Greek dialectics: the puzzle of the One and the Many, essentially a Platonic and Hegelian problem.



already-disrupted social order; let's call this comic-text incongruity. Yet Koestler's "bisociation of form and function" is really the split between two entire discourses or texts: the normal or "serious" discourse-text as function and—encompassed by or, we may think, encompassing it<sup>14</sup>—the "comic" discourse-text as "form" (the play-frame or play-mode of "not taking seriously"). Let's call this "bisociative" level of incongruity double-text incongruity. Mulkay (26), following Koestler, Bateson and Fry, offers us a nice account of Koestler's bisociation:

The basic principles and practices of the humorous mode are the reverse of those [of] serious discourse. Whereas ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretive diversity ["comic-text incongruity"] are often treated as problems during serious discourse [...], they are necessary features of the humorous mode. In contrast to the unitary character of serious discourse, humour depends on the discursive display of opposing interpretative *possibilities*. In the realm of humour, not only are our everyday assumptions about the one, known-in-common world constantly confounded, but the interpretative expectations generated in the course of humorous discourse itself are undermined as that discourse proceeds. This does not mean that the discourse of humour makes no sense. Rather, humour involves a kind of controlled nonsense. Judged by the criteria of serious discourse, humour *is* nonsensical. Nevertheless, the assertions of humorous discourse are always understandable in terms of the special requirements and expectations of the humorous realm.<sup>15</sup>

Again we have the above-noted ambiguity: Mulkay seems to contrast "serious discourse" with a "comic discourse" which itself is ambivalent because it splits into "two texts," the "functional" one that is taken seriously and the "formal" or "framing" one that is not taken seriously. In this case we might have a sort of (potentially) infinite regress, or indefinitely extended series of metalanguages (meta-texts).<sup>16</sup> We

<sup>14</sup> While the two texts are also "the same text" looked at from different perspectives, there is an important sense in which we will tend to think of the comic text as "encompassing." See later discussion.

<sup>15</sup> Mulkay (26) continues here: "The central process whereby the interpretative disjunctures characteristic of humour are created has been termed "bisociation" by Arthur Koestler (1964). [...] The basic idea is that humour occurs when there is a sudden movement between, or unexpected combination of, distinct interpretive frames. In Koestler's words, the production of humour necessarily involves "the perceiving of a situation or idea in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference." As Paulos puts it: "a necessary ingredient of humour is that two (or more) incongruous ways of viewing something (a person, a sentence, a situation) be juxtaposed."

<sup>16</sup> The pre-Derridean "poststructuralist turn" of French structuralist Roland Barthes is often described in terms of his realization that no text can have a clear "center" or "circumference": just as "outside" a poem lies the discourse of the critic who *interprets* that poem (first-order metalanguage), and beyond it the discourse of a more "theoretical" critic (second-order metalanguage) who critiques the first-order critical discourse, so within the poem's *own* discourse/language there may be various levels (concentric circles/spheres) of discourse; it is the problem of infinite (indefinite) regress in both "directions."

have the bisociation (incongruity) of comic text and serious text, yet the comic text is already incongruous, manifesting “ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretive diversity”; perhaps within this “second order” bifurcation (especially in the context of “interpretive diversity”) we will again get the bifurcation of serious text/comic text; again the comic text will split into serious and comic components, and so on. These “higher order” bifurcations (incongruities) are also suggested by the notion that “In the realm of humour, not only are our everyday assumptions about the one, known-in-common world constantly confounded, but the interpretative expectations generated in the course of humorous discourse itself are undermined as that discourse proceeds.” In any event, whether or not we need to worry about (theoretical) regresses and logical conundrums—which (the same point put another way) are by nature themselves “humorous”—the key problem will be that of *interpretation*. It is obvious that amusing (humorous, comical) stimuli are only judged to be amusing (only have the comic effect) when people *interpret* them that way; that particular events, people, jokes, statements, texts may be thought “serious” by one observer/reader and comical by another. But Mulkey’s point here is that such interpretive ambiguity is an essential aspect of the comic text/discourse: “In contrast to the unitary character of serious discourse, humour depends on the discursive display of opposing *interpretative possibilities*.”

However, from another “perspective” we could also say there is only one level or order of incongruity in the Mulkey/Koestler model of bisociation. After all, we only *know* that the comic text is incongruous (with or within itself) when we measure it against the rationality of the serious text; these are two sides of, two perspectives on the same text. Let us return to Freud’s model of the psyche: the comic disruption of our normal (rational) thinking saves us energy, for we no longer need to think rationally; the excess energy is released as laughter. But this comic disruption does not really mean that a “comic text” (comic thinking, comic language) is set over against a “serious text”; rather, the essentially linguistic disruption of word-play and absurdity is a disruption, a “self-transformation” of the normal/moral/rational text itself. Perhaps this Freudian, “purely linguistic” comic text is the foundational case: we only see the humor of puns and absurd (totally unexpected) associations of ideas, can only see that something *is* a pun or a random association, by measuring it against the “background” of normal language/discourse. This could then serve as the basic paradigm for analyzing those more social models of bisociation, of “looking at the same text in two different ways,” as “form” and as “function”; as the social models begin from an explicitly social text, the problem of relativity of (social) context and of a multiplicity of possible “interpretations” is more explicit.

Of course, we may doubt that it is really possible to have such a pre-social comic

text, restricted to a particular individual's mind; we may think this problem of a (potential) diversity of (individual) interpretations within the social context will inevitably permeate "down" into thought-language textuality, or rather that thought-language textuality must be always already social. Thus perhaps we only think that the *langue*-disruptions of word-play and absurdity are "funny" because they disrupt a *langue* which is in some sense always already social; in fact, one's own witty or absurd thoughts, even though apparently part of an internal monologue, are in some sense always "remembered." But the comic-effect model of the single disrupted-text still seems more "fundamental" than that of irony; the latter always involves—like parody, though this operates on a more broadly inter-textual level—a split between two "levels" of discourse, thus perhaps seeming almost to "mimic" the comic model of bisociation. And sociologists are quick to note the crucial role of *tone of voice* when we enter "ironic mode": the listener only knows we are now in this mode because of the speaker's tone—when he says, for instance, "There is a *genius* in the White House." At first we might think that irony is thus a purely social phenomenon which does not permeate down to the level of the (Freudian) disrupted-*langue* text in an individual's mind. Even if we argue that the individual, thinking of something "ironic," will in a sense be thinking of or remembering a certain tone of voice, this is clearly a more overtly social comic model than that of the Freudian disrupted-text.

Suppose then we only consider the zero-level case of an individual who laughs because he thinks of something that strikes him as funny, even bracketing out "background" socio-cultural factors that determine why he finds this *particular* absurd thought funny, although in another culture or even to another person it might not be so funny. We are still dealing with a sort of "communicative act" here, there is still a comic stimulus—even if within this person's own "mental text"—which has a comic effect—even if on this same mental text. That is, even the model of a single, self-disrupting (mental, linguistic) text implies, if we "find it comical," the duality of stimulus-effect, or of a signal which is sent and received; in this sense the comic, even at the "individual" level, is always a certain form of "communication." The problem of a possible infinite regress of serious/comic text dichotomies within the "initial" comic text may be closely related to Bateson and Fry's paradox of the comic signal:

Explicit, unambiguous signals would, by their very nature, anchor the discourse more firmly within the serious mode. Entry into humour has to be signaled in the kind of allusive manner that is dominant within this realm of discourse [e.g. an ironic tone]. Fry (1963) [...] has argued, following Gregory Bateson (1955), that humorous cues are essentially paradoxical in character. They are paradoxical [...] because they convey that the discourse of which they form a

part is not genuine [...] discourse and should not be taken seriously. This implies, however, that the signals themselves cannot be taken seriously and therefore do not mean what they appear to mean. If this is so, it seems to follow that the discourse is serious after all and that the signals do mean what they appear to mean: namely, that the discourse is not serious. And so on. (Mulkey 50)

The context here is explicitly social. Yet, seeking the maximally simple and, I am assuming, foundational level of analysis, would it be possible to look at the “individual” disrupted-text model in the same light? If now we are dealing with a single text which then somehow rearranges or disrupts itself, then—we come back to the underlying problem of incongruity theory—how could there be two texts, a “humorous-cue”-text or “form”-text (play-frame text) which signals to us that the “signals themselves” or “function”-text “cannot be taken seriously”? If there is a single self-transforming text, then it must *itself* signal that now it is in comic mode, whereas a moment ago it was in serious mode. Perhaps the disrupted langue-text signals that “the discourse of which it forms a part,” that is, the whole standard system of *langue* (language, textuality) is itself ultimately ambivalent, contingent, not to be taken seriously; this underlying sense of a hollow excessiveness or of “emptiness” may give rise to that excess energy which for Freud is released as laughter.

Yet we still must assume a duality of comic stimulus and comic effect, of a signal that is sent and received, if only within the economy of an individual psyche or mind-text. It seems that on the most minimal model we must now simply take the “encompassing” standard-*langue* text as that “mind” which “receives” the signal sent by an already-disrupted *langue*-text, the signal telling us that this standard-*langue* is itself, being ultimately contingent or “groundless,” not to be taken seriously. This would give us a model, at the most basic level of analysis, of the “comic” as a signal sent, in effect, back to its own sender (or back to itself), a signal which disrupts itself and thus lays bare its own excessiveness, superfluousness, redundancy, hollowness, comic emptiness.<sup>17</sup> Yet such a self-subverting signal suggests something more like “noise” than “specified content,” raising the question as to how it could have carried any meaning or sense in the first place.

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<sup>17</sup> See note 12 on Kant’s theory of the comic as the “sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.” Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony* (36) also speaks of Socratic irony as a sort of deflation or emptying out of our meaning-expectation, here the false promise of a totalized or absolute meaning (e.g. the meaning of “Being,” “the One,” “the Good”). This irony is employed by Socrates in his mode of asking questions (e.g. “What is Being?”) “without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind.”

### Incongruity, Redundancy, Noise

Of course, on the standard “social” model of the comic, which Mulkey assumes in his description of the paradox of the comic signal, there is clearly a distinction (at least at the outset) between serious and comic texts, as also between “sender” and “receiver” of the signal. Yet Mulkey’s (Fry’s, Bateson’s) paradoxical, self-subverting “circularity” (“serious” message means “not serious” message means “serious” message . . .) of the comic signal suggests we may be simply on a more complex or elaborated level of that “single-text paradox” (self-negating-signal paradox) just described.

But if we began by thinking of the comic (or comic signal) as something like a “noisy signal,” one that (through a self-disrupting circularity) subverts its own “sense,” we would have one of the basic cybernetic models of information or communication theory. This is the notion that the normal communication between two people, A and B—*via* verbal language perhaps combined, as with telephones (speech) or the internet (writing)—may reach a state of maximum logical “efficiency,” at which point it freezes into “information death.” One way to see this “maximum efficiency” is as the disappearance of the “space” between signals, which was necessary for there to be sense: “Whattimeisit?” may become an ambiguous and thus nonsensical message. We can also see this level of “extreme rationality” in terms of a pure formal logic which has become redundant: “A = A” is Aristotle’s principle of identity, the foundation of western logic, science, rational order, yet it is a tautological redundancy, for we already know (without being told) that a “pen,” for example, “is a pen.” This tautological description of a hyper-redundancy, one which becomes the disorder, thus and nonsense of that “frozen” state predicted by entropy theory as terminal equilibrium and information death, is a variation on the “no-space” description: both ultimately can be expressed in terms of endless repetition, either as “A=A” now become “AAAAA” or “Howareyou?” now become “Howareyou-howareyouhowareyou?” or (ultimately) “AAAAA.” The striking point about this theory of communication is that the randomness and incongruity of “noise” is thought to be necessary to the creation of new “space” between signals, and/or to the “slight disordering” of the too-rationally-efficient discourse of pure logic. That is, a certain (minimal) amount of “background noise” (static on the radio), which is precisely what we eliminate in order to send a “clear signal,” needs to remain “within” every transmitted signal (or rather between signals) in order to prevent terminal “freezing” and reopen the channel of (meaningful) communication between A and B.

In his elaboration of non-linear dynamics or physical chaos theory, the French mathematician and philosopher Michel Serres begins from the “classical” model (e.g.

Prirogine's) of chaos theory, which is really one kind of "systems theory": bodies (things, systems) self-order (self-organize), through the repetition of elements, out of disordered (ultimately non-repeating) "atomic flows"; yet at the limit of maximum (physical and/or logical) order we reach that "saturation point" of hyper-redundancy at which there is a kind of "return" to chaos/disorder. In *The Parasite* Serres sees as modes of (finally nonsensical) hyper-order the super-efficient, military-based communication systems of late capitalist ("fascistic") governments and huge corporations ("Microsoft Inc."). And in *Genesis* he builds still further upon the cybernetic theory discussed above. Here he interprets the model of chaos-order-chaos in terms of the emergence out of background noise (as in radio static) of individual sounds/languages/meanings, followed by the dissolution (at the point of hyper-order) back into background noise. He also distinguishes the initial "dark chaos" of pure disorder (randomness, contingency, incongruity) from the "blank chaos" of hyper-order: these are virtually the same but also different, as if two sides of the same coin whose "return" into one another can be pictured as both a dynamic (cyclic) "flow" and a static, momentary *Gestalt*-switch.<sup>18</sup>

In order now to more fully develop the thought that we might look at the theory (or problem) of "the comic" in the light of Serresian chaos theory, I want to look again at the problem (paradox) of bisociation or double-textuality by comparing the primarily psychological incongruity and relief theories (again using Freud as model) with the obviously more socio-political superiority/ambivalence theory, focusing specifically on the problem of "liberation" and/or "restoration. In the Freudian model, incongruity disrupts the rational/moral order, "liberating" us, just as in superiority/ambivalence theory the comic event or discourse disrupts the "normal" (moral, rational) social order, in a sense "liberating" it (or us within it); and yet the

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<sup>18</sup> Discussing Serres' interpretation of communication theory, White explains (267-268) that "communicational 'harmony,' understood as the consensus achieved between interlocutors who understand each other perfectly, is only 'an ante-chamber to death.' Cultural vitality depends on 'parasitic dissonance' (*The Parasite* 126). As order comes out of chaos, so sense requires nonsense. Meaning emerges not as predictable derivative but as stochastic departure from tradition, as *invention*. [...] From a martial perspective successful communication between two interlocutors depends on the exclusion of a third person [...] who threatens constantly to disrupt the transmission of messages (*Hermes* 67). Since the optimum performance of any system depends upon communicative transparency, noise must be eliminated [...] but] the exclusion of noise amounts to an exclusion of genuine information. Information, understood in Gregory Bateson's phrase as the 'difference that makes a difference,' is excluded in favor of information-free, wholly redundant messages. The system endlessly reiterates, endlessly ratifies itself. But such a system, however self-coherent or optimally efficient, is nevertheless doomed to entropic degradation. Like any closed system, it can only run down. The achievement of redundancy—when everything that needs to be said has already been said—is analogous to entropic homogeneity when matter-energy settles into terminal equilibrium. In cultural systems, then, just as in physical systems, noise or chaos amounts to a force for renewal. Serres thus imagines a 'parasite'—precisely, static in a communication channel—who intervenes to interrupt normal communications [...] and] provoke the production of novelty." The mode of comic pleasure, perhaps the encompassing mode of "not taking seriously," might be just such a "noisy opening" of a logical or narrative system, the opening of possible pathways of wider communication on a "higher level."

ultimate purpose of comic disruption of the social order is restoration of the normal order, perhaps at a higher level of “civilization,” just as in Freud we return to a “re-energized” state of rational consciousness after the temporary “recreation” of humor.<sup>19</sup> But is the comic text, in the case of both psychic and social “economies,” simply the serious text “reinterpreted,” or looked at “upside-down”? True, the temporary inversion of social classes—inverting and thus in effect breaking down hierarchical order—followed by the restoration of a re-energized, traditional hierarchical order—is the model of Bakhtinian carnival. Yet social satire may also be laying bare the incongruities already present in the “normal” social order by *exaggerating* them (making them still more incongruous and therefore funny) in order to “correct” them; in effect it may flatten out these irregularities or “abnormalities” to create a “smoother” (less incongruous) social text. Koller, we remember, reads in this way (9) the dominant theme in Bergson’s comic theory. Thus we have a comic subversion of normal order proceeding *via* the comic exaggeration of that very order, in order ultimately to return or restore it to its “middle position” of “order”—“normality” in the *sens proper*. This suggests a Serresian model of the “comic” as two sorts of chaos—a totally disruptive chaos and a chaos as hyper-redundant order—in between which lies the “normal order” of things.

Of the social-comic theorists, Bergson in *De Rire, Laughter* most clearly invites this interpretation of the comic force of “social correction” in terms of an exaggerated or redundant order. His claim that “We always laugh when a person gives us the impression of a thing”<sup>20</sup> is a specific case of his more general argument: “This rigidity of life in the direction of the *mechanical* is here the true cause of laughter . . . For life in its true vitality should never *repeat*. There where we see *repetition, complete similitude*, we always suspect the *mechanical functioning behind the living*” (my emphasis).<sup>21</sup> The italicized phrases clearly invite a Serresian reading: order becomes frozen into redundant (rigid, mechanical) hyper-rationality or hyper-order, which—as the virtual equivalent of the initial background noise (and thus too, I am suggesting, of

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<sup>19</sup> (And just as Freud’s pleasure principle generally returns to its condition of being dominated by the reality principle.) While this dynamic is more obviously at work in the Bakhtinian/Bergsonian model than the Freudian, it is also one aspect of Freud’s comic disruption of the psychic-language-text. The central point in *Witz* is again that we save “comic energy” (released as laughter) by “not having to think rationally”: it is because we feel overly restricted by the (hyper-*mechanical*) order of rational consciousness (the ego, superego, reality principle) that we must expend psychic energy on “being rational.” The comic disruption of a linguistically rearranged “rational text”—which in a certain way parallels its disruption by the unconscious, in dreams as well as jokes and other overtly comic forms—releases excess energy (a rational tension which now appears as superfluous) and thus in effect returns us to a normal (in-between) state. Freud’s emphasis on libidinal energies of the unconscious, on the relation between jokes and such other unconscious mechanisms as slips, lies largely beyond my focus here.

<sup>20</sup> “*Nous rions toutes les fois qu’une personne nous donne l’impression d’une chose.*”

<sup>21</sup> “*Cet inflexionnement de la vie dans la direction de la mécanique est ici la vraie cause du rire [...]. C’est que la vie bien vivante ne devrait jamais se repeter. La ou il y a repetition, similitude complete, nous soupconons toujours du mécanique fonctionnant derriere le vivant.*”

the comic-disruption noise) “functions behind the living”—“behind” the noise of human vitality, of the healthy and “moderated” human organism, the noise of the “middle position” of self-ordering. Yet while Bergson apparently takes the comic effect of the “too-mechanical” scene or event—as in his numerous examples from Moliere and slapstick comedy, the man slipping on a banana peel—to be that of the comic’s “corrective mocking” of society’s tendencies toward mindless hyper-order, we could also see the “mechanical functioning behind the living” here as itself a *parodying* of life by “the mechanical.” This still fits a Serresian comic model in which comic-disruptive noise and hyper-redundant noise are virtually equivalent.

This Serresian model might then also be applied to that picture of a self-subverting comic “noise” we arrived at in our analysis of a hypothetical (Freudian) “single text” (*langue*, the system of language or perhaps of all discourses/texts) that *subverts itself* by disrupting, rearranging, *reordering* itself. On the Serresian model in *Genesis* we begin and end with noise: order in the form of sounds, languages, meanings self-organizes, self-specifies or “tunes in” out of *background noise* (dark chaos) and returns again (*via* blank-chaotic redundancy) to background noise. Thus whereas in most traditional comic theories (e.g. Koestler’s and Mulkay’s) it seems that the comic “form”-text only temporarily emerges to subvert the serious “function”-text (standard language and communication), we now clearly have an ever-present because encompassing comic text, that is, encompassing noise—or underlying noise, between-lying noise, as with radio static. But in the zero-level case of a single, self-disrupting, linguistic-mental text where (paradoxically perhaps) this text is also *langue* itself, it appears that *langue* “short-circuits” itself through its comical (absurd) self-rearrangements, leaving us (i.e. leaving itself) with its own sense of superfluosity or hyper-redundancy, of hollowness and emptiness, of being something ultimately “not serious.” That is, of being mere “noise,” the noise both of radical disorder and of indefinitely (if not infinitely) recursive and self-repeating hyper-order.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> One could construct a linear model, necessarily over-simplifying, of the *self-rearranging* (horizontal, single-surface) *langue*-text: “abcd” becomes “cbda.” Or, to catch the notion of absurdity as the congruence of normally unrelated or “distant” terms within *langue*, as in Stevens’ “emperor of ice-cream” (rather than “emperor of China” or “dish of ice-cream”): out of the series “abcdefghij” we randomly select “bh”). Furthermore, the Bakhtinian hierarchical order of A over B (A/B) becomes inverted as B over A (B/A), but it is the exaggerated “hierarchical distance,” denoted perhaps as A//B, which leads to the inversion. (If we emphasized the A/B difference by *repeating* A/B A/B A/B one might by chance start with a B and think he had B/A.) See Deleuze’s mathematical and graphic discussion of the “Eleventh Series of Nonsense” in *The Logic of Sense* (66-67). We also see the notion of hyper-logic as a *reductio ad absurdum*, reduction or “return” to absurdity/nonsense/noise, in literary texts. Rabelais’ Gargantua spent “more than eighteen years and six months” reading *De modis significandi*, “The Methods of Reasoned Analysis”: “And by then Gargantua knew it so well that, if you asked him, he could recite every single line, backward, proving [...] the methods of reasoned analysis were neither reasonable nor a science” (38- 39). Bakhtin will see this as Rabelaisian carnival: the official voice (here, a classical-philosophy-based educational system) is being subverted. This whole tradition of debasing logic,



And yet the key point we get from both cybernetic and Serresian chaos theory is that noise is precisely a force which (ultimately) *renews* and *regenerates* communication, meaning, order. For if each case of A-B (interpersonal) communication is clarified, normalized or renewed by the minimal introduction of noise (on the cybernetic model appropriated by Serres), then on another level the whole society is normalized, renewed, regenerated. Thus we might say that in both the linguistic-textual (Freud) and social-textual (Bergson, Bakhtin) models we have comic subversion as a means of restoring and renewing the psychic/social order by “setting” it back in/to its middle or normal position or state, between the overtly comic disruption of dark chaos—which as noise in the cybernetic model must be kept to a minimum so as not to “engulf” the signal, and as “the comic” in social-comic theories can emerge only temporarily, periodically in the normal life of society—and those blank-chaotic manifestations of a too-rigid, too-rational, too-mechanical order which the noisy comic force mocks (ironizes, parodies, satirizes) through a certain sort of exaggeration.<sup>23</sup>

Its close proximity to laughter also suggests that noise will be a promising mode of approach to the complex and indeed paradoxical, if not totally self-negating, “theory of comic.” Laughter is bodily noise, the noise of the body, and if (as Kant among others has suggested<sup>24</sup>) one ultimately must begin from laughter as comic effect in order to understand the mysterious and elusive nature of the comic stimulus, then we must surely begin from this manifestation of corporeal noise. But we have already been taking noise as that chaotic incongruity which, as comic stimulus, makes us laugh—as both the dark-chaotic incongruity of the subverted or rearranged text (Freud) and the blank-chaotic incongruity of the exaggerated and thus hyper-redundant text (Bergson). Can noise then be the underlying form of both of these (virtually equivalent) comic stimuli and also of laughter, which is the comic response to both? Such a view, presumably implied or allowed by a Serresian model in which order is fundamentally disorder or noise, in which basically “all is noise,” could only reinforce the (Kantian) tendency to begin, apparently *in modo reverso*, with laughter (as effect) in order to explain the comic stimulus. Or, more generally, it might help to account for the seeming fundamental ambivalence, the equivocity or

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beginning perhaps from Socrates (see note 15), goes through Shakespeare to Beckett and postmodern fiction. Kenner (1961), noting the author’s fascination with 6<sup>th</sup>-century B.C. Pythagorean mathematics (surds, irrational numbers) and 17<sup>th</sup>-century continental rationalism (algebra, geometry, the infinitesimal calculus), elaborated the “formal self-exhaustion” reading of Beckett: in his novels (*Watt* is perhaps the clearest example) we get a playing out of all logical possibilities, conjunctive and disjunctive; the novel becomes a huge “machine” in which the whole surface of *langue* (extended now to include logic, as in Derrida) is “exhausted.” See also Deleuze’s reading of *Watt* in “He Stuttered” (1994).

<sup>23</sup> In fact the comic force’s “hyperbolic mocking” of redundant forms is itself a (hyper-) repetition of what is already a (hyper-) repetition.

<sup>24</sup> See note 5.

indeed reversibility of stimulus-response when we are dealing with the comic.

We see the radically ambivalent nature of laughter when we compare its role as comic effect and/or response—in Freud’s theory and on one reading of Bergson’s theory, according to which the too-rigidified, too-mechanical man is a comic stimulus which makes us laugh—with its role as comic “cause” (and possibly even “stimulus”) in Bakhtinian, Bergsonian and perhaps all “superiority” theories of the comic whose primary purpose is “social correction.”<sup>25</sup> Now laughter becomes not the *release* of excess energy but the *expression* of one’s own (social) “superiority,” one’s *scorn*. In this case we do not begin with a stimulus (incongruity) that is then responded to (laughter), but rather with an act of *expression* (laughter); it is almost as if we have reversed Freud’s order of cause-and-effect, beginning with the (Freudian) “effect” (energy-release as expression) in order to bring about the (Freudian) “cause,” the incongruity of “social distance.” For in its mockery (through exaggeration) of the comic target, Bergsonian and Bakhtinian laughter indeed becomes a force of *social distancing*; mockery or scorn is perhaps already this force. And yet such “comic scorn” still has for its purpose the “correcting” of society. We create or rather exaggerate the pre-existing duality or hierarchy of social distance here—in Bergson by temporarily “ostracizing” the too-rational/mechanical man, in Bakhtin by temporarily inverting the whole socio-political hierarchy—in order to overcome it, to “flatten out” or “normalize” society. And if we see the social distance expressed by the laugher/scorner as a variation on the self-distancing of the incongruous text (as comic stimulus), then once again we are thrown into *modo reverso*, we see the ultimate contingency (reversibility) of cause-effect order here. Laughter (as force of social distancing) causes incongruity (self-distancing) in the social text; linguistic-textual and social-textual self-difference (exaggerated for comic effect in the Bergsonian and perhaps Freudian model) causes laughter. But if laughter is itself noise, “another” manifestation (another wave) of the same pervasive undercurrent that lies beneath the surface of incongruity, of (linguistic and social) textual self-difference, this picture of things could more easily be explained.

We might then even speculate, returning to that anthropological perspective assumed by superiority theory, that the laughter of the attacking ape-man already creates such “social distance” in the most direct and primitive way, by scorning his enemy/opponent/victim. Yet the mock-aggressive, conciliatory laughter of his (potential) victim serves to “erase” this distance. In this double-function of laughter, to create and (simultaneously) to erase distance, perhaps we see already a suggestion of what will become the fundamentally double-textual or “bisociative” nature of the

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps one could even approach Freud from this direction: beginning with laughter as a “distancing force” within the psyche, one whose ultimate purpose is to “correct,” “cure,” “regenerate” the psyche.

comic stimulus, and/or the comic response—of the comic as simultaneously stimulus and response, cause and effect. For laughter is at once the shocking force of incongruity and differentiation, in its violent and unexpected eruption, and the pleasurable force of conciliation or normalization, of erasing differences, regenerating unity and (individual and social) harmony. Do we then see this latter mode of comic laughter as its more “ironic” and encompassing mode (attitude) of “not taking seriously”? The mode or perspective that “remains” once the world has been deflated, all the meaning emptied out of it?<sup>26</sup> If so, if the tranquil (monk-like) mode of “not taking the world too seriously” is the most excessive and encompassing mode, then perhaps the shock of comic incongruity breaks the illusion of such a peaceful “oneness,” forcing it to regenerate itself.

### (In)corporeal Noise and the Textual Surface(s)

Coming back then to the anthropological perspective, to the “prehistoric history of the comic,” we could easily correlate the comic “text” and/or comic “laughter” with the raw energy or force of noise, taken now as the biological life-force of the human (mammalian) body, the force of and for *survival* (or *regeneration*).<sup>27</sup> The “comic sense” is commonly understood as being above all a *pleasurable* sense, a feeling of bodily well-being that can overcome all problems and obstacles (e.g. by defeating one’s enemies), an exuberance.<sup>28</sup> This then could be interpreted as the noise that overflows in both laughter and the comic “effect”—that is, even when our laughter, prompted by the comic stimulus, remains silent. Nietzsche and Bataille, in their anthropologically-grounded philosophies of human existence as a state of exuberance and excess, foreground laughter and/as a kind of radically excessive, playful, ultimately ironic life-attitude which “does not take things seriously.”<sup>29</sup> This view of “the comic” could easily be elaborated by taking noise (on the cybernetic model) as an excessive “signal” that is simultaneously nonsensical and meaning-

<sup>26</sup> See earlier notes on Kant (5, 12), Kierkegaard (17), Rabelais and Beckett (22).

<sup>27</sup> See the early discussion and notes 5, 6, 7..

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Morreall’s theory of laughter as “the physical activity that is caused by, and which gives expression to, the feelings produced by a sudden psychological shift in a pleasurable direction,” as being “due to the sudden and pleasurable change of state which accompanies the release of tension [...]” (Mulkay 102). Also see Plessner’s phenomenological view of laughter as being (like crying) a bodily state which takes us to/beyond (and thus lets us experience) our own bodily limits.

<sup>29</sup> See note 2 on Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and the whole issue of “seriousness.” Bataille, like his “master” Nietzsche, is essentially tragic-comic; the “laughter” of *Inner Experience* and other writings is ultimately one way of gaining access to the clearest or truest perspective on things, of “communicating” with (reaching) the sacred. (Other ways include excessive eroticism and ritual sacrifice.) See e.g. Bataille’s “Two fragments of laughter,” *Guilty*, with its “Correlation of Rupture in Laughter with Communication and Knowledge (in Laughter, Sacrificial Anguish, Erotic Pleasure, Poetry and Ecstasy)” (Botting 59). The over-perspective of Bataillan “sovereign” and Nietzschean “overman” is also (always already) permeated by a kind of (textual) incongruity.

regenerating, and as a chaotic *force* (on the Serresian non-linear dynamic model) that underlies or constitutes both laughter and the comic effect of the “disrupted text” (darkly or blankly chaotic text).

However, we still seem to be left with the duality, here, of comic noise as force (as actual laughter) and as the mere virtual-laughter “effect” of the (linguistic and/or social) textual surface. While the Serresian order/disorder duality is also to be read as a meaning/background noise duality, while the reversion of hyper-order to primordial disorder in a kind of Gestalt-switch may seem to place us on a (virtual) surface, this model is still in the first place a dynamic one, a description in terms of forces and flows. Ideally one might want to bring Deleuze into play here, combining his perspective with that of Serres, inasmuch as Deleuze is explicitly concerned with simulacra, surfaces, virtuality, and in effect projects the Nietzschean interplay of forces onto a “metaphysical surface”; the Nietzschean subtext of Deleuze also brings with it (potentially at least) an explicit concern with irony and the problem of “seriousness.”<sup>30</sup> Deleuze claims that “*humor* is the art of surfaces and of the complex relation between the two surfaces” (*Logic of Sense* 248) yet also gives us, in *The Logic of Sense*, a fully biological-anthropological view of human body. This serves as the basis for his “bio-genetic” theory of (human) language, a picture rather different from, yet still comparable to, that offered us by Serres. Deleuze traces language back to its “origin” in corporeal or inner-body noise:

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<sup>30</sup> In his first Appendix to *The Logic of Sense*, “The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy,” Deleuze follows Nietzsche in “overturning” Plato (“Eternal return and simulation”). For Plato only “true images” point upward to the transcendent *eidos*, forms/ideas that give them an ontological foundation, while “false images” (mere fantasies) have no such corresponding *eidos*; for Deleuze *all* “images” are in effect “false” (mere “simulacra”) since there *are* no transcendent *eidos*. Or, we can no longer distinguish between Plato’s *eidos* “on top” and his “mere shadows” on the bottom. In the Introduction to *Repetition and Difference*: “The first way of overturning the law is ironic, where irony appears as the art of principles [texts], of ascent towards the principles and of overturning principles [by showing they are ‘secondary, derived, borrowed’]. The second is humour [mimicking, parodying of actual people and events through a ‘too-perfect attention to detail’], which is an art of consequences and descents, of suspensions and falls. Must we understand that repetition appears in both this suspense and this ascent, as though existence recommences and ‘reiterated’ itself once it is no longer constrained by laws? Repetition belongs to humour and irony; it is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsume under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws” (*Repetition and Difference* 5). Hamlet, in an ironic but also humorous/parodic mode that suggests Bakhtinian carnival, also overturns Plato and thus the “highest principles” by showing that the latter are “only secondary”: “H: ‘O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.’ G: ‘Which dreams indeed are ambition; for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.’ H: ‘A dream itself is but a shadow.’ R: ‘Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow’s shadow.’ H: ‘Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars’ shadows. Shall we to the court? For, by my fay, I cannot reason” (Mack 1572). See Rabelais on reading “The Methods of Reasoned Analysis” backwards, a move that suggests the hyper-redundancy of “excessive logic” (note 22). Shakespeare’s “reasoning” here is a form of metaphysical wit or *play* which we could hardly take less “seriously” than Plato’s own “metaphysical play”—one game is the simulacrum of the other. Hamlet’s ironic-parodic use of the (“serious” philosophical) term “reason” here echoes Deleuze’s “ascending irony” as well as the “fundamental” strategies of Rabelais, Poe, Nietzsche, Beckett *et al.*

Henceforth, everything takes place in the depth, beneath the realm of sense, between two nonsenses of pure noise—the nonsense of the body and of the splintered word, and the nonsense of the block of bodies or of inarticulate words. [...] And then the first stage of the dynamic genesis appears. The depth is clamorous [...] with] the shattered sounds of internal objects, and also the inarticulate howl-breaths of the body without organs which respond to them— [...] speaking will be fashioned out of eating and shitting, language and its univocity will be sculpted out of shit [...]. (*The Logic of Sense* 186-93)

This nonsense of the “splintered word” and of “inarticulate words,” described by Deleuze *via* the discourse of schizophrenic and catatonic patients who are expressing their sense of their own bodies, could be the nonsense (or absurdity) of two types of “incongruous” or “disrupted texts,” now given a deep-body “ground” where they may lie in closer proximity to the primitive force of laughter. But in his genetic (developmental) theory of human language here, Deleuze pictures this inner noise as moving out toward what now is called not the corporeal but the “incorporeal surface” (for the “body” is also a “body without organs”); we pass through the stages of “voice” and then “speech” to reach that “metaphysical surface” onto which is “projected” the “infinitive verb,” a model of purely open and “disjunctive” meaning-possibilities.<sup>31</sup> This horizontal surface<sup>32</sup> is also a *virtual* surface, a *simulacrum*; the inner-noise of the bodily depths is *projected* onto it. In one way we might correlate this incorporeal surface which “displays” the virtually infinite meanings of the verb with Serresian hyper-order, the redundancy of blank chaos; similarly, we might correlate the corporeal inner-noise with initial disorder or dark chaos. In this way we could think of both as possessing a certain “comic incongruity.” Yet Deleuze says that “*humor* is the art of surfaces and of the complex relation between the two surfaces”—here we won’t think of inner-body forces at all but of a purely virtual “world,” one on whose “surface” could be inscribed various forms of linguistic incongruity; indeed in this book “nonsense” and the “absurd” are often discussed in terms which assimilate structural linguistics to the virtuality of geometry and mathematics.

And if this inner-noise correlates with the wild (discordant and perhaps perverse) energy of a Freudian *eros*, the (in)corporeal surface is *silent*, as we might expect of a purely virtual reality. Indeed it correlates with *thanatos* or the death-instinct:

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<sup>31</sup> “Disjunctive” yet “infinitely open”: the verb “to go” can mean “x” or “y” or ..., taken just as a verb; but if we consider all the possible nouns we could use here (“A goes,” “B goes,”...) the field opens out considerably. (Note the structuralist influence of Saussure *et al.*) But these are simply ways of expanding on the *infinitive*’s initial sense: not “A goes” or “B goes” but “to go”; it “opens out” horizontally.

<sup>32</sup> See the previous note.

Speaking, in the complete sense of the word, presupposes the verb and passes through the verb, which projects the mouth onto the metaphysical surface, filling it with the ideal events of this surface. The verb is the “verbal representation” in its entirety, as well as the highest *affirmative power of the disjunction* (univocity, with respect to that which diverges) [...]. The verb, however, is *silent*, and we must take literally the idea that Eros is sonorous and the death instinct is silence [...]. (*The Logic of Sense* 241)

Here I only point toward possible future directions for unraveling the mystery of “the comic”—directions in which it might be “unraveled,” in two or three dimensions of textual or pre-textual space. The comic field is so vast as to be (virtually) incomprehensible, or at least indeterminate—its boundaries cannot be easily defined. I have mainly suggested a Serresian approach in terms of noise, as this may be a way to catch the sense of laughter as noisy force, the sense of comic effect as both noisy and silent force, noisy and silent laughter. But silence, fitting as it does the notion of writing, textuality and (merely virtual) textual surfaces, also suggests the Deleuzian conception of “humor” as a relation or play between surfaces. Deleuze’s subtext in the above passage is Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; the silence of his “verb” is tied to that of the ultimate release-of-tension, relaxation and vacation (*vacances*), the ultimate “laughter” which is death itself. Death as the ultimate mode of the comic: we think again of Kantian laughter as an opening up of emptiness, the Schlegelian “absolute transcendence of irony,” a Nietzschean “Spirit of Levity” that in effect encompasses the world “from within” by “not taking it seriously.” But also of two explosive outbursts, two roars of laughter, the shocking and incongruous laughter of the attacking hominid and of his conciliating victim who do and do not care about life-and-death, whose primary concern is the interface or surface between life-death, a silence perhaps between two noises.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> But this “surface,” in order to intervene or interface, would need two sides; it could not, like Borges’ disk, have only one. Nietzsche places laughter at the interface of human-superhuman (*ubermensch*) or (perhaps the same thing) of human/non-human (human/pre-human, living/inorganic, life/death): “O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter [*ich horte ein Lachen, das keines Menschen Lachen war*]; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still. My longing for this laughter gnaws at me; oh, how do I bear to go on living!” (Kaufmann 272, *KSA* 24, 202) One of the issues which may seem to arise in the context of this paper, but which I have not attempted to explore here, is this: the interface between human/non-human taken now as human/machine (or “cyborg”) interface. The cybernetic and mechanical basis of Serresian theory, reinforced by the key role of repetition and redundancy in (Freud and) Bergson as well as Serres (and Deleuze), suggests this might be a key consideration for understanding “the comic.” Bergson indeed says “*Nous rions toutes les fois qu’une personne nous donne l’impression d’une chose. [...] Cet inflexionnement de la vie dans la direction de la mécanique est ici la vraie cause du rire [...]. C’est que la vie bien vivante ne devrait jamais se repeter. La ou il y a répétition, similitude complète, nous soupçonnons toujours du mécanisme fonctionnant derrière le vivant.*” (See notes 19, 22 and the earlier discussion of Bergson.) Thinking too of laughter as

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exploding life-force, perhaps thus as exhaustion of life-force, and of that excessive mode of not taking life seriously which may suggest the perspective of/from death itself, the question now becomes: does this Bergsonian "comic suspicion" of "the mechanical functioning behind life" (my emphasis), prompted by all forms of "repetition" and "complete similitude," imply or presuppose that the human/organic "exceeds" (encompasses) the non-human/inorganic, or is it the other way around? Or: does the human/organic move from a state of non-repetition (Bergson's condition of life, "*C'est que la vie bien vivante ne derrait jamais se repeter*") to one of mechanical repetition (perhaps Serresian hyper-repetition as the disorder of terminal equilibrium), or do we move in the other direction? (Or both simultaneously?) And is "the comic effect" then the "incongruity" of this move going in either direction?

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