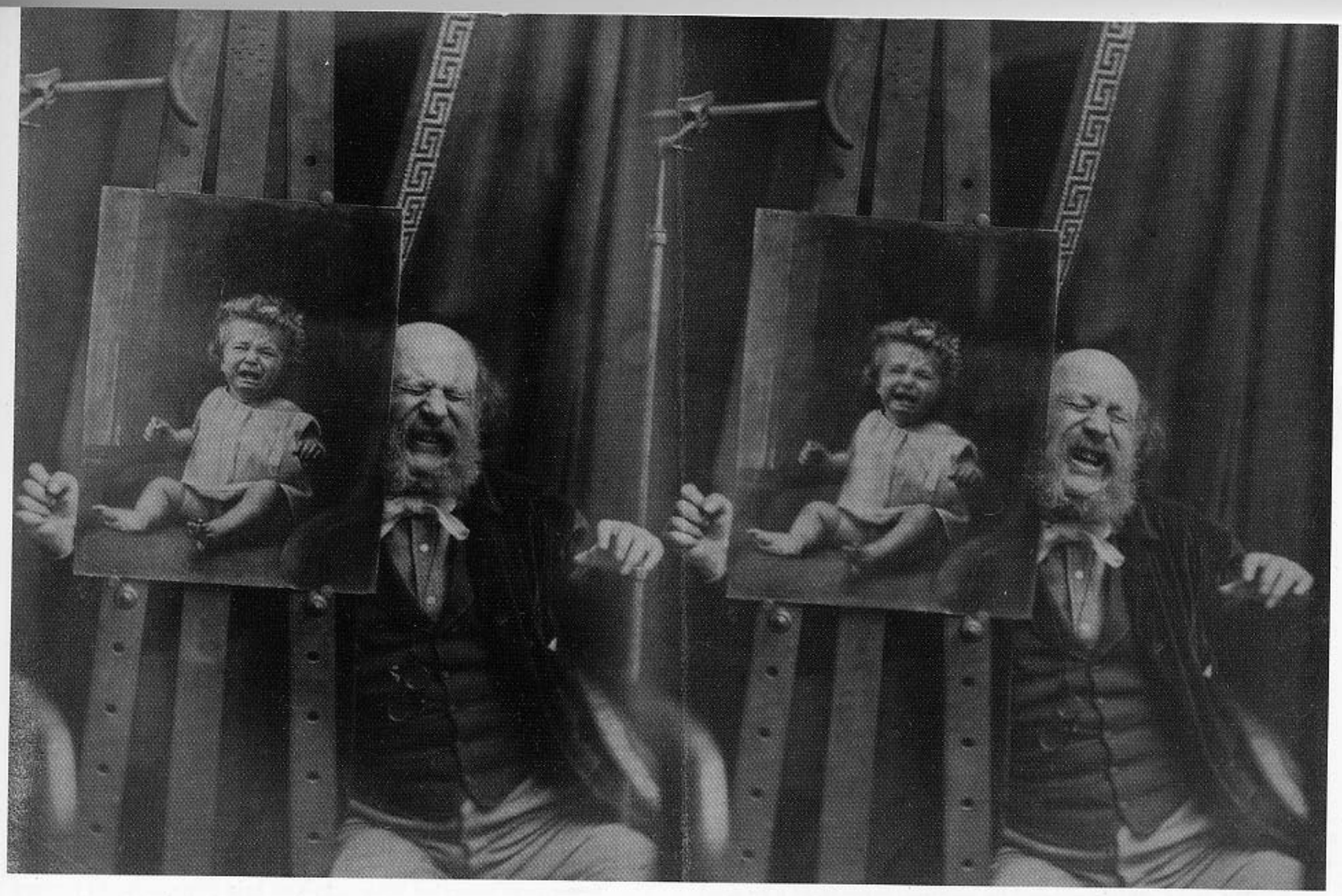


TEARS OF LAUGHTER

CHRISTOPHER TURNER

"Between the expressions of laughter and weeping there is no difference in the motion of the features," Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his posthumously published *Treatise on Painting*, "either in the eyes, mouth or cheeks." With the difference between the physical expression of emotions so subtle, artists had a challenge on their hands: How to differentially depict, in the words of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the "frantic joy of a Bacchante and the grief of a Mary Magdalen"?

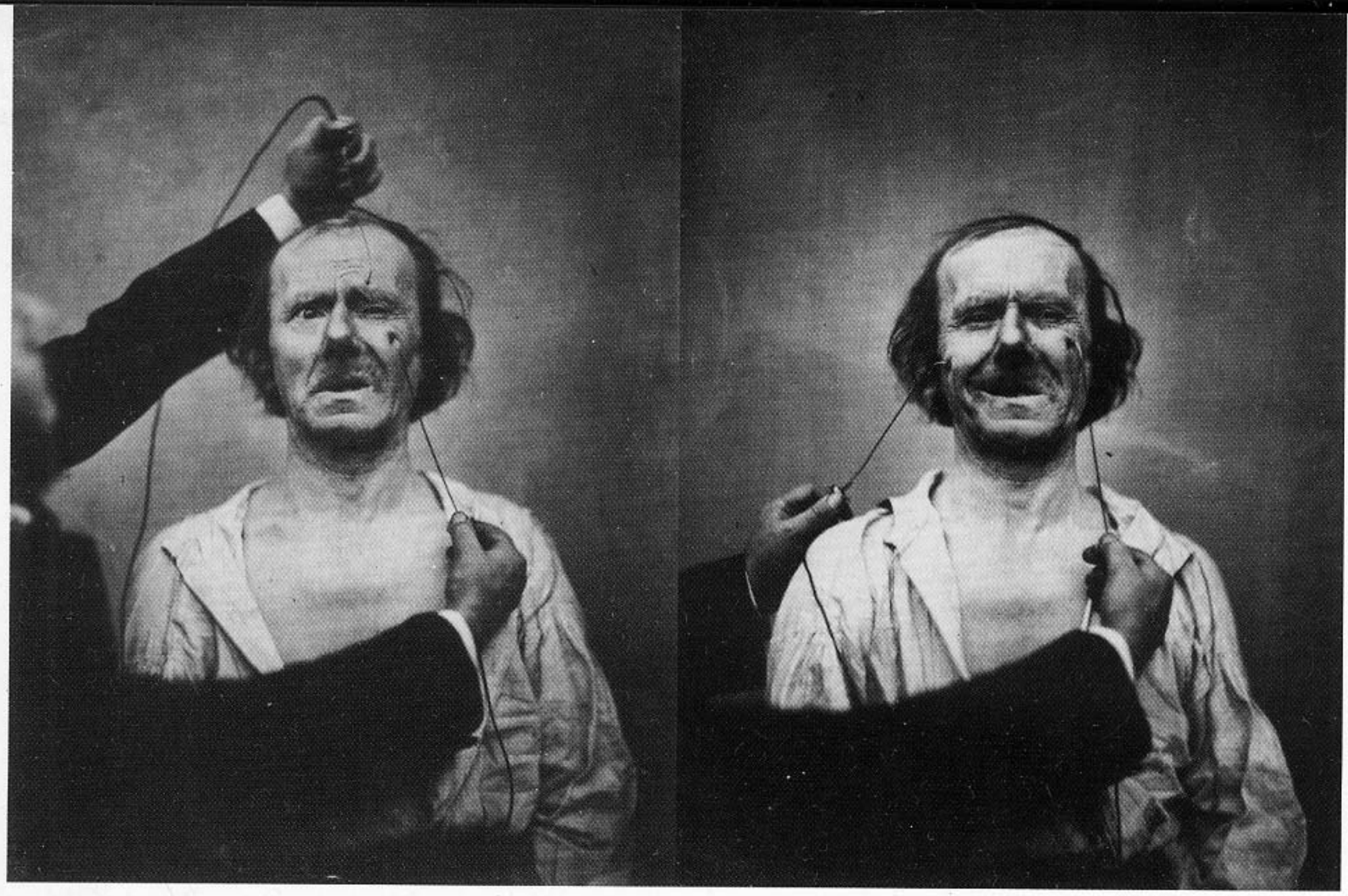
To do so, artists relied on a staged iconography of expression and posture, codified in handbooks such as Charles Le Brun's *A Method to Learn to Design the Passions* (1667), in which Le Brun adapted Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* (1649) into a visual lexicon of twenty-four emotions. Here, a menacing portrayal of the laughing face immediately precedes the illustration of a crumpled, crying one, almost as if the expressions were modulations of one another, but with certain differences artificially accentuated, especially in relation to the ruffling of the brow. Thus Le Brun created a stylized, histrionic vocabulary of the passions easily recognizable as tragic or comic on both canvas and stage.

Despite such expert guidance in the depiction of laughter, in the history of art there are very few images of people laughing. Le Brun, who was painter to the king at Versailles, systematized the passions amid an atmosphere of courtly restraint, as if by categorizing these turbulent invasions he could tame them.

Laughter was considered vulgar in the eighteenth century as well, a variant of contempt, and decorum dictated that it should be strictly regulated. In a letter to his son in 1748, the moralist Lord Chesterfield proclaimed, "In my mind there is nothing so illiberal and so ill-bred as audible laughter," especially by virtue of "the disagreeable noise that it makes, and the shocking distortion of the face that it occasions." In his *Laocoön* (1766), Gotthold Lessing describes a portrait of the philosopher and libertine Julien Offroy de La Mettrie, in which he is depicted as Democritus, or the "laughing philosopher." For Lessing, the philosopher's gaping mouth is a worrying stain; the laugh degenerates into a foppish and repulsive grin, which fills him, he writes, with "disgust and horror." In *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), William Hogarth complained, in a similar vein, that "excessive laughter, oftener than any other, gives a sensible face a silly or disagreeable look, as it is apt to form regular pain lines about the mouth, like a parenthesis, which sometimes appears like crying."

Nearly half a millennium after Leonardo, contemporary scientists have discovered a neurological explanation for the affinity between physical expressions and emotional sensations of joy and grief. In the centuries between, scientists took over where artists left off in urgently pursuing the

above: The Swedish photographer Oscar Rejlander mimicking the facial expression of *Ginx's Baby*, as his portrait of a screaming infant was known. On the back of these photographs, which were taken for Charles Darwin, Rejlander wrote: "There I laughed! Ha! Ha! Ha!... In the other I cried—e, e, e, e, ... Yet how similar the expression." Courtesy Darwin Archives.



question. Charles Darwin notably fused the two approaches, using the art of photography to further his scientific inquiry. In order to formulate *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) with scientific veracity, Darwin broke with both schematic artistic representations of the passions and aristocratic conventions preventing extreme displays of emotion. He hoped to use photography to portray emotional subtleties—like the close similarity between the laughing and crying face—with a renewed realism.

Capturing particular expressions, inherently transitory, volatile, and ephemeral, at first seemed almost impossible with the long exposure time photography then required. (Eadweard Muybridge had only just begun his experiments recording sequences of a horse in motion the year *Expression* came out.) Darwin described the spasms a laughing fit provoked, which would have rendered any photograph a blur: "During excessive laughter the whole body is often thrown backward and shakes, or is almost convulsed. The respiration is much disturbed; the head and face become gorged with blood, with the veins distended; and the orbicular muscles are spasmodically contracted in order to protect the eyes. Tears are freely shed," he noted, appending a key observation, "Hence... it is scarcely possible to point out any difference between the tear-stained face of a person after a paroxysm of excessive laughter and after a bitter crying-fit."

Darwin found a ready-made solution to the problem of how to capture raw expression in a set of extraordinary pictures taken by the French doctor Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne and reproduced in his book, *Mécanismes de la physiognomie humaine* (1862). Duchenne practiced medicine at the Salpêtrière hospital, where he embarked on an infamous series of experiments in an effort to explain the workings of facial musculature. His process involved administering a constant flow of electric current to human facial muscles, which contorted the face into various expressions and held them long enough for photographs to be taken.

Duchenne took as his primary subject "an old, toothless man, with a thin face, whose features, without being absolutely ugly, approached ordinary triviality and whose facial expression was in perfect agreement with his inoffensive character and his restricted intelligence." The man suffered from palsy, which paralyzed his face and made him impervious to the pain of the electricity. Using his electrical devices, Duchenne could "fake" emotions in his subject, activating and fixing expressions without inflicting torture, as though he were, as he put it, "working with a still irritable cadaver." The results are disturbing; the use of electrodes, and the hands that hold them in place toward the bottom of the frame, create a distinct impression of sadism. Darwin must have noted this, for in his book, the hands are only visible in the plates depicting benign expressions such as the smile;

above: Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne stimulating facial muscles with electrodes in order to illustrate certain expressions. The subject suffered from palsy and had no feeling in his face. In the right-hand photograph two different emotions are illustrated in a single expression: "moderate crying" on the left, and "fake laughter" on the right.

opposite: Joseph Wolf's drawings of a monkey, which he entitled *Cynopithecus niger, in a Placid Condition*, and *The same titillated by sitting on a crawling turtle*. Both were reproduced in Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Courtesy Darwin Archives.

indeed, for the picture Darwin used to illustrate horror and agony, he instructed the engraver to remove the menacing electrical apparatus and the hands that press it to the skin.

In one of Duchenne's pictures, which Darwin refers to but does not reproduce (Plate 48 of the *Mécanismes*), Duchenne galvanized each side of his subject's—or victim's—face with a different expression: one half is given a fake smile; the other is made to weep. Duchenne's intention was to show that the similarity of the two expressions stemmed from the underlying musculature in the marked naso-labial fold, which runs from the wings of the nostrils to the corners of the mouth, wrinkling both cheeks, and which is a characteristic of both the laughing and crying face. Darwin was apparently less than impressed with the results of this particular experiment: "Almost all those (viz. nineteen out of twenty-one persons) to whom I showed the smiling half of the face instantly recognized the expression," Darwin wrote, "but, with respect to the other half, only six persons out of twenty-one recognized it—that is, if we accept such terms as 'grief,' 'misery,' 'annoyance,' as correct."

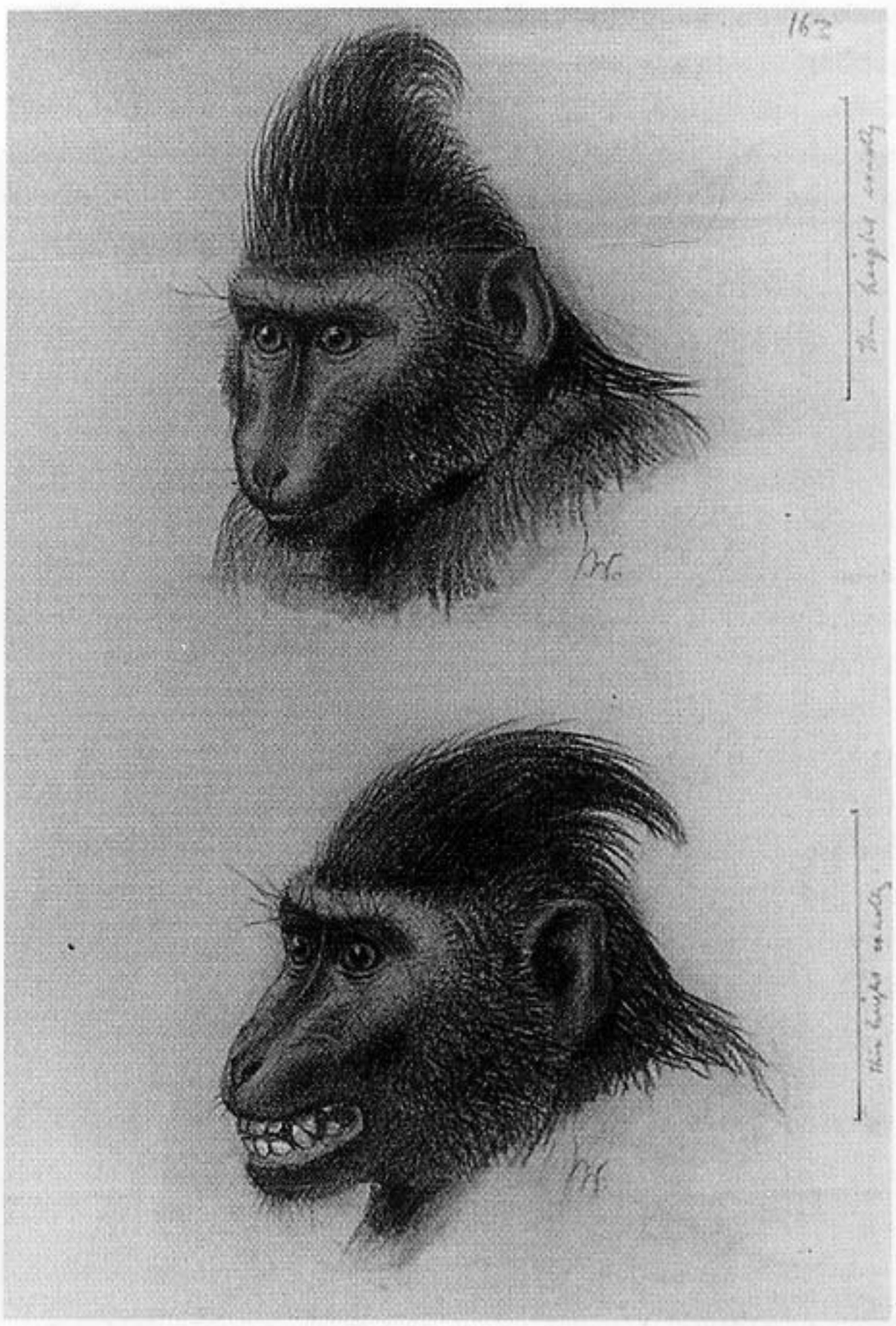
Darwin then turned to the Swedish photographer Oscar Rejlander, who taught photography to Julia Margaret Cameron and Lewis Carroll, to investigate these similarities and differences. Rejlander was famous for his large, allegorical photographs and self-portraits; he once portrayed himself in a toga and with a leering grin as Democritus, the laughing philosopher who had so offended Lessing. At the invitation of Darwin, Rejlander posed for four photographs in *Expression*. He even had his moustache trimmed so as not to obstruct the pantomimic grimaces and decorous gestures he acted out for the camera. But his most famous contribution was his picture of a screaming child, known as *Ginx's Baby*, illustrating the chapter on "Low spirits, anxiety, grief, dejection, despair." Rejlander sold 300,000 prints of this photograph, which almost single-handedly kept his foundering studio afloat.

In the Darwin archive at the University of Cambridge there is a photograph of Rejlander next to *Ginx's Baby*. The famous image rests on an easel and by it sits the photographer, mimicking his subject's expression, his arm around the picture of the baby. Another, almost identical picture appears alongside it, like a stereoscopic slide. "Fun, only," he wrote on the back of the photograph, "There I laughed! Ha! Ha! Ha! Violently—In the other I cried—e, e, e, e,... Yet how similar the expression." It is almost impossible to tell them apart.

Also in the Darwin archive is a slide produced by the London Stereoscopic Company that depicts two sculptures by Adolphe Itasse of babies in bonnets, one crying, the other laughing. Normally, a stereoscopic slide would contain two identical images, which would create a 3-D effect when seen through the viewfinder. Here, however, the two sculptures would appear superimposed, their expressions blurring into each other. The composite image would flicker between the two emotional extremes like a hologram.

Why would the uncanny similarity between the expressions of laughter and crying have so intrigued Darwin? In short, it helped confirm his theory of evolution. Darwin thought that monkeys, like humans, laughed. In this, he disagreed with Aristotle, who claimed that humans were the only creatures who laughed. Darwin's purpose was to show that the expressive facial muscles had evolved from animals and that therefore man was not a separate, divinely created species. Duchenne kept a pet monkey and reported to Darwin that he'd often seen it smile, but Darwin relied on his own empirical experiments to argue that primates laughed as well. "If a young chimpanzee be tickled—the armpits are particularly sensitive to tickling, as in the case of our children—a more decided chuckling or laughing sound is uttered," Darwin wrote, "Young Orangs, when tickled, likewise grin and make a chuckling sound and . . . their eyes grow brighter."

Along the way, however, Darwin noted that apes didn't shed any tears when they laughed. To prove that tears of laughter were a definitively human feature, Darwin, a keen armchair anthropologist, sent a questionnaire to a number of colonial functionaries in the far outreaches of the British Empire, asking "whether tears are freely shed during excessive laughter by most of the races of men." The answer was affirmative. Sir Andrew Smith had seen "the painted face of a Hottentot woman all furrowed with tears after a fit of laughter"; Rajah C. Brooke reported that the Dyaks of Borneo had an expression which meant "we nearly made



tears from laughter"; and Mr. Swinhoe informed him that the Chinese, more curiously, "when suffering from deep grief, burst out into hysterical fits of laughter."

Darwin's efforts to wring various emotions from our evolutionary forefathers were tireless. As well as tickling apes under the armpits, he gave snuff to chimpanzees to make them sneeze, made faces at orangutans, and watched baboons recoil in horror from a stuffed snake. One such experiment involved hiding a turtle under a heap of straw in London Zoo's monkey cage. Darwin was hoping to shock the monkeys, thereby evoking expressions of astonishment or terror. The animal illustrator Joseph Wolf, who Darwin claimed had "an eye like photographic paper," was on hand to record the results: "The Monkeys suspected something and kept looking down from on high," Wolf wrote in his memoir, "Clever fellows! I shall never forget that. The keeper then retired, and presently the heap of straw began to move. The turtle came out, and instead of showing fear, the Monkeys crept nearer. The back-crested ape came and looked at it, and walked in front of the turtle as it crept under him. Finally he went and sat on the Turtle. Darwin was much amused, and asked for a drawing of the incident."

The sketch of the scene is illustrated in *Expression* as *Cynopithecus niger, in a placid condition, and the same titillated by sitting on a crawling turtle*. The monkey who is riding the turtle is depicted with his impressive crest of hair flattened back, and with the corners of his mouth drawn backwards to reveal a frightening set of chattering teeth with which, according to Darwin, he was making a "slight jabbering noise." Only "those familiar with the animal," Darwin admitted, could be absolutely sure he was not baring his teeth but grinning with happiness. Years later Wolf added a skeptical note to his sketch: "I never believed the fellow was laughing, although Darwin said he was."

. . .

Five years ago, at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, where Duchenne had distorted faces with a galvanized rod, Professor Yves Agid implanted an electrode into the brain of a 65-year-old woman in the hope of discovering a cure for her Parkinson's disease. The electric current would sometimes alleviate her symptoms, but this time something quite unexpected happened. A melancholy expression came over the patient, her head slumped forward, and she tilted to the right. She began sobbing uncontrollably. "I no longer wish to live, to see anything, hear anything, feel anything," she wept, "I'm fed up with life." With another flick of the switch her dark mood was immediately lifted. She smiled and said apologetically, "What was all that about?"

In Los Angeles, California, around the same time, another surgeon, Itzhak Fried, inserted the tip of an electrode into the skull of a 16-year-old girl to investigate her severe case of epilepsy. When a low voltage was applied she began to smile. As it increased she started giggling, until finally she fell about in paroxysms of laughter. "You guys are just so funny," she guffawed at the team of scientists in white lab coats, who began to crack up too because her laughter was contagious.

By poking about in this adolescent girl's head, neuroscientists had discovered, by mistake, what they called the "laughter center," a piece of the brain roughly one inch square, in which our sense of humor seems to be located. The 65-year-old woman's mind revealed what one might term, by extension, the "crying center," source of all our misery and grief. It turns out these points abut each other in the left-frontal lobe of the brain, and their close proximity provided neuroscientists with a clue as to why laughing and crying are so interconnected.

Whereas Darwin had sought to explain away the confluence in terms of excess nervous energy—"It is probably due to the close similarity of the spasmodic movements caused by these widely different emotions," he wrote, "that hysteric patients alternately cry and laugh with violence, and that young children sometimes pass suddenly from the one to the other state"—contemporary scientists have found an answer in the very bedrock of the brain. Among the sources of their discovery is a rare disorder known as Pathological Laughter and Crying (PLC), which was first diagnosed in the early twentieth century. The condition illustrates the jumble of the two emotions in startlingly graphic form: patients suffering from PLC suddenly burst into Tourettic fits of giggles or tears.

One well-documented case of PLC is that of a 51-year-old landscape gardener, referred to simply as C.B. by his doctor, Antonio Damasio. C.B. suffered a mild stroke in 1999 that damaged both his brainstem and the cerebellum, which neurologists now believe controls the laughter and crying centers, adjusting behavior to the appropriate context. As a result, he'd laugh riotously in response to sad news and sob irrepressibly in response to a joke—or, indeed, in response to anything at all. A laughing fit would sometimes turn into a crying one, but never vice versa, and the patient noted that after a long bout of laughter or crying, he would eventually feel correspondingly jolly or sad. Neuroscientists concluded that "feelings were being produced, consonant with the emotional expression, and in the absence of any appropriate stimulus." In other words, one can manufacture or summon up an emotion, much as an actor might, by assuming the desired expression. If this is so, one can only imagine the internal pleasures or horrors experienced, while scientists and philosophers preoccupied themselves with the surface of things, by Duchenne's paralyzed old man.

opposite: A stereoscopic slide of two sculptures by Adolphe Itasse. The laughing and crying infants would blur together when looked at through the viewfinder. Courtesy Darwin Archives.

137—LAUGHING AND CRYING, BY ITASSE, FRANCE.

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION, 1871. 64

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STIMULI ELICITING SMILING AND LAUGHING IN CHILDREN AT DIFFERENT AGES

AGE	STIMULI ELICITING SMILING	STIMULI ELICITING LAUGHTER
Birth	Stimulation of erogenous zones; Intra-organic stimulation; Tickling, shaking, patting; Gentle rocking, turning on stomach	—
First Month	State of comfort on waking; Normal digestive function; Tickling under chin; Nursing	—
First Week	Tickled on Cheek; Comfort; Father	
Second Week	Preceding regurgitation; Bright light	—
Third Week	Persons	Nursing
Fourth Week	Contentment; Talking or mimicry; Touch of nipple on cheek; Hand and arm shaken playfully; Curtain drawn back from cradle	—
Second Month	State of comfort; Adult smiles, domestic baby talk; Exteroceptive stimuli substituted for intraorganic ones	Laughing, prattle, and comfort
Fifth Week	Dropping asleep after feeding; During sleep; Pleasant looks; Physical comfort after sleep	—
Sixth Week	Persons; Squeaking sound; Pleasure when looking at mother	Persons; Incipient laugh
Eighth Week	Mood lasting all day; Rubbing with oil; Sweet high-pitched talk—lively face; Silver rattle; Social stimulation; Peek-a-boo (cloth over subject's face)	Artificial light; Tickling on belly; Varied motion of his own or another's body
Ninth Week	Mirror image	Presence of grown-ups; Taking nourishment
Third month	Friendly looks; Mirror image; Adult conversation; Mirror image of aunt; Pinch on nose or cheek; Rhythmical knee drop	Gestures; Social stimulation
Fourth Month	Nods, prattles, cuddling; Tumbling about; tossed in air; slid down knees; Sister's antics; Satiety; Sneeze; Pinafore over face withdrawn; Mirror image; Threatening head; Elevator play; Tickling	Boisterous play or frolic; Adult uncovered face and approached; Droll, meaningless sound; Mother saying things in a funny way; Mirror image; Threatening head
Fifth Month	High pitched question; Piano; Sister's antics; Aunt appearing frequently through closed doors; Good health and high spirits; Peek-a-boo (cloth between the examiner and the subject); Sudden reappearance from under table; Rhythmical hand clapping; Reappearance of examiner from cupboard; Special experimental apparatus	"Joy" stimulation; Rhythmical hand clapping; Rhythmical knee dropping; Elevator Play; Sudden reappearance of examiner from under table; Peek-a-boo; Tickling
Sixth Month	Kind smiling face; Peek-a-boo	Experimenting with own body; Frolic with father, later same day, seeing father; Teasing (pulling father's beard); Good health and high spirits; Smiles, nods, laughs, pats, tickles, jumping up and down, waving leaves, children jumping about, quick movements of toys or bright objects, near faces, kiss, children with balloons; When adults do; Sensations of laughter caused laughter; Great pleasure; Pulling sister's hair; Sudden movements of one's head, reappearance; Sudden movements of one's head with ducking; Rhythmic motions or sounds ending in a jolt; Hearing or trying to say "papa" or "poopoo"; Swinging or tossing to arms of another
Seventh Month	Coquetry; Child's name called by stranger; Gratified desire	Other's laughter; Looking sidelong; Pretending to disobey; Queer guttural sounds; Tickling; Outdoor; Expectation and surprise
Eighth Month	Special smile for friends	Sitting on a blanket in sun; Fruit juice; Bumps, if laughed with; Kitten (with fear signs also)
Ninth Month	—	New pleasing object; Creeping away from pursuers; Sudden reappearance of examiner from cupboard

AGE	STIMULI ELICITING SMILING	STIMULI ELICITING LAUGHTER
Tenth Month	—	Very little laughter because of interest in self-activity; Letting go after pulling herself up
Eleventh Month	Being allowed to walk; To attract attention to pleasure in a peach	Long strides of nurse; Being laughed at; Blowing whistle (sense of power); Grasping at image; Creeping toward object and being pulled back
Twelfth Month	—	Purely physical cause, tickling; Appearance of intelligence; Prospect of being nursed; Quick play-like movements of heavy adults; Disorderliness in hair or dress of others, especially superiors; New noises (thunder, gargling); Special experimental apparatus
One to Three Years	—	Social stimuli
Two to Five Years	Own success; Humorous situation or story; At others; When others smiled at him	Active play; Loud noise; Chair upset; Peculiar face or noise made by other child; Others laughing; Taught to make others laugh; Own mistake; Other's mistake; Unusual event and absurdities; Adult's suggestion in funny story; Physical movement; Physical movement and verbal movement
Three to Five Years	—	Motion by self, objects or others; Noises by self, objects, or others; Socially unacceptable situations; Grimaces by self or others; Inferiority of others; Pleasure in occupation or accomplishments; Appreciation of humor; Word play; Imitative laughter; Make believe; General well being
Five Years	—	Visual type of humor
Three to Six Years	Experimental situations involving: (*a*) surprise or defeated expectation; (*b*) Superiority and degradation; (*c*) Incongruity and contrast situations; (*d*) Social smile; (*e*) Relief from strain; (*f*) Play situations	Same
Seven Years	—	Transition to elementary play upon words
Eight Years	—	Misfortunes of others; fairy stories
Nine Years	—	Funny stories and jokes
Twelve Years	—	Exaggeration

from *Toronto University Studies Child Development Series, No. 7: A Study of Laughter in the Nursery School Child* (1936), by William E. Blatz, Kathleen Drew Allin, and Dorothy A. Millichamp

LAUGHTER, INTERRUPTED

"'Tis good to laugh at any rate," observed John Dryden, "and if a straw can tickle a man, it is an instrument of happiness." The inspiration for the commissioned artist projects presented on the following pages began with a discussion within our editorial group about the causes of laughter. Could we ask artists to devise a machine—a sort of post-Industrial Revolution version of Dryden's seventeenth-century piece of straw—that would act as an "instrument of happiness," or, more specifically, cause laughter? What might it look like? How would it work, and what types of laughter might it provoke? Anticipating that the assignment might simply produce a succession of glorified Rube-Goldbergian tickling machines, we abandoned the idea. The question of laughter types, however, stuck.

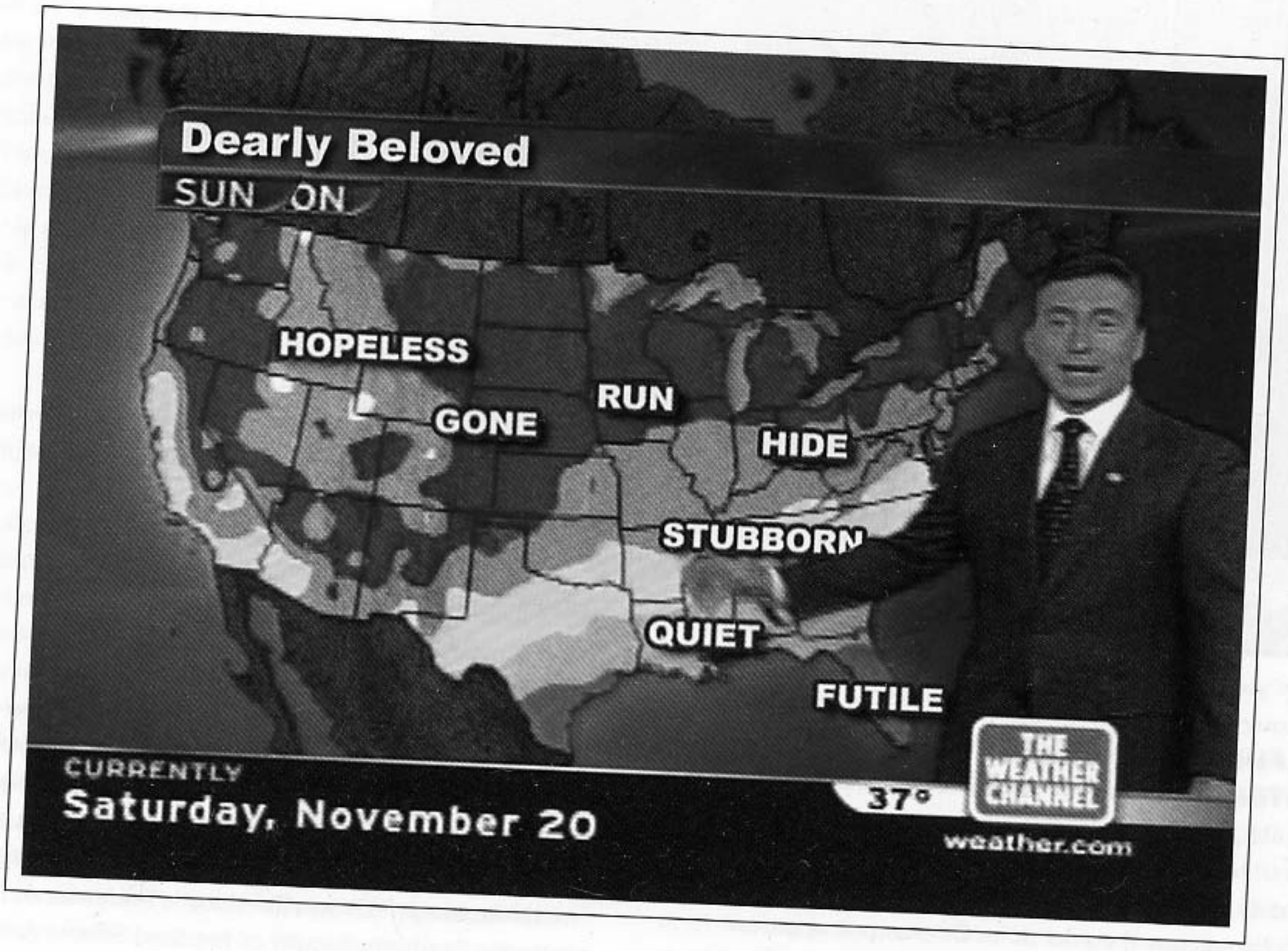
In the end, we invited a number of artists to choose a particular kind of laughter from a list provided by *Cabinet* and to deconstruct it—essentially to supply a "recipe" for the production of the given laughter type, a scenario that might suggest the conditions required for its creation without necessarily attempting to produce it in the readers themselves. What we hoped to get was something akin to explaining a joke without ever telling it. Perhaps predictably, no one chose "joyful." "Sinister," "ironic," and "nervous" also went unclaimed. But Paul Chan, Lawrence Weiner, Matt Freedman, and Steven Brower picked right up on "rueful," "cruel," "malicious," and "perverse," respectively, suggesting that the straight-faced take on laughter holds little appeal nowadays. (The artists who chose "drug-induced" and "hysterical," which might have lent a note of levity to our laughter types, are absent as their dogs ate their projects just before deadline.)

Artist: Paul Chan. *Laughter type: rueful*, 2005. Page 77

Artist: Lawrence Weiner. *Laughter type: cruel*, 2005. Page 86

Artist: Matt Freedman. *Laughter type: malicious*, 2005. Page 91

Artist: Steven Brower. *Laughter type: perverse*, 2005. Page 96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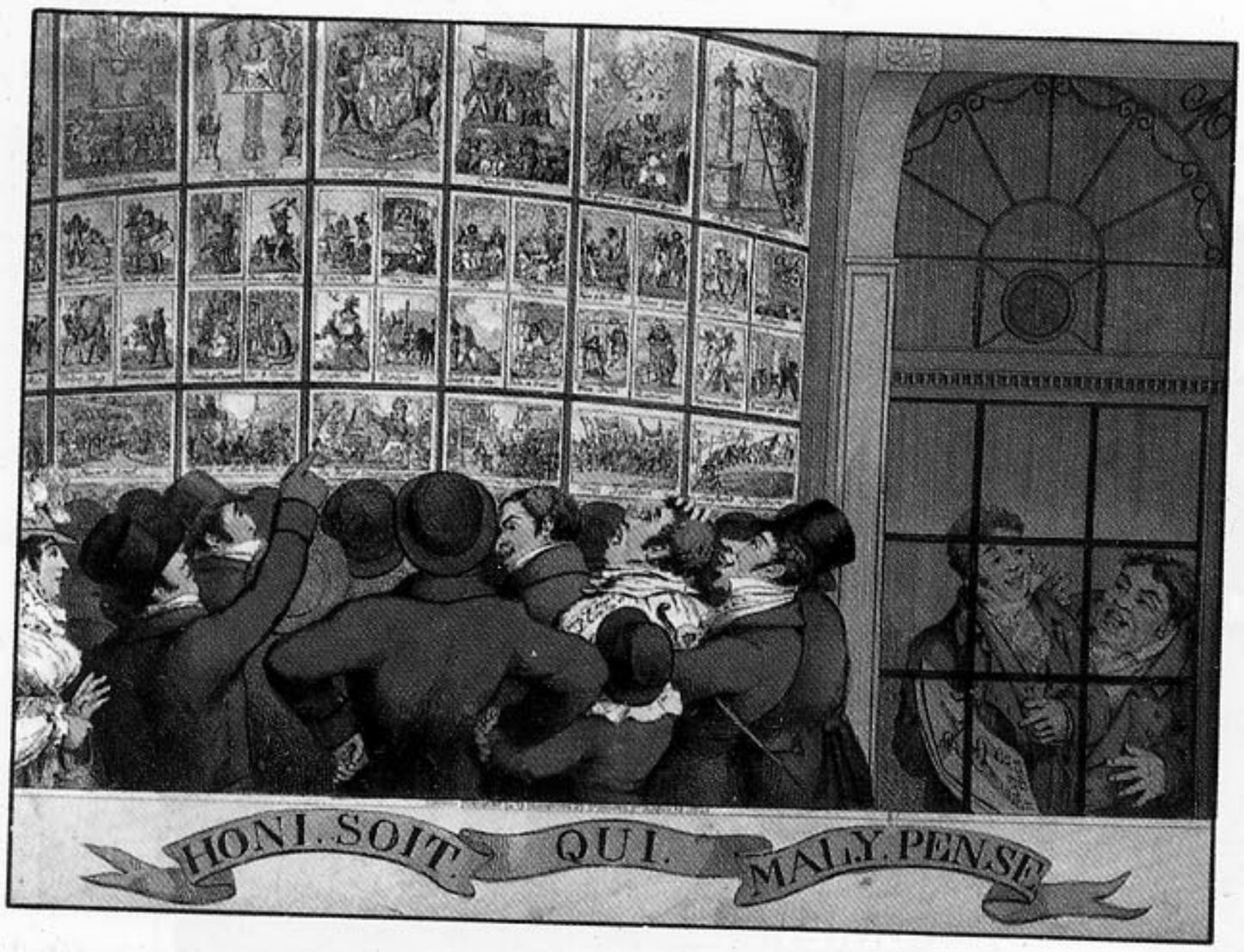

VERY FUNNY: AN INTERVIEW WITH SIMON CRITCHLEY

BRIAN DILLON

In the early 1590s, in one of his short prose fragments entitled *Paradoxes*, the poet John Donne took apparent exception to a certain traditional view of laughter as a sign of foolishness. The essay conjectures "That a Wise Man is Known by Much Laughing." Donne writes: "By much laughing thou mayst know there is a foole, not that the laughers are fooles, but that amongst them there is some fool at whome wise men laugh." The notion of a wise ribaldry is slyly overturned, however, in the second half of Donne's text. Laughter, it turns out, is merely a function of the "superstitious civility of manners": we laugh to let it be known to those around us that we recognize folly when we see it. Which is to say, according to a conventional affinity between laughter and abject deformity or even madness, that we become fools in order to prove ourselves wise.

True wisdom, philosophy has often insisted, is a sober state, not given to laughing at others, nor (perhaps especially) at itself. But there also exists a long history of philosophical reflections on humor: from Aristotle's lost sequel to the *Poetics* (in which he famously turned from tragedy to address the genre of comedy) to Freud's reflections on the obscene or tendentious witticism in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). Three broad philosophical models for humor can be adduced from this lineage: humor as the expression of a felt superiority, as the release of certain repressed psychological or social energies, and as the sudden, witty spark across the poles of an apparent contradiction or incongruity. In his book *On Humor*, the philosopher Simon Critchley offers both a history of this tradition and a meditation on the stark and less than consoling truths which humor teaches.

On Humor is in part, he says, the mirror image of his previous book on tragedy, mourning, and death, *Very Little, Almost Nothing*. But the latter is a curiously light-hearted book, the former actually rather dark: Critchley, in the end, is interested in what he calls, following Samuel Beckett, the "mirthless laugh." Simon Critchley is Professor of Philosophy in the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, New York. His other books include *The Ethics of Deconstruction* and *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. In 2004, he released a CD with John Simmons entitled *Humiliation*. His new book, *Things Merely Are*, was published in March 2005. Brian Dillon spoke to him in London.

How and why does a philosopher become interested in humor?

I've got a theory of impossible objects; I'm attracted to things that philosophy cannot appropriate or conceptualize. I've always been very drawn to the idea of philosophy, as a discourse, confronting things which resist it, and then watching what happens in that play of resistance and attraction. And the three things I've focused on in the last few years have been humor, poetry, and music. I've got different strategies of impossibility with all three, but one is the humor book: to write a book about humor from a philosophical point of view. Humor in itself as a social practice is what's interesting. I'm convinced that there are deep philosophical insights yielded through the practice of humor.

Has that opposition between humor and philosophy always been present in philosophy itself?

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above: George Humphrey's print shop in St. James Street, 12 August 1821. Caricature by Theodore Lane.

It's a very complicated issue, and there are different ways of telling the story. One story would be: the history of philosophy is the history of the repression of laughter, or the attempt to suppress laughter, and that suppression is obviously there in Plato, in the *Republic*, where the guardians of the polis are not meant to laugh. That continues into religious traditions, particularly monastic traditions, where it was initially proscribed for monks to laugh. So one philosophical strategy is the exclusion of laughter because laughter is animalistic and bestial. Another strategy is to contain it conceptually, to write about it, and there are some remarks in Aristotle: this is what we would have had if we had the second book of the *Poetics*, on comedy.

At the same time, the philosopher's seriousness is traditionally an object for ridicule.

Another story would be that nobody takes this story (of the philosophical exclusion of laughter) seriously; nobody in their right minds.... Zizek has a wonderful analysis of totalitarianism: the usual liberal analysis of totalitarianism is that it has to suppress laughter. Laughter is an unruly force, and the great hero of this would be Bakhtin, who in *Rabelais and his World* talks about the lower bodily stratum and the materiality of laughter; this is a site of popular resistance to totalitarianism. Zizek turns that on its head and says the thing about totalitarianism was that nobody ever took it seriously. It was a joke, and the only people who took it seriously were Western liberals who thought it was serious. You could say very similar things about other, seemingly totalizing discourses, like Christianity, which has been an unruly, comic discourse. Its official discourse might be one thing; but nobody took that seriously, and you can take this all the way back to Plato. Does one take Plato's exclusion of laughter seriously? It's really a moot point. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates is the great ironist, the great comedian in a way, and the levels of irony in the dialogues are infinite. They're certainly not meant to be read at face value at all; it's as likely that these things are meant to invite ribaldry and laughter.

Your book is specifically on humor, rather than laughter or the comic. Is it possible to separate these categories with any real rigor? What does the idea of humor offer the philosopher that these others don't?

This was initially going to be a book about comedy, but that seemed too broad a focus, and the really peculiar thing, working on non-serious topics, is that there are definitional problems. No one can agree what comedy is, what comedy is not, what the difference is between irony, humor, satire: these are incredibly contested and contestable topics. I chose humor, partly, because I can tell a clear historical story about it: humor begins as a concept in the English language at the end of the seventeenth century, with the shift from the medical theory of the four humors to the modern idea of humor. You can locate it, and its location is one that you can tell a story about in so far as the birth of humor as something jocular (and not as the doctrine of the humors in classical medicine) is tied to the development of what we now think of as liberal democracy. The first theorist of humor is Shaftesbury—in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, in 1711—and his idea is that humor is a form of common sense—*sensus communis*—and that it is something which civilized gentlemen in a democratic, Protestant culture have in common. What civilized gentlemen in a liberal democratic country share is this ability to exercise raillery.

There seems, in that case, to be an analogy between humor and taste, the other category in that period which is also thought of as natural or intrinsic to the individual, but is at the same time, of course, cultivated: a product of society and common sense.

The word that would translate humor in Latin in Cicero is *urbanitas*; so humor is urbane, it's urban, it's a consequence of city life, maybe even of metropolitan life. It's what civilized people do, share, have in common; so it's very much like taste. The rise of taste and the rise of humor: you could probably plot similar genealogies for both concepts. Certainly, in Shaftesbury, his whole aesthetic theory is a theory of taste. One place this goes is into Kant: taste for him is something which is artificial, cultivated, but has to be universalizable. There has to be a universal voice, as he puts it, at work in judgments of taste: which is another way of thinking about common sense; the universal voice would be common sense.

Is it possible to say how the shift is effected from humoral theory to a theory of humor? The two meanings seem to compete briefly in the seventeenth century. Why does the modern usage lose that earlier sense of physical, bodily or medical being?

The first recorded usage, according to the *OED*, which of course you should never believe, is in 1688. There's obviously a shift—in Elizabethan England, in Shakespeare or Jonson—from a man in his humor, in a certain mood, to something else. We know that shift happens in the seventeenth century, but I've got no idea why it happens and why it happens in one particular culture. I hesitate to say "in England." There is an idea of humor as an essentially English concept; various people make that claim, and the most famous of them is Diderot. In the article on humor in the *Encyclopédie*, he begins by saying that humor belongs essentially to the English mind: *l'esprit Anglais*. And then, as an example of English humor, he talks about Swift, who he doesn't seem to realise is the contrary of Englishness. There's a tradition of humor, with Shaftesbury in the eighteenth century, which is tasteful, urbane, refined, or Horatian—it's light, genteel—and against that you have another tradition of humor, embodied in Swift, which is Juvenalian, dark, brooding, cruel, vicious; and in that case it's Irish. The Anglo-Irish dynamics of humor are very

interesting in the way in which this language, English, is internally subverted by traditions of Irish satire. You can trace that, beginning with Swift, and going on to include Beckett, Flann O'Brien, and others.

You would, presumably, need to include Wilde in that tradition; though with Wilde you have a complicated relation to the idea of genteel English humor: his aphoristic dandyism is appropriated from a cultivated English wit, but is also a scurrilous subversion of its conventions. He seems to conflate the two figures that English culture would like to keep separate: the witty fop and the humorous clown. Can one maintain a distinction between wit and humor?

The genealogy of foppery: that would make a good research project. As for wit and humor: I don't think you can make a hard and fast distinction. One thing I discuss in the book is George Eliot's article on Heine: a brilliant piece, where she makes a distinction between the English and the Germans. I think one of the interesting things about humor is that the ugly issue of national identity surfaces in a very powerful way, and I think it should. I think we have an easy and complacent internationalism which simply doesn't acknowledge that we are, all of us, rooted in national traditions which are ugly and horrible and make us what we are. George Eliot divides it up into the English and the Germans, and she's thinking of wit as *Witz*, as the putting together of unlikes in a momentary likeness, and that producing a laugh. And that's indeed true; but then, that would also be true of humor or jokes. In terms of national characteristics, there's a powerful tradition of *Witz* in German, which begins with the German Romantics. It's also the word that Freud uses in his 1905 book on jokes. But, to make matters even worse, the Germanophones are taking the notion of *Witz* from the concept of *esprit*, which is what the French are meant to have; just think of Molière. So, according to this fantastic geography, what would distinguish the French and the English would be wit versus humor. My point is that in relation to nonserious concepts you can create all sorts of historical and geographical narratives in order to distinguish them, but basically they are just terribly muddled.

A good deal of critical or philosophical thinking about laughter seems to depend on this very idea of the actual, comic porousness of supposedly hard distinctions. Can you say something about the comedic opposition, for example, between thought and the body?

I think this distinction between thought and the body takes on a decisive form in modernity. Let's consider Descartes. Descartes looks out of his window in his *Meditations* and wonders to himself whether what he sees are human beings like himself or automata, robots, dolls, puppets. This is the seed of the problem of skepticism: how can I know that these people are robots or are humans? The philosophical operation of thought that gives birth to the notion of skepticism is a comic operation, and it's very similar to the operation that you find in Bergson's definition of comedy. Bergson has two formulations of the same thought: comedy is the encrusting of the mechanical onto the organic, and comedy occurs when we take a person for a thing. Wyndham Lewis very amusingly turns that thought on its head and says what makes us laugh is not when a person becomes a thing but, on the contrary, when a thing becomes a person. A cabbage reading Flaubert: that's funny. Humor takes place in that gap between the human and the inhuman, between the mechanical and the organic, the living and the dead. It's a negotiation between those categories: something we do every day.

Although the theory of humor and comedy deals often with the failure of the body or the collapse of logic, it rarely tackles the failure of a joke itself (which is one formal difference from the discourse on taste. Taste is made up of *distastes*: to express aesthetic revulsion is one way of marking yourself as a connoisseur, but not laughing at a bad joke doesn't immediately give you a reputation for having a keen sense of humor). Is that moment, of the failed joke, something that can be talked about philosophically?

I have much experience with failure myself: trying to talk about humor, with examples, and just not getting laughs, and that can be simply painful. For example, I gave the same talk on humor to a group of Cambridge graduate students and, three days later, to a group of psychoanalysts. You would have thought the psychoanalysts would understand humor, would have some investment in it. I got big laughs from the Cambridge graduate students and nothing—it was like a morgue—from the psychoanalysts. And I came to the conclusion that it was to do with a sort of intellectual security or assurance those graduate students had. Whether it was real or legitimate or not, they had it and felt comfortable laughing, and the analysts didn't have that so didn't feel comfortable laughing. Very odd. Maybe they were analyzing me.

Is there something to be said, then, not only about what we might learn from laughter, but about the place of humor in teaching?

This is a delicate matter because the way in which I work is very simple: if I had the ability, I'd do something else. I'd have been a novelist, or a musician, poet, or a dancer. Because I don't have that ability, I can be a philosopher and write about those things. In relation to humor, there are people who are genuinely funny, who've got funny bones, who I laugh at. I'm not one of them, so I can write about humor, and if people don't find me funny or don't find my book amusing, that's okay. But as a teacher, I suppose I'd like to think that I'm using laughter effectively. Such is vanity. The students might be thinking: he's a total bloody idiot. And they should; at a certain point I want them to think I'm a total bloody idiot. Students should both admire you and then be repulsed by you. The art of teaching is managing that play

of attraction and repulsion; in psychoanalytic terms, of making the transference and breaking it and not letting teaching turn into the crass discipleship one sees too much of in the United States. The interesting thing about the structure of laughter is that you're opened up in the laugh and that's when you can be hit. So I try to use humor in teaching to make serious points; it's only when you've opened yourself up through humor that you can be wounded. That's what it should do, and God knows we need that right now.

There's a particular sort of tragedy about the teacher, or the philosopher, who tries to make us laugh and fails, as if the gulf between philosophy and the world is suddenly revealed. As a philosopher of humor, you have to court that failure to an even greater degree.

Take a great English comedian like Frankie Howerd: his entire humor was in the fact that he couldn't tell jokes. But that's only funny because he's funny. I think there are people with funny bones: they can tell failed jokes, but it's because they're funny. Why are certain people funny? I don't know. But there are people who are genuinely funny. We want to believe that those people are miserable. The only way we can bear the thought that there are people who are incredibly funny is that they're miserable; think of the tradition of depressed comedians. But the terrifying thought is that there are people who are genuinely funny and lead quite happy lives, and I think we should resent them for that. As philosophers, the pedagogical task we face is forcing people out of their manic happiness and into normal human misery. We live in cultures of increasing mania and imaginary obsessions, where there's lots of laughter but it's deeply humorless.

In your work, Beckett is an important corrective in that regard.

Ah, Beckett. In Beckett's *Watt*, you've got a distinction between three forms of laughter: the bitter, the hollow, and the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, the hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, but it is the mirthless laugh that is the most interesting, what Beckett calls the "pure laugh," the *risus purus*. The mirthless laugh is the highest laugh and it laughs at that which is unhappy. True humor is therapeutic insofar as it allows us to recover from the delusory happiness of ideology into the lucidity of seeing things for what they are. When we see things for what they are—and this is a very philosophical thought and it is the other item that I borrow from Beckett—then we do not laugh, we smile. I end my book on humor with a discussion of smiling, which I see as the final acknowledgment of our humanity. This happens when we look at ourselves from outside ourselves and find ourselves ridiculous. It's the acknowledgment of one's ridiculousness in a smile that finally interests me.

THE PRACTITIONER: AN INTERVIEW WITH MAUD SKOOG BRANDIN

MATS BIGERT

We do not laugh because we are happy—we are happy because we laugh.

—William James

In March 1995, Indian doctor Madan Kataria read Norman Cousins' book *Anatomy of an Illness* in which the author describes how laughing made him recover from an incurable disease of the spine. Kataria decided to go to a local park in Mumbai and speak to people there about starting a laughter club. Originally met with ridicule, the idea grew into laughter clubs across India and then abroad.

To begin with, all the participants would gather in a circle and each would take turns telling jokes. Sessions would last around twenty minutes. Partly in response to the sexist nature of many of the jokes, Dr. Kataria began to wonder if it was possible to laugh simply for the sake of laughing. Kataria's technique of "laughter without reason" is now the organizing principle for over 2,500 laughter clubs around the world. Mats Bigert met with Maud Skoog Brandin, the woman who introduced the movement to Sweden.

What does a laughter instructor do?

A laughter instructor is like an aerobics instructor who's leading a laughter session instead. Some people call it laughter yoga. To make it work, you have to be able to do it on command. So, for example, the laughter instructor says to everyone in the room, "Now we're going to do the 'cell phone laugh.'"

What does the cell phone laugh sound like?

You pretend to be on your cell phone and you laugh.

I see, so it's not that you have to sound like a cell phone.

No, it's a trick so that you can laugh on the street without being classified as a nutcase.

How did you become a laughter instructor?

I was feeling burned out in my job as the head of the Kalmar Community Council and was taking sedatives. One day I saw something on TV about these laughter clubs in India. I thought it sounded great, so I found Dr. Kataria online and contacted him. He invited me to come to India and study the techniques and I decided to go right away. I resigned from my job and after three weeks, I had finished my training and brought the laughter movement back to Sweden with me.

Is it possible to measure the positive effects of laughter?

One hundred laughs is the equivalent of a thirty-minute workout. Fifty years ago, the average person laughed eighteen minutes a day; today, that figure is down to six minutes a day. So it's something we really need!

So we're supposed to have it 300% worse than in the 1950s?

I don't know but that's a number that was cited during the humor convention in Basel.

The humor convention in Basel? That sounds made up!

No, it really exists.

What distinguishes a laugh produced on demand from a spontaneous one?

Absolutely nothing. Laughter is a physical phenomenon. It is not the intellectual stimulation that makes a body release endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine, and creates a feeling of well-being and relaxation. It's of no importance whether the laughter was triggered by someone slipping over a banana peel or if it's put on.

The laughter that the laughter clubs promote is purely functional and doesn't express any specific feeling. Spontaneous laughter is defined in accordance to the feeling that produced it, for example, scornful laughter, hysterical laughter, schadenfreude, and so on. Is there some specific category of laughter that you aim for?

The ironic thing is that you are naming different types of laughter with negative connotations. But they are just as beneficial physically as if the person had laughed in a hearty or friendly way. We try to infect the person with laughter. It's the only kind of harmless infection that we have. My favorite laughs are the "ouch laugh" and the "lion laugh."

Does it always work? Have you ever not been successful with a group?

Yes, once, when I was invited to the Red Cross. It began with me having to have a sign language interpreter beside me who would translate for the deaf Red Cross workers, which meant I couldn't move around the room. It's absolutely necessary that you mingle with the participants to get the group going. When I later asked the person who'd invited me what they were all going to do afterwards, he said that they were about to find out who was going to be laid off.

Can you give the readers a short description of how they can adopt laughter therapy at home?

After breakfast, go to the bathroom and stand in front of the mirror. It's going to take five to ten minutes, so prepare yourself mentally. Now think that you are going to take charge of your day; no one else is going to do that. Look yourself in the eyes and fill them with energy. It's possible if you want to do it. If you don't, it won't work. Relax with a smile and stretch your body. Then begin with a "Ho ho ho, Ha ha ha" followed by a deep breath. Repeat this a few times. Then you can continue with some specific laughs. Energize your eyes, stick out your tongue, and do the "lion laugh." Then you can simulate being at the dentist and do the "ouch laugh." The "I told you so laugh" always works. Shake your finger at your mirror image and laugh, "Ho ho, ha ha ha!" End it with a crazy "elephant trunk laugh." You're guaranteed to feel better than if you'd spent the ten minutes looking at the news.

above: Brandin demonstrating her technique. From left to right: The "I told you so laugh," the "cell phone laugh," the "ouch laugh," and the "lion laugh." Photos Mats Bigert

INFECTIOUS LAUGHTER

DAVID SERLIN

In the days before public health campaigns had all but eradicated maladies like smallpox and polio, the singular distinction for being the rarest disease on the planet was held by kuru. Kuru first came to international attention in the late 1950s after D. Carleton Gajdusek, an American virologist and pediatrician, was invited to investigate a mysterious and fatal illness that was devastating the Fore tribe in New Guinea. Between 1957 and 1968, over 1,100 of the Fore died from kuru, the vast majority of whom were adult females and children.[1] Kuru marks its epidemiological territory through what observers called the "laughing sickness" or "laughing death," a distinct set of physical effects that include hysterical laughter, dementia, bodily spasms, and a broad, terrifying smile across the face of its hapless victim.

Kuru is usually identified as a prototypical example of a culture-specific disease, that is, one that only emerges in the context of a particular society and is found nowhere else on earth. After studying the Fore's formal customs and daily activities, Gajdusek postulated a link between those who had contracted kuru and their participation in funeral rites, which for the Fore people included mortuary cannibalism and the eating of human brains. Challenging the idea that kuru was hereditary, Gajdusek argued that it was the consumption of diseased brains that was responsible for delivering kuru's fatal blow. Anthropologists later found that women and children had been the most likely to contract kuru because feasting on human brains was among the few methods by which non-male members of the gender-stratified tribal hierarchy received any protein. Gajdusek convinced the Fore elders to discontinue the tribe's cannibal practices, and as a result the number of kuru deaths began to decline. By the 1970s, fatalities from kuru had declined precipitously and the symptoms of the "laughing death" seem to have all but disappeared.

The discovery of kuru amidst post-World War II campaigns focused on global standards of living, like those of the Marshall Plan or the World Health Organization, must have played like something from a horror film that revealed an uncharted world impervious to the golden touch of modernity. For Westerners, the practice, let alone the existence, of cannibalism is unsettling, though it also entices us to reflect upon our insatiable curiosity about the rituals of so-called primitive peoples. Eating animal organs known as "sweetbreads," such as the pancreas and thymus of a calf or lamb, holds high status in some gastronomic circles. But eating human brains—or any part of any human, for that matter—has never fully been engaged by the aesthetics of taste, even among gourmets, and continues to provoke visceral repulsion and disgust. Even a B-grade horror film like *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), typically interpreted as a generic Cold War allegory about communist invasion, capitalized on the public's fascination with the arrival of cannibalistic marauders who served as potent metaphors for the invasion of the individual body and the body politic. In the film, aliens materialize as voracious crabs that eat human brains and absorb the voices and memories of their victims. A decade later, George A. Romero's cult classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) allegorized the specter of kuru more closely by depicting a band of virtually unstoppable zombies who banquet upon human brains and other body parts. Romero's film, and the wave of 1970s horror films that followed it, reveled in the gory excrescences of blood feasts and serial killings, luring audiences to imagine that human cannibals were a far more likely phenomenon than brain-eating alien invaders. Staking their claim at the intersection of psychologically-driven horror and Grand Guignol-inspired humor, such films suggest that our revulsion toward and fascination with eating brains not only excavates a deep-seated social taboo but, like all taboos, perpetually gives license to the mind to wander into uncharted territory.

As a kid growing up in the 1970s, I was both repelled and consumed by the existence of kuru, as well as by the possibility that it might turn me, my family, and my closest friends into hysterical cannibals. The rarity of the disease only served to convince me of the inescapable likelihood of its transmissibility. I remember reading about kuru in a copy of our family encyclopedia and staring for hours at the grainy black-and-white image of a laughing Fore tribesman. The colonial dimensions of the photograph notwithstanding, the image of a laughing, brain-eating cannibal seemed to me incompatible with the gravity of the disease, since laughter itself seemed incompatible with cannibalism. For me, the true horror implicit in the photograph derived not simply from the prospect that this human actually ate human brains—a seemingly inhuman act—but that such savagery resulted in peals of echoing, maniacal laughter. Here was laughter that was neither silly nor charming nor charismatic—what my young mind understood to be the link between the sensation of laughing and the experience of happiness. Instead, here was a visual depiction of a sensation I feared even as I tried desperately to imagine it.

Many years later, I learned that the kuru victim depicted in that photograph was not in fact laughing and, indeed, the idea that kuru produces "laughing sickness" was

something of an oversimplification focused on the most telltale effect of the disease. Gajdusek's findings on kuru in the 1960s, for which he won the Nobel Prize in 1976, laid the groundwork for Stanley B. Prusiner, a viral neurologist who discovered the existence of *prions*, proteins capable of passing disease from the brain of one organism to that of another. For Prusiner, who won the Nobel Prize in 1997, prions were instrumental in understanding the molecular basis of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), the human counterpart to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), known colloquially as "mad cow" disease. One of the common elements found in diseases like BSE, CJD, and kuru is that they all deprive their victims of muscle control and induce what might be perceived as manic behavior—hence the so-called madness at the core of "mad cow." During the initial period of the disease, the body submits to uncontrollable physical spasms and audible outbursts; after a short time, it succumbs to complete passivity until all physical movement comes to a standstill.

What I believed the image of a Fore tribesman told me about the maniacal laughter of flesh-eating cannibals was so utterly different from what the image actually depicted that I have come to regard kuru as something of a modern object lesson. The allegedly hysterical laughter attributed to kuru is not a subjective, personality-driven reaction to the joys of cannibalism, as I had imagined it. It is an involuntary neurodegenerative reaction resulting from the collapse of all physical constraints. Laughter, the essential charm of which derives from its evanescence, becomes with the onset of kuru an eerily empty signifier unmoored from any recognizable system of meaning except, perhaps, for signaling one's imminent mortality. Similarly, the broad smile that appears on the victim's face is not a deliberate expression of pleasure or contentment. It is, instead, the smile's terrifying opposite: the confirmation of the complete collapse of one's neurophysiologic system. The smile brought on by kuru is the inscrutable grimace of a face seemingly stripped of legibility.

According to recent health statistics, smallpox has replaced kuru as the rarest disease on the planet. Since the mid-1960s, however, a number of neurodegenerative diseases related to kuru have been reportedly on the rise: not among brain-feasting cannibals but among members of the civilized West. During the period in which kuru was virtually eradicated from the Fore tribe, for example, many women and children—the same demographic groups that contracted kuru—in the US, Europe, and parts of Asia and Africa contracted CJD as a result of injections of growth hormones and fertility drugs distilled from pituitary glands harvested from BSE-infected animals.[2] Before the mad cow scares of the mid-1990s, cattle and sheep were regularly pulverized and used as food sources for other cattle and sheep, which made it possible for the disease to pass to healthy animals and humans through the food chain. According to one apocalyptic researcher, infected meat will leave half the British population brain-dead by CJD by the middle of the century.[3]

Meanwhile, cattle farmers from Britain and the European Union have been exporting beef infected with BSE into the free market even while banning the consumption of tainted beef in their own countries, contributing to the appearance of CJD in India and parts of Asia. Clearly, the exoticism that we once attributed to the cannibalistic rituals of primitive tribes has come home to us through the widespread practices of industrial farming and modern pharmaceuticals, thereby recalibrating the cycle of taboo according to the politics of feast or famine. With the specter of "mad cow" on the horizon, it has become virtually impossible for me to eat those triangle-shaped wedges of soft processed cheese imported from France known as *La vache qui rit* ["the laughing cow"] with anything approaching the ironic gusto with which I enjoyed it only a few years ago. In the era of BSE, the image of a cow laughing, no matter how stylized or nostalgic, reminds me too much of the provocative misalignment between signifier and signified.

When is laughter a sign of true happiness, and when it is a sign of sickness? When is laughter something else altogether? Just as kuru is discussed as an essentially culture-specific disease, our understanding of smiling and laughter is just as specific, shaped as much by culture and geography as it is by the relativistic assumptions that societies attribute to them. During his time researching kuru in New Guinea in the 1950s and 1960s, D. Carleton Gajdusek posed for photographs among grateful members of the Fore tribe. In image after image, Gajdusek is surrounded by smiling and laughing adolescent boys, most of whom his research had saved from an almost certain death. But like the encyclopedia's image of the hysterical cannibal, these photographs of Gajdusek, read in retrospect, assume a sinister dimension that challenges our expectations of what laughter is supposed to signify. In the mid-1990s, at precisely the same time that "mad cow" disease was making international headlines, Gajdusek pleaded guilty to charges that he had engaged in sexual relations with several of the Fore boys whom he had formally adopted and to whom he had given his own surname. In 1998, after a brief period of incarceration at a Frederick, Maryland, penitentiary, a federal judge offered him the opportunity to leave the United States, never to return again. Gajdusek chose to settle in Paris, a safe haven for serious gourmets and social outcasts alike, and home to the corporate headquarters for Bel, the manufacturer of the cheese marked by the sign of the laughing cow. If it is possible to accept that laughter is a medium capable of both illumination and illusion, of revealing inner joy and signaling hidden suffering, how will we ever be able to tell the difference?

1 Shirley Lindenbaum, *Kuru Sorcery* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1979), p. 113.

2 Lynette J. Dumble, "The Third World And Infertile Women: The Would-Be Victims And Invisible Victims Of Mad Cow And Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Imperialists," <http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/3468/dumble.html>.

3 Lynette J. Dumble, "The Next Global Plague? From Mad Cows to Humans," *Nexus* 5:1 (December 1997/January 1998).

opposite: *La Vache Qui Rit*, launched in 1921, was the world's first branded cheese.

THEY TOOK A GIRL TO THE COUNTY FAIR

or

SAT HER IN THE FRONT

ALONG CAME A HORSE FLY

or

BIT HER IN THE COUNTRY BOY

COUNTRY BOY SITTING ON A ROCK

ALONG CAME A PIT BULL

or

BIT OFF HIS COCKTAIL

GINGER ALE 5 cents A GLASS

THEY ARE A BIT BIG AINT THEY?

THE ART OF LAUGHTER

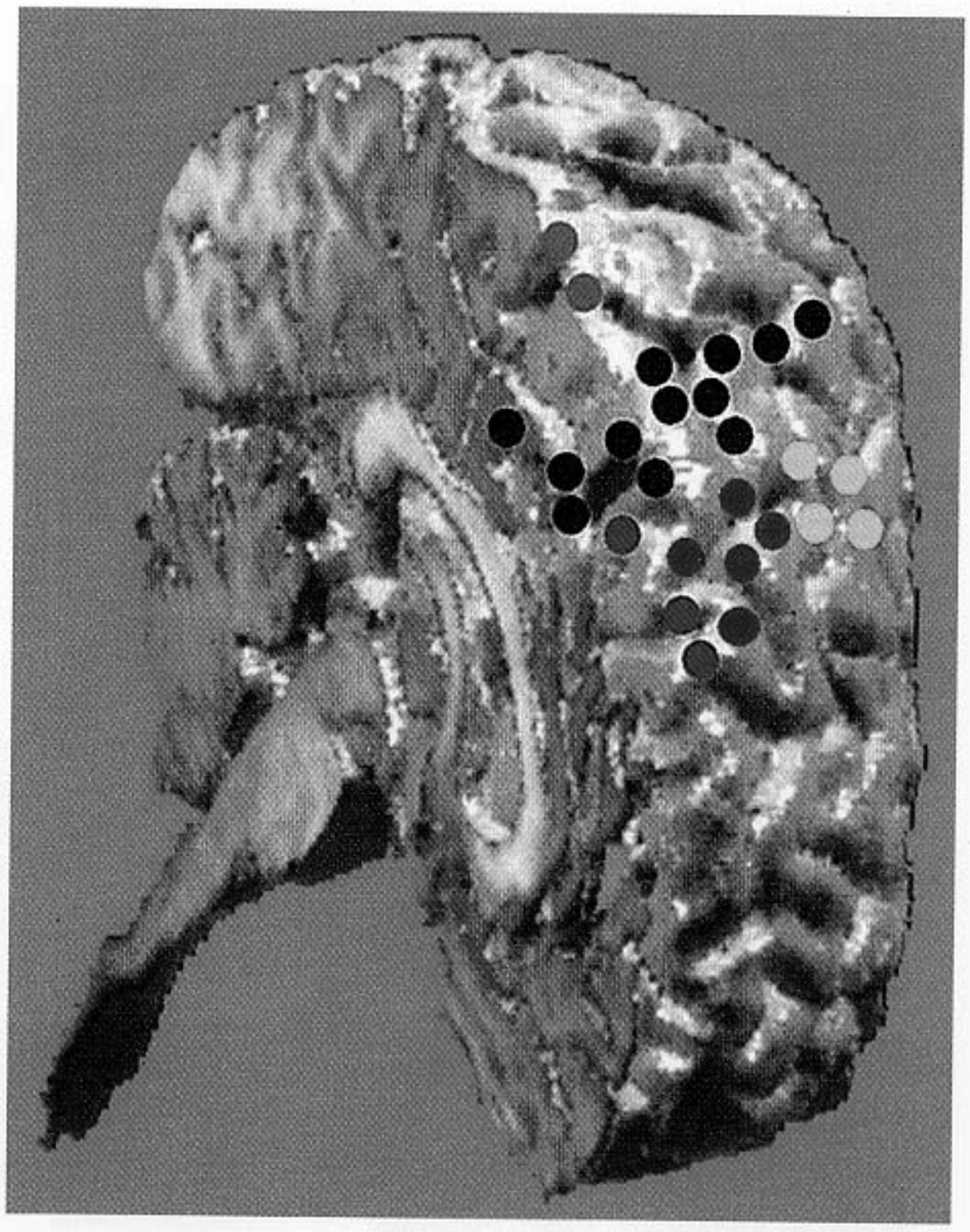
JIM HOLT

It involves the contraction of some fifteen facial muscles, along with the simultaneous stimulation of the muscles of inspiration and those of expiration, resulting in a series of respiratory spasms accompanied by a burst of vowel-based notes. Healthful side-effects of this experience are believed to include oxygenation of the blood, reduction in stress hormones, and a bolstering of the immune system through heightened T-cell activity. If the experience is sufficiently intense, however, cataplexy can set in, leading to muscular collapse and possible injury. In rare cases the consequences are graver still. Anthony Trollope had a stroke while undergoing this experience in response to the now-forgotten nineteenth-century novel *Vice Versa*. And, according to tradition, the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, reacting to the portrait of a hag he had just made, actually died of it.

What I have been describing, of course, is laughter. What is it about the humorous situation that evokes this response? Why should a certain kind of cerebral activity issue in such a peculiar behavioral reflex—a "luxury" reflex, moreover, that serves no obvious evolutionary purpose? As Voltaire mockingly observed in the entry under "Laughter" in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), "Those who know why this kind of joy that kindles laughter should draw the zygomatic muscle ... back toward the ears are knowing indeed."

It is an oft-registered complaint that philosophers do not devote enough attention to laughter and humor. In the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995), for example, the entry under "Humour" opens, "Although laughter, like language, is often cited as one of the distinguishing features of human beings, philosophers have spent only a small proportion of their time and pages on it and on the allied topic of amusement when compared with the volumes devoted to the philosophy of language." The entry under "Laughter" concludes by noting that "The topic deserves more attention in the philosophy of mind." Scattered aperçus can be found throughout the Western philosophical canon; Plato deemed the proper object of laughter to be human vice and folly, and Aristotle declared the laughable to be a species of the ugly. Spinoza—a rather agelastic fellow himself, according to contemporaries—observed in his *Ethics* (1677) that "Laughter is merely pleasure" and, as such, is "in itself good." Hobbes, Kant, and Schopenhauer all hazarded somewhat elliptical theories of humor as asides in major writings. Only Henri Bergson devoted an entire treatise to the subject; in *Le rire* (1899), he defined the comic as "the encrustation of the mechanical on the living"—the paradigm case, disappointingly, being a man slipping on a banana peel.

Yet no figure in the philosophical tradition has produced a sustained account of humor and laughter that bears comparison with Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). Freud's interest in the problem of humor was not primarily philosophical.



Rather, he was specifically attracted to jokes—a subgenre of the humorous—because of their many likenesses to dreams. (When Wilhelm Fleiss was reading the proofs of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in the fall of 1899, he complained to Freud that the dreams seem to contain an awful lot of jokes.) In both jokes and dreams, Freud observed, meanings are condensed and displaced; things are represented indirectly or by their opposites; fallacious reasoning trumps logic. Jokes, like dreams, arise involuntarily (and, also like dreams, tend to be swiftly forgotten). From these similarities, Freud inferred that jokes and dreams share a common origin in the unconscious and are both essentially means of outwitting the inner "censor." Yet there is a critical difference, he added. Jokes are meant to be understood; indeed, this is crucial to their success. Dreams, by contrast, remain unintelligible even to the dreamer, and are therefore totally uninteresting to other people. In a sense, a dream is a failed joke.

There are three competing theories of jokes. The "superiority theory," which can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, holds that we find something risible when we feel superior to it. The classic statement of this theory was

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opposite: Lawrence Weiner, *Laughter type: cruel*, 2005.

above: A 3-D reconstruction of an MRI scan of a 16-year-old girl suffering from severe epilepsy; the scan shows sites in the left hemisphere of her brain where electrical stimulation evoked behavioral responses. Key to colors: red, laughter; yellow, disruption or arrest of speech; blue, disruption or arrest of speech, naming and manual activity; black, motor movements involving the lower and upper extremities; green, tingling sensations in the right lower extremity. (From Itzak Fried et al, 'Electric Current Stimulates Laughter', *Nature*, 1998)

supplied in the seventeeth century by Hobbes, who declared that laughter expressed "a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others." On this theory all humor is at root mockery and derision, all laughter a slightly spiritualized snarl.

A second traditional theory of humor, the "incongruity theory," was hinted at by Aristotle (in the *Rhetoric* he observed that a good way to get a laugh was to set up your audience to expect one thing and then to hit them with a surprising punchline) and worked out in detail by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), and by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819). The gist of the incongruity theory is that we laugh when two things normally kept in separate compartments in our mind are unexpectedly yanked together. On this rather intellectualist account, a joke forces us to perceive incongruities: between the decorous and the low, the ideal and the actual, the logical and the absurd.

Finally there is the "relief theory" of humor, which was pioneered by Herbert Spencer and given its most elaborate statement by Freud. Laughter, Freud submitted in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, is essentially a release of excess energy. Where does this energy come from? From the temporary lifting of an inhibition. Keeping down forbidden impulses, Freud held, requires an expenditure of psychic effort. When the cunning devices of a joke force such a thought or feeling to be entertained (by presenting it in an outwardly innocent guise), the energy used to maintain the inhibition against it suddenly becomes superfluous. It is therefore available to be discharged through the facial and respiratory muscles in the form of laughter.

Of these three theories of humor, it is the incongruity theory that is taken most seriously by philosophers today. It too, however, is open to objections. Why should incongruity be a source of pleasure? Shouldn't the asymmetrical, the disorderly, and the absurd cause bewilderment and anxiety in rational creatures like ourselves, not merriment? The nineteenth-century philosopher Alexander Bain observed, "There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh. A decrepit man under a heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfitness and gross disproportion; an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep's clothing, a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; the multitude taking the law into their own hands, and everything of the nature of disorder; a corpse at a feast, parental cruelty, filial ingratitude, and whatever is unnatural; the entire catalogue of vanities given by Solomon—are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth." (Bain was a Victorian with little capacity for the darker forms of humor, but there is something to his point.)

. . .

The idea that all jocularity was harmful to moral character was widespread at the beginning of the Victorian era. The reason for this disapproval is not hard to fathom: by long tradition, laughter had been associated with blasphemy, with scorn for the outcast and infirm, and, above all, with obscenity. As folklorists have documented, the vast majority of jokes in oral circulation have always been about sex. Such "dirty jokes" served to lure the innocent into sexual degradation, it was believed. Women, in particular, were supposed to be too good to laugh. Only slightly less corrupting was the sort of pitiless laughter directed at the misfortunes and vices of others, at the drunkard, the cripple, the cuckold, the foreigner. It was the duty of the decent, charitable man to refrain from jests directed at such butts. (This sentiment, by the way, was not confined to the priggish Victorians. Baudelaire, in his essay "De l'essence du rire", denounced laughter as springing from "the idea of one's superiority—a satanic idea, if ever there was one!")

In the mid nineteenth century, however, a shift in attitude can be detected. The joke impulse—once seen as actuated by feelings of superiority, aggression, and lust—came to acquire something of an intellectual aura. Comic theorists like Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, and Sidney Smith, taking a leaf from Kant and Schopenhauer, began to put witty paradox at the heart of jocularity. It is significant that the meaning of "wit" has evolved from referring to intellect in general, to the ability to perceive connections between ideas, to a quickness at perceiving incongruous resemblances that evoke delighted surprise. A really good witticism reveals a discrepancy between the ideal and the real, it was argued; laughter had a kind of logical power to destroy solemn untruths, allowing truth, in all its robustness, to survive. It was a powerful weapon against bigotry and false enthusiasm. Joke-making ceased to be thought of as entirely disreputable, and susceptibility to jokes, at least those of the drier, more cerebral sort, became a social plus. Leslie Stephen, writing in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1876, remarked that "a fashion has sprung up of late years regarding the sense of humour as one of the cardinal virtues." A few decades later, Max Beerbohm observed that a man would sooner confess to lacking a sense of beauty than to lacking a sense of humor.

Perhaps the reason it is so hard to pin down the essence of jokes is that it doesn't hold still. It is not an unchanging Platonic form, but something that evolves over time. Born of lewdness and aggression, the jocular impulse aspires to the delicate perception of pure incongruity. At what rarefied *telos* is this evolutionary process aiming? Why, the Jewish joke, of course—or, to be more precise, the Talmudic joke. The abiding themes of Jewish humor

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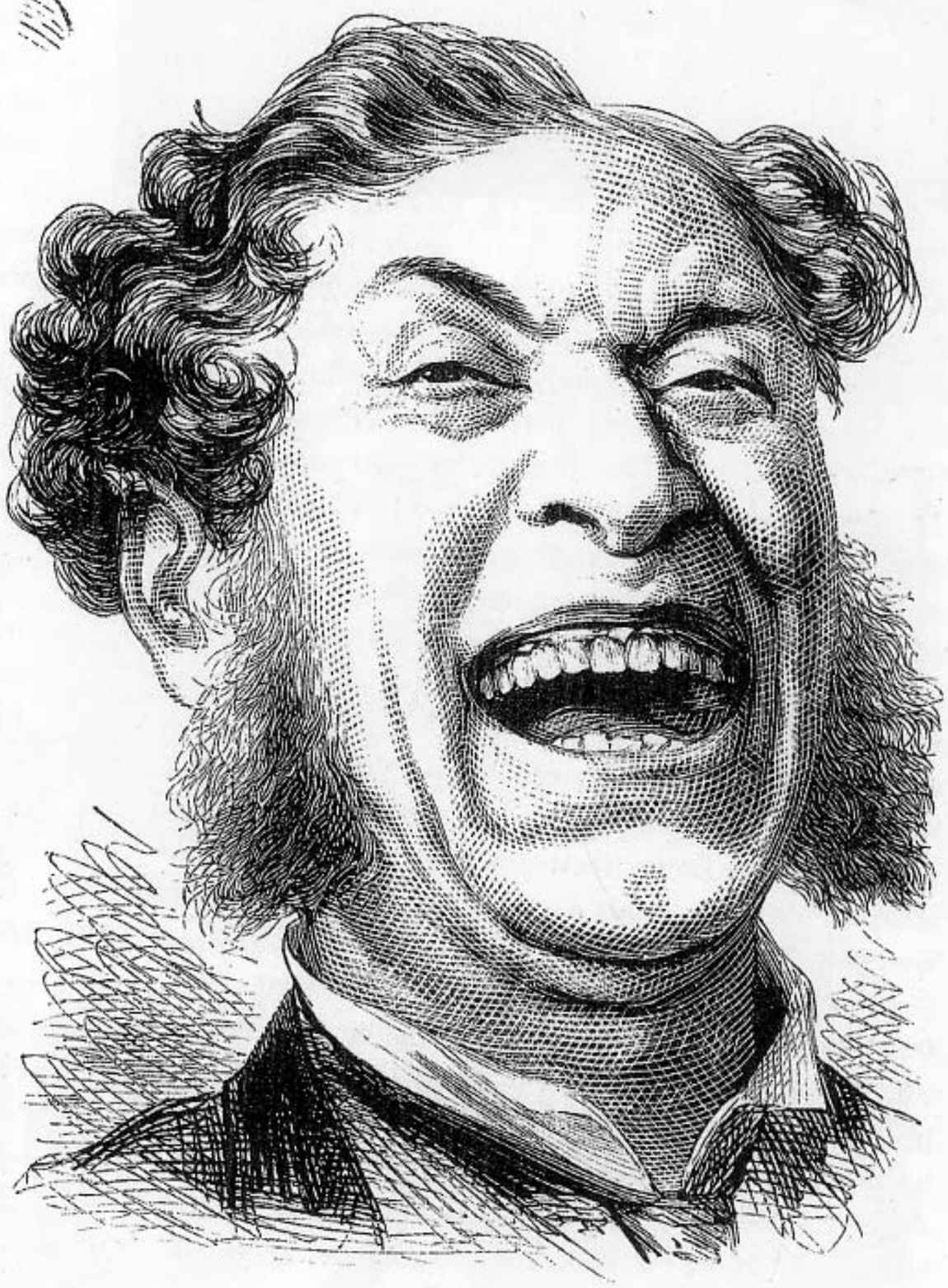
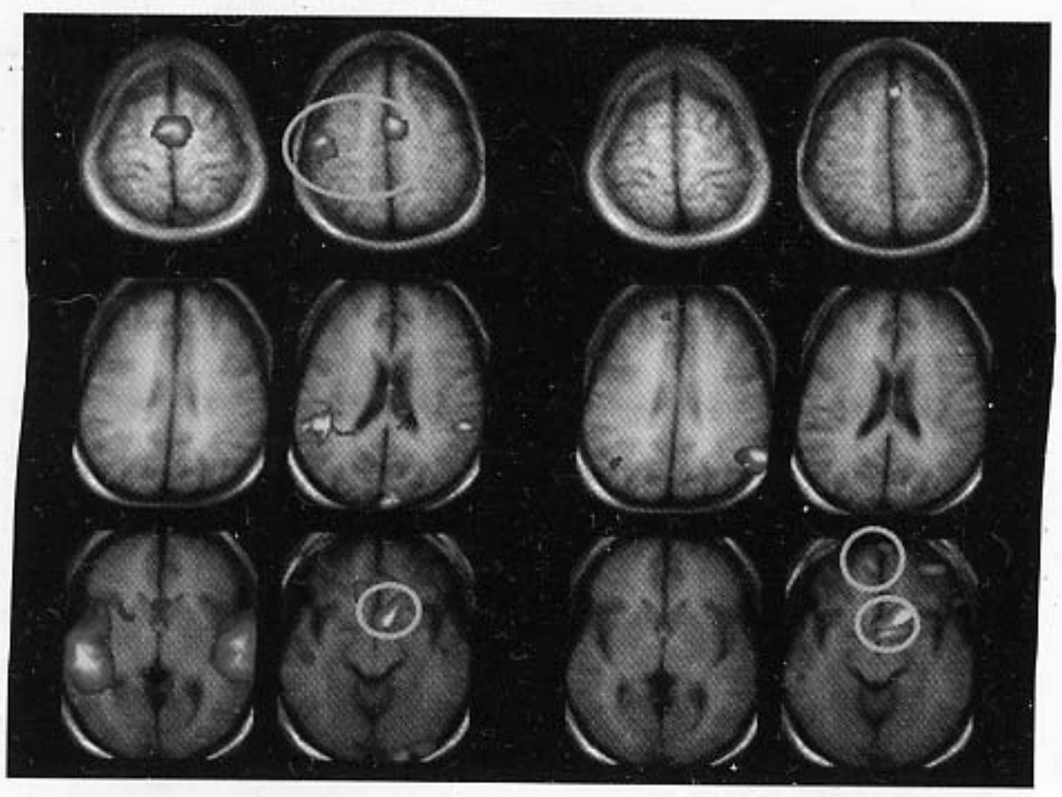
opposite, clockwise from top: "The Giggling Laugh, excited by Boisterous Fun and Nonsense." "The Obstreperous Laugh, instigated by Practical Jokes or Extreme Absurdities." "The Hearty Laugh of the Gentler Sex." "The Stentorian Laugh of the Stronger Sex." "The Superlative Laugh, or Highest Degree of Laughter." From *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*, George Vesey, 1877. Courtesy New York Historical Society.





are not sex and superiority, but logic and language. Take this rather feeble specimen cited (and explicated at some length!) by Freud: Two Jews met in the neighborhood of the bath-house. "Have you taken a bath?" asked one of them. "What?" asked the other in return, "is there one missing?"

Jewish humor deploys crazy logic as a way of coping with the incomprehensible. This places the Jewish joke very close to another jocular genre of great rarefaction, the philosophical joke. The best philosophical jokes tend to be evoked by the most persistent incomprehensibilities. Take the question that Martin Heidegger deemed the deepest and darkest in all of philosophy: Why is there something rather than nothing? When I posed it to the Columbia philosopher Arthur Danto a few years ago, he replied rather sharply, "Who says there's not nothing?" On another occasion I pressed Danto's colleague, (the recently deceased) Sidney Morgenbesser with the same question. "Even if there was nothing," Morgenbesser wearily said, "you still wouldn't be satisfied!" Many years ago, the Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin was delivering a paper about language to a big audience at a conference. In the course of his address, Austin raised the matter of the double negative. "In some languages," he observed, (here I paraphrase) "a double negative yields an affirmative; in others, it yields a more emphatic negative. But in no language, natural or artificial, does a double affirmative yield a negative." At which point Morgenbesser piped up from the back of the room, "Yeah, yeah."

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above: The subject of the brain cross-sections on the left is silently laughing along with audio recordings of other people's laughter, while the one on the right is reading a joke book. Courtesy Dean Shibata, MD, University of Washington.

opposite: Matt Freedman, *Laughter type: malicious*, 2005

One can imagine the wave of Homeric laughter that must have spread through the audience on this occasion. But what, exactly, did it express? Albert Rapp, in *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (1951), argued that all human laughter evolved from a pre-linguistic "roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel," a roar that would pass contagiously from the victorious combatant to his kin standing on the sideline. Are we to suppose, then, that the laughter evoked by Morgenbesser's quip was a collective roar of superiority at the slaying of an opponent by a philosophical counterexample? Or are we to suppose, with Freud, that it was a mass discharge of psychic energy freed up by the temporary lifting of an inhibition against being frivolous at academic conferences? If we assume, as the incongruity theory would have it, that the philosophers were simply relishing an especially neat inversion of logic, then why all the noisy and convulsive chest-heaving? How did such a peculiar motor response get attached to the aesthetic enjoyment of the incongruous?

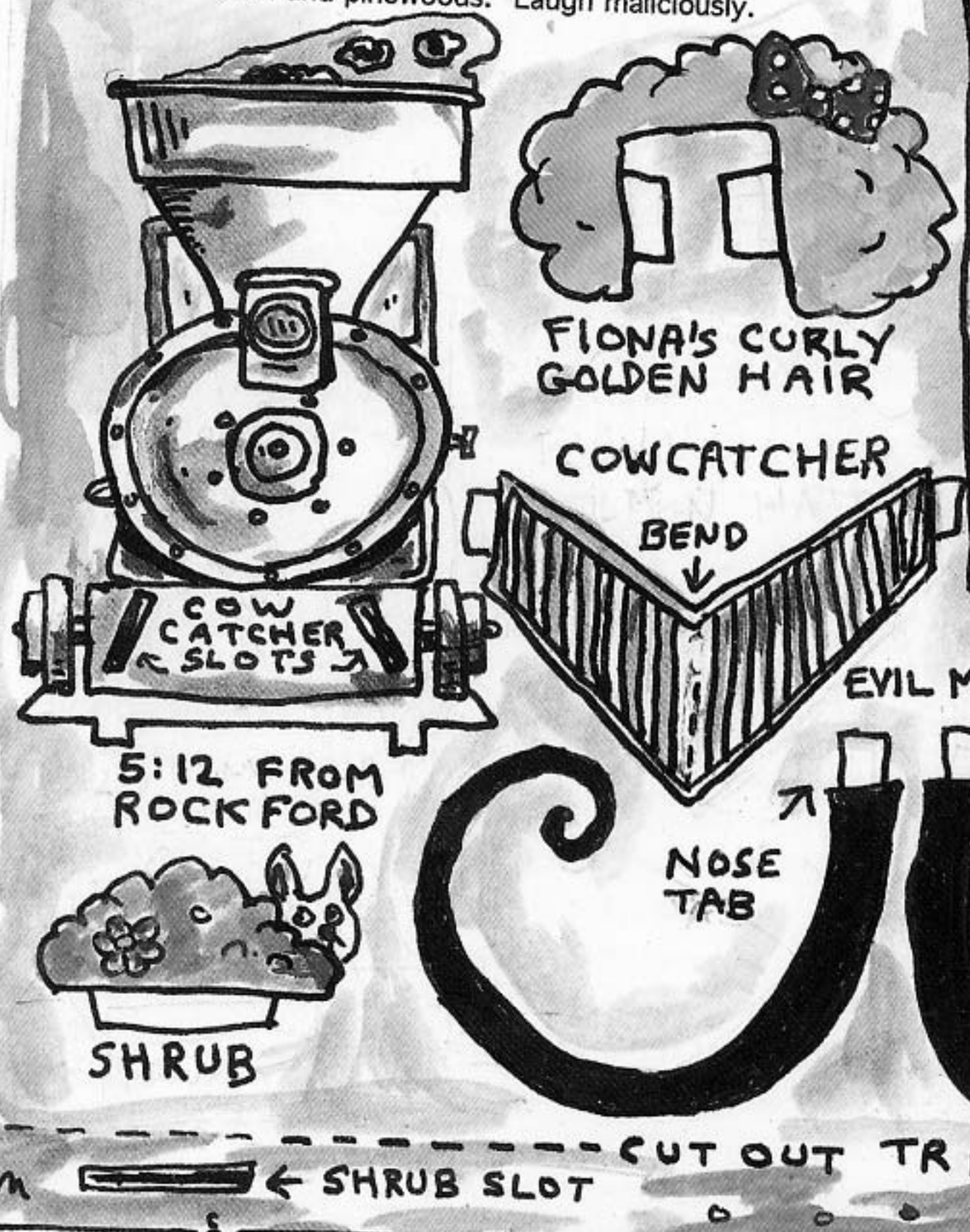
Though it takes place in the most recently evolved part of the human brain—the higher cortices—amusement at the contrived absurdities of jokes taps into more primitive circuitry that we share with our apish cousins and thereby produce laughter. Brain damage can rob you of your sense of humor, just as surely as it can impair your ability to grasp metaphors and make creative connections. It appears to be the right frontal lobe that is crucial for "getting" jokes. Patients with lesions in this area have a terrible time distinguishing humorous from neutral statements (humorous example: a sign in a Tokyo hotel—GUESTS ARE INVITED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE CHAMBERMAID), and are little inclined to laugh.

Jokes are products of human ingenuity that, at their driest and most refined, fall within the domain of art. Yet I know many people who abhor them—even people blessed with a rich sense of humor. Perhaps that has to do with the origins of most jokes. Freud claimed that the most compulsive jokesmiths are neurotics, because they are most plagued with strong impulses from their unconscious. Sociologically speaking, the most fecund sources for jokes would seem to be Wall Street traders and inmates of prisons. We have all been tortured by amateur comics who cannot repress the urge to *tell* jokes, and some have even been tortured by being made to tell jokes. Evelyn Waugh, convinced that his son James had no sense of humor, forced the poor child to tell him a new joke every day as a kind of remedial therapy. "In desperation," Waugh's biographer Selina Hastings tells us, "James bought a book of a thousand and one American jokes, and stammered through each day's installment at lunchtime, while his father sat stony-faced, refusing to laugh."

YOUR FINGER IS THE VICTIM OF MALICIOUS LAUGHTER

Cousin Finona (played by your finger), has rejected your amorous advances. You are thus denied the woman you love and your right to her vast estates. You are mad with loss and greed. If Fiona dies, no one else will ever possess her and you may claim her family fortune. You knock Fiona out with your walking stick, truss her up and stick her on the railroad tracks. The lonesome whistle of the 5:12 from Rockford echoes through the Pinewoods. A peal of malicious laughter breaks from your lips. Revenge is sweet! You hear the distant pounding of Flitterfoot, the horse of Fiona's lover Captain Jack Strongboy. Can he save the day?

You can assemble the elements of this tableau. Draw Fiona's face on your middle finger and cut out and tape her curly golden hair to the tip. Cut out the hole in the tracks and stick your finger through. Cut out and install evil mustachios in your nose. Assemble and install train and pinewoods. Laugh maliciously.



THE CHRISTIAN-HEGELIAN COMEDY

SLAVOJ ZIZEK

A patient in a large hospital room with many beds complains to the doctor about the constant noise and cries other patients are making, which are driving him crazy. After the doctor replies that nothing can be done if the patients are like that, that one cannot forbid them from expressing their despair since they all know they are dying, the patient goes on: "Why don't you then put them in a separate room for dying?" The doctor replies calmly and glibly: "But this *is* a room for those who are dying..." Why does anyone who knows a little bit about Hegel immediately discern a "Hegelian" taste in this morbid joke? It is precisely because of the final twist in which the patient's subjective position is undermined: he finds himself included into the series from which he wanted to maintain distance.

And, since one is dealing with Hegel here, one is immediately tempted to conceive of this joke as the first term of a triad. Thus, since the basic turn of this joke resides in the inclusion into the series of the apparent exception (the complaining patient is himself dying), its "negation" would be a joke whose final turn would, on the contrary, involve exclusion from the series, i.e., the extraction of the One and its positing as an exception to the series. In a recent Bosnian joke, for example, Fata (the proverbial ordinary Bosnian's wife) complains to the doctor that Muyo, her husband, makes love to her for hours every evening, so that, even in the darkness of their bedroom, she cannot get enough sleep—again and again, he jumps on her. The good doctor advises her to apply shock therapy: she should keep at her bedside a strong lamp so that, when she gets really tired of sex, she can all of a sudden blind Muyo, and this shock will for sure cool off his excessive passion. That same evening, after hours of sex, Fata does exactly as advised—and recognizes the face of Haso, one of Muyo's colleagues. Surprised, she asks him, "But what are you doing here? Where is Muyo, my husband?" The embarrassed Haso answers, "Well, he is there at the door, collecting money from those waiting in line..." And the third term in the Hegelian triad would be here a kind of joke-correlative of the "infinite judgment," the tautology as supreme contradiction, as in the joke about a man who complains to his doctor that he often hears voices of people who are not present in the room. The doctor inquires, "Really? In order to enable me to discover the meaning of this hallucination, could you describe to me under what precise circumstances you usually hear the voices of people who are not present?" "Well, it mostly happens when I talk on a phone..."

As is often the case, Kierkegaard is here unexpectedly close to Hegel, officially his greatest opponent. Kierkegaard insists on the *comical* character of Christianity: is there anything more comical than Incarnation, this ridiculous overlapping of the Highest and the Lowest, the coincidence of God, creator of the universe, and a miserable man?[1] And, again, the point is that the gap that separates God from man in Christ is purely parallactic: Christ is not a person with two substances, immortal and mortal. Perhaps, this would also be one way to distinguish between pagan gnosticism and Christianity: the problem with Gnosticism is that it is all too serious in developing its narrative of ascent towards Wisdom, that it misses the humorous side of religious experience—Gnostics are Christians who *miss the joke* of Christianity. (And, incidentally, this is why Mel Gibson's *Passion* is ultimately an anti-Christian film: it totally lacks this comic aspect.)

For Hegel, the passage from tragedy to comedy concerns overcoming the limits of representation. While in a tragedy the individual actor represents the universal character he plays, in a comedy he immediately *is* this character.[2] The gap of representation is thus closed, exactly as in the case of Christ who, in contrast to previous pagan divinities, does not "represent" some universal power or principle (as in Hinduism, in which Krishna, Vishna, Shivu, etc., all "stand for" certain spiritual principles or powers such as love, hatred, reason). As this miserable human, Christ directly *is* God. Christ is not *also* human distinct from being a god; he is a man precisely *insofar as he is God*, i.e., the *ecce homo is* the highest mark of his divinity. There is thus an objective irony in Pontius Pilate's "Ecce homo!," when he presents Christ to the enraged mob. Its meaning is *not* "Look at this miserable tortured creature? Do you not see in it a simple vulnerable man? Have you not any compassion for it?" but, rather, "Here is God himself!"

However, in a comedy, the actor does not coincide with the person he plays in the sense that he plays himself on the stage, that he "is what he really is" up there. It is rather that, in a properly Hegelian way, the gap that separates the actor from his stage persona in a tragedy is transposed into the stage persona itself. A comic character is never fully identified with his role; he always retains the ability to observe himself from outside, "making fun of himself." Recall the immortal Lucy from *I Love Lucy* whose trademark gesture when something surprised her was to bend her neck slightly and cast a direct fixed gaze of surprise into the camera—this was not Lucille Ball, the actress, mockingly addressing the public, but an attitude of self-estrangement that was part of "Lucy" (as a screen persona) herself. This is how Hegelian "reconciliation" works: not as an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but as the redoubling of the gap or antagonism—the two opposed moments are "reconciled" when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms. In Christianity, the gap that separates God from man is not effectively "sublated" directly in the figure of Christ as God-man, but only in the tensest moment of crucifixion when Christ himself despairs ("Father, why have you forsaken me?"). In this moment, the gap that separates God from man is transposed into God himself, as the gap that separates Christ from God-Father. The properly dialectical trick here is that the very feature that appeared to separate me from God turns out to unite me with God.

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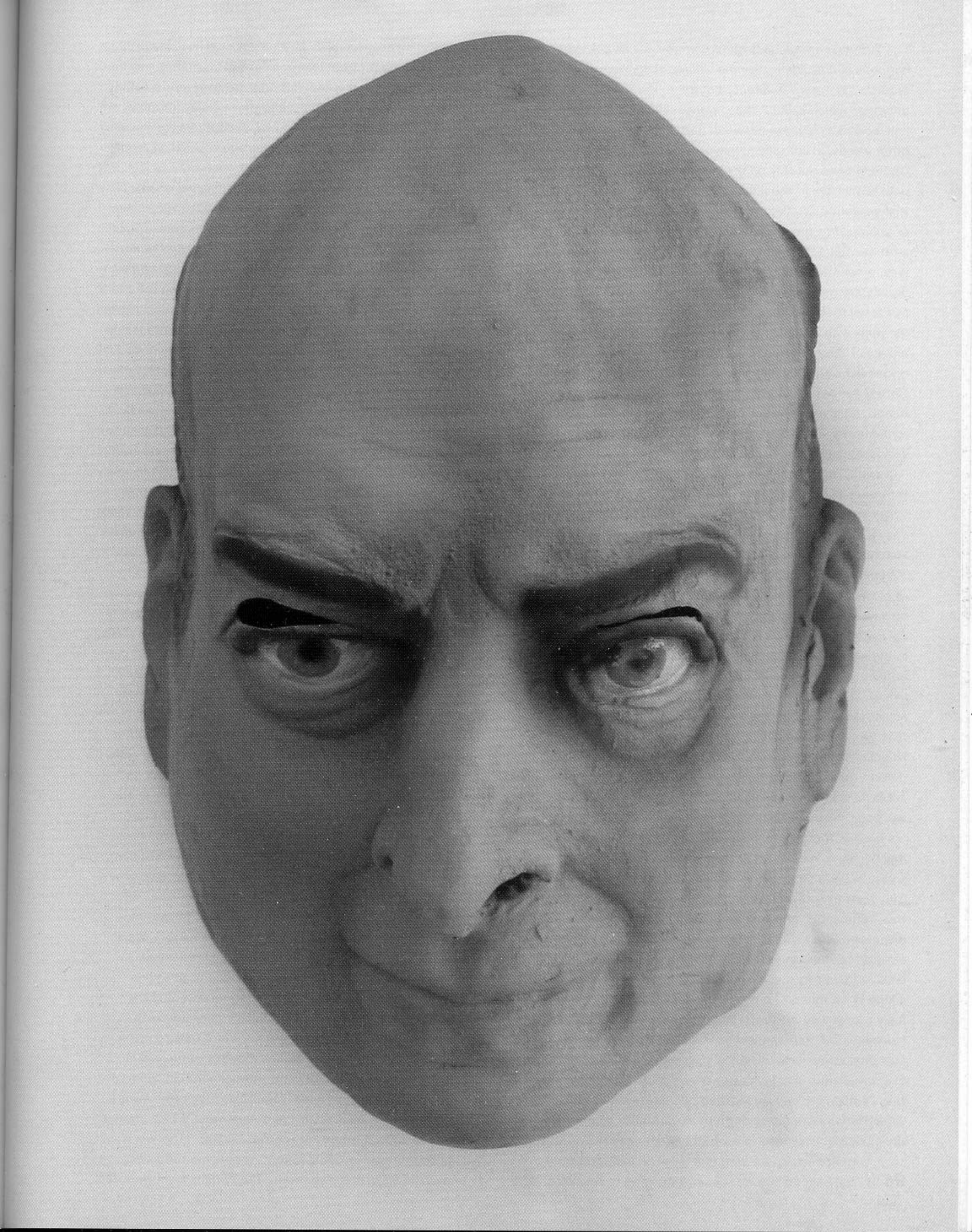
opposite: Mask of Domingo Cavallo, Minister of Economy in Argentina, 1991–1996. Thanks to Lara Correa. Photo Josefina Tommasi



And this brings us back to comedy: for Hegel, what happens in comedy is that the Universal *appears* directly. It appears "as such," in direct contrast to the mere "abstract" universal which is the "mute" universality of the passive link (common feature) between particular moments. In other words, in comedy, universality directly *acts*. How? Comedy does not rely on the undermining of our dignity with reminders of the ridiculous contingencies of our terrestrial existence. On the contrary, comedy is the full assertion of universality, the immediate coincidence of universality with the character's/actor's singularity. Or to ask it another way, what effectively happens when all universal features of dignity are mocked and subverted in a comedy? The negative force that undermines them is that of the individual, of the hero with his attitude of disrespect towards all elevated universal values, and this negativity itself is the only true remaining universal force. And does the same not hold for Christ? All stable-substantial universal features are undermined, relativized, by his scandalous acts, so that the only remaining universality is the one embodied in Him, in his very singularity. The universals undermined by Christ are "abstract" substantial universals (presented in the guise of the Jewish Law), while the "concrete" universality is the very negativity of undermining abstract universals.

This direct overlapping of the Universal and the Singular also poses a limit to the standard critique of "reification." While observing Napoleon on a horse in the streets of Jena after the battle of 1807, Hegel remarked that it was as if he saw there World Spirit riding a horse. The Christological implications of this remark are obvious: what happened in the case of Christ is that God himself, the creator of our entire universe, was walking out there as a common individual. This mystery of incarnation is discernible at different levels, up to parents' speculative judgment apropos a child that "out there our love is walking," which stands for the Hegelian reversal of determinate reflection into reflexive determination. The same happens with a king when his subjects see him walking around: "Out there our state is walking." Marx's evocation of reflexive determination (in his famous footnote in Chapter 1 of *Capital*) falls too short: individuals think they treat a person as a king because he is a king in himself, while, effectively, he is a king only because they treat him as one. However, the crucial point is that this "reification" of a social relation in a person cannot be dismissed as a simple "fetishist misperception"; what such a dismissal itself misses is something that, perhaps, could be designated as the "Hegelian performative." Of course a king is "in himself" a miserable individual, and of course he is a king only insofar as his subjects treat him like one. However, the point is that the "fetishist illusion" which sustains our veneration of the king has in itself a performative dimension—*the very unity of our state, that which the king "embodies," actualizes itself only in the person of a king*. Which is why it is not enough to insist on the need to avoid the "fetishist trap" and to distinguish between the contingent person of a king and what he stands for. What the king stands for only comes to be in his person, the same as with a couple's love which only becomes actual in their offspring (at least within a certain traditional perspective). And it is not difficult to see the extreme proximity of the sublime and the ridiculous in these cases: there is something sublime in stating, "Look out! The World Spirit itself is riding a horse there," but also something inherently comical.

Comedy is thus the very opposite of shame: shame endeavors to maintain the veil, while comedy relies on the gesture of unveiling. More closely, the comic effect proper occurs when, after the act of unveiling, one confronts the ridicule and the nullity of the unveiled content—in contrast to encountering behind the veil the terrifying Thing too traumatic for our gaze. Which is why the ultimate comical effect occurs when, after removing the mask, we confront exactly the same face as that of the mask. A supreme case of such a comedy occurred in December 2001 in Buenos Aires, when Argentinians took to the streets to protest against the current government, and especially against Domingo Cavallo, the Minister of Economy. When the crowd gathered around Cavallo's building, threatening to storm it, he escaped wearing a mask of himself (sold in disguise shops so that people could mock him by wearing his mask). It thus seems that at least Cavallo did learn something from the widely spread Lacanian movement in Argentina—the fact that a thing is its own best mask. And is this also not the ultimate definition of the divinity—God also has to wear a mask of himself? Perhaps "God" is the name for this supreme split between the absolute as the noumenal Thing and the absolute as the appearance of itself, for the fact is that the two are the same, that the difference between the two is purely formal. In this precise sense, "God" names the supreme contradiction: God—the absolute irrepresentable Beyond—*has to appear as such*. What one encounters in tautology is thus *pure difference*, not the difference between the element and other elements, but the difference of the element *from itself*. This is why the Marx brothers' "This man looks as an idiot and acts as an idiot; but this should not deceive you—he *is* an idiot!" is properly comical: when, instead of a hidden terrifying secret, we encounter behind the veil *the same thing* as in front of it, this very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with the "pure" difference that separates an element *from itself*.

According to an anecdote from the May '68 period, there was a graffito on a Paris wall that read "God is dead. Nietzsche." Next day, another graffito appeared below it: "Nietzsche is dead. God." What is wrong with this joke? Why is it so obviously reactionary? It is not only that the reversed statement relies on a moralistic platitude with no inherent truth; its failure is deeper, and it concerns the form of reversal itself. What makes the joke a *bad* joke is the *pure symmetry of the reversal*—the underlying claim of the first graffito ("God is dead. Signed by [obviously *living*] Nietzsche") is turned around into a statement which implies "Nietzsche is dead, while *I am still alive*. God." There is a well-known Yugoslav riddle-joke: "What is the difference between the Pope and a trumpet? The Pope is from Rome,

and the trumpet is made from tin. And what is the difference between the Pope from Rome and the trumpet made from tin? The trumpet made from tin can be from Rome, while the Pope from Rome cannot be made from tin." In a similar way, one should redouble the Paris graffiti joke: "What is the difference between 'God is dead' and 'Nietzsche is dead'? It was Nietzsche who said, 'God is dead,' and it was God who said 'Nietzsche is dead.' And what is the difference between Nietzsche who said, 'God is dead' and God who said, 'Nietzsche is dead'? Nietzsche who said, 'God is dead' was not dead, while the God who said 'Nietzsche is dead' *was himself dead*." Crucial for the proper comical effect is not difference where we expect sameness, but, rather, sameness where we expect difference,[3] which is why, as Alenka Zupancic has pointed out, the materialist (and therefore properly comic) version of the above joke would have been something like: "God is dead. And, as a matter of fact, I also do not feel too well..." Is this not a comic version of Christ's complaint on the cross? Christ will die on the cross not to get rid of his mortal envelope and rejoin the divine; he will die *because he is God*. No wonder, then, that, in the last years of his intellectual activity, Nietzsche used to sign his texts and letters also as "Christ": the proper comical supplement to Nietzsche's "God is dead" would have been to make *Nietzsche himself* add to it: "And, as a matter of fact, I also do not feel too well..."

1 See *The Humor of Kierkegaard. An Anthology*, edited and introduced by Thomas C. Oden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

2 I rely here heavily on Alenka Zupancic's unpublished manuscript on comedy.

3 This is why the "What is the difference between..." jokes are most efficient when difference is denied, as in: "What is the difference between toy trains and women's breasts? None: both are meant for children, and with both it is mostly adult men that play."

CONRAD CARPENTER, UNDEREMPLOYED ASTRONAUT, HAVING SPENT THE LAST 30 YEARS ATTEMPTING TO CULL SOME MEANING FROM HIS EXPERIENCES IN HAVING BEEN TRAINED TO WALK ON THE MOON, ONLY TO HAVE HIS MISSION CANCELLED DUE TO BUDGET CUTS, IS TODAY EXAMINING THE PROBLEM OF HIS LACK OF MIRTH.

"WHY HAVE I LACKED MIRTH FOR SO MANY YEARS?"

ALTHOUGH HE HAS GAINED A MODICUM OF SATISFACTION FROM HIS OCCUPATION AS A HANDYMAN AND INSPIRATIONAL FIGURE, HE IS AT A LOSS TO ACCOUNT FOR THIS ABSENCE OF LAUGHTER.

"MY TRAINING HAS NEVER STEERED ME WRONG – MAYBE ONE OF MY OLD APOLLO MANUALS WILL GIVE ME SOME ANSWERS."

"NO SHIT – HERE IT IS!"

AFTER HOURS OF PORING OVER THE ANTIQUE DOCUMENTS...

HE ERUPTS IN A SUSTAINED FIT OF ANGUISHED CACHINNATION WHICH ECHOES AROUND THE CABIN OF HIS CAREFULLY REPRODUCED LUNAR MODULE.

LM 10 THROUGH LM 14

EXCITEDLY RUNNING THROUGH THE CHECKLISTS, HE MARVELS AT HIS OBJECTLESS OUTBURST, AND CHUCKLES AGAIN.

VEHICLE FAMILIARIZATION MANUAL

SLOWLY THOUGH, BITTER IRONY WASHES OVER HIM, AND HE CONTEMPLATES THE PRIDEFUL FOLLY OF IGNORING HIS BELOVED INDOCTRINATION FOR SO LONG.

III

"THERE IS NO PATH UNCONNECTED BY THESE INSTRUMENTS – IT'S A PITY MORE PEOPLE DON'T HAVE THIS EDUCATION."

HE CONFIGURES CONTROL PANEL 1 TO ENABLE "PERVERSE LAUGHTER" AND WAITS...

THE LAFF BOX

In 1953, Charles Douglass (1910-2003) invented the first machine to produce canned laughter, which he called the Laff Box. It stood more than two feet tall and was operated like an organ; you pressed keys to choose the style, sex, and age of the desired laughter and worked a foot pedal to determine its length. He collected audience responses at mime shows, where the lack of dialogue gave him clean recordings. Douglass kept a tight monopoly on his device, driving around Los Angeles's television studios with his machine like a traveling laughter salesman. The Laff Box was first used for episodes of *The Jack Benny Show* and *I Love Lucy*.

INCORRUPTIBLE TEETH, OR, THE FRENCH SMILE REVOLUTION

COLIN JONES

In 1787, Madame Vigée-Lebrun, painter to France's royal and aristocratic elite, displayed a canvas at the Paris Salon. It was a self-portrait depicting the artist in an affectionate embrace with her daughter. Vigée-Lebrun is smiling—a sweet, broad smile revealing white teeth. There is little about this pose that seems in any way exceptional, yet exception was furiously taken. "An affectation which artists, art-lovers and persons of taste have been united in condemning," wrote an anonymous commentator, "and which finds no precedent amongst the Ancients, is that in smiling she shows her teeth. This affectation is particularly out of place in a mother."

What was so shocking, and what was so new, in a gesture—the white-toothed smile—that has become in the modern world an anodyne marker of individual identity? In the twenty-first century, we associate that gesture most with the Great American Smile, that cultural icon (and investment opportunity) which stares down at us from every billboard and every political campaign poster. Madame Vigée-Lebrun offers a timid, un-American antecedent; why France first? And just what was at stake in the world of art—and indeed the world of smiles—as France limbered up for the more evidently world-historical episode inaugurated in 1789?

One dimension of the smile revolution had to do solely

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opposite: Steven Brower, *Laughter type: perverse*, 2004.

above: Vigée-Lebrun's controversial 1787 painting.

with the world of painting that Madame Vigée-Lebrun inhabited. Representational conventions in place since Antiquity (as our anonymous critic noted) dictated that an open mouth in Western art had very negative connotations. It showed, first, that a person was plebeian. An open mouth could often reveal a lack of teeth that only the "low" would own up to. Eighteenth-century teeth were often bad. The mass ingestion of sugar across Western Europe from the late seventeenth century—in the form of sweets and bonbons, chocolate and sugared drinks like coffee, tea, and lemonade—meant that teeth were probably in worse shape than at any previous stage in human history. Open mouths in painting were fathomless black holes, Rabelaisian orifices emitting foul smells and provoking simple hilarity. They also signified that individuals were not fully in control of their reason. Such individuals might be insane or demented on one hand, or else children who had not yet attained the age of reason.

The scandal over Madame Vigée-Lebrun's 1787 smile brought to public attention a shift that had been going on outside the art world too. The French smile—relaxed, open-mouthed, good-humored, and hopefully white-toothed—was something to which other authors paid homage. For the Italian savant Caraccioli, Paris shook with

> "a moderated gaiety which consists not of great bursts of mirth but of a smiling countenance." The

celebrated theorist of physiognomy, Lavater, was in agreement. The French were always smiling: "I know them chiefly by their teeth and their laugh."

Did French pride in their teeth owe something to superior mouth care? It did indeed. It was the French, in the eighteenth century, who invented scientific dentistry. In fact, they invented the word *dentiste* too, before it spread into other languages. In the past the noble art of tooth-pulling had been practiced by showmen who traveled from fair to marketplace, yanking out painful teeth in full public view before a gawping populace (and sometimes offering tightrope walking and *commedia dell'arte* performances on the side). The dentist, in contrast, prided himself on surgical legerdemain, medical book-learning, and gentlemanly respectability.

The emergence of dental science and a body of proficient dentists came more slowly in other countries, allowing France to develop an international hegemony in this domain. When Austrian empress Maria Theresa wanted the teeth of her daughter (the future queen Marie-Antoinette) straightened, she summoned a French dentist. When George Washington had toothache troubles on campaign in the War

above: Thomas Rowlandson's 1811 print of French dentist Dubois de Chemant showing off the mouth of a woman fitted with a double row of his mineral paste teeth and gums.

of Independence, he sent for an expatriate French dentist to lend succor. When the salon conversationalist, the Abbé Galiani, was finding that the progressive loss of his teeth was making it difficult for his Neapolitan friends to understand what on earth he was saying, he sent for a Paris-made set of dentures to restore his articulacy. His dentures were, he stated, his "parliament": they restored a voice to the dentally disenfranchised.

Within France, better provision for the care of teeth and smiles was registered in a buoyant market for mouth-care products of every description. Newspaper advertisements and handbills proclaimed the virtues of every kind of commodity that promoted good teeth and a healthy mouth: tooth-files, toothpicks, tongue-scrapers, tooth-powders and dentifrices, tooth-whitening agents, lipsticks, mouth deodorants and the like. The toothbrush—and Paris-made brushes were recognized across Europe as the very best—became the center of what was to become a daily morning ritual. So, for some, did artificial dentures, another energetically marketed commodity.

One of the most famous of the new breed of dentists was Nicolas Dubois de Chémant. A Paris surgeon by training, Dubois had an epiphanic moment in 1788, as he reeled with horror after an evening spent in the company of a society lady with artificial teeth and very strong halitosis. Dubois hit on the idea of creating porcelain teeth rather than using the smelly and perishable human and animal teeth hitherto employed in dentures. Using the hard-paste porcelain that was only just coming into use in France, he launched a series of manufacturing trials for "mineral dentures," even drawing on the expertise of workers at the top-of-the-range porcelain factory at Sèvres to create a product that was comfortable, natural-looking, and resistant to surface cracking. By 1789, he had invented what became known as his "Incorruptible Teeth," and had had them approved by the most prestigious academies and learned societies.

There was an enthusiastic launch amongst France's social elite for a product that put the French smile at the disposal even of those who had lost all their teeth. Yet Dubois de Chémant was soon following many of his aristocratic clients into emigration. In 1793, he settled in Soho, London, home to a solid phalanx of political émigrés from Revolutionary France. In 1797, he even became a naturalized Englishman, switched his paste-supplier from Sèvres to Wedgwood, and peddled his wares to an upper-class English clientele as well as to fellow Frenchmen.

Sales of the new "mineral, incorruptible teeth" were not at all bad. Dubois de Chémant's advertising material in 1797 boasted of having sold 3,000 sets of dentures; by 1816, the figure would be 12,000. Yet, in England, retailing the French smile—especially an artificial version of it—was fraught with problems. After all, these were years in which the English were honing their sense of national identity on blatant undercurrents of Francophobia. The wearers of Dubois's new contraptions had to put up with a considerable degree of mockery, as exemplified in Thomas Rowlandson's famous 1811 engraving, "A French Dentist Shewing a Specimen of his Artificial Teeth and False Palates." Under the heading "Mineral Teeth," we read, "Monsieur de Charmant from Paris"—not much of a disguise for Dubois de Chémant—"engages to affix from one tooth to a whole set without pain. Monsieur Dubois can also affix an artificial palate or a glass eye. He also distils." The French smile was ridiculous because the mouth gaped open, but also because it revealed the ridiculous French contraption of porcelain dentures in the mouths of English individuals who had been duped by a quack—and who should have known better anyway than to attempt the French smile.

The English gentleman on the right of Rowlandson's engraving, caught admiring the French (porcelain) smile, showed teeth in the kind of state that made the appeal of porcelain dentures understandable. Teeth were bad; but dental caries appear to have been no worse in France than elsewhere in western Europe—indeed French teeth may have been better than those of the English, whose per capita sugar consumption seems to have been exceptionally high. The fact that scientific dentistry evolved in France before England and elsewhere showed that explanations for the phenomenon are more social and cultural than biological.

Part of the explanation for "Why France First?" lies in the buoyant world of French medicine and surgery from which scientific dentistry had evolved. But there was a demand as well as a supply side to the phenomenon. The French in the eighteenth century seem to have prided themselves on white teeth. The cornucopian profusion of mouth-care commodities on offer is unimaginable without a strong demand from within French society. The notion that the good-hearted smile was a national characteristic of the French also seems linked to changes going on in the French economy. A proto-consumer revolution, no less, was in train, with individuals even well down the social scale dressing, primping, and presenting themselves in ways more receptive to fashion and exchange. A new body was emergent, more soigné and cared for, more self aware, more individualistic in appearance, and yet also more attuned to emergent codes of politeness and to the dictates of fashion. The prizing of a healthy and preferably beautiful mouth appears to have been an offshoot of these overarching developments. To a considerable extent the new smile was only possible in the context of a new body.

The new body was a bourgeois body. The plebeian body was still a Rabelaisian retort, recklessly spilling out odors and infections. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, the aristocratic body lagged behind the cultural changes emerging out on the Great Chain of Buying characteristic of bourgeois commodity culture. The great German sociologist Norbert Elias's contention that the royal court was the *fons et origo* of the civilizing process in the West is far off the mark where teeth were concerned. The royal body had a closed mouth: teeth were immaterial. In public, the French king's speeches were read for him. The king's body embodied sovereignty. He did not need to open his mouth to assert it; his presence sufficed. At a more mundane but in its way no less significant level, moreover, Louis XIV had had the

indignity of losing the upper part of his jaw in an over-enthusiastic bout of tooth-extraction in the 1680s—well before, of course, the advent of the dentist and the smile revolution. For the rest of his life he could not eat soup without spraying his plate through his nose—a spectacle that must have enlivened the public dining which was a feature of court life at Versailles. (Such a gesture would of course be unimaginable in the world of modern politics: Tony Blair is more famous for his Hollywood grin than for his table manners.)

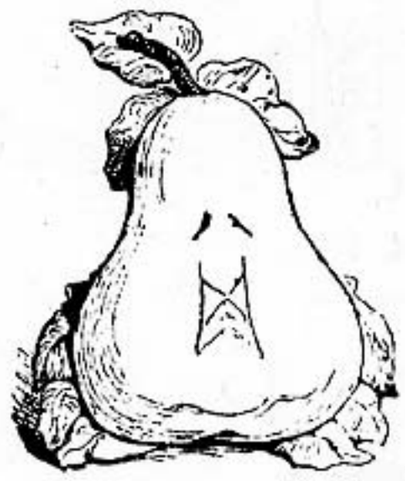
Power in *ancien régime* France was thus encoded and embodied in the closed mouth: Rigaud's famous swagger portrait of Louis XIV has the monarch showcasing those dancer's legs—but with no attempt to camouflage the sunken cheeks of toothless aging and reckless toothpulling. Kings did not care much for smiling anyway. Louis XV's decision to have one of his eyeteeth extracted, a courtier noted, "will disfigure him in talking and laughing." No matter: the tooth went. As for Louis XVI, he might have "a fine leg," another courtier opined, but "his teeth were badly arranged and made his smile rather ungraceful." As for the future king, Charles X, he had "his mouth continually open," in a hopelessly gormless manner. The French smile revolution—*pace* Elias—was not made at court. It was made out in the bourgeois public sphere.

There was something mildly democratic about the new French smile as it became increasingly evident in the decades leading up to Madame Vigée-Lebrun's 1787 gesture. It was as though eighteenth-century France was in the process of becoming an "open-mouthed society." This was witnessed not only in the ceaseless patter of mouth-care advertisements but also, more importantly, in the profusion of writing and in the loquacity of Enlightenment sociability from salon to coffee-house. This contrasted strikingly with the habitual taciturnity of Bourbon closed-mouthedness. In this context, painting—in the shape of Madame Vigée-Lebrun's 1787 self-portrait—was a late-comer to the smile party.

On the eve of the French Revolution of 1789, the new smile which was making its revolutionary way in western culture was thoroughly French. Yet if the open-mouthed, white-toothed smile went on to greater things, it also lost its close Gallic association. To some extent, prosaically, we can attribute this to the decline of French dentistry. When in 1802 the legislature re-organized the medical professions, it made no provisions at all for the practice of dentistry. Skilled dental practitioners had hitherto to practice on terms of legal equality with a whole army of tooth-pulling quacks and charlatans. The personal dentist of Napoleon I had been a trained practitioner in Paris under the *ancien régime*; yet the dentist of his nephew, Napoleon III, in the 1850s and 1860s, was an American citizen. It was as though by mid nineteenth-century, the decline of French dentistry and the French smile was opening up space in which American dentistry could establish a new and enduring brand leadership.

French hegemony over the smile had in fact been shaken before the reorganization of the medical professions. The Revolutionary decade which followed Madame Vigée-Lebrun's portrait was full of open mouths. In the long term, however, the Revolution would be more about maimed mouths than winsome smiles, especially once Terror came on the scene. The revolutionary crowd of 10 August 1792 which overthrew the monarchy had a vilely expressive atrocity to offer, whose obscene memory lingered over the following century: once they had killed Marie-Antoinette's alleged lesbian lover, the Princesse de Lamballe, they cut off her head, plonked it on the end of a pike, and smeared around its mouth, in a kind of chillingly grotesque moustache, the princess's own pudenda, before going on to wave this ghastly object in the face of the imprisoned queen.

If late eighteenth-century France had seemed to launch a French smile Revolution, the political maelstrom of the 1790s took the French smile in quite a different direction. The characteristic French smile of the 1790s was the acme of horror and terror: the rictus of the gaping, mutilated mouth.



WIDE AT THE BOTTOM, NARROW AT THE TOP

SASHA ARCHIBALD

In the wake of new press freedoms won by the July Revolution of 1830, France's King Louis-Philippe found himself just as popular a target of caricature as his despised predecessor, Charles X. Accordingly, the support of the "Citizen King" for free expression quickly cooled. Between November 1830 and April 1831, a period described in detail in Robert Justin Goldstein's *Censorship of Political Caricature in Nineteenth-Century France*, no less than four press laws were passed expressly to limit the publication of images. The primary target of these laws was *La Caricature*, a tabloid-style weekly founded by twenty-eight-year-old Charles Philipon in November 1830. Philipon's extraordinary penchant for caricature was outdone only by his zealous commitment to indicting the King. As he goaded the talents of such greats as Daumier, Grandville, and Traviès toward forwarding his cause, Philipon endured a steady barrage of harassment, lawsuits, fines, seizures, and raids, as well as multiple imprisonments. But even prison could not stop him: Philipon directed *La Caricature* and even launched a new caricature journal, the daily *Le Charivari*, from behind bars.

The most caustic weapon in *La Caricature*'s imagistic arsenal was a figure suggesting the ostensible resemblance of King Louis-Philippe's face to a pear. Prosecuted in May 1831 for publishing two drawings in *La Caricature* that depicted men who looked like the King, Philipon's defense ran that if all drawings resembling the King were to be censored, artists would have little left to draw. The government certainly couldn't censor everything wide at the bottom and narrow at the top, Philipon continued, and to prove his point, he quickly sketched the king's transformation into a plump pear. Immediately following his widely publicized acquittal, the pear drawings appeared in *La Caricature*. The likeness resonated with the people of France, and the symbol took off. Pears decorated the walls and buildings of Paris; caricaturists churned out drawings of pears in compromising positions; and common parlance began to denote *La Caricature* as The Pear. Stendhal's *Lucien Leuwen*, Hugo's *Les Miserables*, and the memoirs of Thackeray, Heinrich Heine, and Baudelaire all refer to the fruity representations ubiquitous in Paris between 1830 and 1835; an entire book of puns on the theme, *Physiology of the Pear*, was published in 1832. *La Caricature* followed the first drawings with several more: The allegorical Liberty constrained by a pear-shaped ball and chain; the king stooping to help a child draw a pear on a city wall; pear trees watered with blood; and pear-shaped arrangements of type. In 1833, Philipon published a particularly incendiary drawing depicting a monument in the shape of a pear placed on the site of Louis XVI's guillotine death. In the ensuing court trial, the prosecution argued that the drawing constituted "a provocation to murder." To this Philipon replied, "It would be at most a provocation to make marmalade."

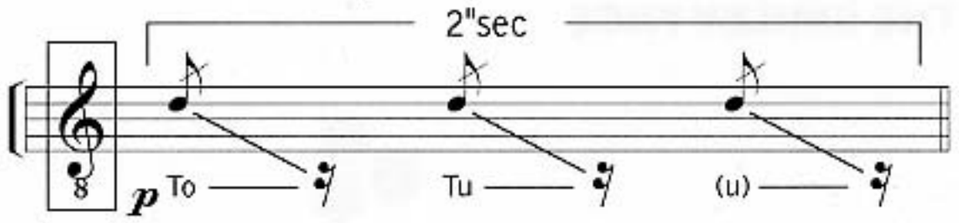
LAUGHTER SCORES

EDWARD JESSEN

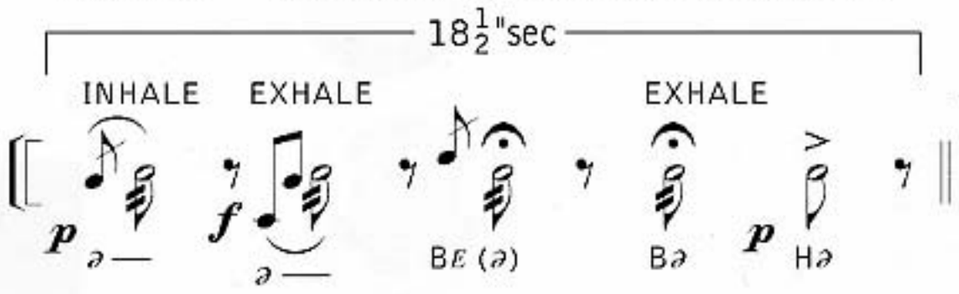
I began scoring laughter in 1994, when Jason Griffiths and Alex Gino entered an architectural competition to build a Temple of Laughter, and asked me to contribute. (Their design went on to win.) They explained that their small building, basically a shipping container that could be transported around the country on the back of a truck, would support a kind of "laughter system" which would both encourage visitors to laugh by playing them canned laughter and record their laughter responses as well. The idea was to create a building that would contain an ever-expanding cacophony of laughter.

My job was to make distinctions between the different categories of laughter—the giggle, the guffaw, the bellow, etc.—by recording samples from friends, children, and the TV and then making musical notations of them. It became immediately evident that the process of faithfully transcribing pure sounds of emotion was going to be enormously difficult. Unlike speech, which generally has a decipherable pitch, laughter seemed to be ecstatic, more like the sound of forced air and involuntary pitchless spasms. Therefore, with each example of laughter I resolved to take impressions of the vowels, the speeds and the curvature in the way that a court artist might quickly sketch a villain during a big murder trial—not the deepest likeness, yet not unrecognizable either. The impressions are based on a series of closer and closer approximations. A person should be able to look at the notes and execute the same sounds in an accurate and, with any luck, emotive manner.

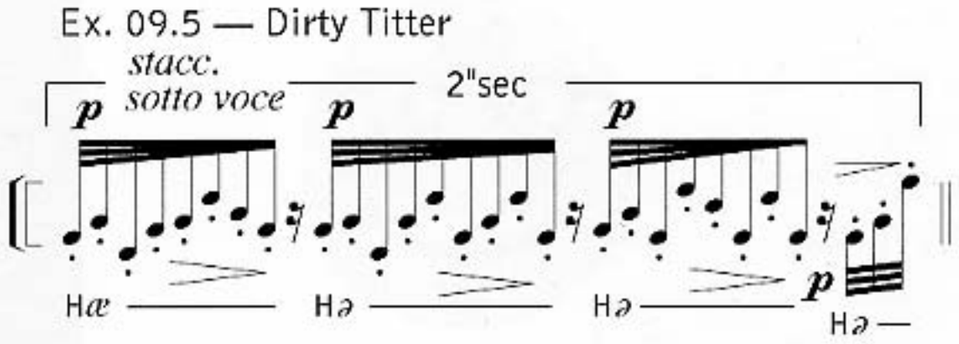
Ex. 04.1 — Short, Disingenuous Male Chortle



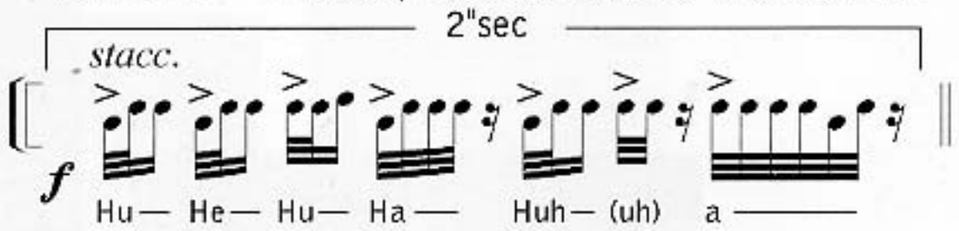
Ex. 06.6 — Vigorous Baby Giggles (Oscar, 8 mos)



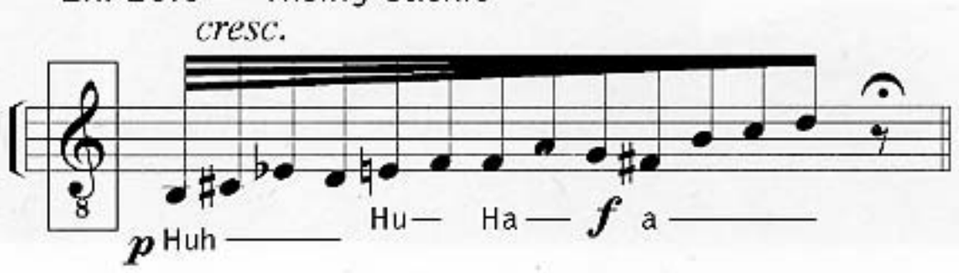
Ex. 09.5 — Dirty Titter



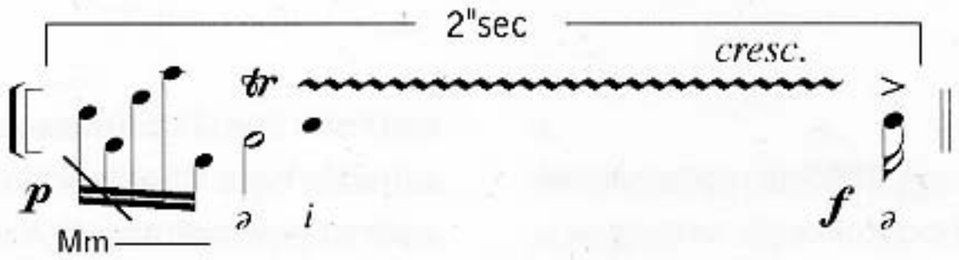
Ex. 11.0 — Frenetic, Pulsing Laughter (Young Girl)



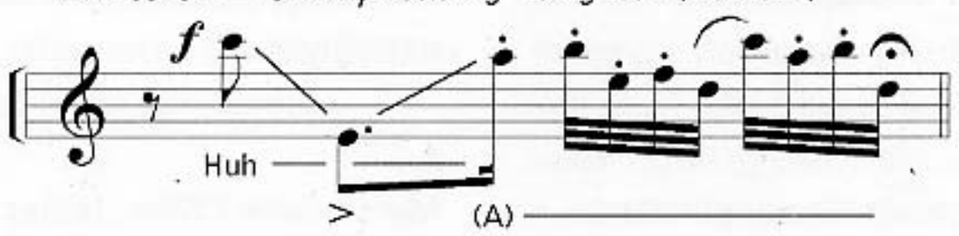
Ex. 20.0 — Rising Cackle



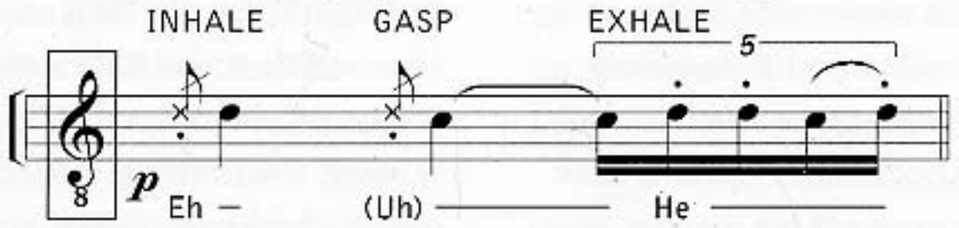
Ex. 24.2 — Raucous Snigger (Cartoon Animal)



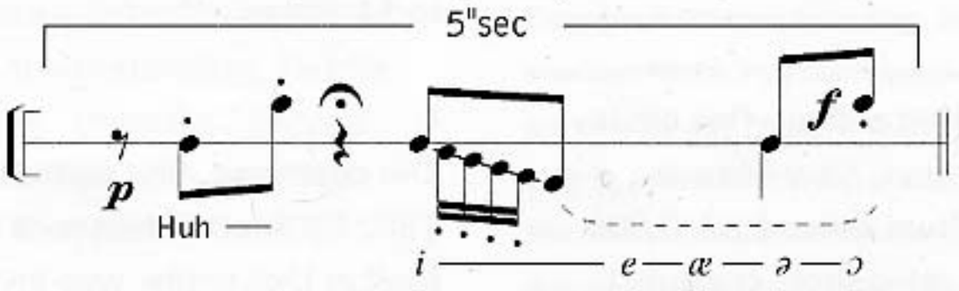
Ex. 03.3 — Shrill, Teasing Laughter (Female)



Ex. 34.0 — Insipid, Half-Voiced Male Giggle



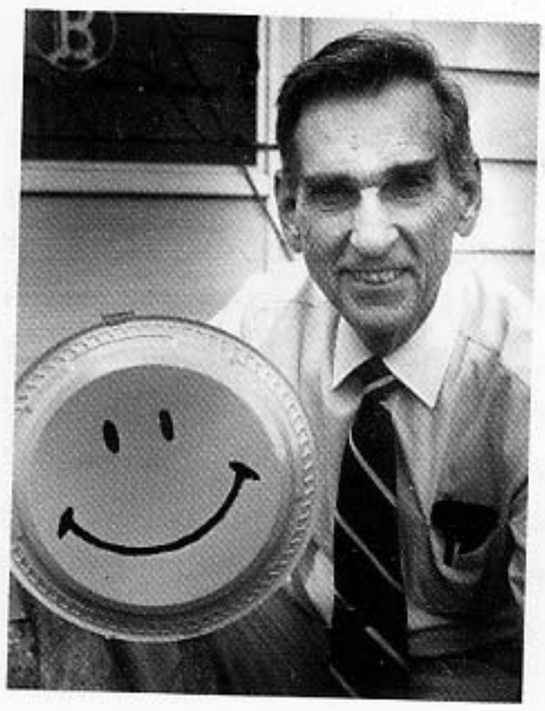
Ex. 34.1 — Forced Party Laugh (Male)



NO LAUGHING MATTER:
A SHORT, SAD HISTORY OF THE SMILEY FACE

JENNIFER LIESE

1.



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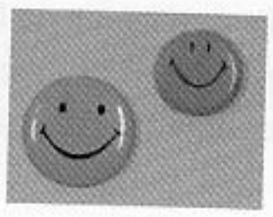
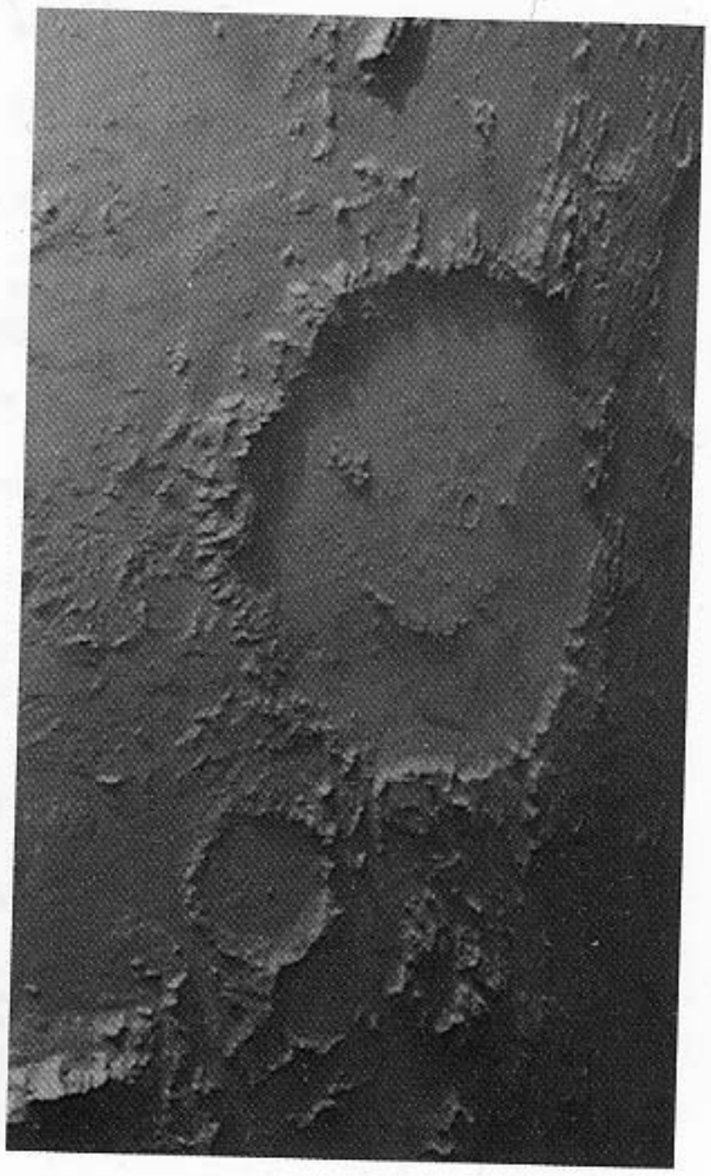


3.

4.



1.
The "original" smiley face was drawn in 1963 by commercial artist Harvey Ball for a campaign to boost morale among employees brooding over an ominous merger at State Mutual Life Assurance of Worcester, Massachusetts. Ball's fee: $45.

2.
By the early 1970s, the smiley had become a ubiquitous peace icon-*cum*-cheerleader, thanks to Bernard and Murray Spain, two brothers from Philadelphia who made fortunes off their sundry smiley products (50 million buttons alone were sold). Sales spiked when the Spains gave voice to their cash cow, bestowing its enduring exhortation: "Have a Nice Day!" Ball, who never made another cent off his design, was said to have found the expression "insipid."

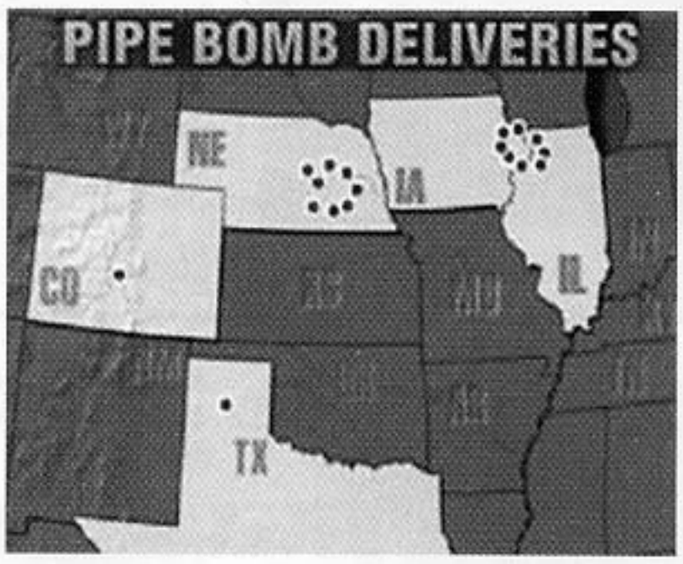
3.
But of course Ball's wasn't the *very* first smiley. This smiley petroglyph was found in Frijoles Canyon, New Mexico, where the Pueblo Indian culture dates back 3,000 years. Millennia of drought, relocation, conquest, and now this: For the past decade or so Native-American activists have fought and mostly lost a series of battles against new commuter highways linking suburban developments to downtown Albuquerque—built right alongside the Petroglyph National Monument, home to 20,000 sacred petroglyphs.

4.
Mars's Galle Crater, better known as the "Happy Face Crater," photographed by the Mars Global Surveyor Orbiter in 1999. Wrought by a meteor, it's about 134 miles across. (According to NASA's website, "It looks like Mars is happy to see us!") Current NASA funding for the Spaceguard Survey, the primary means of earth's defense against asteroids and comets: $4 million per year. Estimated cost for George W. Bush's man-on-Mars space initiative: $500 billion to $1 trillion.

5.
The emoticon, first posted on an online bulletin board in 1982 by Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, was invented as a way to indicate humor

5.

:-)



6.

7.

8.

or sarcasm. Who knew digital epistles would turn out to be so much funnier than their paper forebears? "It didn't seem like a big deal at the time," Fahlman reflects. Today, anecdotal evidence suggests that more blossoming love affairs have been called off over one party's horror at discovering the other's use of emoticons than over differences on abortion, political affiliation, and capital punishment combined.

6.

And who can forget the "smiley face bomber," Luke Helder, the 21-year-old art student arrested in 2002 for planting 18 pipe bombs in mailboxes across the US heartland? Having set off the eyes in Nebraska and on the Iowa/Illinois border, he had just begun the mouth in Colorado and Texas when he got caught. The pipe bombs, which produced injuries but no deaths, were delivered along with a photocopied anti-government rant signed "Someone Who Cares." The name of his rock band—Apathy—notwithstanding, Helder was invariably described by friends as "cheerful." Indeed, pictures show him grinning widely while being escorted between jail and court, finishing off that smile one way or another.

7.

Remarkably protean, the smiley serves infinite happy agendas.

8.

If Harvey Ball's son, Charlie Ball, has his way, the smiley will soon adorn every license plate in Massachusetts—or at least 1,500 of them. Since March 2003, Ball *fils* has been on a mission to gather the 1,500 applications Massachusetts DMV requires to produce a specialty plate. According to smileyplate.com, by mid-January 2005, Ball had 1,002 applications in hand. "Just 498 to go!" Bay State residents take note: You just might make this a happy ending after all.

Harvey Ball photo reprinted with permission of the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*. Vintage smiley buttons from the collection of Nathaniel Levtow. Petroglyph photo by Sally King, Bandelier National Monument. Mars photo courtesy NASA. Pipe bomb images source: CNN. Those three tiny smileys in #7 are Ecstasy pills. "Bob," a kind of Windows- meets-virtual-reality-for-dummies (1995), is Microsoft's worst-selling product of all time. Smiley Swastika pin by ManWoman. Proposed Massachusetts license plate design courtesy Charlie Ball and the Harvey Ball World Smile Foundation.