

We are all familiar with this comic turnabout in older cartoons: that absurd situation involving, usually, a rampant chase, or sometimes a backwards-treading showdown, which ends with the unfortunate victim running headlong (or deliberately pacing) into frightfully empty space. Suspended oblivious in mid-air off the edge of a cliff, the victim of this joke pantomimes the sprinter's circular leg motions—and, of course, his forward velocity only stops once he has realized the ground is no longer beneath him, that is, gravity only actually “takes hold” in the moments following the ‘revelation’ wherein the character ‘real’-izes that it should have already taken hold of him.

Why is there humor in this moment? Because we recognize ourselves in it: immersed within a theme of universal separation, i.e., surrounded by “nothing,” humor comprehends that the universe is not what we decide it is, but is always only what we real-ize it is. More generally, a joke “cures” us as a vaccine does, by reproducing the disease in an ‘innocuous’ form; in particular, the joke neuters a radical or contradictory situation, but by exemplifying the inconsistent and exaggerating it. There are at least three reasons for this. First, by impertinently giving voice straightforwardly to an a-sensical disjunction, we disarm the imminent threat of the contradiction, we “open up” a void in the world in order to distract ourselves from the actual void, but only for a time—even though by doing so, we (“inadvertently”) introduce further tensions via themes and association, tearing open an infinite number of linked and novel inconsistencies. Which is why, secondly, jokes are a release of unconscious tension: by placing these contradictions into the (“logical”) temporal sequence of events, we “master” and therefore obliterate time itself: humor owes its existence entirely to deliberate timing. Third, by encapsulating the paradox, we position the feared object strictly within the horizon of thought; but a joke always wants to say more than it says, and humor lives entirely in the gap between what is and what is said.

By reifying the glitch between language and being, the joke strikes us both as true and absurd simultaneously, and thus offers a glimpse beyond the horizon at an alternate reality, as enjoyment and effulgent feeling which is not a surprised knowing but is precisely laughter. Thus a joke is a narratively structured mis-leading which is just hypnotic enough to cause a momentary “hiccup” in our stream of reality, the improvised incorporation of an alien and unexpected rhythm. This moment is a break that mends us, a tearing open of a wound that heals us, if only for one instant, from the irreducible lack in this defective world, a makeshift vaccine simultaneously made for and from the inevitable brokenness of being (one-self).

Humor is this cure which reifies the terrifying eruption of naked existence itself. Although a humorous euphemism seems only to reiterate the ‘feared’ or ‘broken’ object in a clandestine and reconstituted shape, it is really a way of forgetting the thing itself, for within the bounds of this deliberate act of self-deception our abstract fear and tension dissipates, but not by being erased: rather, we express the tension all too directly, we magnify and externalize our unnameable fears, surround ourselves with it until it is colossal, all-consuming, cosmically terrifying, and then, of course, it can no longer hurt us because we realize it has become altogether too much, which is, of course, never enough. A joke is only really funny once. A stale joke reeks of the fears which caused it to be created as an armor piece in the very first place.

What is funny in this delayed falling, in the “hiccup” moment of the cartoon just after the unfortunate victim realizes there is no longer support beneath him? It is because the victim himself thereby brings about the very end he only suspects. We identify with the victim of the joke in this minimal terror of sudden foundationlessness. An unstatable fear because it echoes an ex-centered tension, or threat creeping in from beyond or outside the situation, and this fear which is precisely what-is-stated. Indeed, by stating our unstatable fear, this joke is giving voice to the “wavering” between language and reality which underlies our most strictly held beliefs, indeed, our ‘real’-ity itself. A joke, whose superbly joyous and free existence depends almost entirely on its timing, reveals the uncertain temporality of existence itself. The delayed timing upon which this joke depends, the hesitation literalized in this mid-air suspension, reifies the everyday situation where our very fear and ignorance brings about the thing which causes us to be afraid. Perhaps because fear and tension make us distracted and thus vulnerable, allowing us insufficient attention towards ominous constellations of coincidences— (who knows, perhaps the perverse tendency of dangerous but unlikely scenarios to occur at a rate so frequent it would seem to belie their statistical improbability rather reveals our own unconscious though “deliberate” hand in their occurrence, not only in the paranoid formation of nightmare-fantasy but in this precisely *forgotten* transference between the semi-bodied half-dreamworld and the all-too-real situation—) such “coincidences” indeed turn out to be anything but, since between our crippling fear and empowering anxiety, we are mired in a generative though aversive amnesia: we ourselves bring about the most feared, least favorable condition by our own hand even as we try to prevent it, because we try to prevent it.

An obsessively-feared occurrence is so dark we cannot help but clarify it, so unthinkable we cannot stop imagining and re-realizing its occurrence. But it is the same fearful thing against which we would enthusiastically raise our entire being up unless the thing in itself did not already present our own desire so completely and positively that to contradict it would be already to contradict this moment of resistance itself, to contradict our own superimposition. Our existence is itself nothing; our position within reality is arbitrary, random, meaningless; but the sequence of events in a human life is anything but arbitrary, anything but random. Such a suspension in mid-air is the result of a deliberate forgetting, an act of doublethink: a moment is forgotten, but (not) consciously, for we remember to forget (to remember...) The “x” which was to be erased is rather just crossed out with another “x”—but such self-censorship is not yet futility, even though through the act of repression itself we give a privileged place to the underlying unadulterated truth. Repression admits of multiple possible modalities of enjoyment even as it denies this possibility, and is an erasure of (alleged) “bad” through a violent un-forgetting of the “right” way to do things: a *legal* limit on infinity is already close to society’s definition of ‘sanity.’

Self-censorship is an internalization of an entire society into your own mind, and already an expression of loyalty and dependence upon the entire chain of social appearances; thus can we only coherently externalize our “unique” (i.e., apart from “society”) attitude towards life through irreverence and disobedience towards society itself? “Breaking the rules” reformulates the exact structure of repression, though in reverse (“Now, I will impose MY reality upon YOU!”) and thus fails completely to liberate: rebellion and discontent and chaos is not the same as completely liberated and uncensored desire— which means “organized resistance” is already an irony and a contradiction—resistance, ultimately, is banal, about the every day situation, our allotment of

time, and what we DO with it—and so “organization” already re-expresses the very repression which justice demands we resist. The problem, of course, is that of replacement: what do we do now that the old organization is out of the way? As Lacan remarks apropos of the events of May 1968, those who look for new masters will surely find them. The question is entirely one of the correct expressions of master morality, which is a difficult and obscure question with troubling dimensions. But resistance in slavery is the alternative, and moreover is ludicrous, since we deny and affirm the same state of affairs simultaneously. For between freedom and repression there is a gap, and it is only in between that events take place— in our following, we cannot move to either side without already becoming both part of the happening and irreversibly excised from it. Thus we are forever completely caught up within the “real” situation, without being able or willing to extricate ourselves—and, we are also wholly engrossed with the situation as an obstacle to be overcome: we prevent ourselves from passing beyond or through by the very fantasy that we are at a crossroads and that we are supposed, somehow, to “choose correctly” (even though we may be in “anguish”) and “move along” as though we could terminate eternally all relation we ever had to this event. But we are afraid to say “yes” and afraid to say “no,” and the truth is that it is only when we are unrecoverably stuck in this gap between absolute planes of existence, we actually have a choice.

Only in this gap between the “so-called” choice, which is so axiomatic, simplistic and pure as to be almost meaningless, do we ever exercise any sort of potentiality which could actually be called a freedom. But this freedom is always and only a freedom to perform a repressed act— (perform what?)—the act of demonstrating the existence of freedom, that is to say, an implication, the presentation of the possibility of a violation, the presentation merely of the possibility of such a performance, though it may ultimately be absurd in the cosmic sense. The possibility of something different than the ways things are, in different way than we are used to considering, is worth something: indeed, it’s worth everything, it’s the underlying rhythm of every joke, and the message of every joke is symptomatic of a pre-existing censorship which declares in almighty absolutes the limits of possibility. Thus humor is a teasing of the limits of the virtual. For example, art is always created in response to a repression, and expresses as always only an enduring, resistant, immanent freedom itself, in defiance of the censor: art is an asymptotic transference (i.e., an emancipatory event, an event at the ‘boundary’ of infinity.)

We are to be free in order to show others that there is repression— we recognize in the delayed timing of the fall the true reality beneath appearances, that is, that we willingly suspend ourselves in mid-air, in universal doubt and hopelessness, in subjective anxiety and existential straits and spiritual hardship, in thoughtlessness and boredom and hesitation— not in an attempt to change the ultimate outcome (which is, in any case, known completely in advance,) but simply to escape ourselves—

As in all jokes we learn from these cartoons a truth about freedom, which is only funny because it doesn’t help—we already know that we cannot become free just by running away, whether from repression or from the object being repressed. The revelation is incarceration: we’re only trapped when we realize we’re trapped, left only to perform our meaningless dance in that unnameable intersection between the void and the law (violence/death/universality.) It is *not* obvious this “metaphysical” situation is not an academic question, or that an agnostic position over this kind of freedom is a contradiction, already choicelessness and pure nihilism, e.g., “supposing such

choices are only theoretical, how can they make a universal difference?” It is important that the repressed memory here is humor itself, or more generally, the positivity of the void: running away won’t make us free, because the very force of the desire to escape the threat causes the unwanted event to come about. Pure escape is a paranoid fantasy just as absolute knowledge is a generic paranoid pretension. The difficulty here is that paranoid certainty verges on reality with a cryptic and surreal twist: we are indeed trapped. But then the question for freedom can therefore never be one of pure escape. Rather it is always particularly framed as the problematic of absolute separation, the difficult practical questions of pure revolt, the invocation of thought upon an eminently logical rebellion, a rigorous, a priori militant resistance to injustice. Freedom must be therefore be expressed as simultaneously particular, universal, and transcending the universal: as resistance in the name of truth, as intolerance in the name of justice, and as courage in the face of annihilation—

(c) Fractal Ontology, 2007