

problématique

today. It is fitting that we have available to us the example of the "man" who is not the white(man) subject in process. Rather the terminator has no feelings, no emotions, no hate, no love - it has no pity, it cannot be bargained with, it will not stop until it has terminated its subject.

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Ma The (Seemingly) Inevitable Theory of the Joke

The (Seemingly) Inevitable Theory of the Joke in Film Criticism: or the Gain, the Laughter, the +/-, the Risible Visible, and the Loss of any Salvaging Project of Truth or Demystification in (My) Life Today

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In this paper, I want to look at film theory. However, to be truthful, I cannot without reservations simply look at film theory because there is something that comes before film theory that invalidates these excursions (for me) if left uninvestigated. That is, the premise of a critical theory, upon which the project of film theory is based, comes between my desire to investigate and/or participate in the meaning of film and the possibility of achieving insight. It is an obstructive premise that I meet with laughter. Thus, I am interested in looking at laughter when it occurs during or alongside the contemporary inability of (post)modern critical thought to comprehend something. I want to look at laughter as being

able to do something, as being an ability in itself, as opposed to being a disability, a therapeutic supplement, or a mere tonic to our ills.

I am inclined to laugh, or I think about laughing, when I think about critical theory. Theory promises to make the thing under its investigation (e.g. the film, the individual, the world, etc...) both better and easier to understand; however, due to my suspicions as to whether one can ever make something better or more understandable, theory often prepares me more for laughter than it does for some kind of positivist enlightenment. These suspicions arise due to a realization that the main difficulty of theory is that in its efforts to realize only one small part of the world (i.e. to explain it) the theory inevitably needs to involve itself and the reader with either self-suturing and clearly totalizing world views or with understated, yet comparably complete realizations of the world. It is precisely the occurrence of this announced (or unannounced) theoretical totality that does not permit theory to fully realize the chaos of a world that is perhaps better met with concepts such as the Kristevan semiotic, the Lacanian "real", or a phenomenological being-in-the-world that lack particular imminence or order. That is, my suspicions coupled with my acknowledgement of a phenomenal world that is more often beyond cognition, while also paradoxically and completely contained and produced by it, frees me up to laugh in the face of (in the wake of) theory. Now, certainly one can rebuke this by calling my attention to the fact that these projects are also theories or attempts to arrive at an anti-theory theory, in the hopes of bettering traditional theoria. I would gladly surrender to such calls to question, however it is exactly this instance or moment of double closure or arresting rebuke that I think the laughter I speak about -released by postmodern critical theory- begins to blot onto the surface.

Perhaps theory will always fall short of its goal to reveal and demystify, and so I am amused by both its wantings and my own -here in this inscription or circumscription. This is nothing new. I see the promise that

critical theory holds out to us for finding, establishing, and accepting its explanations for the occurrence of the things around us, and yet, the seemingly cyclic process of a "solution" becoming its own next problem (especially in view of the "postmodern"), frustrating both the critical project and its adherent and giving birth to new ones, stirs up many of my (a)musings. Musings or moods of thought that could perhaps even be called: critical musings. That is, could there not be a view that this kind of conjunctural musing (amongst which laughter may only be one) accomplishes the emancipatory things that other more formal research attempts have been unable to achieve? Can laughter be the little births of different (i.e. new) momentary projects of theory that somehow temporarily and temporally (i.e. the historical) escape the traditional problems of a centring discourse?

I will investigate humour, laughter, the joke, the irreverent comic gesture, or the exasperated shaking of one's head, in response to some of the problems that formal theory presents. I will examine laughter as being accomplished both as a social and as an existential response to the present plethora of problematized theoretical projects. However, I advance the occurrence of laughter as a response that is not merely an answer, a return, or mere refutation of the critical aporias (by any other name) of our time, nor as a romantic overflow of such critical settings, but rather as something neither overflowing nor contained, nor as that which is within or without a project of enlightenment (i.e. in the strictest sense). That is, I want to resist "responding" in view of the phenomenon of dialectical recuperation. In so doing, I will look into how both Julia Kristeva and Georges Bataille attempt to explain possible excess or resistance in their works *Revolution in Poetic Language* and "Unknowing: Laughter and Tears", respectively, in answer to the question: what comes before film theory and why does it induce laughter? However, before I move onto these two theorists, I wish first to map out how the attempts of film theory are problematic, and how they do not address the problem that comes before the investigation.

In general, film theory attempts to explain what occurs on the screen (through the various cultural/economic/semiotic/sexual/subject avenues of production, exhibition, and distribution) as a film is shown and made. Film theory attempts to explain the reception and/or interpellation of the projection as it meets with its viewer or subject(s). Closely paralleling the developments in literary criticism, film theory has involved itself with various strategies and theoretical positions. For example: marxist interpretations that deal with a cinematic and/or ideological apparatus, semiotic projects that attempt to track the unfolding of cinematic languages on/in/out of screen, psychoanalytic explanations that attempt to describe the phenomenon of the film viewing/producing subject in process, *auteur* explanations that attempt to locate an underlying theme in a film-maker's body of work, and so on.... However, few of these projects have reflexive questions, concerning the validity of their projects, imbedded into their critique. That is, it is their own lack of self-undermining or lack of desire to de-centre themselves that create monocular projects, which in turn, create my disenchantment. A disenchantment that is most often of the laughable rather than that of the tragic or of a sadness-inducing.

There are two examples of film theory, that best evoke or elicit from me such contradictions of theory in film and which bring about this risible disenchantment. These two examples are Teresa de Lauretis' "Through the Looking Glass" and Christine Gledhill's "Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism." As feminist projects attempting to re-evaluate both the ideological and semiotic inquiries into film they provide much promise. However, in as much as they provide much promise, these articles are also riddled with their unseen internal debate, cross purposes, and hidden agendas.

In "Through the Looking Glass," de Lauretis sets up the task for being somehow un-rigid and un-static as a way by which to achieve some kind of project of betterment or advancement from the place that we presently inhabit. She writes:

I now want to suggest that the questions of representation and subject processes should be posed from a less rigid, less static or unified notion of meaning than is instated by an exclusive emphasis on the signifier and by a view of signification as always already determined in a fixed order of language (de Lauretis: 369).

In looking at this quotation, I think it is clear that de Lauretis is advocating a "different" place from which to speak. A place that is uncentred and free from the types of positivism that she sees in the critiques of ideology, and also in the counter-critiques of ideology. More specifically she wants to get away from projects that reference semiotic terms like signifier and signified so as to free up the speaking subject for their embrace of the "other" or the truly unchained site. That is, to move away from projects that are actively engaged in seeking out the answers to questions that are positivistically posed (i.e. questions gauged through class, production, gender, patriarchy, race, etc...).

However, if her proposition of non-stasis or un-rigidity is taken to its logical end, dispensing with the trope of logic altogether, I think such a move actually leads us away from the type of possible emancipatory projects of new critical insight (which she no doubt wants to maintain). It is at this crossroads, in the following of an un-logic, as leading to some kind of non-end, that we are led to a state of parody, irony, the smirk, or the "joke". That is, we are led to the laughable. Although, on the one hand, the "joke" can certainly be valorized as doing good work because it fills the requirements of decentredness and excess that an un-rigidity or non-stasis demands, on the other hand, it is exactly the valorization of a project of joke which laughter resists. Thus, what I mean by this sense of the "joke" is merely whatever act (or acting out) that is inscribed with a sense of play that interests itself not with a project, but with an interest in an irrelevant troping: that which involves itself with rubbish or gibberish remarks and comments about nothing in particular.

problématique

I am sympathetic to the very trap or position that de Lauretis finds herself caught inside, but my desire is not caught within the dream or possibility of escaping the bind of signification or language itself. Rather, I want to posit the relief from signification as a possibility, as does de Lauretis, but as a temporary relief and as arising from laughter (not a project of laughter). That is, as is the case with most provisional replies, this very concept can only be put forward as a component from the margin. The activity of laughter, however much I may not want it to be a project, becomes a concept in this instance of reference to a centre. This, of course, being the very thing that I (and de Lauretis' intention alike) would want to resist.

Is the joke, the derision, the pun, or the simple unreflexive (or colloquial) act of de-canonizing a script, a theory, a novel, a work, or a tv show ever really outside of a "fixed order of language?" Certainly nothing can be outside of an order since order is contingent on the structuring work of consciousness itself. Thus the problem arises out of how to actually see or figure out what is the next step or the furthering of an exit to lead us outside of an "order of language". I believe de Lauretis is suggesting that there can be acts of language that are less exclusive or non-myopic in their emphasis on language and that will permit us more than just a limited discourse which is chained to a particular set of 'questions of representation and subject processes'. However, unlike her conclusions, I think that this is exactly what the joke is about, but a joke in which the joke, the joker, and the laugh makers are all still inscribed, and continually inscribed, in some kind of emphasis on language (whether it be located in a conscious or active awareness of the signification or not) as the laughter seeks not to escape 'the exclusive emphasis on the signifier.'

And yet my worry is that I do not think Teresa de Lauretis would really be pleased about the criticism of how and what we do in life as only falling into some kind of mere joking around. I do not think this would ever be tolerated in the academy nor would it be tolerated by the revolutionary guard nor by the nuclei of a proletarian revolution that I

Ma The (Seemingly) Inevitable Theory of the Joke

believe still exists in the sequestered little areas of the limbic system that remains part of the make-up of any good ex-disenfranchised or disenchanting marxist (laughter here). And yet, with my reservations present, I still want to continue to suggest that perhaps the irreverent and the irrelevant joke can still do some good work.

The second quote that I call up, to further represent film theory's limitation in explaining the working process of film, is from Gledhill's article "Recent Developments in Feminist Film Criticism". In this article she overviews feminist strategies as they relate to the various developments of post-structuralism and a marxist project. This is another instance where I think the problem the theorist sets up is also best served by humour. The quote is as follows:

The ultimate problem, it seems to me, lies in the attempt to make language and the signifying process so exclusively central to the production of the social formation. Under the insistence on the semiotic production of meaning, the effectivity of social, economic, and political practice threatens to disappear altogether. There is a danger of conflating the social structure of reality with its signification, by virtue of the fact that social processes and relations have to be mediated through language, and the evidence that the mediating power of language reflects back on the social process. But to say that language has a determining effect on society is a different matter from saying that society is nothing but its languages and signifying practices (Gledhill, 1989: 844).

It may be difficult to get out from under the confusion or tautology of such an elliptical statement, however I think the investigation of such a proposition can help unravel the reasons behind why this conundrum readily receives the risible or may be prone (as a "postmodern" moment) to creating a fleeting excess. I think it is *appropo* for her to state right off: "the ultimate problem, it seems to me" because this "seeming to her" speaks, in its own right, about a particular personal problem while also illustrating to us, in its calling up of the subjective, the absence of any of the "real" truths that

problématique

she hiddenly appeals to. By saying “it seems to me” Gledhill is unknowingly dredging up the kind of basis of writing that is most often hidden as it calls our attention to the imprisoning work of our singular subjectness. And in this sense, undermines her own desire to appeal to and to make solid the thing which she calls “the social structure of reality” or “the social processes and relations”.

If we re-read this quote we can see the realist vision that the symbolic is just that: merely the symbolic, and that outside of this symbolic realm exists “the” real social process. Thus, I believe what is located here in this writing and my reading of it, is that ancient revolutionary desire to say that there can be significant acts to be performed, but not mere signification. Gledhill’s passage suggests that the performance of such acts will mitigate the confusing element of seeing the world as a process of communication, mere semiosis, or language, while at the same time functioning to deny the nihilism present in the theoretical moves that much of post-structuralism attempts to make.

Alternately, in relation to a practice of humour and laughter, Gledhill’s project does not look at the elements of postmodernity that would parody, make fun, make sarcastic, or make cynical and ironic her question of “what is to be done?” (i.e. ‘the ultimate problem’) all in the service of humour. For example, the irreverent acts of parody, pastiche, and/or even academic humour found in the works of theorists such as Baudrillard, Virillio, Deleuze-Guattari (who are more than familiar with marxism), amongst others, are examples of acts of theory that work against the very stability that she seeks to reinscribe into a modified marxism. Certainly, mockery (in the extreme) of the different names of the father can be one possible route for theory to go, if one wanted to heed the words of de Lauretis for us to be less rigid. Yet, I think that to only half way reflexively reserve the view that the symbolic is just the symbolic is thus to maintain the very circle of self-deceit that one so desperately seeks to purge from the “ultimate” projects of emancipation (e.g. marxism).

Gledhill’s move to say that society is more than its

Ma The (Seemingly) Inevitable Theory of the Joke

languages and significations is exactly where her project breaks down. In acknowledging the constituting presence of language I think it foolish for one to then still maintain that there is an empirically knowable social that is apart from language, which is exactly what Gledhill would need to maintain if she wanted to keep a “real” political, social, or epistemic project of revolutionizing reality. In the end, neither Gledhill nor de Lauretis have really attempted to overturn their own subject position, processes, or constituting presences as (white, (womb-man, gendered, hetero/homo sexualized) female, marxist, etc...) feminist theorists in their attempts to posit epistemic and ontologic categorical de-territorializations. Nor do I sense their interest in re-evaluating “naturalized sight” even though they are attempting to (re)write on the subject of films or filmic vision in the context of a (feminist) re-positing. That is, their premises of vision and its “seeing” or the “seen” are both still based on manufactured “natural” categories of sight that are established outside, or are pre-existent to, their rhetoric of transformative political practice and radical re-cuperation of meaning(s).

Now, in a sense, it may seem that I simply set up both de Lauretis and Gledhill as sort of strawwomen, to get my project going and to help lead us to where I think the acknowledgment of humour or laughter can enter into the discourse as both a quick tonic for our confusion and also as a project of “real” politick. However, the problem that I see in Gledhill’s position is the same problem that one has when one professes that a project will grant an unrestricted ultimate freedom, yet at the same time desiring to retain some kind of moral imperative or social truth. It would seem that if one truly gives oneself over to an “ultimate” freeing then one cannot hang onto the fear of chaos or anarchy nor to the stability of one’s project. One then has to make a sort of leap of faith as to believe in the order of chaos to bring humanity (and of course humanity is another idea which is left behind) into another stage (which is another hierarchical term to be left behind) where there is an open space. Of course, then one does ask: must it all become reduced to this? Just an “open space” that we cannot, at the moment, peek into or have a

glimpse of, or that which is existing only always out there, beyond our vision or hearing or touch? Or is the trope of ephemerality and spaciality also to be left behind? And what of my own trope of "being left behind"? Would this also need to be somehow revised, perhaps as "remaining in front" instead of leaving behind? Rhetorical devices (which laughter takes advantage of) may, indeed, be just "rhetorical", yet if we are only left with the possibilities of language, then language (and the rhetoric that goes along with it) can only be the device with which we move towards freeing moments.

Thus, rhetorically, I ask: is such solipsism only the inward spiral into and away from ourselves that does little work? I do not think so, because I think that one never really gets to such a stage of complete abandon where all is lost, rather I think we can only know that we come to a stage of humour (or alternately I would also suggest, for that matter, a sadness or confusion or a nostalgia or melancholia) that precedes such abandon. A stage of humour (or sadness) that is precipitated by one's realization that the big questions of truth that one asks in this "postmodern" moment can only be answered in the humorous musings of irony, parody, pastiche, or sarcasm. However, I am suggesting a humour that is not resuscitating nor rescuing us in any projected sense because this momentary feeling of "joy" is merely a humour that brings an uncommitted and sometimes nervous laughter. A laughter that is not unitary, nor overdetermining, nor the same for everyone. It is not a laughter that in any way salvages us from a moral depravity or existential doubt, but I believe that in this laughter (and perhaps I am also suggesting the sadness inherent in some laughter) lies some type of space that is the type of space that all these positivist projects are employed in looking for. However, they keep visually looking for it instead of surrendering to it, instead of surrendering to both the doubt (or mood) of an unclosed theoretical space, and instead of surrendering to their own "bodily" function, a surrender which then gives up the possibility of laughter or recuperation in whatever ways that the subject desires to manifest. That is, a possibility (e.g. of laughter or tragedy)

that I cannot describe or contain.

However, I also do not want to organize it or naturalize it as being in the corporeal body, nor do I want to aestheticize it or an-estheteize it by invoking it as an entity of the abstract. I want only to say, that in the portion of this (conjunctural) potential that is of the laughable, there occurs in the space of the "body" the willingness of itself to heave up and down as we laugh at jokes and parodies or punctums of the absurd, and it is this that I see as being part of the "real" politick activity of humour. I see this in the same light as the type of emancipatory necessity that occurs in all writing that is influenced (knowingly or unknowingly) by marxism. And perhaps I concede to de Lauretis and especially Gledhill the question: what writing is not influenced by Marx or the dream characterized by Marx, or the marxian ontological dream of utopia?

After tracing through the types of problems illustrated by the examples of Gledhill and de Lauretis I think we can look to authors who try to posit a way out of this bind, authors such as Kristeva and Bataille. In fact, Kristeva speaks precisely about the kind of emancipatory moment in poetry or laughter that can actually be an escape within the very situation I describe.

Similar to my own concerns about not being able to get out from under the symbolic or logic of theoretical postulates, Kristeva proposes a way to interact or track theory so that it can free us up from its tautological problems. In her discussion of the thetic movement of the semiotic through the symbolic, Kristeva has posited certain activities, or moments in those activities (e.g. poetry, music), that possess the possible ability to, however immanently paradoxical, break through into a space unknown or unlike thoughts (or text). That is, an ability of the activity to be totally unlike the conceptions that have been constrained in the traditional and binding properties of metaphysics. And one of these possibilities of revolution resides in laughter.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva writes about the ability of the semiotic to poke through the symbolic,

but this poking through is always in some way transported, mediated, or reclaimed through/by the symbolic. It is this break through the signifying practice that she names the "thetic". All types of utterances and statements are thetic in the sense that they must be made by separating the speaking subject from the symbolic object being created in this process of speaking and signification (Kristeva, 1984: 43). The "subject in process" is literally in the process as s/he must paradoxically first locate him/herself in a process of identification that is being used to differentiate him/herself from this thetic separation or space. Kristeva writes:

In this sense, there exists only one signification, that of the thetic phase, which contains the object as well as the proposition, and the complicity between them. There is no sign that is not thetic and every sign is already the germ of a "sentence," attributing a signifier to an object through a "copula" that will function as a signified (Kristeva, 1984: 44).

In so doing, she tries to set up a language that suitably handles talking about the possibility of transgressive moments in language. However, she always wants us to keep in mind that this moment in the thetic does not transcend, renounce or relinquish the thetic, but instead "go[es] through its truth (signification, denotation) to tell the 'truth' about it" (Kristeva, 1984: 60). She posits mimesis and poetic language as being able to function in the capacity or attempt of "breaching" the thetic, and it is the breaching of such a thetic that is the "good work" of this practice. It is a process she equates with social revolution. Kristeva writes,

But mimesis and poetic language do more than engage in an intra-ideological debate; they question the very principle of the ideological because they unfold the unicity of the thetic (the pre-condition for meaning and signification) and prevent its theologization. As the place of production for a subject who transgresses the thetic by using it as a necessary boundary -but not as an absolute or as an origin- poetic language and the mimesis from which it is inseparable, are profoundly atheological. They are not critics of theology but rather the

enemy within and without, recognizing both its necessity and its pretensions (Kristeva, 1984: 61).

By valorizing poetic language as being able to transgress the thetic, which was first posited as integral to subjectness, Kristeva is preparing the grounds for when she will propose laughter as doing similar (or better) emancipatory work than does poetry. Thus, in her second to last section in *Revolution in Poetic Language* concerning laughter: "Maldoror and Poems: Laughter as Practice", she posits laughter as being able to actually transcend this thetic boundary and as being able to lay claim to a "thing" arisen out of the semiotic or from the un-knowable "chora", the "thing" that floats unconstitutedly below the development of such laughter.

Although laughter thus indicates one of the internal laws governing meaning only a few rare philosophers can become the subject of laughter (whereas anyone can be its object). It is above all the "artist" who must accomplish, in each of his actions, what the instant of laughter reveals to the philosopher only in rare privileged moments.... Laughter is thus merely the witness of a process which remains the privileged experience of the "artist": a sovereignty (of the subject and of meaning, but also of history) that is simultaneously assumed and undermined. Thus, since "the nations of the world will see a multiplication of comic themes in proportion as their superiority increases," it is clearly up to the "artist" to guide them on this path (Kristeva, 1984: 223).

Her positing of a project of laughter, as akin to some kind of (moral) mission that an "artist" must clearly undertake to help free and lead the 'nations of the world', is a worthy project. However, I cannot help but smirk when I realize the presence of both the hidden ecumenical agenda imbedded in her project of salvation and her illogical regard for the artist (or joke maker) as potentially revolutionary. Her use of the analog of the joker who must command a sovereignty over his/her joke-work as s/he tells it to undermine 'the subject', meaning, and history is over-stated and seemingly impossible to substantiate with a "proof". It would be impossible because

problématique

of the paradox of entering this 'privileged' overturning of the thetic boundary without artistry or laughter. My reaction to her valorization of the "artist", as being able to do the double work of both assuming sovereignty and undermining it, is that of a peaked interest. However, she offers no apparent proof for suggesting why the "artist", over everyone else, possesses the rare ability to breach the thetic through his/her use of poetic language or through his/her dual possession of both sides of the thetic.

Unfortunately, there are many places in Kristeva's framing that come up short. She writes:

Laughter is what lifts inhibitions by breaking through prohibition (symbolized by the Creator) to introduce the aggressive, violent, liberating drive. Yet when this contradiction takes place within a subject, it can hardly be said to make him laugh (Kristeva, 1984: 224).

The practice of the text is a kind of laughter whose only explosions are those of language. The pleasure obtained from the lifting of inhibitions is immediately invested in the production of the new. Every practice of laughter: it obeys laughter's logic and provides the subject with laughter's advantages. When practice is not laughter, there is nothing new; where there is nothing new, practice cannot be provoking: it is at best a repeated, empty act. The novelty of a practice (that of the text or any practice) indicates the *jouissance* invested therein and this quality of newness is the equivalent of the laughter it conceals. Beyond merely laughable phenomena and through prohibition, Lautremont's text bears this message for social practice (Kristeva, 1984: 225).

I find I like the way Kristeva describes this laughter as an instant that can "hardly be said to make him laugh." However, I also feel Kristeva over-invests laughter with the kind of energy or power that she has invested in the artist or in poetic language. Whether those agents have the necessary ability to overwhelm the symbolic is not crucial to my argument. However, as a treatment (or analog) of laughter her terms do not cohere with my intentions.

Ma The (Seemingly) Inevitable Theory of the Joke

In the type of laughter that I want to evoke, or speak about, the laughing does not in any way free the subject so that s/he can (in process) do "good work" in social practice. Rather, it is the activity of laughing for that moment which is all of the work of the humorous. That is, there is no other remainder or excess other than the laughter transpiring. I propose that this conjunctural activity is a moment of revolution, but one that cannot be brought back into a symbolic or social project in any way other than the form in which it (already) transpires. It is not so much that I want to demonstrate laughter as a Kristevan transgressive moment, but rather my attempt is to show how the mere traversal of this space by the subject and what occurs in this space (i.e. in the non-programmatic event or moment in the laughable) as being the marxian "good work" of laughter. I want to resist Kristeva's aim of connecting laughter to a project extended beyond its moment, but also propose that within that moment there is the ephemeral potential for being content that this laughter is doing a work equivalent to any outside project of emancipation.

In this regard, I am also proposing that laughter is never a complete excess, but rather that laughter is always a compromise but a compromise which is not so bad. That is, I am proposing that laughter, as it occurs with(in) critical theory, is an excess but one which is only conjunctural. An excess or remainder that overflows a situation only in its moment and not in any progressively transcendent way. Thus, laughter is always a temporary moment that cannot quantifiably contribute to a "real" social project because it is not the kind of excess that can supplement the establishment of the research project or framing from which it arises or in which the subject is engaged.

In "Unknowing: Laughter and Tears", Bataille also writes about laughter in a similar way to Kristeva. He writes,

Let us suppose that that which induces laughter is not only unknown, but unknowable. There is still one possibility to be considered. That which is laughable may simply be the

problématique

unknowable. In other words, the unknown nature of the laughable would be not accidental, but essential. We would laugh, not for some reason which, due to lack of information, or of sufficient penetration, we shall never manage to know, but because the unknown makes us laugh.

We laugh, in short, in passing very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which everything is firmly qualified, in which everything is given as stable within a generally stable order, into a world in which our assurance is overwhelmed, in which we perceive that this assurance was deceptive (Bataille, 1988: 90).

Bataille explains that laughter or the laughable occurs when we fall from a position of knowing into one of un-knowing. That is, when our assurance in a stable and firm world is undermined or overthrown by a sudden realizing that there is "something" that is unforeseeable or unattainable through knowledge. And that the risible is the one reaction, within a range of reactions, which is able to give the subject some kind of positive feeling or "joy" as it illuminates this unknowability in a productive way (Bataille, 1988: 90-91). That is, the subject is given over to the production of laughter, the mood of un-foreseeability, and the acceptance of the lack of the known.

However, in relation to my own theory of laughter, I disagree with Bataille's notion of laughter. In my positing of the laughter contingent on theory, the subject (in process/in language) is not in a place of stability nor control, rather this subject is aware of his/her unstable and provisional stance atop an ever-shifting surface of theory. Hence this subject does not laugh because s/he is presented or overwhelmed by un-knowing, but rather this subject meets uncertainty with the uncertainty s/he already possesses (i.e. doubt, insecurity, fear, etc...) and s/he laughs because his/her doubt is playfully re-confirmed. This is not to suggest that all subjects who encounter critical theory are in compromised positions of confusion, or alternately, within empowered positions brought on by their strategic use of structural de-centring or projects of de-territorialization. Nor do I suggest that we can

Ma The (Seemingly) Inevitable Theory of the Joke

exist day to day without possessing certain ontologic groundings or unquestioned phenomenological experiences. However, the subject who proceeds with "postmodern" theory today and involves him/herself in the process of de-stabilization does not laugh because s/he suddenly confronts an irregular texture in the stratum of theoretical investigation. Rather, the "postmodern" subject today is continually inscribed in a process of de-stabilization where s/he laughs, not as an epiphanic reaction, but when s/he is periodically reminded of the aporia of theory (e.g. the loss of god, truth, telos).

Unlike Bataille's subject, the "postmodern" subject is not presented with anything any more overwhelming than the uncertainty already apprehended. The laughter or humour derived from such an encounter is only a localized conjunctural epiphenomenon arising from this sliding of surfaces. A phenomenon happening above or on top of the one already in place or the one into which the subject is momentarily traced. In this sense, Kristeva's idea of a semiotic rupture of surfaces or boundaries is a helpful model but her romantic notion of the rupture as being emancipatory and explosive goes beyond the investment I am willing to make. And since they both theorize the revolutionary or transcendent moment as an excess, it is not coincidental that Kristeva's notion of a "choric" knowing is very similar to Bataille's "un-knowing".

Bataille writes:

Now, it must be stated that the transcendence present in laughter is not of great interest if it is not the transcendence indicated in Nietzsche's phrase. In general we laugh on condition that our position of dominance not be at the mercy of laughter, the object of laughter. To laugh, it is necessary that one not risk losing one's position of dominance....

To return to the terms I have already employed - laughter is, let us say, the effect of un-knowing, though laughter has not, theoretically, as its object the state of un-knowing; one does not, by laughing, accept the idea that one knows nothing. Something unexpected occurs, which is in contradiction to the knowledge we do have. (Bataille, 1988: 97)

It seems that Bataille contradicts his previous statements about “un-knowing” as an entering into an unexpected area where stability is overwhelmed with his statement that one never “knows nothing” or that the subject’s position of dominance is never really in danger. I think he is merely attempting to track the movement of the un-knowing as a(n) (a)knowledgment of contradiction. A contradiction which necessitates a framing of knowing or dominance in which to exist. It is akin to Kristeva’s example of how the joke teller’s rendering of stability permits him/her to conceptualize and tell the joke, but where the effect of the joke (i.e. “the effect of un-knowing”) causes the rupture (i.e. the un-known). However, although Bataille is coherent in this respect, I disagree with Bataille’s belief that the subject’s position of dominance is not assailed or that one really does not accept the idea that one knows nothing. I disagree with Bataille’s premise (one very similar to Kristeva’s) that we must have a stable frame into which the chaos of the un-knowing movement may be introduced. It is couched in an optimistic notion of reclamation or resuscitation as is his reference to Nietzsche’s romantic view of a joyful divineness born from a laughing at the tragic. Rather, the frame of critical theory that has been assailed by various post-structuralist strategies, exists today less as a “frame” than as an inverted colander. A colander whose drainage holes have turned into surfaces, and whose old positive structure, which used to collect and strain, have, arguably, become impossible spaces that now invisibly hold the (anti)structure together in its “new” strain or tensile strength. A tensileness brought about by the reversed organization of such critical moments. A lattice work of empty spaces and emotions.

My feeling is that the phenomenon of the laughable--or at least as it occurs contemporaneously in relation to theory--is the mere re-affirmation that one really does not know or have unassailable confidence when confronted with the aporia of theory or the truly un-knowability of truth. That is, one is reaffirmed about one’s lack, rather than this “rupture” striking

the subject like an epiphany of doubt or clarity of vision. There are moments in which the contemporary subject of critical theory is so used to a “postmodern” lack of closure or topographical overview such that s/he has learnt to use the lack of stability in theory as the basis for theoretical or textual being. In this sense, my treatment is similar to the reasons that Kristeva and Bataille give for laughter, but differs in the manner of how it starts and in the manner of how one gauges the duration or potential for revolutionary practice.

Thus, in my time, or for my purposes, the un-knowability that Bataille speaks about in relation to the laughable is but a doubt that is re-confirmed, and not one that is newly given rise to. As well, I also do not see myself giving laughter the kind of space that Kristeva wants to give to the thetic moment of breaking through processes of signification. Rather, I see laughter as conjunctural or filling into a space that momentarily makes itself available.

In general, I agree with Kristeva that laughter permits us something that other discourses do not. However, I prefer to be more precise. I would agree in saying that revolutionary acts (i.e. laughter) arising out of theoretical tomfoolery mixed with “postmodern” doubt is similar to the kind of revolution that Kristeva attributes to the laughable. However, I would not agree that this revolution in any way exceeds its particular conjunctural moment, nor do I see any proof as to why it would be restricted to, or linked to, an artistic practice. As well, Kristeva and Bataille never talk about laughter as coming out of a particular location nor as arising from a particular theoretical conjuncture. Rather, they both only posit it as a general or amorphous potential abstractly existing beneath the surface of the world.

I have suggested that when the “postmodern” theorist (in the company of contemporary theory) cracks a joke about theory or theorizing then that is a revolutionary or emancipatory act. Even the saying of “crack” a joke is somewhat indicative of what it is supposed to do. It is about cracking the surface of something, of being heretic towards the venter of things. And yet, I am not trying to suggest this in any way cashes out as a traditional revolutionary act or in

any way transforms the external "social world," nor do I say that it directly effects the discourse of revolution and emancipation, nor does it speak about or act against "real" social injustices (e.g. apartheid in South Africa), but I think it does do something more than is traditionally perceived.

And what that more is, is that it specifically is doing something more than what comedians or coffee-table philosophy suggests comedy does for us. I have tried to make a space to speculatively allude to this minor form of present day humour, the smirk, or the laughable that exists within the discourse of nihilism in which we find ourselves (i.e. a discourse that both celebrates and critiques the destruction of the father, the collapse of teleology, the denial of meta-narratives, and comments (laughably) on the general malaise found in the type of incomplete dialogues and/or feelings of inefficiency that pervade the arena of "post-modernity"). However, as the elements I contest in Bataille and Kristeva have shown us, that quality is very difficult to pinpoint.

I do not suggest that this is the first time in history that there is pessimism or jokes about it, but I have attempted to say that perhaps in looking at our inability to fully comprehend that aegis of pessimism, which is seemingly pervasive, as a thing that brings about a different kind of humour and which in turn does the good work as opposed to a buckling under a pessimism that creates mere mockery and cynicism. That is, I have proposed that this 'conjunctural' laughter is not merely marginal to the central projects of critical discourse that are supposed to rationally overcome this aporia. A laughter of humour that temporarily recoups the aporia as it simultaneously acknowledges and gives rise to the impossible-rendering that impossibility possible- just as it fades from our view. Laughter achieves its good work as it is forgotten, and specifically because it is neither recouped as an "employable" agent of social change, nor as a romantic principle of excess.

I have not said laughter makes life more better or more understandable, rather I have said that it does make a particular moment of reception/production of the contradictions and complexities of (post)modern theory more palatable. A palatability, like food palatability, passing through us to provide excreta or a remainder that is literally "shitted out." However, it is not the abject that I want to valorize, rather it is the moment of palatability, or of the taste (of the initial food) that is made more tastier by laughter. That is, my non-project of laughter has not been in the pursuit of investigating, examining, nor producing the object residue. It has been to call our attention to a laughter that meets with the obstacles in front (behind) of theory.

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