Introduction

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Anthropology is the science of the sense of humour. (Malinowski 1937)

In the end, this work, if we will carry it further, will make clear … the nature and function of important aesthetic elements, naturally mixed … with darker aspects of social life. Obscenities, satirical songs, insults against people, and ridiculous representation of some sacred beings, are also at the origins of comedy; just as the respect shown to Gods and heroes nourishes what is lyrical, epic and tragic. (Mauss 1968: 161)[1]

This volume results from a cooperative project to describe and analyse a wide variety of humorous experiences, expressions and texts in different social settings and contexts. While the main focus of the book is on anthropological aspects, it soon became clear that research on humour inevitably demands an interdisciplinary treatment. Indeed, contributors have drawn on the methods and theories of related disciplines; a strong emphasis on psychological and cognitive aspects of humour is thus variously combined in the different chapters with aesthetic, historical and philosophical considerations, and with the research methods of literary criticism, textual analysis and film studies.[2]

While each of the chapters contributes some theoretical insight and casts interesting light on earlier discussions, we did not attempt to reach a general and fixed agreement on the 'essential' nature of humour and, while well aware that the three terms in our heading 'Humour, Comedy and Laughter', may designate different realities, contributors to this volume have taken their connections at face value.

Theories of Humour

As Avner Ziv writes (1984: Introduction), humour appears to be highly resistant to a firm analytical definition: 'Nearly thirty years ago, no less than eighty

definitions were put forth in the professional literature (Berger 1956) and since then another thirty have been added'. The OED simply defines humour as 'The quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech' and Merriam-Webster 'A funny or amusing quality, jokes, funny stories, the ability to be funny or to be amused by things that are funny'. A more extended definition of humour as 'mood, temper, feeling', and 'a message whose ingenuity or verbal skill or incongruity has the power to evoke laughter', also includes an understanding of humour as a form of communication – as we shall see, a fundamental aspect present in all the chapters in this book (www.wolframalpha.com).[3]

Humour is commonly associated with laughter, although the two are not always and necessarily interdependent: there can be humour without laughter, and conversely much laughter can be quite humourless. One difficulty is that laughter has been explained by ethologists in different and fundamentally contrary ways; for some, at the origins, the baring of teeth was a sign of hostility, while others, seeing it essentially as a form of smile, understand it as a sign of appeasement. Both laughter and smiling can express very different feelings: they can be bitter, arrogant, false, or apologetic and bashful; as Harbsmeier stated (unpublished paper, 2010), 'The Chinese … have a vast and subtly analytical vocabulary for laughter and smiling, each qualified and named according to the emotions which prompt or accompany them'. Most commonly, however, the feelings expressed seem to be simple friendliness, understanding and amusement. As Avner Ziv points out,

> Laughter is easier to define than humour, because we can see and hear it, and, although it can also be caused by physiological stimuli, like tickling, here too is a social element: you don't laugh if you tickle yourself and you don't tickle a stranger! Also we laugh more when we are with friends, than with strangers. It reinforces cohesion and reduces tension, thus creates a positive atmosphere. (1984: 9)

That view is now confirmed thanks to scientific research by neurophysiologist R.A. Provine and his conclusion that both chimpanzee and human laughter is '*decidedly a social signal with a social function*' (1996 and 2000, my italics). Quoting Provine (1996) in her chapter on 'Jungle Humour: Play in Wild Bonobos', Isabel Behncke describes laughter as 'A universal signal of wellbeing in a playful situation to help regulate and cement social interactions' (unpublished paper, 2010). On the subject of courting – as we shall see, central to several chapters in this book – Robin Dunbar explains,

> The evolution of the human brain was driven by the demands for sexual advertizing … the modern male has to keep his partner smiling. A property of smiling and laughter is that they are good at stimulating the production of endogenous opiates. Making a prospective mate laugh lulls them into a sense of security … [Opiates] are a crucial part in the mechanisms of bonding. (1996: 190–92)

Such attempts to define what it is that leads people to make others laugh and able to perceive humorous expressions and jokes as 'funny' are very usefully grouped under three main headings, as 'superiority', 'incongruity', and 'tension' (Smuts 2013). In addition 'Play theory' classifies humour as a form of play, or a disinterested and pleasurable activity considered to have strong adaptive value, and to be an important part in children's development of cognitive and social skills, as Wilkie and Saxton clearly illustrate (chapter 1 in this volume). Experiences of incongruity, superiority, tension relief, as well as a general view of humour as a form of play, are not exclusive, but, on the contrary, they may complement one another in explaining why a joke or event may lead to amusement and laughter.

However, a distinction remains between the laughter that may follow the perception of some amusingly absurd or incongruous remark or event, and the laughter directed at another's weakness and inadequacy. Many of those who have reflected on laughter have pointed out its potential for causing humiliation and pain – a view discussed by Plato and Aristotle and summed up in Thomas Hobbes' much quoted definition of laughter as 'Nothing else but sudden glory, arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly', in keeping with his view of human nature as fundamentally cruel and competitive (Hobbes 1840). I shall return to that problem, but first – and without any hope of covering the vast critical literature on humour – I shall briefly sum up discussions by anthropologists, in particular Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Gregory Bateson and Mary Douglas.

The first British anthropologist to write about joking – or, more specifically, 'joking relationships' – was A.R. Radcliffe-Brown: a joking relationship, he writes, is one 'between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, or in some instances required, to tease and make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offense'. The main example and topic of his analysis is the 'privileged familiarity between sister's son and mother's brother' observed in some African societies. Joking relationships are 'most widespread in relations by marriage' when the changed position of the two families in the social structure may lead to conflict and hostility, while 'conjunction requires the avoidance of strife'. Extreme mutual respect between the son-in-law and the wife's parents, most of all her mother, is therefore countered by 'the playful antagonism of teasing' (1968: 9).

Joking takes place between persons of similar ages, as it is usually the mother's younger brother who is involved; also cross-cousins like to tease and embarrass one another in jest when they meet, but they too are not supposed to take offence. In some parts of Africa, 'there are joking relationships that have nothing to do with marriage, as they can be between distinct tribes or clans'. Radcliffe-Brown thus describes joking as a form of adaptation, that is, a process by which 'an

individual acquires habits and mental characteristics that fit him for a place in social life [and] ensures the continuance of a system' (1968: 90–94).

In light of the chapters in this volume, especially Ardener's and Sciama's on the vicissitudes and sometimes comical difficulties in courtship and marriage, Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of some of the sentiments involved – for example, 'a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism' between affines and the contrast between 'authority and a subtle undermining of respect' by the younger generation – do underlie much joking and humour in general. However, Radcliffe-Brown's critics rightly observed that his discussion is not so much about joking as it is about social structure and affinal relationships. Mary Douglas observed that 'He wrote on the subject of joking in a very dessicated perspective' (1975: 91), and indeed his analysis shows the limitations of a narrow functionalist approach whereby joking is understood as merely a way to avoid strife and keep the social system going, thanks to 'social behaviours in which conjunctive and disjunctive components … are maintained and combined' (1968: 95). Radcliffe-Brown's scant interest in individuals and his privileging of social structure over culture, which he defined as merely 'a characteristic of a social system' (1957: 106) really deprived his analysis of any deeper psychological insights or awareness of the aesthetic and symbolic potential of humour.

Just as in the 1930s, in Chicago, Radcliffe-Brown was promoting his view of anthropology as the 'natural science of society', anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic were developing a strong interest in relations between culture and psychology. In England, Malinowski, as well as advancing the methods of anthropological fieldwork, developed and broadened the concept of culture, which he urged his students to analyse in a number of distinct aspects, including language, education, systems of knowledge, material culture, and above all psychology – as we have seen, essential in any attempt to understand humour. As Audrey Richards (1968: 22, 118–21) remembered, he had a strong interest in the psychoanalytical theories that flourished in 1920s and 1930s Europe, and, 'he carried that interest in his fieldwork'.[4]

At the same time American anthropologists, especially Boas's students and colleagues, were increasingly attracted to psychology, psychoanalysis and learning theories. Boas himself observed that 'An error of modern anthropology … [lay] in the overemphasis on historical reconstruction … as against the stress of the culture' in which people lived (quoted in Kuper 1973: 87). A key question in Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1959), based on her observation of the psychological traits of different Indian tribesmen, is how people adapt to the customs, life-styles and moral attitudes of their society – and the answer was to look at the different ways they were socialized. Also Edward Sapir, a close friend and colleague of Benedict's, inquired into relations of individuals and society, and found that deep-seated connections, a sense of belonging and a 'common sense'

all developed through language learning – a process described by Wilkie and Saxton (chapter 1 in this volume) in their account of the way in which socialization proceeds hand in hand with the acquisition of language, with a capacity to communicate, and, of course, to appreciate humour and jokes within a given cultural group.

But the first anthropologist to conduct theoretical research on humour in a truly holistic way was Gregory Bateson.[5] Because of the great complexity of social relations, and the variety of cultural constructions, he thought that anthropology definitely required an interdisciplinary approach. His theory of humour is thus part of his wider research on the development of human cognition and communication. Some of his early thoughts on humour are recorded in a paper mainly based on discussions that took place at an interdisciplinary conference on 'The Position of Humour in Human Communication' (Bateson 1952). The meeting included a number of distinguished neurologists, cyberneticists, cognitive and clinical psychologists, as well as two anthropologists, Margaret Mead and Bateson himself, who, as 'presenter', was obviously taking the leading role in discussion. As the conference title indicates, it was generally assumed that humour is a form of communication, hence a strong emphasis on language and on implicit as well as explicit meanings. The connection between humour and laughter is taken for granted – their differences recognized – and the two terms then used interchangeably.

A starting point for Bateson's thoughts on humour was Russell and Whitehead's work on paradoxes, which, they found, were a major difficulty in their attempt to reduce all mathematics to logic.[6] Paradoxes may not in themselves be particularly funny, but they do create a sense of suspense or puzzlement comparable to that brought about by many jokes and riddles. Bateson's idea was that Russell and Whitehead's theory, developed to resolve problems in mathematical logic, could be applied to anthropological studies of communication, and especially humour. He emphasizes that messages usually carry a lot of implicit information; in particular jokes contain some information on the surface as well as implicit content in the background that usually becomes explicit when the point of the joke is reached and brings about laughter as 'a circuit of contradictory notions is completed' (1952: 2).[7]

An important aspect of joking behaviour is therefore the implied meta-message, or 'code', that indicates that such behaviour is indeed playful. 'Play', as a concept of greater generality (defined by Russell and Whitehead as of 'a higher logical type') than the names of the different forms and behaviours involved, thus designates the background – in Bateson's words, 'the ground' or 'mood' – for humorous events, and one of his most significant findings is that a failure to grasp such meta-messages and to recognize the different contexts of communication can lead to mental illness. Indeed, it was thanks to his understanding of Russell and Whitehead's insights into paradoxes and their relevance to the

study of human communication that Bateson developed his influential theory of schizophrenia as sometimes a cultural rather than a solely genetic disorder.[8] But, although paradoxes and, I should like to add, contradictions, incongruities, nonsense, banter and so forth, are a problem for those who fail to grasp their nature, they are the prototypic paradigms for humour and jokes.[9]

As well as being a source of confusion and distress for those unable to understand their meta-messages and to grasp their contexts, paradoxes can provide an escape from the narrow boundaries of logic – they too, sometimes, a potential cause of madness.

As Bateson writes,

> These paradoxes, are the staff of human communication … In ordinary life, as distinct from scientific talk, we continually accept the implicit paradoxes. Freedom to admit paradox has been cultivated in the therapy situation, but this flexibility exists between two people whenever, God willing, they succeed in giving each other a freedom of discussion. That freedom, the freedom to talk nonsense, the freedom to entertain illogical alternatives … is probably essential … In sum I am arguing that there is an important ingredient common to comfortable human relations, *humour* and that this ingredient is the implicit presence and acceptance of the paradoxes … The alternative to the freedoms introduced by paradox is the rigidity of logic. (Bateson 1952: 3)

It is of interest that 'freedom' is repeated no less than six times! Logic cannot admit to life's changing realities, while the 'study of mind through a causal approach will lead us to accepting the paradoxes … which are related to humour, and in general are related to mental health and human amenity' (ibid.: 3).[10] Commenting on Bateson's essay 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy' (1972), his daughter Mary explains,

> It is not merely bad natural history to suggest that people might or should obey the theory of Logical Types … we believe that the paradoxes of abstraction must make their appearance in all communication more complex than that of mood signals, and that without these paradoxes, the evolution of communication would be at an end. Life would then be an endless interchange of stylized messages, a game with rigid rules, unrelieved by change or humor. (1999–2000: 192–93; see Hofstadter 1979: 11)

Indeed, humour and jokes are contingent: as we find in all of the chapters in this book, they are generally bound up with the times and places in which they are generated, although sentiments and imaginings about past or future times (Martinez, chapter 6) can also inspire jokes and bring about laughter.

I shall return to cognitive aspects of humour, but first examine Mary Douglas' essays (1975: 83–114), given that she too looked upon humour as liberating; while Bateson contrasts humour with the rigidity of strictly logical thinking and

with an incapacity to accept the changing and contradictory nature of human realities, Mary Douglas sees humour and jokes as a counter to the constraints and formalities of social life. Both Bergson and Freud, according to Douglas, have in their different ways argued against rigidity (cf. Apte 1985). Bergson's reflections on laughter are in keeping with his belief in the superiority of intuition and spontaneity over logic, and of life over 'mechanism'. For Freud, as it brings unconscious thoughts and emotions to consciousness,

> A joke shows that an accepted pattern has no necessity … It brings no alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general … as it unleashes the energy of the subconscious against the control of the conscious … For both the essence of the joke is that something formal is attacked by something informal, something organized and controlled, by something vital, energetic, an upsurge of life for Bergson, of libido for Freud. The common denominator underlying both approaches is the joke seen as an attack on control … All jokes have this subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas. (Douglas 1975: 95–96)

And, because different societies impose different manners and degrees of bodily control, social etiquette generally determines how much and how loudly people can give way to laughter. 'Some tribes are said to be dour and unlaughing. Others laugh easily' (ibid.: 84). For example, according to Turnbull, pygmies, who are freely mobile in the forests of Equatorial Congo, 'lie on the ground and kick their legs in the air, panting and shaking in paroxysms of laughter' (1961, quoted in Douglas 1975: 84). A similar difference, Douglas suggests, might be found in a comparison of jungle-dwelling chimpanzees with others inhabiting more exposed, and relatively more settled savannah areas.

Thanks to her interesting comparison of jokes with rituals, Douglas observes that both connect different symbols and concepts; but while in rituals they support each other, 'in jokes they disparage each other … the rite imposes order and harmony, the joke disorganizes. … They [jokes] do not affirm the dominant values, but denigrate and devalue. Jokes challenge … A joke is by nature an anti-rite' (Douglas 1975: 102–103). Quoting Victor Turner (1982: 11–12) on the contrast between structure, which supports hierarchy and authority through a social system, and community, in which roles are not strictly defined and there is fellowship and warmth, Douglas observes that laughter and jokes express community: 'A joke represents a temporary suspension of the social structure' (1975: 107).

Here then we see that, while Bateson looks upon humour as a counter to rigid modes of thought, Douglas, developing Bergson's and Freud's arguments, concludes that jokes actually provide a form of critique and a potential escape from rigid structures, be they structures and forms of society, forms of thought that may restrict the potential for human communication and creativity, or, as for Freud, the domination of an oppressive superego.

Cognitive Aspects of Humour

'Didn't Frankenstein get married?'
'Did he?' said Eggy. 'I don't know. I never met him. Harrow man, I expect'.
(Wodehouse 1936)

To call the social fact *total* is not merely to signify that *everything observed is part of the observation*, but also … that in a science in which the observer is of the same nature as his object of study, *the observer himself is a part of his observation*. (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 29, my italics)

In this section, as my two epigraphs imply, I shall look further at cognitive aspects of humour, then discuss accounts of humorous and funny incidents that sometimes occur when people of different cultures meet – as Okely shows (chapter 2, this volume), an aspect of humour particularly relevant to ethnographers' accounts of their fieldwork.

As we have seen in Bateson's discussion, a 'sense of humour' implies both a capacity to understand a joke or comical event and a capacity to communicate a sense of amusement by some original, unexpected, or ironic observation, parody, bodily expression or turn of phrase. Making a joke, Köestler writes, is a creative act that requires intelligence and observation. There are, in his view, three main forms of creativity: that of the humourist, the scientist and the creative artist. The quality common to all three is 'the perceiving of a situation or idea in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference' (1964: 95).[11] This section's first epigraph, for example, shows how a simple sentence can be amusing thanks to the contrast of different perspectives: Eggy's answer to Bertie's simple question, had Frankenstein got married, showing his naïve assumptions that Frankenstein was a real person, and that any man Bertie and he might have met would have been associated with a public school, is contrasted to the presumably wider perspective of the readers, who, Wodehouse assumed, would have known that 'Frankenstein' just referred to Mary Shelley's imaginary creature.[12] Comic creativity is thus a skill that depends on a keen understanding of social realities and a capacity to cast such realities, be they persons, situations or events, in some critical or whimsical way.

Examples of jokes and comic performances based on keen observation are reported in Keith Basso's *Portraits of the Whiteman* (1979). He introduces his book with quotations from two Native American writers, respectively Vine Deloria Jr. and Harold Cardinal. As the first writes, 'the humorous side of Indian life has not been emphasized by professed experts, yet every problem and experience has been well-defined by American Indians through jokes and stories … the more desperate the problem, the more humour is directed to describe it' (Deloria 1969, quoted in Basso 1979: 4–5). And, as Cardinal stated, 'The biggest of all Indian problems is "the Whiteman"' (1969). Thus, to briefly paraphrase Basso's introductory

remarks, 'the Whiteman' is an abstraction that Indian people use to confer order and intelligibility upon their experience of Anglo-Americans. Their portraits of 'the Whiteman' are actually different for different Indians, but the opposition 'Indian versus Whiteman' is fixed (1979: 5). Apaches partly solve, or learn to cope, with their 'Whiteman' problem by some humorous but insightful jokes and performances in which they portray Americans as incompetent and clumsy, ready to affect and take for granted a back-slapping, overly familiar friendship that does not actually exist; they talk too much, they say one thing and do another, and, worst of all, they boss people about and make them feel small – which is completely contrary to Apaches' strong emphasis on social equality. In this way, Apaches define what an Indian is not, or should not be, while their sketches and jokes are like a mirror in which Americans can see themselves portrayed.

The work of the humorist has also been compared to that of anthropologists: for example, Critchley (2002: 9–10), a philosopher, writes,

> A true joke … lets us see the familiar 'defamiliarized'.
> The genius of jokes is that they light up the common features of our world, not by offering theoretical considerations … but in a practical way … *they are a form of practical abstraction, socially embedded philosophizing.* (Ibid.: 87, my italics)

Critchley's observations thus come very close to those of anthropologists, who have reflected on humour in light of their fieldwork experiences. In comparing humour with anthropology, Henk Driessen (1997: 228–31) notes that 'defamiliarization and relativism make anthropologists open to seeing the funny side of their own society … more so than other professions'. Like Okely (chapter 2), he thinks that sociologists are dull and serious.

Comic incidents often do take place, especially on first encounters of ethnographers with the people they are setting out to study. There is some amusement in Evans-Pritchard's account of his arrival and fieldwork conditions among the Nuer in the 1930s, as he emphasizes the contrast between their customs and his own firmly British habits and expectations. His account of the way Nuer would 'from early morning till late at night' visit his tent uninvited to demand tobacco and to appropriate his game, on the ground that it was shot on their land, contains a great deal of insight into Nuer character, as well as Evans-Pritchard's ironical self-reflection. The main issue was his loss of privacy – an essential English value. 'The chief privation', he writes, 'was the publicity to which all my actions were exposed, and it was long before I became hardened, though never entirely insensitive, to performing the most intimate operations before an audience or in full view of the camp' (1968: 14–15). 'One is just driven crazy' by the Nuer's obdurate refusal to answer questions. 'Indeed, after a few weeks of associating solely with Nuer one displays, if the pun be allowed, the most evident symptoms of "Nuerosis"' (ibid.: 13).

David Maybury Lewis describes how, when he arrived in Shavante territory with his wife and one-year old son, a number of Shavante who had gone to the airstrip to help carry their luggage, had set it all down before the village chief, who expected the trunks to be open and their contents immediately distributed. Meanwhile, the guide who had accompanied him from Sao Domingos gave the men's council a detailed report on their two-and-a-half days' journey, expertly mimicking his clumsy Shavante and recounting everything he had said and done *en route*. This included the fact that one morning he could not find his packhorse because he had let it wonder away for miles over hard ground the previous night. 'The Shavante found this uproariously funny, and were obviously amused by my general ignorance and incompetence in their habitat'. Then, in order to make himself popular, he joined the men on their hunting treks and was found to be rather impractical and clumsy; he had to adjust to being 'cast in the role of camp jester, or perhaps mascot' (1974 [1967], introduction, no page number).

'In Bali', Clifford Geertz writes, 'to be teased is to be accepted'. On arriving in an isolated village to conduct fieldwork with his wife, he found that they were generally ignored, 'treated as non-persons, specters … as if [they] did not exist, or anyway not yet' (1973: 412–16). That entirely changed after they decided to watch an illegal cock-fight – forbidden but integral to the villagers' way of life. As they were totally absorbed in the game when they were surprised by a large number of policemen, they decided to follow the villagers, who were dispersing and ended up being offered tea in a man's compound. Joined by the police, their host explained with considerable knowledge, that they were important people, anthropologists, fully cleared by higher authority. The villagers were amused and surprised that he had not himself explained his position, but they were happy he had shared their 'cowardice'. That incident put an end to their invisibility. 'Getting caught in a vice raid actually led to rapport…' (ibid.: 412–16).

Examples could probably be multiplied, but, Maybury Lewis comments, 'anthropologists are frequently reticent about the circumstances of their field-work. I find this regrettable … it is time we abandoned the mystique which surrounds fieldwork and made it conventional to describe in some detail the circumstances of data collecting so that they may be as subject to scrutiny as the data themselves' (1974, no page number).

The great cognitive value of comical incidents and misunderstandings is clearly shown in Okely's chapter. As she writes, a reluctance to report the funny moments one may experience, especially at the beginning stage of anthropological fieldwork, is due to a tendency to exclude the autobiographical and the personal in the writing of ethnography (Okely and Callaway 1992; Driessen 1997: 228–31). That, she thinks, is a loss because not only the narration, but also systematic reflection upon comical moments, can be quite instructive, as well as amusing and encouraging to students. Indeed humour may develop precisely 'when cultural boundaries are crossed', and errors and misunderstandings 'may

be resolved through laughter' (chapter 2) which may help to establish good field-work relations. When different people laugh together, mutual suspicion and reserve thus begins to give way to a positive sense of some common sentiments and outlooks.

Some shared knowledge and assumptions, whether based on a common background or creatively achieved, are nonetheless taken for granted for much humour to be fully understood and enjoyed. Indeed, an important cognitive aspect of jokes is their necessary connection with contemporary and past social realities. As we have seen above, in his contrast between logical and temporal thinking, Bateson points out the 'historicity' of humour and jokes: all the chapters in this book show that they are inevitably bound up with the times and places in which they are generated. Ian Rakoff's analysis of American comics (chapter 4) shows that they are actually part of the history of American social attitudes and prejudices, while Fiona Moore (chapter 5) tells us how the joking and banter of German bankers and their English colleagues in London are always constrained by awareness of a difficult past; while disposed to indulge in some office humour, they certainly show a keen sensitivity about the troubling history of the Second World War. Their joking itself, always ruled by caution and reserve, can be looked upon as a way of mutual learning which is instrumental to working together, as they turn embarrassment and ironical stereotyping into fun and solidarity.

As Ardener shows (chapter 7), pantomimes are anchored to their times through topical jokes and references to current social or political realities, local politics, gossip or scandal; not only the creators and performers of comic events, but also their audiences, are largely conditioned by changing tastes and times. It is of note that some comic products, like cartoons, films and drawings – among others, Donald McGill's bawdy seaside postcards, formerly dismissed as utterly vulgar and obscene – have recently been the subject of an exhibition, 'Rude Britannia: British Comic Art', at London's Tate Britain (9 June–5 September 2010).

Dolores Martinez's analysis of science fiction films also provides a commentary on aspects of modernity, with its hopes and its fears for the future. For example, comic renderings of young space scientists' ineffectual romantic enterprises, as well as differences in various remakes of the Frankenstein story, reflect apprehensions about masculinity and gender relations, in light of strong feminist power and scientific progress of in-vitro insemination, especially in 1970s United States. Changes in gender relations are also illustrated in the vernacular songs collected by Glauco Sanga, as they document social and family transformations in late nineteenth-century Italy, and they illustrate the misogynist attitudes of a conservative and narrow-minded peasantry to women's achievement of some measure of economic independence and personal freedom.

Goldoni's late eighteenth-century comedy, *Scuffles in Chioggia*, with its vivid representation of class relations and incomprehensions, is very much a product

of its time, as it shows the sharp contrast between dialect and language speakers, and rustic versus urban culture. A noticeable difference in the responses of the people of Chioggia who inspired the play, from its first performances in the late eighteenth century to the present, clearly shows how sensitivity to ridicule can radically change with the passing of time and with changing circumstances.[13]

Elisabeth Hsu (chapter 3) shows that some ancient Chinese medical diagnoses, concerning the king's and the queen's complaints, are in fact ironical comments on the state of the country. Thanks to her painstaking linguistic detection and analysis, she finds that an awareness of the presence of comic elements can be a valuable key to unpacking the metaphors of an ancient text and it can guide the critic in her most subtle and original interpretative work. Most importantly, Hsu concludes that jokes and riddles that may superficially appear just as titillating 'sexual innuendo', condemned in the Christian tradition, 'are really about the ultimate mystery of life, the union of man and woman' and 'humour can broaden and deepen human understanding'.

Comedy

> The most promising advance in recent research … has been the endeavour to isolate and conceptualize the time factor … Maintenance and replacement [of society] … are temporal phenomena … These processes have biological determinants. One is the life span of the individual; the other is the physical replacement of every generation by the next in the succession of death and birth. (Fortes 1971: 1)

Succession to power and control by the young, as a phase in the life-cycle, with its attendant tensions and rituals, is very often the topic of traditional comedies and pantomimes. Indeed, an association, and sometimes a tension and contrast of humour and comedy with ritual and the sacred, noted by Douglas and Victor Turner (above) and subtly researched by Hsu (chapter 3), also characterizes the beginnings of European theatre. In the early Middle Ages all dramas, and especially comical performances, considered a continuation of pagan culture that potentially undermined the Church's authority, were strongly disapproved of and generally banished.[14] However, in time the Church asserted its control precisely by absorbing some theatrical elements into its ritual.

Antiphonal hymns for solo voices and choir thus became a starting point for dramatic dialogues, and, while early performances were based exclusively on sacred narratives, in the course of history they increasingly introduced secular themes. Partly through a need for wide spaces to accommodate their increasingly large audiences, performances had to be moved from the church to the village common, or to the town square, where, thanks to the Church's well considered syncretism, brief comical interludes, gags and dances were allowed between the scenes of liturgical dramas. The contrast between medieval gloom and a festive

'carnival culture' is eloquently described by Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and his World* (ca 1940). As he writes, 'Nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspects always marked by fairs, and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters and trained animals' (Morris 1994: 196).

Although condemned by the Church and even denied the Sacraments, the companies of mimes, storytellers, jugglers and minstrels who wondered around Europe generally aiming to reach the great Christian capitals of Paris, Rome and Santiago de Compostela in order to join their large festive gatherings, thus increasingly took part in those early shows that were eventually to develop into a great comical tradition. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when attitudes were changing, and distinctions were made between 'bad' and 'good' comic performers, some of the latter were actually employed by Church leaders to entertain and edify the large crowds who gathered at abbeys, sanctuaries and village fairs, by reciting some holy verse and recounting the lives of saints (Apollonio 1981: 69–79).

Some religious holidays thus gradually merged with ancient folk celebrations and seasonal festivals. Comparing this process to one of 'using old skins to contain new wine' a historian of the theatre notes that

> some dislocation of traditional customs and calendar dates occurred: some of the most cherished among them, however, obstinately refused to be accommodated. This is most noticeable in respect of certain spring and autumn festivals. (Wickham 1985: 61)

Most relevant from an anthropological point of view is the fact that such celebrations often included the ritual miming of death and resurrection – a recurrent archetypal pattern, most effectively described in Frazer's vision of the sacrifice of the 'Year-King' or God of vegetation, and analysed by anthropologists and literary critics.[15] In his extensive 'morphology of literary symbolism' Northrop Frye (1957: 105, 165–69) found that a death and rebirth cycle is present in almost all mythologies, and that, traditionally, different categories of drama, especially comedy and tragedy, were almost invariably associated with different times in the year's cycle. According to his theory of genres, comedy, associated with birth, is aligned with spring, summer with romance and autumn with tragedy, while death, associated with the final harvest in winter, is aligned with satire, with the underworld and the myth of Persephone. Seasonal comedies are therefore characterized by two time dimensions: the cyclical time of the seasons, like the repetitive sequence of generations and, by contrast, the linear long-term time of history.

Like Frye, Van Gennep (1997) and Frazer (1949), Bakhtin relates carnival to moments of crisis and renewal in nature, in the human life-cycle and in society; 'such moments', he writes, 'were the second life of the people, who for a time, during carnival, entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance'.[16] Bakhtin was well aware that in reality such feasts sanctioned the existing pattern of things and were just a temporary liberation from the hardships

of poverty and social distinctions. However, in his view, the suspension or reversal of hierarchical precedence brought about a type of communication free from all the norms of politeness that would have been impossible in everyday life. As verbal etiquette was relaxed, insults and abusive language could be used even against the deity; the barriers between persons and social classes were weakened as they all took part in the Carnival drama of the death of the old world and the simultaneous birth of the new.

> Parodies and travesties, profanations and comic crownings and uncrownings humiliate and ridicule, but the Carnival is quite different from the negative parody of modern times … Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture. It is a relativistic world, with no absolute denial – one in which the lower part of the body and its functions are associated with birth, prosperity and renewal. The body becomes 'enormous, exaggerated, grandiose' and is an image of fertility. Degradation, like indecencies and scatological humour bring people down to earth, but is at the same time an element of birth or rebirth: it is not destructive but regenerative. (1979: 200–208)

Underlying Bakhtin's vivid description of the 'carnival culture' is criticism of earlier scholars, who, in his view, did not sufficiently appreciate the dialogic nature of language or the significance of heteroglossia, that is, the presence of different forms of speech and different discourses within a given 'official' national language. Encounters and confrontations of different speakers with their diverse points of view, at times of street feasting, when boundaries are suppressed and inhibitions abandoned, usually reveal a tension between the state's centralizing tendencies and people's determination to maintain their identity and resist or oppose the state's authority and the overbearing attitudes of elites to their rustic or archaic speech. Indeed, linguistic differences often give way to much teasing and comical parodies (1981 [1934–1935]).

As we shall see, Venetians' mockery of Chioggiotti's dialect is one of the main themes in Goldoni's comedy I analyse in chapter 9. However, change in modern conceptions of humour – and, no less, in the street life of European cities – has brought a loss in the spirit of carnival, and in people's ability to communicate and express themselves in public. In looking at changes in scholarly attitudes to laughter, Bakhtin finds that in the pre-Romantic and Romantic period, when concepts of humour were based on 'narrow bourgeois aesthetics', no room was left for studying the market place and the aesthetics of laughter (Morris 1994: 195–96). He thus contrasts 'grotesque realism … apt to free the conscience from the hypocritical seriousness associated with authority', and the 'Romantic grotesque' which he associates with fear, be it the fear of authority, of death and punishment in hell, or, as in the science fiction films analysed by Martinez (chapter 6), the terror of cosmic dissolution.

In light of Bakhtin's work, it is no coincidence that the pantomimes discussed by Ardener (chapter 7) are always performed during the Christmas season,

while Goldoni's Scuffles in Chioggia (chapter 9) was first produced as part of Carnival celebrations in 1762. Indeed, although the dates are not strictly the same throughout Europe, where Christmas takes place at the end of December, and Carnival, with its masking and miming, its comedies and its mock execution of the Carnival King, is usually celebrated in early February, in the past all were associated with spring – or, more precisely, with the approaching end of winter, by all accounts a time of transition.

Bakhtin's association of carnival with the renewal of life is obviously in agreement with anthropological accounts of transition rituals. In his book on *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep compares 'ceremonies pertaining to the seasons' with those performed at initiation rituals. As he writes,

> Often the expulsion of winter is a rite of separation, while bringing summer into the village [is] a rite of incorporation: in other cases the winter dies and the summer or spring is reborn. These rites … insure the resumption of animal sex life and the resultant increase in herds. All these ceremonies include both rites of passage and sympathetic rites … for fertility, multiplication, and growth.
>
> One of the most striking elements in seasonal ceremonies is the dramatic representation of the death and rebirth of the moon, the season, the year, and the deities that preside over and regulate vegetation … The idea is suggested or dramatized in seasonal ceremonies, rites of pregnancy and delivery. (1977: 178–79, 182)[17]

Frazer (1949: 28–38) also describes the way in which dancing and leaping high is thought to make grains grow high by imitative magic, and he quotes the chant 'We carry death out of the village and spring into the village' (ibid.: 308). During Carnival, in Italy's Friulan countryside, where I conducted fieldwork in the 1970s, the peasants would join a procession with their ploughs and other agricultural implements, while mimicking the movements associated with their use (Sciama 1977). After taking part in the jolly celebrations, a man who impersonated Carnival had to undergo a mock trial for his crimes and he was usually condemned to death. Before the execution, he was invited to dictate his will – generally in a comical vein, echoed by much joking and laughter from the bystanders – then, after a mock funeral, a large straw dummy would be burned in his place. A female equivalent, usually an ugly old 'witch', would similarly be burnt halfway through Lent.

Such winter festivals, with the mimicking of the death of Carnival as a scapegoat that takes away all the sins and excesses of the dying year, are mirrored in the plots of many a pantomime and comedy. Stripped of all detail and complexity, comedies usually begin with a problematic situation: a young couple are in love, but their union is opposed by either the young man's or the young woman's father, obviously reluctant to accept the limitations of old age and give up their position of authority and control. For example, Pantaloon, an ever-present character in Venice's *commedia dell'arte* (and usually the best-paid actor), was meant

to represent a rich aging merchant, ridiculed because of his miserliness and his lasciviousness.[18] He usually appeared in the street, wearing a black mask with a suggestively large nose, and what looked like indoor clothes and slippers, with narrow red breeches that seem to be a caricature of young men's fashionable hose. By the end of the comedy, he was either defeated in his pursuit of a young woman, or he was circumvented and taken advantage of by a nimble and cunning servant, Harlequin or Brighella.

In the best of endings, he actually underwent a psychological change and, thanks to newly acquired wisdom, he accepted his daughter's choice of a husband, or his son's demands for greater independence, freedom to marry, and a more generous allowance.

Comedy thus challenges the balance of power in the relations of fathers and daughters or sons, and in general of youth against established society – in Meyer Fortes' words, the 'fundamental and difficult problems' related to the 'replacement of every generation by the next' (1971: 1; see also Okely on Masai rituals, chapter 2). But the rigid social rules upheld by the old, initially obstacles to the continuation and reproduction of life, are not hated; conflict does not lead to death, as it might in tragedy, but gives way to new insight and reconciliation. After a sequence of amusing, sometimes threatening, misunderstandings,

Figure 0.1: Conflict between old and young is a much favoured theme for comic writers and performers. Pantaloon is often represented as transgressive and lascivious, but very harsh towards his offspring. Here, in his role as a strict father, he is about to harangue his daughter, just as, unknown to him, she receives a message from her lover. (*Commedia dell'Arte.* Troupe Gelosi. In the collection of le Musée Carnavalet, Paris).

disappearances or confrontations, problems are resolved and the play usually ends in a wedding, with dancing and music.

Indeed, 'The theme of the comic', Frye writes, 'is the integration of society – incorporating a central character into it, and the mechanism that brings this about is marriage' (1957: 164, 166–70). A generally positive and benevolent view of society is represented as a parallel to the reawakening of nature and the animal world. As Victor Turner observes, although contemporary performances have become fully separate from religious practices,

> A sense of community and purification is still present in the best of experimental theatre … Performances … probe a community's weaknesses; call its leaders to account. … [They] make explicit meanings that would otherwise remain implicit and little understood. … in that way, also ludic and joking behaviours may be ethical features of cyclical repetitive societies. (1982: 11, 32)

As Turner's reference to 'cyclical repetitive societies' implies, Frye's theory of genres is of great interest for both literary texts and dramatic performances in traditional societies, but it may have little relevance for contemporary works, in which comic and tragic moments often mix and alternate. Post-modern critics, like artists and writers, have abandoned or altogether rejected a once conventional adherence to genre.[19] For example, while Goldoni's eighteenth-century comedy (see chapter 9) and the traditional English pantomimes analysed by Ardener (chapter 7) do conform to a comic style and are associated with the transition from winter to spring, in much contemporary drama, different genres are woven together and mixed. As Dolores Martinez shows, the science fiction films she analysed (chapter 6) always include and alternate serious and comic moments in a style that reflects contemporary realities and fears. As she explains, probably due to a deepening anxiety about the potential destructiveness of technology, in recent years few comedy science fiction films have been produced – and those mostly for children.

Is Humour Always a Good Thing?

> Human laughter is intimately linked with the accident of an ancient Fall … In the earthly paradise … joy did not find its dwelling in laughter … it is with his tears that man washes the afflictions of man, and it is with his laughter that sometimes he soothes and charms his heart; for the phenomena engendered by the Fall will become the means of redemption. (Baudelaire 1956: 135)

Most of the authors I have quoted so far and, not least, the contributors to this book, write about humour as a positive aspect of human communication and a mode of interaction that can lead to amity. As Bateson and Mary Douglas have

shown, humour can contribute to bringing about social and political change by implying criticism of society's rigid and repressive rules. However, aesthetic as well as moral aspects of humour have always been a concern to those who have reflected upon it. Baldesar Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528) describes a quick wit and a capacity to amuse as desirable accomplishments, but, like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and many others both before and after him – and unlike Bakhtin – he thought that jokes and humour are only enjoyable as long they are kept within the dictates of good breeding and *urbanitas*. A gentleman must never be raucous and vulgar and must 'in all circumstances maintain his dignity'; it is not right for him to try and make others laugh all day, or to do it 'in the manner of madmen and drunks' or 'in the way of those clowns and fools who are so popular at Italy's courts'. Style is then an important aspect of humour, and indeed Castiglione does admit that even some of Boccaccio's most scurrilous stories – like one about the way a priest contrived to make love to a farmer's young wife – are really quite amusing, because they are associated with witty dialogue and with truly clever and ingenious tricks (1947: 208; Boccaccio 1972: VIII, 2).[20] As a distinguished diplomat, Castiglione was supremely aware of the politics of joking, and he warned his readers that just as people 'must never laugh at those that are weak and vulnerable', equally they 'must bear respect to those who are powerful and universally loved … sometimes by jeering at such persons, one might acquire some dangerous enmities' (1947: 205, 209 and ff.).

A contemporary example is Basso's account of how an Apache woman, who saw her young daughter mimicking an American school teacher while she reproached her pet dog for biting her, warned the little girl 'it is dangerous to joke the Whiteman!'[21]

As we have seen above, Fiona Moore describes the way in which the German and English employees of a London-based German bank treat their joking with great caution and take care not to offend, so that an inevitable – and ultimately positive – joking activity is hedged round with rules concerning the extent to which mutual stereotyping and memories of the war-time past can be evoked or should be altogether avoided. Furthermore, as suggested by Castiglione, those making a joke must take account of office politics and hierarchy, because disrespect towards those in senior positions might bring about very unpleasant hostilities and tensions.

To safeguard their employment, the early writers of American comics described by Ian Rakoff had to choose carefully a safe path between social criticism and conformity, although in some instances, the strongly expressive visual medium offered some welcome opportunities for political criticism, especially in the 1950s, when a 'commie-hunting Senator, Malarky' was drawn as a swamp rat bearing 'a recognizable resemblance to McCarthy'. As Rakoff comments, 'How Possum got away with its scathing depiction of McCarthyism stands as a testament as to what one can get away with under the guise of humour' (chapter 4).

As Geertz writes, 'Fighting cocks, almost every Balinese … has said, is like playing with fire and not getting burned. You activate village and kingroup rivalries and hostility, but in play form, coming dangerously and entrancingly close to the expression of open and direct aggression … but not quite because, after all, it is "only a cockfight"' (1973: 440).

Unfortunately humour and laughter do not always amuse or express benevolence and warmth; not only can they offend against good manners but, when we laugh *at* rather than *with* others, they can be downright cruel and unpleasant. At its worst, humour can cause humiliation and shame, or indeed harm rather than assist a young person's learning processes, and, rather than encourage friendship and warmth, it can damage relationships. Many humorous events and expressions, as Ardener observes (chapter 7), can have 'an element of exposure'. Indeed, not all writers agree with a wholly sanguine view of humour. For example, Michael Billig (2005: Introduction) writes against the 'more good-natured, even sentimental, theories of humour that currently predominate'; calling into question the goodness of laughter, he challenges 'common-sense assumptions about the desirability of humour' and he draws his readers' attention to the 'darker, less easily admired practice of ridicule'. Humour, he writes, can be used to exercise authority and impose discipline (ibid.: 2).

The potential of laughter to hurt is also noted by those who ultimately give greater weight to its positive outcomes. Bergson pointed out that laughter always involves a momentary 'anaesthesia of the heart', a moment of detachment and standing back from a person or a situation, but the cruelties expressed in some jokes can be far more long lasting and damaging then he implies. For example, ethnic jokes, sometimes said to be good in strengthening people's sense of identity, can in fact be deeply offensive and divisive, while racist jokes and cartoons[22] can actually propagate negative stereotypes and keep alive prejudice. Laughing at others may indeed be evidence of that Hobbesian 'sense of superiority and triumph' so often cited in analyses of the most negative aspects of humour, especially when it turns to satire and sarcasm.

An important aspect of the psychology of humour and laughter is their association with fear: as Martinez shows in her study of science fiction films, producers deliberately introduce some comic incident just before a 'scene of pure terror' (chapter 6). And clearly suspense and fear are part of the thrill in pantomime as well, as the protagonists are threatened with some imminent disaster, while the gender ambiguity of heavily dressed and made-up characters sometimes does bring a few tears, as well as laughter, from children new to that form of entertainment.

In some instances comical figures carry sinister aspects or associations with life's sadness and poverty; by a truly interesting paradox, Harlequin, one of the most vivacious and popular characters in Italian *commedia dell'arte*, is surrounded with mystery, as his origin is associated by scholars with the chthonian

world of the dead and with ancient beliefs about visions of the dead during the twelve days that followed the winter solstice (Ginzburg 1966: 44, 48–49).[23] Indeed, Harlequin was represented by the Church as a black-faced emissary of the devil and was generally associated with the fear of darkness and night and with the sounds of wind and howling dogs, especially in Italy's mountain areas. Punch, in Italian, Pulcinella, always at the receiving end of humiliations and blows by his betters, destined to reproduce (as is sometimes suggested, by parthenogenesis), and obviously hinting at a parody of some impoverished Neapolitans, is often cast as the exhausted and inadequate father of a very large family he is unable to feed. Only thanks to the actors' great skill can his endless misfortunes and discomfitures be represented in such a way as to bring about laughter.

Conclusion

The moral dangers of uncontrolled and cruel laughter are described by Critchley (2002: 64) who concludes that ultimately the best laughter is that addressed at oneself. By contrast, an American philosopher, Ted Cohen (1999: 10), finds that most humour has great potential for encouraging or even healing those who are suffering – and it may make the suffering more tolerable.[24] Similarly Peter Berger, and, not least, the contributors to this book, seem to have brought to light the positive emotional, as well as intellectual, aspects of humour.

It is of interest that Primo Levi, asked to write a personal anthology based on books he first read in his youth in order to bring to light 'the possible traces of what has been read on what has been written', included passages from his favourite comic writers, their names listed under the general heading 'the salvation of laughter'.[25]

The heartening, and possibly healing, quality of humour seems ultimately to prevail.

Notes

1 Translations from French and Italian are mine.
2 As Tim Ingold writes, 'I am an anthropologist: not a social or cultural anthropologist; not a biological or archaeological anthropologist; just an anthropologist…' (2011: Preface).
3 *Wolfram Alpha* also lists 'One of the four fluids in the body whose balance was believed to determine your emotional and physical state'. Chambers', a now old-fashioned twentieth-century dictionary first renders 'humour' as 'the moisture or fluids of animal bodies' then, as a secondary gloss, 'a mental quality which delights in ludicrous and mirthful ideas; playful fancy'.

4 Thanks to his interest in psychology, Malinowski emphasized that researchers should always take note of their individual informants' accounts and viewpoints. In his view, as Ericsen and Nielsen write, 'Institutions existed for people, not viceversa, and it was … ultimately their biological needs that was the prime motor of social stability and change … This was "methodological individualism" … in an academic climate dominated by Durkheimians, [like Radcliffe-Brown] it was not favourably received' (2001: 43–44).

5 After several fieldwork trips in New Britain, New Guinea, and Bali, and after the publication of *Naven* (1936), Bateson resided and worked in the US from 1940.

6 An example often quoted by mathematicians is Epimenides' paradox, 'All the Cretans are liars'. Because Epimenides is himself a Cretan, he too is a liar. But if he is a liar and what he says is untrue, the Cretans are truthful; but because Epimenides is a Cretan, and therefore what he says is true, in saying the Cretans are liars, Epimenides is himself a liar, and what he says is untrue. Thus, Bateson writes, 'we may go on alternately proving that Epimenides and the Cretans are truthful and untruthful'. The problem, Russell and Whitehead found, is due to the self-referential nature of the initial statement, 'All the Cretans are liars', which includes Epimenides' in the general class 'the Cretans'. Indeed paradoxes occur especially when a message also contains a message about itself. According to Russell and Whitehead's theory of language, paradoxes generated through self-referential statements can be avoided by arranging sentences in a kind of pyramid, according to their different levels of generality (Whitehead and Russell 1927).

7 Bateson concedes that jokes are not always literally 'paradoxes'; a joke is 'a paradox, or *something like it*' (my italics). He also notes that 'for some reason those who discuss humour from a scientific point of view always use dull jokes' (1952: 2). Groucho Marx acknowledged, 'Well, all the jokes can't be good, you've got to expect that once in a while'. However, his well known 'I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member' contains an unexpected paradoxical punchline that exhilarates the audience. The joke, a comical reversal of 'I would not, [even if I could] join any club that did not accept Italians, Jews, blacks, etc.', is clearly a comment on a sensitive social issue in 1930s New York. Harpo Marx joked, 'I am the most fortunate self-taught harpist and non-speaking actor who has ever lived'. But was it really lucky to have been too poor to have a music teacher, and to be told that his voice was so bad that he had better stay silent?' The idea of fortune is often treated ironically by Jewish writers. As Primo Levi writes, 'It was *my good fortune* (my italics) to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944' (*Se questo è un uomo*, I, 5).
   A poignantly paradoxical joke is 'We all have to die. If the rich could pay us poor to die in their place, we could make a very good living!'

8 Bateson's theory inspired R.D. Laing and the 1960s anti-psychiatry movement.

9 As Bateson wrote in his later reflections, 'Whether Whitehead and Russell had any idea when they were working on *Principia* that the matter of their interest was vital to the life of human beings … I do not know. Whitehead certainly knew that human beings could be amused and humour generated by kidding around with types. But I doubt whether he ever made the step from enjoying this game to seeing that the game was non-trivial' (1979: 129).

10 According to Hofstadter, paradoxes and contradictions, such as we find in many puns, puzzles and jokes, can be 'a major source of clarification and progress in all domains of life' (1979: 11).

11 Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) notion of language through the metaphor of the rhizome, a stem or plant that works through horizontal and trans-species connections, in contrast with 'arborescent' metaphors, may usefully describe the cognitive processes at the heart of humour. In their view, language is organized, like Freud's dreamwork, in accordance with the laws of condensation, displacement and compromise.

12 Another dimension to this joke is that for those who, whether rightly or wrongly, thought that Wodehouse was racist, or intended to represent Eggy as fashionably anti-Semitic, an implication that he thought Frankenstein was Jewish was based both on the name and the fact that Harrow was one of the first English public schools to have a Jewish house!

13 Some jokes do require a shared knowledge of the past. In my fieldwork island, Burano, I was puzzled as some women, when they couldn't decide what to cook, often laughed as they said 'Let us go to the friars!' (*andemo dai frati*). They explained to me that in the old days, when they were extremely poor, they would get the children into a boat and row to the nearby Franciscan monastery island, where the friars always kept a huge pot of soup, ready for anyone too poor to afford a meal. Memories of past poverty, now over, always brought a smile. But if the past was sufficiently close to cause hurt or offence, it had to be treated with care.

14 Tertullian (ca 160–226 CE) defined theatrical entertainments as 'false', 'sacrilegious' and 'demoniacal'. Actors were thought to be possessed by the devil (*De Spectaculis*: 195 CE).

15 The cycle of death and rebirth inspired many literary works, especially T.S. Eliot's 'Waste Land'. According to post-structuralist, deconstructionist and feminist critics, classifications by *genre*, and a strong focus on structural features, fail to account for the variety of plots and characters and tend to essentialize literary or dramatic works and to obscure their originality. I nonetheless find Frye's approach relevant in anthropological analyses, especially when dealing with traditional forms of entertainment, ritual and joking.

16 As well as carnival, there was the Festa Stultorum, or the Feast of Fools, the Feast of the Ass and the Risus Paschalis. Church Festas, as we have seen, always included amusements and fairs, as did the grape harvest.

17 In sixteenth-century Venice laughter at weddings was thought to encourage fertility; masked figures or mummers, representing ancestors anxious for the continuity of the family line, would entertain newly-wed couples with scurrilous songs (Sciama, forthcoming).

18 A figure parodied by Venetian renaissance actor and comedy writer, Andrea Calmo, in his madrigal: 'I am an old man in love / and with great pleasure / I make cheer and I sing and play the lute; / To my orchard I go / To gather figs / white, black and yellow / Then give them all as tribute / To the great beauty of Clare; / Who for love makes me pine / Wilt and despair' (1553: 49; my free translation). But Pantaloon has also been described as a prototype for Shylock (Moore 1949: 33–42): both are old,

rich and stingy, they come into conflict with their daughters or sons and are defeated. Although such themes are very widespread or even universal, a connection between Pantaloon and Shylock shows the latter's rootedness in Venetian custom and theatrical tradition. However, at the heart of Shakespeare's play is Shylock's ethnicity, and, although *The Merchant of Venice* is classified as a comedy, it is one in which the joke went badly wrong: the comic genre breaks down as tragic moments alternate with romantic and comic ones.

19 The progressive abandonment of adherence to genre is evident in a comparison of the chapters by Ardener and Sciama with Martinez's analysis of science fiction films, in which comic and serious parts are skilfully mixed and contrasted.

20 Castiglione concludes, 'It is more fitting to laugh at the faults found in persons not so unfortunate as to move one to compassion, nor so bad that they seem to deserve to be sentenced to death, nor so powerful that causing them even some slight anger may cause one great damage'. Given that proper caution is exercised, however, 'laughter exhilarates the soul and gives pleasure'; it takes the mind off 'the troubling afflictions and grievances of which our life is full. Laughter is therefore most welcome and those who can bring it about pleasantly at the right time are most praiseworthy' (1947: 208).

21 The difficult relation between respect and freedom of expression was tragically illustrated in January 2015, when Charlie Hebdo's cartoons, deeply offensive to Muslims, led to twelve people being murdered and to violent world-wide retaliation.

22 I would hesitate to call them humorous, although that may be their authors' intention.

23 One of the devils Dante encountered in Hell was called Alichino – according to Italian scholars, a name derived from French Hallequin, the diabolical leader in the mythical Wild Hunt (Dazzi-Vasta 1960: 268). In his reading of Inquisition trials, Carlo Ginzburg (1966: 44, 48–49) found that from time to time people claimed to have seen a procession of the dead led by a figure wearing multi-coloured clothes with a sword and a purse attached to his belt, in all ways similar to Harlequin. In the early days of *commedia dell'arte* Harlequin's slapstick acted as a magic wand that brought about a change of scenery.

24 The therapeutic potential of laughter is also confirmed by some doctors and psychotherapists.

25 Levi's book list includes works by Rabelais and Shalom Aleichem, as well as two late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century Italian satirical poets, Porta and Belli, who wrote in their dialects, respectively Milanese and Roman (1981: 1361–63). Other headings are 'the salvation of understanding', 'man's unjust suffering', and 'man's stature'.

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