

‘To express his sense of the irrelevance of religious differences Voltaire resorted to estrangement (*straniamento*), a literary process which transformed something familiar – an object, a behaviour, an institution – into something strange, senseless, ridiculous. Victor Shklovskij, who was the first to identify and analyse this literary device, noted that the philosophes had used it frequently.’¹

1. ‘To be sure, artistic or literary procedures are only instruments, which can be used for different or even opposed purposes.’² This claim is made by Carlo Ginzburg in defence of Voltaire and the Enlightenment, against Erich Auerbach’s criticisms, from his *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*: ‘Quite different is the stylistic level of the realistic texts which serve the propaganda purposes of the Enlightenment... The master of the game is Voltaire.’³

2. As applied to humour, I am interested in Ginzburg’s statement for two reasons. First, he insists on the instrumental or, better, technical modes of artistic creativity. Second, he underscores the ambiguity of all such techniques, counter to Auerbach’s single-track critique of Voltaire’s use of humour as propaganda. Technical processes do not have unique purposes, they call up opposed camps and aims.

3. In a passage discussed by Ginzburg, Voltaire makes fun of religious practices for their irrelevance to trade on the floor of the London stock exchange. When compared to the religious neutrality of open exchange, the special ceremonies and marks meant to guarantee different creeds become outlandish. Religious sectarianism in the home is laughable when compared to the rationality of markets and prices.

4. Auerbach describes how a joke can ease the way into the destruction of culture and value in favour of liberal free exchange. Voltaire’s humour throws a spotlight on religious practices by taking them out of context and putting them on the same plane of free trading. In this comic estrangement, capital comes to replace community. Worse, Voltaire’s love of trade and mockery is accompanied by an exploitative racism and anti-Semitism. As Ginzburg acknowledges in the middle sections of his argument, this violence is inherent to estrangement with its combination of ridicule and misrepresentation.

5. If we follow Auerbach, Voltaire’s humour is an instrument of propaganda for a coming power and a precursor to horrifying violence, like the catcalls of the mob before they set upon an outsider. In his concluding remarks, Ginzburg responds by rehabilitating Voltaire in appealing to an ideal thread for the Enlightenment. The comic process of estrangement always carries the risk of intolerance

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, Trans. Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, p 99

² *Ibid.* p 101

³ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003, p 401

along with a promised tolerance in new enlightened communities. The ideal is in seeking to cancel the hateful mockery of the first with the shared laughter of the second.

6. Ginzburg's claim about procedures and instruments leads me to suggest an addition to philosophical discussions of humour, but within a less literary and historical frame than Ginzburg or Auerbach. This broader frame is the comic sign as process across the full social field. In the latter stages of my argument I aim to show how an analysis of humour according to a dynamic and diagrammatic process model can be consistent with, and yet go well-beyond other ways of explaining how humour works technically as estrangement.

7. Ginzburg's second claim, about opposed outcomes, sides and values, encourages me to make a blanket claim about the value, purpose and classification of humour. It is commonplace to accept humour as double-edged – both edifying and destructive – due to its dependence on an ambiguous form. This ambiguity supports an explanation of the history of humour as an aggressive and yet also beneficial form of communication. Nonetheless, it is also common to try to delineate positive types of humour, avoiding this duality. My broad contention is that no humour escapes moral ambiguity, however hard we try to distinguish between good and bad comedy.

8. The claim about ambiguity extends to efforts to tack a redemptive line to humour. When Ginzburg argues for an ideal thread for the Enlightenment ('a subdued utopian accent'⁴), that thread cannot come from comedy alone. It depends on thought. Humour is neither sufficient nor necessary for the positive work of creative and critical thinking. That's not to say comedy cannot come to its aid. It can and does. It is to say that humour is only one technique among many and, as technique, it endangers reason.

9. I'll expand on the nature of ambiguity later. It is the mainstay of the incongruity thesis of humour as described by John Morreall (among many others, Freud above all): '... humorous amusement is the enjoyment of incongruity.'⁵ For now, it is sufficient to remark that humour works by introducing oddity through displacement (for instance, when things are funny when made unfamiliar by taking them out of context). The price of this comic ambiguity is uncertainty.

10. Uncertainty is a form of ignorance. When ignorance is allied to emotions, it gives rise to what Spinoza calls passions, such as mistrust and fear, but also joy. A passion arises out of lack of understanding; it is therefore an affect, a transformative emotion with an external and incompletely understood cause. For example, the enthusiastic hope of a group of sailors, working together in response to a sign that their ship might be saved after a storm, depends on not knowing the outcome of their efforts.

11. If sailors knew about either salvation or doom with certainty, there would be neither hope nor enthusiasm, but calm accommodation to the situation, or complete resignation. In opposition to common sense views of optimism, for Spinoza hope can never be good because it reinforces ignorance and because, when the outcome falls, hope is either followed by despair or by diminished

⁴ Ginzburg 2012, 192

⁵ John Morreall, 'Humour and the conduct of politics' in Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer (Eds) *Beyond and Joke: The Limits of Humour*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp 63-78, esp 67

understanding. The close association of hope to superstition comes from ignorance. We have hope because we do not know the outcome, but this lack of knowledge pushes us to believe in false explanations. Hope keeps us walking towards a mirage.

12. Spinoza's contrast between passions and reason can be grasped by comparing a gambler to an engineer. Gamblers at a racetrack are caught in an ebb and flow of hope and despair; they are often vulnerable to superstitions, such as the idea that luck must change. An engineer finding and repairing a fault in a software program proceeds with equanimity, dependent on a rational plan. The hope of the one is close to addiction, whereas the understanding of the latter grows with learning and achievement.

13. Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* unfolds according to waves of hope and despair running through wounded gamblers and addicts: 'The multiple outcomes could make you dizzy. "The money's not important," said my dad. "All money represents is the energy of the thing, you know. It's how you track it. The flow of chance."' ⁶ The novel's strength comes from its depiction of the momentum of life and luck, going beyond Spinoza's insights by adding past trauma, and the need to ease it, to the dynamics of addiction and understanding. In an analysis of the grip of sad passions, it is not enough to oppose reason to ignorance, since reason and the passions issue from an inescapable past of injuries and repair. Should we elude the past, we would no longer be ourselves at all.

14. The opposition of engineer and gambler is a false one. Both figures are governed by inevitable passions formed by past events. The difference is a matter of degree and circumstance, not an essential opposition. This means that the succour of reason alone – the pure love of the latter parts of *Ethics* – is itself a mirage. It is not that Spinoza is mistaken about the passions, but rather that he is mistaken about the power and independence of understanding. When he professes '... not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them' ⁷, in a passage admired by Nietzsche, the problem is not in Spinoza's study of the necessity of the passions, but in failing to trace the same causes to both passions and reason.

15. The idea of the preponderance of degree and circumstance over pure reason is one of the justifications for speaking of Spinoza when studying humour. A passion and its lasting effects are always conditioned by situation, degree and necessity. Situation describes the particular arrangement of causes and bodies. Degree captures the mixing of different passions and powers. Necessity rejects free will and decision in favour of necessary causes.

16. The mix of degrees of passion in any situation explains why humour is necessarily ambiguous. As Ginzburg shows in a discussion of Kracauer on photography, film and history, estrangement is never simply comical. It always prompts a degree of melancholy, because viewers are placed at a distance from events that nonetheless move them. Taken dynamically, estrangement is a stretch or transformation across emotional and spatial fields: laughter and melancholy. It touches the full field and therefore cannot act in one place, or on one affect, without changing all others in different degrees.

⁶ Donna Tartt *The Goldfinch* London: Little, Brown, p 341

⁷ Benedict de Spinoza *Political Treatise* Indianapolis: Hackett p 43

17. Sadness at the loss of affect, an awareness of detachment, and the combination of a new desire to approach despite distances, define melancholy. Estrangement imposes a type of impassibility – an inability to experience passions – not only in film but with any technique of sensory distancing. Feelings we have been accustomed to experience in direct contact with familiar situations are lost in the break with habitual environments. However, the detachment of impassibility is incomplete. It is not full imperviousness to feeling, but rather a shift in level, from familiar affects to strange new ones, from familiar pleasure and pain to melancholy and then intense and dangerous novelty.

18. Against Spinoza's reason, Ginzburg remarks how understanding necessarily comes at the cost of melancholy: 'Kracauer emphasized that the stranger, he who is marginalised, he who "does not belong in the house," is in a position to understand more, and more deeply. The instant in which recognition fails opens to the estranged gaze of the spectator the way to cognitive awareness.'⁸ At the point where we understand more deeply we fail to belong, but still need to.

19. Within comic film this play of humour, melancholy, impassibility and the montage of estrangement has one of its most complex moments in Buster Keaton. His dispassionate yet manifold and upsetting expression bears witness to his displacement and the viewer's, in an amplified cycle. Keaton cheats death and we laugh. He stares blankly deep into us and we know we remain mortal.

20. In *Underworld*, Don DeLillo gives one of the great descriptions of the melancholy of the stand-up comedian in his portrayal of Lenny Bruce, struggling and failing to develop a humane line through his act:

He didn't give her a name. He couldn't think of a name. Not a real name. He went back to old jokes instead. He told a mother-in-law joke and they laughed because in fact it was funny. He told a Jewish mother joke, even better, and they loved it, they laughed and he worked his way back to form, doing race, sex, religion, and it was funny and offensive Lenny and the night ended finally in booming waves of laughter and applause, in spirited shouts from the kids in the top tiers, and he stood on the great stage in his stupid white suit, small and remorseful, and then he turned and walked towards the wings.⁹

Ginzburg explains how melancholy comes from a revelation of death in the witnessing of estrangement, like a soul looking back at its cadaver.¹⁰ At the height of the Cuban missile crisis, DeLillo gives Bruce a terrible refrain, both funny and tragic, 'We're all gonna die!' The audience laughs, but with dread and growing unease. DeLillo's pessimistic novel forces Bruce back into violent

⁸ Ginzburg 2012, p 185

⁹ Don DeLillo *Underworld* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977 p 633

¹⁰ For a study of death and dread in comedy see Shaun May *A Philosophy of Comedy on Stage and Screen: You Have to be There*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016. May's discussion of Heidegger and Beckett are particularly good at rendering the ambiguity of comedy around the inevitability death: '... I will suggest that the entropic nature of one's physical body – that is, the inevitability of its breakdown – grounds Dasein as 'thrown projection' and its being-towards-death. I will suggest that, because of this, physical impairment has the potential to induce an existential anxiety, using the bodily impairments that one encounters in Beckett's Endgame to illustrate this idea.'

mockery, in each of his attempts to testify to suffering communities – in the search for a real name for an impoverished girl preyed on by a money man.

21. Even if the passions are mixed, maybe it is possible to distinguish them and thereby trace a new utopian thread. Sometimes passions in Spinoza are given the added epithet of negative or sad; for example, in Deleuze's reading: 'Spinoza traces step by step the dreadful concatenation of sad passions; first, sadness itself, then hatred, aversion, mockery, fear, despair, *morsus conscientiae*, pity, indignation, envy, humility, repentance, self-abasement, shame, regret, anger, vengeance, cruelty, ...'¹¹ The sad passions are then contrasted with joyful ones. There is danger in doing this, since it hides the multiple mixtures around any passion. The risk of false hope is strong in Deleuze's reading of Spinoza on the passions and where Deleuze's philosophy clings to pure affirmation (deep into the melancholy and exhaustion of his interpretations of Beckett and Melville).¹²

22. Deleuze's chain of negative passions displays many types and consequences of humour, from ridicule, to the humility of self-mockery and the hatred, fear, vengeance and cruelty of jokes aimed at others. Series such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Seinfeld* draw powerful comic scenes from this range of sad passions, perhaps no more so than in the character of George Costanza, a celebration of the sad passion. As backward looking shame, the regret of *morsus conscientiae* has become a staple of modern humour, such as the macho Yorkshire man 'still haunted' by an accidental purchase of a case of Rosé wine...

23. An avid comedy club fan has suggested to me that the recent success of regretful humour can be explained by the search for strength in vulnerability. The comedian creates a rapport with the audience through shared weaknesses, a backward look at common defects, exposing them to ridicule and hence redemption; for instance, in Jack Dee's jokes about his alcoholism.

24. However, the comedian must also be able to repel hecklers and embody resilience for those whose laughter is also identification with the comical acceptance of imperfections. Flaws are turned to strengths by flipping the source of weakness and rejecting those who exploit it. 'I think I am aware of my flaws and I have accepted them. And anyone who doesn't... can fuck off...' (Sarah Millacan)

25. Why would a sense of strong vulnerability be a sad passion, given its role in the overcoming of perceived and imposed flaws? Chaplin's tramp makes us laugh in revenge against wealth and power, but also in resistance to poverty and misery. What is sad, understood as weakness through ignorance, in becoming aware of our capacity to fight back against sources of oppression while laughing at misery and illegitimate might? The answer is in the subservience of awareness to passion. In passion, a remainder of ignorance hinders the growth of understanding.¹³

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Trans. R. Hurley, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988, p 26

¹² Samuel Beckett and Gilles Deleuze *Quad, suivi de L'épuisé de Gilles Deleuze* Paris: Minuit, 1992. Gilles Deleuze *Essays Critical and Clinical* Trans Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997

¹³ Against my reading of Chaplin and the meaning of laughter around the tramp, see Lisa Trahair *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* New York: SUNY, 2007: 'This book has been written with the aim of keeping a fundamental absurdity in view. This absurdity is that the anxiety over the meaning of the comic almost inevitably leads to a reduction of the comic object to its significance. What is intrinsically comic about the object is lost in the rational articulation of what the comic means.' p 7

26. For Spinoza, every passion is negative in some way, when compared to being led to action by understanding alone. This is because reason takes account of the whole, whereas passion is partial in both senses of the word. It takes too much interest in the part: 'P60: A desire arising from either a joy or a sadness related to one, or several, but not all parts of the body, has no advantage for the whole man.'¹⁴ The duality of humour follows from its effects in the mix of affects and passions, leading to action dependent on an inhibition or insufficiency of understanding.

27. When defined as a passion caused by ambiguity, humour is necessarily harmful. Spinoza explains this in a scholium on joy following Proposition 60 of *Ethics*. The disadvantage of such passions is that they compel us to preserve part of a body, rather than the whole: 'Therefore, since joy is generally related to one part of the body, for the most part we desire to preserve our being without regard to our health as a whole. To this we may add that the desires by which we are most bound have regard only to the present and not the future.'¹⁵

28. Chaplin's tramp is good at showing the negative effects of passions focusing us on parts rather than the whole; for example, in delusion drawn from hunger (*The Gold Rush*) or the overwhelming effect of being love struck (*The Immigrant*) or, more subtly, in an obsessive desire to regiment everything separately, from eating to working (*Modern Times*). In these moments, Chaplin's humour reveals passions as barriers to full understanding, while also hinting at the same weakness in comedy itself when compared to romantic humanism (*The Great Dictator*, *Limelight*).

29. Spinoza's point about the partial aspect of the passions also explains why they are well-suited to humour. Partiality is necessarily a form of estrangement, because the part is taken away from the whole. That's why the passion of falling in love is such a frequent subject of humour; to be besotted is to be estranged. In this vein, David Sedaris's humour frequently works on the clash between the partiality of two passions, pride and greed or love and cruelty: 'Real love amounts to withholding the truth, even when you are offered the perfect opportunity to hurt someone's feelings.'¹⁶

30. The focus on the part rather than the whole does not mean there is nothing good in a passion. Chaplin's tramp is affirmative. We can struggle against oppression even when we appear weak. There is misery in poverty, but in laughing at it we can become aware that it is neither necessary nor our own fault. The problem is that this good is only relative and becomes negative when we consider the whole, when we pay attention to wider effects and specific processes.

31. From the point of view of collective action towards equality, the heroic aspect of the tramp's comedy gives too much succour to individualism. The tramp hides material conditions for his own actions even when he reveals them for his condition. From the point of view of resistance to pathos, the romanticism of the tramp's comedy gives too much power to love. In his search for romance and in the idea of human love as ultimate value, the tramp conceals desire in its violent and selfish forms.

¹⁴ Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*, Edwin Curley (Translator and Editor), Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, 232

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ David Sedaris 'The End of the Affair' in *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*

32. For Spinoza, reason alone has regard to the whole. It will guard against an action that seems beneficial but with unforeseen or inadmissible bad consequences; when desires lead us to act without attention to later exhaustion, excess or obsession. The problem with laughter, with its ambiguous cause in humour as estrangement, is that the consequences are necessarily divisive with respect to the whole. Ambiguity is essentially divisive. As a consequence, humour replicates division despite helping to draw communities together.

33. In a metaphysical version of his lesson, Spinoza draws attention to the splitting of time and concentration on the present in a passion. When moved by passions, we turn away from the whole of time and live for the present alone (*Don't let this moment ever stop*) or we turn away from the breadth of time and seek to live a single narrow line through it (*We shall be together forever despite the others*).

34. The pace of a stand-up routine and audience reaction to it are good ways of understanding Spinoza's ideas about time and passion. Comedy creates an isolated space to allow for incongruity; for instance, in the way a sketch presents outlandish behaviour but doesn't fall foul of outright disbelief. Within the comic space, a routine builds up, from initial mirth to great laughter. At its zenith, the audience wills to be frozen in time. The power of the affect is that you do not want it to stop. That is also its weakness, in the comedown as the routine closes.

35. What's the problem with isolation, division and narrowing of time? It is that the advantages of separation and seclusion become weakness when viewed from the whole. You can see this when you move from one performer at a comedy club to a group. It is in the pressure felt by those who have to follow a great routine and who catch the audience on a downer. It is in the difficulty of opening the show, when the isolation effect is not fully working yet – hence the importance of a good crowd warmer for live shows. It is in the struggle to draw the audience to a new line of comedy when they have been primed to follow another. Where the passions are concerned the stronger the part the weaker the whole.

36. The risk is not only for performers. Passion is also damaging for the members of the audience, since their joy depends on three divisions across time and space. First, there is the technique of isolation, the spatial enclosure: night out, basement club, the rhythm of the comedian's routine, the moment of a shared event and, perhaps, some form of enabling intoxication. Second, there is the unresolved ambiguity of the humour itself, the clashing contrasts which create funny images at a distance from the everyday. Third, there is a lock into the present and fragmentation of lived time in the short-term addictive quality of laughter.

37. The three divisions imposed by techniques of comic estrangement explain why the critical power of comedy is limited and flawed. Late-night deconstructions of politicians have little lasting effect because they take place in a space detached from effective social interaction, because they depend on passions as illusory power – as if laughter were a kind of proof or retraction – and because their appeal is instantaneous and prone to fading when compared to reasoned argument and organised resistance.

38. The moral problem for comedy as estrangement is duality caused by ambiguity. Sad passions haunt joyful ones. In Magritte's numerous versions of the painting *Empire of Light* (1950-54), the play on contrasts of simultaneous night and day, natural and artificial light, nocturnal and diurnal scenery, lived-in buildings and absence of inhabitants, and urban and country atmosphere make the paintings subjects of both amused delight and deep unease. Fun is offset by dread; reverie by nightmares. The same is true for humour. Jokes lead to joy but also to an unease falling rapidly into mistrust, fear and disdain. There is truth in effective mockery. It can lead to the joy of self-understanding. It is also at the service of cruelty and fear, two of the most powerful sad passions of populist and violent politics, but also personal despair.

39. Once ambiguity has been granted, humour is often rehabilitated through distinctions between different types. This return to favour is justified by the critical and formative purposes of humour. It has critical power and it can be edifying. Humour is then redeemed according to categories allowing for the separation of positive and negative practices; for example, the 'laughing with' of empathetic comedy, against the 'laughing at' of racist jokes; or the learning of self-deprecatory insight, against the spread of mistrust in the mockery of a minority.¹⁷

40. The redemption of humour as purely positive takes different forms. With Morreall, it is idealist: '... the ideal political humour would emerge as playful moments in honest discussion between people who care about one another, like the humour in conversation between friends.'¹⁸ Humour would be at its most positive when shared honestly and for nurture within a group.

41. Real situations rarely have the purity required by Morreall. That's the fate of idealists. Morreall's thin fiction about humour between friends would not survive even the most cursory study of memories of such conversations, or as rendered in film, drama and literature, where jokes are a conduit for unsayable desires and intentions, or moves in a competitive environment. Humour is part of the libidinal jousting of conversation, even among close friends.

42. Critchley avoids the teleology and pure aims of Morreall's idealism. His study of humour considers a series of candidates for positive humour. For each one, Critchley reveals the risks of taking it as simply positive. His analysis of the celebration of the power of jesters as critical comedy is instructive, not only historically, but also for our current situation where too much hope is given to comic dissent. Jestors criticise within carefully defined boundaries. They act as support for power and as a conduit for the safe release of revolutionary desire. We laugh but the king stays on the throne.

¹⁷ For an analysis of the extent of damage caused by racist humour, see Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah 'Race and ethnicity in popular humour' in Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer (Eds) *Beyond and Joke: The Limits of Humour*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp 45-62: 'Not only do racist jokes provide ready opportunities to give expression to ideas of "racial" superiority of one group to another, but they continually reinforce the use of race categories in our thinking... In many ways, the ethnic jokes reduce cultures to the trivial, to be laughed at and not something to be valued. Given this, it is extremely difficult to see how ethnic jokes contribute positively to the development of understanding relevant to multicultural society or globalisation.' p 62

¹⁸ Morreall 2005, 78

43. For Critchley, when compared to the power of bankers, generals and cardinals, the faint influence of the jester is a safe distraction, closer to the circus than the Privy Council. The fool and the jester can be hindrances to genuine change at the ballot box or through insurrection. Following Shaftesbury, Critchley connects the illusory critical power of the jester to the conservative roles of Carnival and Lent: ‘... rather than placing in question the dominant order, such acts of comic subversion simply reinstate it by offering transitory comic relief.’¹⁹

44. Despite his scepticism about positive roles for humour, Critchley considers a minor redemptive and messianic function: ‘... jokes return us to a common, familiar world of shared practices [sensus communis]... Humour both reveals the situation, and indicates how that situation might be changed.’²⁰ This could never be enough, though, since these shared practices can be exclusive and involve violent rejections of others. Racist humour reveals a situation and indicates how it might be changed, but in ways destructive of cosmopolitan values. Anti-racist humour can also fail as community healing; for instance, in the way it plays on violent revenge in the films of Tarantino.

45. To lend humour an inclusive and progressive line, Critchley combines the critical power of humour with its capacity to unite in new ways. Safe jokes of shared recognition do not elevate humour. Its redemption must come from undermining social bonds and leading us to search for better ones: ‘The anti-rite of the joke shows the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage. By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a critical function with respect to society.’²¹ However, even this messianic consciousness must fail, if it draws on the melancholy and nihilist sides of sad passions. We laugh at ourselves and seek to change, but the search is tainted by ridicule and discouragement.

46. In answer to the threat of nihilism within messianic critique, there is a possibility that comes close to Spinoza’s appeal to reason, but only when it is misread as a consoling withdrawal from suffering, rather than as a commitment to growth through understanding. Critchley finally settles on humour as relief and support. The ‘essence of humour’ is in the ‘lucidity of consolation’ where we deride ‘the sublimity and suffering of the human situation.’²² Why, though, would consolation in humour about our condition be more positive than any other laughter? Like telling someone jokes to cheer them up, laughter at the human condition does little to remedy the condition. Humour rings like an effective consolation only to those who do not really need it.

47. The weakness with humour as consolation is that it has no direction and no stability, because of its division of time and space. As such, it cannot resist the recurrence of destructive forces, since it lacks constructive alternatives. Consolation is to endure, rather than change. It is not only fragile, but doomed to rapid self-destruction, like a belief that the next day will be warmer in the midst of winter, or that the next leaders less ridiculous, because the jokes made about their predecessors have been so good.

¹⁹ Simon Critchley *On Humour* London: Routledge, 2002, p 82

²⁰ Critchley 2002, 16

²¹ Critchley 2002, 10

²² Critchley 2002, 111

48. The mix of passions in humour and their cause in estrangement explain why the search for a redemptive line to humour is always doomed. To show this, I move from an account dependent on logical ambiguity to a dynamic model. Ambiguity follows from static oppositions between different linguistic senses, images or locations, whereas a dynamic model maps the transformations that create estrangement and changes in degrees of passions. Humour is not a state of passion and displacement. It is an ongoing process changing relations of affects and signs. It therefore needs dynamic models rather than fixed representations.

49. The contrast between types of model for humour can be explained through Freud. His theories are partly static and partly dynamic. The description of the energy behind laughter depends on dynamic processes of inhibition, expenditure, discharge and cathexis:

Comic pleasure and the effect by which it is known – laughter – can only come about if [the difference between two expenditures] is unutilizable and capable of discharge. We obtain no pleasurable effect but at most a transient sense of pleasure in which the characteristic of being comic does not emerge, if the difference is put to another use as soon as it is recognised.²³

This is an economy of build-ups and releases, where laughter lets out pent-up energy. It is triggered by an object or scene connected to different conceptual formations; one in clear view and the other inadmissible. Given this dependence on visibility and inadmissibility, racist jokes and jokes about sex, provide many of the examples of this cathexis, or energetic build-up and release around a comic scene. However, Freud's theory is meant to apply to all humour; for example, in collective laughter when a plan goes wrong in ways we should have foreseen, but couldn't allow ourselves to acknowledge.

50. Despite dynamism at the level of physical and psychic effects, Freud's theory depends on static description when he turns to the conceptual trigger for laughter. This stasis is a tension and opposition between two conceptual formations that are brought together but without fitting; for instance, Chaplin's tramp combines cunning with foolishness, to comic effect. These oppositions lead to ambiguity and estrangement by drawing together irreconcilable 'ideational methods', such as a search for common humanity that runs up against a clown's mask:

It is a necessary condition for generating the comic that we should be obliged, simultaneously or in rapid succession, to apply to one and the same act of ideation two different ideational methods, between which the 'comparison' is then made and the comic difference emerges [...] In the case of jokes, the difference between two simultaneous methods of viewing things, which operate with a different expenditure, applies to the process in the person who hears the joke.²⁴

This description of the cause of the release of laughter is static because it depends on a difference between states taken simultaneously. There is no economy or dynamic process between them but

²³ Sigmund Freud *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* Trans. James Strachey London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1969, p 218

²⁴ Freud 1969, 234

rather a logical opposition. However, the tension of opposition in this static representation is transferred to the dynamic circulation of energy in the person. Static tension triggers a release in the economy of desire, when the build-up of energy between two conceptual formations flows out as laughter, like the deflation of an angry meeting when a joke brings conflicts to the fore in a comic image.

51. In contrast to a full process model, Freud's account of humour is mistaken in three ways. First, his description of the economy of libidinal energy is restricted and functions like a closed economy 'in the person who hears the joke'. Second, his static account of oppositions between different modes of ideation, or formation of concepts, misses their multiple and dynamic interactions. Third, the distinction between libidinal economy and static oppositions separates fields which should be taken together.

52. Against a closed economy of energy storage and release, we should think of passions and affects as distributed throughout all existing fields in ever-changing mixtures. Freud situates the economy in individual bodies and minds, but passions occupy broad social and material fields such that we can speak of shifting and complex moods for populations, spaces and systems of ideas. A joke and resulting laughter can be identified with a particular body and type of estrangement. Yet its causes and effects are distributed much more widely, as shown by the spread of melancholy or the interaction between series of jokes and ideas over time.

53. The destructive pain of ridicule should therefore not be understood as limited to closed circuits; for instance, among those directly sneered at and those sniggering. It should be traced over long periods, in the way a racist stereotype takes hold over centuries, or in the way ridicule serves to entrench repressive norms and standards across a society; each sexist joke reinforces habits in multiple and often hidden ways. Humour depends upon and shapes behaviour. It shouldn't be viewed as part of restricted economies and tensions between fixed structures, but rather as an intervention within dynamic and interconnected fields.

54. We think of fear in an extended and dynamic way, speaking of increases of fear and instability in societies when they come under threat. We should do the same for laughter and explain it according to changeable mixtures of passions, bodies, spaces, times and thoughts. The flaw in Freud's static account of an opposition between two ideations is that it does not take account of the multiple connections between signs, systems, objects and passions. If we focus on static oppositions between two conceptual formations – the clown and the sage – we miss broader and less stable series of transformations and distant relations – the clown face in Fellini's *La Strada*, or *Zero Mostel* in *The Front*.

55. A joke is not triggered by an opposition between two conceptual formations but rather by a complicated shift within all of them. This change is accompanied by changes within a similarly extended mixture of passions. The meaning of estrangement is at stake here. Is it to be a contrast between two structures, where strangeness is a tension between opposites? Or is it to be a process of transformation across all of them, where strangeness is a change across fields?

56. Auerbach gives a metaphor for estrangement as dynamic process when he describes Voltaire's technique as a spotlight. The joke throws a bright light on a few features and draws them out, thereby distancing them from a familiar environment and allowing them to be put into unfamiliar configurations. When we think of ambiguity as an opposition between two states we miss the way the spotlight throws light and shade across all objects – it partially isolates some in order to recombine relations to others. A joke throws many shadows.

57. Estrangement is not about static oppositions presented as ambiguity, but about transformations across fields of affects, ideas and things. We therefore need a different kind of model for the way jokes function. This dynamic model is the diagram. It suggests maps for the effects of humour. On diagrams, shifts in passions must be given alongside changes in relations of neighbourhoods and objects, like the map of the spread of a disease and its effects on economies, habitats and behaviour.

58. A joke is a sign defined as limitless process. The sign selects a new way to combine elements drawn from any aspect of experience. It does so as estrangement, as a stretch or jump that breaks with habitual patterns and settled neighbourhoods, accompanied by degrees of laughter and other passions. The selection forces different degrees of change, ultimately, on everything – like Kundera's misplaced joke and its disruption of lives among the collapse of political systems, borders and ways of life.²⁵ A joke is a material effect strengthened by passions. Its diagram traces those effects, suggesting a legacy of sadness and joy.

59. Diagrams of comic estrangement are experimental models for the effects and causes of humour. They map the way affects, understood as extended through the social field, spread alongside transformations of relations between peoples, places, races, sexes, polities, nature, animals, ideas, languages and materials. The ambiguity of a joke is never a simple tension between two ideas. It is a ripple of feelings, with social and material transformations, where the affect of laughter dominates, but never alone or innocently.

²⁵ Milan Kundera *The Joke* Trans. Michael Heim New York: Faber and Faber, 1992