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The Animal That Laughs at Itself False False Alarms about the End of ‘Man’

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ABSTRACT: A trio of themes recur across prominent Western theories of laughter: violence, the human/nonhuman, and error. The paper traces this trio through a series of frequently cited paradigms for understanding laughter, including superiority, incongruity and relief theories, Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter and V. S. Ramachandran’s false alarm theory; and argues that it reflects a shared, if partially submerged concern with the instability and demise of a particular figure of the human, one that is circumscribed by the culturally specific (if globally influential) values of Eurocentric/Western thought, largely corresponding to Sylvia Wynter’s ‘Man’. This suggests that laughter has an ambiguous immanent potential for both undermining and/or re-asserting, de- and/or restabilising the illusion of Man’s universalizing drive to identify itself with the human per se.

KEYWORDS: Laughter; Anthropology; Violence; Error; Humour; Laughter in motion pictures; Laughter in literature; Posthumanism; Bergson, Henri

The Animal That Laughs at Itself

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INTRODUCTION

The first two sections of this paper consider a series of Western theories of laughter, identifying and exploring a nexus of themes that resurfaces across different approaches, in particular those that have been referred to as superiority theory, incongruity theory, relief theory, as well as Henri Bergson’s philosophical investigation of laughter and the more recent false alarm theory. The recurring trio of themes I identify comprises violence, the human/nonhuman, and error: together, I argue, they can be read as reflecting a certain, partially submerged concern with the instability and demise of the human. However, my aim is not to point to a unifying or universal set of concerns underpinning what, from within a Western academic and historical context might seem a diverse range of approaches; nor to synthesize these approaches with a view to arriving at a unifying or universal theory of laughter. On the contrary, I want to suggest that the transversal recurrence of this set of themes is actually a reflection of how much these different theorizations of laughter share — of the ways they are circumscribed by a common set of cultural and epistemological factors. Notably, these factors converge in the treatment of a culturally specific (if historically

and globally far-reaching) notion, image, understanding of selfhood as the universal model of the human.

This particular version of the human derives its key features from a set of bodily, intellectual, and moral ideals that are primarily white, Western, masculine, valuing particular forms of cultural education and social behaviour, and defining itself in part through its self-declared superiority to certain nonhuman others, such as animals, machines, and inanimate objects. The self-identification of this culturally-circumscribed version of the human with the category of humanity per se, its self-universalization, is reflected in its historical tendency to refer to its culturally specific values, regarding morality, education, aesthetics, politics, and so on, using terms such as *humanitas*, *Humanität*, and eventually, 'humanism'. Its masculine idealization in particular is also reflected in the traditional use of 'Man' to refer to humans regardless of gender — and indeed, now that the politics of this terminology have entered the cultural consciousness, leading to its abandonment in public cultural and academic discourse, we may employ the capitalized 'Man' as a shorthand for the culturally specific version of the human to which it has actually historically tended to correspond.

It is this figure of the human — built on an equation of a culturally specific form with a universal category — that, I will suggest, can be said to be implicitly treated as under threat in the prominent Western theories of laughter I will discuss. That is, the recurrence of the above-mentioned trio of themes (violent struggle, the human/nonhuman, and error) can be seen as an index of an implicit shared sense that laughter threatens the self-certainty of this culturally specific (Western, masculinized, civilized, non-animal) version of the human — which is to say, exposes the illusory nature of its self-identification with the human per se, destabilizing its attempt to universalize itself. However, whether this gives laughter, even within the cultural context dominated by this falsely universalized figure of the human, a subversive, critical potential, or affords it a particular capacity for managing and suppressing this threat, is a question, I will suggest, that is ultimately undecidable, yet nevertheless is deserving of attention.

In the third section of the paper I gesture towards the ongoing cultural prominence, as well as the discursive mobility of such approaches

to laughter (a quality already highlighted in the second section through references to the slippage between the practical and theoretical functioning of laughter), through the frame of a well-known scene of collective laughter from the film *Goodfellas* (1990). In this scene, in which the thematics of violence, the human/nonhuman, and error converge in formally equivalent ways to their manifestation in Western philosophy and theory, the self-certainty of the Western, masculine, 'civilized' version of the human appears to be under threat — yet is ultimately reasserted through laughter. Thus we may (and I think should) pose, but cannot decisively answer, the question of whether treatments of laughter of the kinds I deal with, whether philosophical, literary, cinematic, or otherwise, reflect a (perhaps growing) sense of the (perhaps increasing) cultural destabilization of 'Man', or simply highlight the ways laughter has figured among the means and techniques by which it has historically managed to reassert itself in the face of the fundamental falsity — and thus the immanent potential cognizability — of its self-equation with 'humanity'.

THE LAUGHING ANIMAL

Contemporary accounts of the treatment of laughter in the history of Western philosophy often start with its categorization into three 'theories': superiority, relief, and incongruity theory.¹ In fact, these are not so much theories as loose ways of categorizing different approaches in order to contrast, oppose, and identify currents between them. Each category has a few particular thinkers who tend to be taken as its primary advocates, regardless of whether their 'theory' of laughter is developed through a sustained treatment of the topic or inferred from a few remarks made in another context. Thus, Thomas Hobbes is frequently cited as a proponent of the so-called superiority theory, '[t]he oldest, and probably still the most widespread theory of laughter', according to which laughter is seen as 'an expression of a person's

1 See, for example, John Morreall, 'A New Theory of Laughter', *Philosophical Studies*, 42.2 (September 1982), pp. 243–54; John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 1–23; Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 2–3; Mordechai Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing: A Philosophical Exploration of the Laughing Animal* (Cham: Springer, 2014), p. 2.

feeling of superiority over others'² — despite the fact that he discusses laughter only very briefly. In Chapter 6 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes that laughter 'is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity.'³ Such an approach associates laughter primarily with something like the feeling of *Schadenfreude*, or what Aristotle termed *epikhairekakia*.⁴ Around the same time as Hobbes, René Descartes made a similar association in suggesting that the observation of evil befalling those who we deem to deserve it arouses a kind of joy 'accompanied by laughter and mockery'.⁵

Given that most statements taken as indicative of a superiority theory approach, despite their dispersal or recurrence over a long historical period, seem to be made more or less in passing, it might be argued that it is only with attempts to 'theorize' laughter in more sustained ways that the superiority approach begins to be characterized as a theory, as something for new (counter-)theories to oppose. This begins

2 Morreall, 'A New Theory of Laughter', p. 243.

3 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Noel Malcolm, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 2012), II, p. 88 (Chapter 6). Hobbes also discusses laughter in chapter 9 of *Human Nature*. See Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. by Ferdinand Tönnies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), pp. 28–37 (pp. 31–32).

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by W. D. Ross, revised by J. O. Umson, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), II, pp. 1729–1867 (p. 1748 [1107a]). Here W. D. Ross translates ἐπιχαυρεκακία as 'spite'. In another edition, Rackham uses the term 'malice': Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 73 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 73. Contrary to the *Schadenfreude* with which English writers and speakers sometimes like to declare that, since the Germans have a specific word for it, *Schadenfreude* is a particularly German emotion, the English language offers various near-equivalents. For example, the verb 'to gloat' can be used to approximate the German word; Aristotle's term is occasionally rendered in English as 'epicariacy'; and one might consider the seventeenth-century theological term 'morose delectation' (from the Latin *delectio morosa*) — 'the habit of dwelling with enjoyment upon evil thoughts' ('morose, adj. 2', in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/122319>> [accessed 1 October 2019]), or more modern terms like 'sadism', as doing similar work in the right contexts.

5 René Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme*, in Descartes, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. by Ferdinand Alquié, 3 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1963–73), III (1973): 1643–1650, pp. 941–1103 (p. 1003 [II, art. 62]). Descartes suggests that undeserved evil, in contrast, arouses sadness, and seeing deserved or undeserved good in others' lives results in serious joy or envy respectively.

with elaborations of a broad approach that has come to be termed ‘incongruity theory’, with proponents including James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, and Arthur Schopenhauer, and developed in different ways by a number of recent thinkers. Incongruity-based approaches share the view or assertion that we laugh when faced with something that does not ‘fit’ with the ‘patterns among things, properties, events, etc.’ that we have come to expect (provided the incongruity does not have any particular negative significance to us).⁶ Alongside incongruity-based approaches, what has been called ‘relief theory’, associated in particular with writers such as Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, but with elements identifiable at least as far back as the early eighteenth century in Lord Shaftesbury’s essay-letter on laughter, suggests that build-ups of ‘nervous energy’ or ‘psychic energy’ must find outlets for release, and in certain circumstances do so through humour and laughter.⁷

I would like to draw attention to three features shared by these different types of approach to laughter and humour — features whose transversal recurrence may be less apparent when such approaches are treated as separate ‘theories.’ John Morreall has argued that salient aspects of the superiority-, incongruity-, and relief-based approaches point towards the possibility of a general theory of laughter, which he summarizes with the formula: ‘Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift.’⁸ Like Morreall, I want to draw out features from these different approaches to laughter which seem to point in a certain direction: however, rather than generalizing or universalizing on this basis, I want to tease out the particularity of these different approaches, pointing through this recurring trio of themes to a shared set of underlying concerns that are, in fact, quite culturally specific (even if the culture to which they are specific has had a historically and globally extensive reach).

6 Morreall, ‘A New Theory’, p. 245.

7 Herbert Spencer, ‘On the Physiology of Laughter’ [1860], in Spencer, *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects* (London: Dent, 1911), pp. 298–309; Sigmund Freud, *The Pelican Freud Library*, trans. by James Strachey, rev. and ed. by Angela Richards, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973–86), III (1976): *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*; Anthony Ashley Cooper, ‘An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour — A Letter to a Friend’ [1709] <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/shaftesbury1709a_1.pdf> [accessed 1 October 2019].

8 Morreall, ‘A New Theory’, p. 249. For Morreall’s subsequent elaboration and exploration of this general theory, see, among other publications, Morreall, *Comic Relief*, especially pp. 49–68.

The first of these themes is an association of laughter with violence and competition — with a struggle between opposing forces. In superiority approaches, this struggle is primarily social: laughter is construed as a means by which one attempts to establish one's superiority over others, possibly, as in Hobbes's formulation, in compensation for one's underlying sense of inferiority or weakness. In the *Republic*, while discussing the qualities that should be possessed by the guardians of the ideal state, before he gets round to suggesting that drunkenness, softness and sloth are 'most unbecoming', Socrates links laughter directly to violence: the guardians should not be 'prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter his condition provokes a violent reaction.'⁹ This dimension of social violence remains closely associated with — indeed is in some senses treated as contiguous with — the emphasis on the interplay or opposition between energetic forces in relief-based approaches. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud suggests that, where wit or joking (*der Witz*) is not intended purely to induce pleasure, it is used either to show hostility or produce obscenity. Obscene or smutty jokes, he suggests, arise from a desire to seduce — but one which manifests in an aggressive attempt: 'Through the utterance of obscene words, the person *attacked* is *forced* to picture the parts of the body in question in the sexual act, and is shown that the *aggressor* himself pictures the same thing.'¹⁰ When wit is used in the service of a hostile tendency, it substitutes for the actual violence which social morals prohibit: 'By belittling and humbling our enemy, by scorning and ridiculing him, we indirectly obtain the pleasure of his defeat by the laughter of the third person, the inactive spectator.'¹¹ And when this kind of wit is used 'as a weapon of attack or criticism of superiors who claim to be an authority', wit can also be employed in response 'as a resistance against

9 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by G. M. A. Grube, rev. by C. D. C. Grube, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), pp. 971–1223 (p. 1036 and p. 1026 [III, 398e and 388e]). Aristotle reaffirms the association of humour with competitiveness in repeating the opinion of Gorgias, that 'jests [...] are supposed to be of some service in controversy. [...] you should kill your opponents' earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness'. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. by W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, II, pp. 2152–2269 (p. 2268 [1419b]).

10 Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 140–41 (emphasis added, J. B.).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

such authority and as an escape from its pressure.¹² This emphasis on the relation of laughter, or at least humour, to social constraint and its resistance, had already been emphasized by Shaftesbury, writing in 1709, with the suggestion that restrictions on free expression lead to the use of wit and humour or ‘raillery’ as a kind of disguise:

If men are forbidden to speak their minds seriously on certain subjects, they’ll do it ironically. If they are forbidden to speak at all on such subjects, or if they think it really dangerous to do so, they will then redouble their disguise [...] Thus raillery comes more into fashion, and goes to extremes. The persecuting spirit has aroused the bantering one.¹³

While relief theories focus more directly on psychic and bodily energy, the struggle between opposing energetic forces remains primary. In Herbert Spencer’s physiologically oriented account of the causes of laughter, he focuses on situations in which ‘a large mass of emotion had been produced, or [...] a large portion of the nervous system was in a state of tension’ — for example, when watching a moving scene in a play. Such tension entails a ‘large amount of nervous energy’ corresponding to a ‘quantity of vague, nascent thought and emotion’ which seems destined to be expended in the ‘body of new feelings and ideas’ that the viewer expects to arise from the next part of the scene.¹⁴ However, if something interrupts the dramatic flow — Spencer imagines a kid goat wandering on to the stage and sniffing the actors at a climactic moment — then ‘the channels along which the discharge was about to take place are closed.’ (As a contemporary equivalent example, we might think of the supposedly comic ‘outtakes’ or ‘bloopers’ sometimes released after or alongside a film or television production, which so often show an actor forgetting their lines at a tense moment in the drama — usually leading to the interruption of the flow

12 Ibid., p. 153.

13 Shaftesbury, ‘An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour’. Such examples already point to the relative arbitrariness of the categorization of approaches to laughter into separate categories: Shaftesbury’s essay clearly already bears elements of both superiority and relief approaches, which are likewise co-present in Freud’s account. At the same time, incongruity — first between social expectations and desires, but also as integral to the psychological experience by which we find something humorous or are given to laughter — play a key role in Freudian and Spencerian relief theories.

14 Spencer, ‘The Physiology of Laughter’, p. 305.

and sudden outbursts of laughter among cast and crew). The actions of the goat open a new channel for direction of this nervous energy, but one based on ideas and feelings that are 'too small' to absorb all of it: 'The excess must therefore discharge itself in some other direction; [...] there results an efflux through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles, producing the half-convulsive actions we term laughter.'¹⁵ Freud draws on and develops Spencer's approach in arguing that the joke, in dealing with topics or ideas usually repressed, yet allowing them not to be, results in a discharge of 'static energy' (*Besetzungsenergie*) which would, in other circumstances, have been used in the 'inhibition' of those ideas, but now finds itself 'superfluous and neutralized'.¹⁶

Approaches that tend to be classed as incongruity theories, meanwhile, can be said to associate laughter with violence in the form of a violation of expectations. Even if this can be construed as a more metaphorical or abstract notion of violence than those central to superiority- and relief-based approaches, proponents of incongruity-based approaches tend to presume that it would be more natural to experience displeasure, discomfort, when suddenly faced with incongruities among things, circumstances, phenomena, or ideas: the ability to find pleasure in such incongruities is seen as a kind of displacement of this more fundamental or natural reaction, and thus a redirection or diversion of a potentially violent experience. (The capacity to enjoy or celebrate ambiguity and incongruity is effectively treated as secondary to the rationalist philosophical tendency to seek to explain or clarify, and thus resolve apparent contradictions, and/or to traditional aesthetic-religious valuations of symmetry, harmony, balance, etc.)¹⁷ The anticipated or implicit violence or discomfort in this reaction to incongruity is displaced into the physiological and psychological form of laughter. Thus, just as Spencer will emphasize the discharge (relief) of 'excess' energy through 'half-convulsive actions', in Kant's version of the incongruity approach, he talks of mental and physical 'agitation': he suggests that a joke works by deceiving us for a moment, so that

15 Ibid., p. 305.

16 Freud, *Jokes*, p. 229.

17 Cf. Gordon, *Humor, Laughter, and Human Flourishing*, pp. 19–22.

when the illusion vanishes, ‘the mind looks at the illusion once more in order to give it another try, and so by a rapid succession of tension and relaxation the mind is bounced back and forth and made to sway’; the sudden ‘snapping’ of the metaphorical string causing this swaying ‘must cause a mental agitation and an inner bodily agitation in harmony with it, which continues involuntarily, and which gives rise to fatigue while yet also cheering us up.’¹⁸

The second feature I would like to highlight as being transversal to historically dominant Western theories of laughter is the foregrounding of the boundary — or perhaps it is more apt to say the relationship — between the human and the nonhuman. Historically, this figures as a concern with the relationship between human and animal, emblemized by Aristotle’s oft-cited declaration that the human is ‘the only animal that laughs.’¹⁹ The logic compressed in this formula situates the human within the category or sphere of the animal, yet only by assigning it its own special sub-category, as isolated from all other animals. Philosophical discussions of laughter in Western thought are, as with many other topics, embedded to a significant extent within the long-running preoccupation with explicating this duality of the human/nonhuman, with distinguishing between human and nonhuman aspects of the human animal (or, increasingly, from the Renaissance on, the human machine). Epitomizing this tendency, Laurent Joubert, in his 1579 *Treatise on Laughter*, distinguishes ‘bastard laughter’ and ‘dog laughter’ as false or ‘untrue’ forms of laughter from the ‘true’ form which is only available to the human. According to Erica Fudge, this ‘true laughter’, which ‘calls on the workings of the rational soul’, but still depends, like bastard and dog laughter, on physiognomy, becomes ‘an important aspect of being human’ — even ‘a microcosmic exhibition of human-ness’ — precisely because it is part voluntary and part involuntary — partly subject to the exercise of will and reason, and partly beyond their control.²⁰

18 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. and introduction by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), p. 204 [AA 333].

19 Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, trans. by W. Ogle, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1, pp. 994–1086 (p. 1049 [673a]).

20 Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 17–18. As she puts it a

This conception of nonhuman entities or agents as characterized by involuntary or deterministic behaviour, in contrast to the rational, wilful, soul-possessing human, was a major factor in attempts from the sixteenth century onwards to draw an equivalence between the animal and the machine. Descartes' thesis of animal automatism, controversial in its time, is one of the best known and most influential — as expressed, for example, in his statement that 'if there were such machines, which had the organs and the appearance of a monkey or any other irrational animal, we would have no means of knowing that they were in any way of a different nature from these animals'; whereas a machine made in the image of a human, able to mimic its actions accurately, would still be absolutely distinguishable from a 'real' human.²¹ Contrary to Descartes's apparent intentions, his arguments would eventually become part of the basis for *eradicating* distinctions between humans and machines — culminating in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's 1748 *L'Homme-Machine*²² — and, indeed, anticipating and establishing some of the conceptual grounding for later posthumanist thought.²³ Thus when Spencer, three centuries after Joubert, likewise

little further on (pp. 19–20), for Joubert, 'in laughter, mind and body are brought into potential conflict, but in true laughter the mind takes control of something that is possibly and powerfully out of its control. [...] The laugh may be of the passionate animal body, but the true laugh is certainly of the reasonable human mind'. See also Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. and annotated by Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980).

- 21 René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, in *Œuvres philosophiques*, I (1963): 1618–1637, pp. 567–650 (p. 628 [v]).
- 22 Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. by Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 23 In effect, these two lines of thought amount to mirrored expansions of Descartes's position, leading on the one hand to the (mechanist) notion that the human is simply a highly sophisticated machine, and on the other to the (posthumanist) notion that it is possible to make a machine so sophisticated that it would be indistinguishable from the human (the latter seemingly implying the former). For an historical account of Descartes's animal automatism and the trajectory connecting it to the human mechanism of the eighteenth century as epitomized by La Mettrie, see Leonora Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968). Rosenfield notes that Fromondus's critique of Descartes on theological grounds (made just three months after the appearance of the *Discourse*) — that atheists would be able to apply his thinking on the animal soul to the rational soul — highlighted precisely the point from which La Mettrie would draw inspiration a century later. (See *ibid.*, pp. 7–8 and pp. 25–26). Neil Badmington has highlighted the way Descartes's argument, intended to mark a radical difference between human and nonhuman, in fact left open the possibility that, with the right technological advancements, it would 'no longer be possible to

attempts to explain laughter on the basis of physiology, the mechanical has replaced the animal as the involuntary, instinctive, or physiological part of the human, that which is not unique to it and which thus binds it to the nonhuman sphere: the question of the human's relation to the (its) non/inhuman dimension remains crucial to the context in which laughter is discussed.

Whether in the form of the animal or the mechanistic, this non-human — or at least, this (emphasized as) not-uniquely-human — aspect of laughter, based in physiology, can be said to mirror the way in which laughter, in a more symbolic manner but at a no less real, experiential level, *reduces* its human targets, in certain relatively common circumstances, to the status of the subhuman. This parallel recurs throughout the history of theoretical discussions of the nature, function, and cause of laughter, yet is seldom remarked explicitly. How is it — or what is the significance of the fact — that a kind of behaviour viewed as somehow less than human, or minimally human, in both a moral and a biological sense (with neither the moral being exclusive to superiority-based approaches, nor the biological exclusive to relief-based approaches) — serves to enact this dehumanizing effect on the laughter's target? A kind of behaviour, rooted in the human's least human dimension, seems to go through the very human circuit of socio-cultural interaction, and produce, when it emerges at the other end, a symbolic reduction of a human who played no active role in this movement. It may even be that this seeming contradiction — or at least, this unusual parallel — is a factor in the tendency to delineate the so-called superiority theory from the so-called relief theory — as though it were harder to countenance the nonhuman as a decisive feature at both ends of the laughing/being-laughed-at relation. This issue is pursued further in the following section, in particular in relation to Bergson's theory of laughter.

The third recurring feature of theoretical explanations of laughter I want to highlight is probably the most obvious (and yet worth re-emphasizing, especially given the context of this volume): the linking of laughter to error. In fact, we require no theories, no philosophical

maintain a clear distinction between the human and the inhuman'. Neil Badmington, 'Theorizing Posthumanism', *Cultural Critique*, 53 (Winter 2003), pp. 10–27 (p. 18).

arguments to convince us that laughter and humour are almost always associated with something ‘wrong’, something out of place — something that is perceived as being ‘in error’. Incongruity theory approaches, as we have seen, make this their direct focus — with much of the theoretical work oriented around explaining how, why, and when experiences that ought to be unsettling — misperception, misunderstanding, thwarted expectations, deception, illusion, incongruity, impropriety — can give rise to a response indicating pleasure or delight. Yet in superiority-based approaches, too, a certain notion of error — albeit moral error — is primary. Indeed, as we have just seen, this primacy is simultaneously highlighted from two seemingly opposing perspectives: on the one hand, the laughter itself is supposed to express some form of contempt or derision regarding that which is lacking in another person — their failings, weaknesses, inadequacies, compared to the one who is laughing; on the other hand, those propounding this explanation of laughter usually seem to view the laugher themselves as morally deficient — ignobly taking pleasure in the misfortune of others (*Schadenfreude*), or compensating for their own insecurities and weakness by putting others down (displaying ‘pusillanimity’, as Hobbes put it), or lacking rational competence and self-control. Finally, in relief-based approaches, error figures in the form of energetic resources that have been prepared, but are no longer needed; that is, the laugher built up a store of nervous or psychic energy for some purpose, which they then no longer needed to fulfil, leaving that stored energy purposeless: this energy, having nowhere to go, yet still needing to be released, became errant, finding its way into physiological and emotional gestures that must be regarded as useless, except to the extent that catering for the suddenly useless is a useful function.

I have been able to provide only a cursory overview here of the recurrence of these different features of Western philosophical approaches to laughter: competition-based violence (whether viewed as actual or symbolic — and we might question whether violence can *ever* be purely symbolic), the relationship between human and nonhuman, and the experience or recognition of error, in a multiplicity of forms. This brief sampling is hopefully enough, however, to allow us to begin to speculate as to why they recur, together, across what have tended to

be separated into different, sometimes opposing theories of laughter. I want to do this based on two propositions, which I will state briefly here before elaborating on them in the following section.

First, while conventional histories of ideas might stress the broad cultural and epistemological differences between thinkers in, say, classical Greece, Renaissance France and twentieth-century Vienna, viewed together — as, for example, from a critical-theoretical, feminist, or postcolonial perspective — they can be said to share a great deal. Crucially, they have a common aspiration to universalism: that is, to understanding certain of their own basic assumptions and values, e.g. with regard to truth, rationality, morality, nature, psychology, as universally applicable. Yet these ‘universal’ values of course derive from a specific (even if apparently broad) set of cultural and material forms, texts, bodies, modes of thought. The figures of the human and *humanitas* that are thus shaped and presented as universal retain key elements of this underlying specificity — and these are most visible where and whenever some individual or group is denied full inclusion within the (supposedly universal, actually particular) category of the human. Thus ‘the human’ arising from these aspirations remains more male than female, more masculine than feminine, more European/Western than non-Western, more heterosexual (or at least, familial) than not, more likely to derive its morals or ethics from Judaeo-Christian sources, and so on. Following Sylvia Wynter, I will refer to this falsely universalized human below using the term by which it generally used to identify itself — ‘Man’ — though now, of course, in order to highlight the specificity that is masked by its historical deployment as the universal representative of the human.²⁴ Second, given that the various Western philosophical approaches to laughter we have touched on can be said to be largely embedded within this falsely universalized — and then strategically restricted — understanding of humanity/the human, it may form the basis for hypothesizing as to the function behind the recurrent trio of themes I have identified across them. The repeated emphasis placed on the distinction between the

24 Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, its Overrepresentation — An Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (2003), pp. 257–337. Cf. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), pp. 13–54.

human and the non/human in such discussions — both attributed to laughter as part of its function, and at stake in discussions of laughter as situated within larger attempts to explain the ideal nature of the human (physiologically, e.g., in Joubert, Spencer; socially, e.g., in Plato, Hobbes; metaphysically, e.g., in Descartes etc) — can be seen as directly connected to the violence or competitiveness that is so frequently at play in these discussions. There is a dehumanizing, overtly or covertly violent struggle to assert the universal but exclusive status of Man, to equate it with, or allow it to dominate, the ‘human’ per se, and thus to enforce the cultural, social dominance of those self-identifying with it over those others it designates as less than human (‘not-Man’). What I would like to hypothesize is that the recognition of error that is crucial in many apparently different ways to the conditions that produce laughter may in some sense consist in the recognition and management of the fundamental error involved in this equation of Man with the human. If this hypothesis carries any weight, a further, consequential and necessary — even if undecidable — question arises: if these accounts of laughter do indeed point to the error at the heart of the Western self-conception as human, do accounts and experiences of laughter in which the primary features of Man feature prominently (i.e., those in which displays of masculinity, cultural and intellectual superiority, sexual and physical domination, are particularly pronounced) render laughter the site of Man’s potential undoing, where its false universality is revealed and begins to collapse — or does laughter simply form another means by which Man copes with such destabilising threats, and ultimately reasserts its dominance?

‘FUNNY HOW?’ — FALSE FALSE (FALSE?) ALARMS

Bergson begins his 1900 study *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* with three general postulates about laughter that will guide the rest of his investigation, and which relate directly to the themes elaborated above, starting with the boundaries of the human. First, he suggests that ‘the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*.’²⁵ Thus he suggests that a landscape is never laugh-

25 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 3.

able without figures or subjects, that animals are laughable only by virtue of 'some human attitude or expression', and that if you laugh at a hat, you're not laughing at its material existence but the shape or use assigned to it by humans. For this reason, he suggests that whereas philosophers (following Aristotle's famous formulation, as cited above) have often defined the human as 'an animal that laughs' (*un animal qui sait rire*), in fact a better definition might be 'the animal that is laughed at' (*un animal qui fait rire*).²⁶ Second, he proposes that laughter tends to be accompanied by an 'absence of feeling' (*insensibilité*).²⁷ This is not to deny that laughter may be pleasurable, but that it is antithetical to 'negative' emotional states — such as anxiety, despair, or fear; and also to feelings of pity or sympathy for whatever/whoever it is that is the object of the laughter (here we seem to have at least an echo of superiority-based approaches). Third, Bergson agrees with many other thinkers in seeing laughter as something fundamentally social: 'Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo.'²⁸ Thus even when it comes from a solitary individual, laughter is always 'the laughter of a group' — and specifically, that of a 'closed circle', such that it indicates a 'complicity with other individuals, real or imaginary.'²⁹

After establishing these framing presumptions, Bergson goes on to develop his central argument, that the comic, and thus laughter, is very widely and fundamentally associated with the central image of 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'.³⁰ This seemingly unnatural combination of the mechanical and the living manifests, he argues, in a number of ways, linked by the recurrence of unnatural or incongruous relationships between elasticity and rigidity, flexibility

26 Ibid., p. 3–4.

27 Ibid., p. 4.

28 Ibid., p. 6.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 37. See also p. 29: 'The attitudes, gestures and movement of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.' Bergson goes on to suggest that many comic figures are funny due to their exhibiting, like Don Quixote, a certain automatism, an ignorance of self — 'the comic person is unconscious' (p. 16) — and that this inelasticity may be manifest in all sorts of ways — in the physical body, a person's mind, character, behaviour, etc. Later in the course of his argument the scope will be expanded, such that he highlights a recurrent slippage from 'an artificial *mechanization* of the human body' to 'any substitution whatsoever of the artificial for the natural'. (p. 48)

and tension. To give just one example, he suggests that if we laugh at someone falling over in the street, it is because we observe ‘a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and pliability of a human being.’³¹ In Bergson’s definition and the many examples through which he elaborates and explores it, we repeatedly encounter the three characteristics we have identified as recurring in Western philosophical discussions: laughter results from an unexpected image or event, violating our expectations and often implying actual physical or emotional violence, caused by an unexpected (erroneous, incongruous) combination of mechanical inelasticity with living pliability — in a ‘strictly human’ context.³²

There is an apparent tension here, however — one which might be identified in any of the explorations of laughter we have already considered, but which I think Bergson’s investigation makes more central than most — between the ‘strictly human’ and the encrusting of the mechanical, artificial, and rigid upon the living: that is, between an image or instance of the human as it is expected to appear, and a process of its becoming nonhuman. Thus laughter in the Bergsonian account revolves around an experience of the human that doesn’t coincide with itself. Something or someone taken at first non-controversially (probably unthinkingly) to be a human acting in a certain, culturally ‘normal’ human way, or forming a culturally recognizable human expression, suddenly upsets these expectations, these norms, and thus reveals itself as not fitting the preconceived notion of the human (or of a ‘normal’ human mode of action, expression, etc.) that initially, probably unconsciously, framed it in the perception of the observer. However, given that the rest of the observer’s general expectations (epistemol-

31 Ibid., p. 10.

32 Freud fully accepts and endorses Bergson’s argument in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, although it seems he can’t help trying to play down the importance of Bergson’s work relative to his own even as he draws on it. The ways thinkers relate to one another’s work is perhaps one of the most visible and recurrent sites in philosophical and theoretical writing of ‘Man’s’ competitive need to assert his superiority at the expense of others, whether he agrees with them or not. Thus Freud avers that he can ‘include his [Bergson’s] view under our own [Freud’s] formula’ (p. 209); and that the relating of comic effects, via automatism and automata, to the child’s toy — in what he condescendingly refers to as ‘Bergson’s charming and lively volume *Le rire*’ — has ‘surprisingly enough’ been an influence on his own attempt to seek for the ‘infantile roots’ of the comic, its psychogenesis. (pp. 222–23)

ogy, ontology, understanding of cultural norms) are not shaken by this encounter with the unexpected — everything else seems to continue to ‘fit’ — they will not go so far as to conclude that what they are observing is actually something nonhuman: the man who falls over due to mechanical inelasticity — e.g., by failing to adapt to obstacles or other changes newly introduced to his environment — is only taken to behave ‘as if’ he were a machine, a nonhuman; if the observer concluded that he were actually, in this action, revealing himself to be a robot — just as if he turned out to be seriously hurt — the laughter would very likely cease; one would be in the realm of other experiences associated with human/nonhuman, living/non-living encounters — the uncanny, mortal fear, social concern, etc. The observer who laughs does not situate what they are laughing *at* outside the realm of the nonhuman or non-living, but recognizes their preconceived notion of what the human entails to be subject to modification: the man behaving as a machine, and falling over, is funny because he must still be considered a man, a human; the category of what is understood as human is widened to include what was intuitively considered just a moment ago as nonhuman; that prior understanding of the limits of the category of the human is thus revealed as having been too small, restrictive, thus flawed.

All of this begs the question, what particular kind of human is it that is thus unsettled — what preconceptions regarding the normal human have been challenged and opened to modification — in this or that particular laughable scenario? A large number of Bergson’s examples are taken from relatively canonical (especially French) modern comic writing — from the plays of Molière, Racine, and Labiche, the caricatures of La Bruyère — as well as popular European comic novels such as *Don Quixote* and *Baron Munchhausen*. These examples very often focus on male (and masculine) figures exhibiting self-confidence or self-certainty regarding their particular outlooks, accompanied by some corresponding character trait(s) from which the comic effects are in part derived — pomposity, arrogance, naivety, hypocrisy, etc.: Don Quixote as identifying himself with the noble hero of chivalric romance and living accordingly despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary; the customs house officers who, on rushing to help passengers rescued from a wrecked steamer ship, adhere rigidly to the rules

of their profession by first asking the survivors if they ‘have anything to declare’;³³ the philosopher who asserts, when faced with people attesting experiences that contradict his arguments, that ‘[e]xperience is in the wrong’;³⁴ or another who criticizes displays of anger before flying into a rage;³⁵ the policeman marionette who repeatedly springs to his feet to assert his authority no matter how many times he is felled by Punch’s cudgel;³⁶ Molière’s doctors, who would rather hold fast to the authority of Hippocratic medicine than save a patient.³⁷ In discussing all these examples, Bergson stresses that it is the rigidity of the characters or their behaviour that is found humorous, identifying this with a certain automatism, life or the human behaving mechanically rather than adapting fluidly (‘being alive’) to changing circumstances. Yet even as he generalizes this notion of rigidity or inflexibility, inserting it within the abstract formula of ‘something mechanical encrusted on the living’, his examples continue to inscribe it within certain cultural ideals of moral propriety and ‘respectability’³⁸ that tend to be circumscribed in Western, masculinized terms (e.g., those which fetishize heroism, scientific rationality, professionalism, bureaucracy, social order, etc.).

In other words, it is more Man than ‘the human’ which is having its claim to fully human status challenged here — yet at the same time, this is treated as the basis for the undermining of *any* image of the human. On the one hand, Bergson is probably quite aware that he is dealing with laughter within a culturally specific context, and that there are recurrent tropes in his examples, many of which involve some aspect of European, civilized masculinity being lampooned or ‘taken down a peg’: he is explicit that the ‘natural environment’ of laughter is society, and that the premise of its fundamentally social function will be ‘the leading idea of all our investigations.’³⁹ Yet on the other hand, his desire to extrapolate from this a general or universal theory of laughter risks

33 Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 46.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

38 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 125–26: ‘To express in reputable language some disreputable idea, to take some scandalous situation, some low-class calling or disgraceful behaviour, and describe them in terms of the utmost “respectability,” is generally comic.’

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

undermining this very specificity — and indeed, risks allowing Man to recover a little of the façade of universality that these comic scenarios are supposed to take away from him.

It is worth emphasizing how the place of superiority (effectively always a prelude to, if not form of, violence) seems to shift constantly through these discourses on laughter. Whereas for those citing Aristotle and Hobbes in support of a superiority approach, laughter is the mark of the coward or weakling attempting to assert his superiority over (an)other(s), in comedies of social manners, the laughter has a ‘corrective’ role, in that it identifies, exposes — and thus encourages the avoidance of — traits taken as socially or morally undesirable.⁴⁰ In other words, the moralizing function implicit in one purportedly *theoretical* way of accounting for laughter passes over to comedic *practices*, which seek to evoke laughter; and, indeed, this moralizing effort is itself a counter to and undermining of the implicit moralizing of the civilized, self-assured figures exposed to ridicule. There is an ongoing, shifting struggle of moral forces that seems to surround laughter in Western culture — especially the literate/literary culture, which, from the classical era through the Renaissance until relatively recently, was both the main prescriptor of *humanitas*, Man, the ideal human, and the means by which one attained to this ideal (through education, reading, cultivation).

This fluidity may mean that we can never take a Western critique of Man at face value, whether conducted through philosophy, theatre, critical theory, or telling a joke: it seems likely that challenges to particular aspects of this multi-faceted figure can always be re-inscribed within a larger scheme of corrective cultivation; one laughs at a flaw in one of Molière’s comic figures in order to correct the tendency towards this trait in oneself and one’s peers — seeing the illusory equation of ‘Man’ with the ‘human’, but only in the end to attain a ‘better’ ideal version of humanity that is ultimately likely to retain some of the salient traits of Man. Perhaps for the same reasons, it seems that such critiques, in exposing the false universalization of a particular figure of

40 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 87–88: The apparent automatism characterizing the comic ‘calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absent-mindedness in men and events.’

the human, find it hard to avoid translating this very self-universalizing tendency back into a fundamentally human trait.

Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that attending to the question of what particular version of the human is being universalized (and thus used to particularize the category of ‘humanity’) is of such importance. This is one of the issues, for example, underpinning Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Tânia Stolze Lima’s critical deployment of ‘Amerindian perspectivism’ towards a ‘requalification of anthropology’ (that modern field in which the relation between particular and universal forms of the human has been so consistently a site of struggle and concern).⁴¹ Viveiros de Castro refers to Lévi-Strauss’s fascination with the parallel ‘anthropological’ investigations of the Spanish and the Americans at the historical moment of their first encounter — with the Americans drowning Spanish prisoners to test their material, bodily natures at the same time as the Spanish were sending investigators to determine whether the Americans had souls. For Lévi-Strauss, this scenario made manifest the seemingly paradoxical way in which ‘[a] kind of congenital avarice preventing the extension of the predicates of humanity to the species as a whole appears to be one of its predicates:’⁴² to claim exclusivity for one’s version of humanity is a universal human trait; all humans identifying with a cultural group equate it with the human. Whether or not this is so, for de Castro and Lima, there is a critical difference between the Spanish doubt regarding the Americans’ possession of souls equivalent to theirs, and the Americans’ doubt concerning the Europeans’ possession of bodies equivalent to their own. The distinction is something like the equivalent one, in another register, of a Pauline political theology: of determining someone as Jewish or Roman (as counting as human) according to the spirit (*pneuma*) or according to the flesh (*sarx*).⁴³ One version grants an

41 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Cannibal Metaphysics: Amerindian Perspectivism,’ *Radical Philosophy*, 182 (November–December 2013), pp. 17–28 (p. 20). Cf. Tânia Stolze Lima, ‘O dois e seu múltiplo: reflexões sobre o perspectivismo emu ma cosmologia tupi,’ *Mana*, 2.2 (1996), pp. 21–47.

42 Viveiros de Castro, ‘Cannibal Metaphysics,’ p. 20.

43 See, for example, Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 55–64 and *passim*; Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 44–58

equivalent right to life, affords equality in terms of moral responsibility, the other denies it.

I have been considering Western philosophical and theoretical engagements with laughter that, to lesser and greater extents, when considered together, seem to repeatedly expose, *and extend or repeat*, the violent ways a particular cultural figure of the human — masculine, civilized, Western — uses laughter to assert its superiority over those it considers non- and subhuman (animals, machines, members of other socio-cultural groups). There seems to be something almost innately ambiguous, not so much about laughter (though the non-linguistic, non-propositional form of laughter may be one reason for its aptness in this context) but about such concerns with the particularity/generality of this culturally specific figure of the human. That is, if every exposure of this false, violent imposition of Man on ‘the human’ simultaneously has the potential to critique *and* reassert it, then it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to know whether a given instance of this exposure — whether in an experience of humour or a philosophical discussion of laughter — has the function/effect of undermining or reinforcing the violent act of the universalization of Man.

This ambiguity and this difficulty recur with particular force in a more recent theory of laughter. Here again the thematic trio of violence, the human/nonhuman boundary or relation, and an experience of error, converge. The false alarm theory of laughter, which borrows from evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and physiology research, suggests that humans evolved laughter as a means of relieving tension in situations where a perceived danger turns out to be a false alarm.⁴⁴ Here is the scenario John Morreall uses to illustrate the false alarm theory in his book *Comic Relief*:

and *passim*. Thirty years after his writing on laughter, in a text that nevertheless again centrally treats processes of mechanization as forms of dehumanization, Bergson also makes an equivalent distinction, between closed and open forms of morality — the former extended only to those a cultural group considers to be like them, the latter extended in principle beyond any given material form of the human, extending in the direction of all life, if not further. See Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton with W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

44 V. S. Ramachandran, ‘The Neurology and Evolution of Humor, Laughter, and Smiling: The False Alarm Theory’, *Medical Hypotheses*, 51.4 (October 1998), pp. 351–54.

A group [of early humans] is sitting around a fire at night, when they see what looks like a horned monster coming through the tall grass. If it really is an invader, then they should be serious and emotionally engaged. Fear or rage would energize them to escape, or to conquer the monster. But what if 'the monster' is actually their chief returning to camp carrying an antelope carcass on his head? Then their fear or rage not only will waste time and energy, but could easily lead to pointless killing. In that case, what they need is a quick way to block or to dispel fight-or-flight emotions. They need to disengage themselves and play with their perceptions and thoughts, rather than act on them.⁴⁵

This 'play' gives rise to laughter, whose value lies not only in relaxing the muscles, releasing the tension, but in communicating to other members of the group that, as V. S. Ramachandran, one of the first proponents of the theory puts it, 'there has been a false alarm; that "the rest of you chaps need not waste your precious energy and resources responding to the spurious anomaly."⁴⁶ This account of laughter actively presents the evolutionary origins of laughter as occurring in a masculinized scene. We need not, of course, presume that those who feel threatened by the perceived invader, becoming 'energized' by it, ready for fight or flight, should be the male members of the group — the 'chaps'. But the prominent features of the scene are identifiable as strongly associated with masculinity in Western culture — the threat of violence, the need to defend the tribe or family, the patriarchal social structure (there seems to be no logical reason, in terms of what the scenario is supposed to say about the origins of laughter, for it to be the chief, as opposed to any other member of the group, who has been mistaken for a monster).

Furthermore, it is precisely the self-certainty of this masculine, assured superiority that has been called into question here — that is, the preparedness and capability of those involved to defend the tribe against a violent invader, which necessarily includes their ability to accurately detect and respond to threats, to distinguish the human from the animal and the monstrous. Laughter arises when members of the group realize that their sense of danger is misplaced and that they

45 John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, p. 44.

46 Ramachandran, 'The Neurology and Evolution of Humor', p. 352.

have mistaken something harmless, indeed, something beneficial to the group, for something dangerous. Their own capacity for perceiving, interpreting, understanding their world, has revealed itself as flawed. In this sense, while the laughter seems to be the outcome of a sense of relief — both emotional and physical — it is also an indicator that this flaw remains: had the error not been realized, they might have killed the chief; at any later point, one of them might be wrongly identified as a threat and killed by the others; or, even after the mistake has been recognized and laughed at, were an actual beast to charge the group later that night, they might take it to be the chief or another member of the group replaying the joke, and thus fail to respond in time to defend themselves and their fellows.

Does the laughter in this scenario — and does this account of the origins of laughter — challenge the confidence of a particular type of human, of Man, the alert, discerning defender of his people, ready for action, laughing at the errors of (his own) superstition; or does it reassert it? On the one hand the theory presents a potential arche-scene for the tendency to take the membership criteria of one's own socio-cultural group for the totality of those worthy of life (respect, protection, preservation); and laughter here, again, seems to challenge the effectiveness of this gesture, to expose its illusory, suspect nature, by virtue of the error in the scene whereby a member of the group (indeed, a privileged member, the chief) is misidentified as nonhuman. The ensuing laughter recognizes and communicates this failure of perception and judgment. Yet on the other hand, the laughter also indicates that this human/nonhuman categorization is stable after all: not only has the apparent violent threat disappeared and physical security returned, but Man's security has been restored. There is, in effect, an interminable undecidability as to whether the identification of Man with the human is exposed and threatened, or managed and reinforced by the laughter in this scene, or in the theoretical discussions of laughter that stage it. Thus the apparent false alarm (the perceived threat is not real) can itself be construed as false (the mistaking of the threat for real marks the instability of perceptions regarding the real), and yet this, in turn, may be marked as a 'false falsehood': Man survives the threat to his Manhood, and remains secure in his self-identification with the human in general.

This uncertain, fluctuating, ambiguous relationship between laughter and violence is encapsulated in an infamous scene from the 1990 film *Goodfellas*, itself epitomizing what has become something of a modern cinematic/audiovisual cliché, especially in narratives revolving around violent struggles (which, of course, most often means masculine struggles, and thus, arguably, struggles over masculinity). Tommy DeVito (played by Joe Pesci), a Mafia figure who has recently begun to rise in power, having been ‘made’ — and who is already known for his volatile capacity for unpredictably becoming extremely violent — is relaxing with his entourage of friends and henchmen in a restaurant. He is in the middle of a long, relatively unfunny anecdote about how he verbally abused a cop. Everyone around him is laughing uproariously, to a degree that the larger narrative, as well as the direction, frames as excessive relative to the comic quality of the account; their laughter is demanded by Tommy’s power, status, and personality. After Henry Hill (played by Ray Liotta), the film’s protagonist and partial narrator, says, ‘You’re funny ...’, Tommy becomes quiet, and, while at first still smiling, repeatedly asks Henry to explain what he means by this. His tone becomes increasingly aggressive: ‘I’m funny how, I mean funny like I’m a clown, I amuse you? I make you laugh, I’m here to fuckin’ amuse you? What do you mean funny, funny how? How am I funny?’ As Tommy’s anger increases, and Henry repeatedly fails to satisfy him, the tension builds to a point where violence seems to be about to break out, before after a final, long pause, Henry declares: ‘Get the fuck out of here Tommy!’, leading to everyone at the table cracking up with laughter, led by Tommy as he makes out that the whole thing has been a big joke.⁴⁷

On the one hand, this second round of laughter may seem like a perfect illustration of the false alarm theory. It seems to have the direct function of deflating tension, saying — with relief — we are all friends here, the threat has passed; ‘the rest of you chaps’ can relax. Except that this scene *started* with laughter and camaraderie: indeed, even when the laughter gave way to a sense of menace, this was caused by the

47 *Goodfellas*, dir. by Martin Scorsese (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1990). Martin Scorsese and Nicholas Pileggi, *Goodfellas* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).

basic component of many jokes and puns, the misunderstanding or ambiguity of a word, in this case the word 'funny'. There was no threat approaching from outside the group: it was the alpha figure, the chief himself, who suddenly seemed to sprout horns and become the threat — presumably reminding everyone present that the social hierarchy for which his leadership is the pivot *depends* upon the past acts of violence that got him there — and the future acts that will be needed to maintain his status. In this sense, the laughter that takes place here must *always* be the indicator of a threat that will *always* be internal to and constitutive of the group — at least of a group such as this, built on masculine aggression, violence, and a rigorous adherence to a familial or tribal structure. In laughing, the group is externalizing this threat, somehow simultaneously both raising the alarm and signalling it as false. It is not incidental that the scene eventually ends with Tommy inflicting actual violence upon a waiter of the restaurant who has the impertinence to ask him to settle his tab: just as the laughter may be seen as a release or relief of tension that was built up by the threat of violence, this economy can be turned around, so that the eventual violence against an outsider is a release of the tension that was built up and restricted by the internal moral structure of the group, with the help of the mechanism of laughter.

CONCLUSION

Combining the traditional Aristotelian formula — the human as the only animal that laughs — with the one proposed by Bergson — the human as the animal that is laughed at (*l'animal qui fait rire*) —, we arrive at the following: the human is the animal that laughs at itself. However, in taking this laughter to amount to the human's undermining, in some sense, of its status as human, there is a risk of reinscribing a presumed, universal notion of the human, exactly where its universality is being challenged. That is, if laughter in many circumstances may be said to challenge what a given human or human group takes to be its humanity, we should not take it for granted that there is an implicit, universal understanding of the human that all people share and that is challenged *in general* by laughter. Rather, we should attend to the particularities of the form, image, definition of the human that

is opened to challenge, destabilized, in any given instance of laughter, or in any given portrayal or account of laughter and its functioning. In this essay, I have considered a number of philosophical and theoretical approaches to laughter that seek to develop a general or universal theory of laughter — of its function, its role in ‘human’ society and culture. Viewed together, their shared cultural particularities are clear, though largely unacknowledged by the thinkers and writers themselves. Yet their theories repeatedly point to the notion that laughter is a mechanism directly engaged with these same errors concerning self-understanding and the boundaries of the human. They imply, even argue for, an understanding of laughter as destabilizing the very status of Man that conditions their own implicit and explicit claims to universality.

The question that then seemingly remains is whether this particular form of the human is destabilized by such accounts of laughter and the instances of humorous, laughter-invoking situations they refer to (literary, dramatic, everyday, etc.) — or whether it is reinforced by them. I do not think this is a question that can be settled in general: rather, the potential for both destabilization and reinforcement remains at every stage and in each circumstance; and this, rather than suggesting that we abandon any attempt to account for the functions and effects of laughter, either in general or in this or that context, should encourage us to be attentive to these effects in their local specificity, even and perhaps especially when that locality seems quite broad, i.e., aspiring to generality or universality. The human is the animal that laughs at itself; but ‘the human’ is seldom, perhaps never a genuinely universal category (even if this very statement implies that it could be). It matters which ‘human’ is laughing at itself, and whether and to what extent this self-directed laughter undermines its false claim to universality, or, by exposing this claim and making it seem of minor consequence, enables its reassertion.

James Burton, 'The Animal That Laughs at Itself: False False Alarms about the End of 'Man'', in *Errans: Going Astray, Being Adrift, Coming to Nothing*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 24 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 49–74 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-24_2>

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