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Humour in art and its use to challenge authority

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Introduction

Art has always been of great interest to me, but it was almost invariably presented to me as quite a high-brow, overly serious concept. Although important, this asceticism was the primary side of art to which I was exposed. When I read about some artists' humorous attitudes and viewpoints towards life and art, I found a great discrepancy between them and how their artworks were solemnly described and presented in books or exhibitions. I understood that not all art has to be so pontifical. Instead, when I found myself discovering a quirky feature in an artwork, or when I recognised its funny aspect or subject, that was when I started to fully appreciate it. When someone explained a painting to me, those "on a side note" pieces of peculiar information were what really struck a chord in me and what I could retain. Therefore, I tried to delve into this aspect of humour in art, and how humour should be considered a key concept when analysing some art products. Rediscovering and re-evaluating comedy is essential. Furthermore, its use as a weapon against all kinds of authority is a topic worth examining. All the way since the myth of David and Goliath, the concept of the small and weak who, through his wit and cunning, is able to cause something bigger to collapse, is a persistently interesting and appealing narrative.

Chapter I

HUMOUR AS A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In this first chapter, I will discuss the importance of the profound nature of humour and its role as a catalyst for thought and reflection. I will also highlight its importance as a new perspective on reality by making references to two social experiments that emphasise this idea.

In his *Republic*, Plato famously critiqued comedy, deeming it a threat to the human rational faculties. According to him, the guardians of the *Polis*, the ideal representation of society, were not meant to laugh. He also described “amusement” as «an emotion in which we tend to lose rational control of ourselves» (Morreal, 1987: 10) and laughter as something «opposed to rationality» (Jones, 2005: 3).

Later philosophers, however, have rightfully reinstated the importance of humour and highlighted its intellectual nature. Among all, Sigmund Freud admitted that «jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life» (Freud, 1905: 9). Henri Bergson wrote an entire collection of essays, titled “Laughter: An essay on the Meaning of the Comic”, in order to determine the laws of humour. Moreover, writer and philosopher Walter Benjamin asserted that «there is no better starting point for thought than laughter» (Diack, 2012: 75), while Wittgenstein is quoted saying that «a serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes» (Dribble, 2004: 87).

The intellectual nature of humour is described, particularly by Benjamin and Wittgenstein, as being in close connection to philosophy. Philosopher and writer Simon Critchley, in his 2008 talk at Google to discuss his new book “On Humour”, addresses this relationship between the two terms, humour and philosophy. He starts off his speech by saying that «philosophy is a funny business, and philosophers are funny people» (Critchley, 2008). He, then, elaborates on this comparison by fostering the similarities in the scope of philosophers and comedians. He declares that

the philosopher asks you to look at the world awry, to place in question your usual habits, assumptions, prejudices and expectations. The philosopher asks you to be skeptical about all sorts of things that you ordinarily took for granted [...]. In this regard, the philosopher has, I think, a family resemblance with the comedian. (*ibid.*)

On the evidence of all of these remarks, we can safely assume that humour is not just irrationally laughing at something. There is more to it. This laughter is, in fact, what lights the fuse of reasoning.

Let us now transport this topic of the intellectual nature of comedy, a trigger for thought, specifically in the context of art. In this area, humour can be used as a “hook” to attract people’s attention and, hopefully, to make them engage with the artwork and its meaning. It can also be used to challenge the public and to push it to contemplate certain issues or incongruities of the reality that surrounds us. For instance, in the majority of Shakespeare’s play, some of the wittiest and most thought-provoking lines are delivered by the character of the “fool”. This type of character is present in many of Shakespeare’s plays, from the Fool in King Lear to the Gravediggers in Hamlet, from Touchstone in “As You Like It” to Puck in “A Midsummer’s Night Dream”. Their lines are thought to be concealing the real opinions of the author, which hid himself behind the mask of the “fool” to express his point of view about some of the themes dealt within the play.

Perhaps, one of the most appropriate definitions of humour is given by modern art history professor and critic John C. Welchman in his preface to the essay collection *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art*. Even though he is specifically referring to the field of art, his viewpoint is a compelling definition of humour in general. He considers humour «a critical conceptual tool [...] to take account of the ordinary in its absurdity, in its structures, in its illogical suspension of disbelief» (Diack, 2012: 77). In his interpretation, humour is not described simply as a means to flee from reality, but as a way to face it and to challenge it. It is described as a tool that we can use to explore what is surrounding us. Most importantly, it is to be regarded as something that offers a new perspective through which to look at reality. A new way to see things.

Two kinds of “social experiments” took place in 2015 and in 2016 in the form of a funny

prank. They both were carried out in museums and they represent a perfect example of this use of humour as a new perspective on reality. They were carried out by artistic laymen, but they wittingly foster some social aspects and human behaviours that affect the general public of art exhibitions. They took place in different countries and in different years but their intention was more or less the same.

After a brief description of the two examples, I will find the connections that they have with the above-mentioned quote by John C. Welchman, in order to highlight the significance of Welchman's definition. I will also try to define how these practical jokes help us looking in a different way at the behaviour of visitors, their preconceptions and absurdities inside a museum. Once again, this will prove the importance of humour both as a catalyst for thought and as a new perspective for a different point of view on reality.

The first experiment took place in the Netherlands, more specifically in the Museum for Modern Art in Arnhem in 2015. The jokesters, in this case, were a group of professional YouTube experimenters, called LifeHunters. To promote the new IKEA art event, Street Art Collection, they put an Ikea print on display inside the museum. They then lured in unaware visitors and asked them what their first impression of the work was. The spectators, after being convinced by an undercover LifeHunters fake expert that this was a piece by mystery Swedish artist "Ike Andrews", were very impressed. The large-scale industrially printed piece drew reactions such as: «you can clearly see that it concerns a form of symbolism» (LifeHunters Team, 2015), and it was described as a «depiction of the chaos in [the author's] mind» (*ibid.*).

The 10€ worth of a picture was estimated by visitors to be worth «200,000 Euros» (*ibid.*), with some visitors declaring: «If you could buy this for 2,5 million [Euros], I'd do it» (*ibid.*).

The official comment from the authors of the social experiment underlined their aim of challenging what they called a «high-class attitude about art» (*ibid.*). Through a simple setup, they managed to fool visitors into believing that an Ikea print was a famous contemporary artist's masterpiece, and to expose their fake high-class attitude by using it against themselves. The pranksters were able to play with the assumption of usual visitors, and see how far they could affect their judgement.

This type of prank exposed the “illogical suspension of disbelief” of reality that J. Welchman described, and which he said humour could suddenly reveal. This “illogical suspension of disbelief” is something that a big part of museums’ audience acquires whenever they cross the threshold of a museum. It is as if most of the visitors who enter a gallery or a museum feel pressured to blindly praise any artwork without any kind of questioning, in order not to appear ignorant.

Also, another point this experiment highlighted is how easy it is to divert the general public’s judgement by faking knowledge and expertise.

The second experiment, instead, was carried out in May 2016 by two students, 16-year-old Kevin Nguyen and 17-year-old TJ Khayatan, inside the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Not so impressed by what they had seen during their tour around the museum, they brought up the recurring comment that a large percentage of visitors consider but dare not say out loud, “I could have done that!”. However, they took it a step forward and acted upon what they declared and, literally, did something themselves. After trying with a jacket and a baseball cap, they finally chose Nguyen’s pair of glasses to be put on the floor, under a plaque that described the theme of the gallery. Within minutes, curious visitors started noticing the glasses and mistaking them for an artistic instalment, lingering to admire the piece with contemplative looks or to take pictures of it.

One of the pranksters, TJ Khayatan, when describing the episode, was quoted saying that «some may interpret it as a joke, some might find great spiritual meaning in it. At the end of the day, I see it as a pleasure for open-minded people and imaginative minds» (Hooton, 2016). In this instance, what the joke emphasised was the easiness with which visitors accept anything as art if it happens to be put next to a plaque. Once again, as it happened in the previous example, humour is used to point out the absurdities of reality, especially the reality of museums and their visitors.

When it comes to art, especially modern and contemporary art, the prevailing feeling seems to be that one has to accept and approve everything that is put in front of oneself, without any sort of filter or question. However, to blindly accept any artwork is to kill the whole point of it. These simplistic behaviours and unquestioning enthusiasm do not do art any good. In fact, the point of some art installations is exactly to trigger a reflecting

mechanism in the audience, which pushes them to question themselves and their beliefs. Some artworks were specifically created to challenge the perception of art, and to induce the audience to question what exactly is art and why one may appreciate some things while despising others.

The response that the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art offered via its Twitter account was: “Do we have a Marcel Duchamp in our midst?”. It’s no surprise that the reply to this funny experiment compared the two students to Duchamp. In fact, the famous French artist carried out a sort of experiment like the aforementioned ones. The event the museum’s comment was referring to was the famous submission by Marcel Duchamp of the “Fountain”. When, in 1917, the already successful artist anonymously submitted a urinal titled “Fountain” to the New York Society of Independent Artists’ Salon, he shook the foundations of art that had been built up until then.

A brief but accurate description of the significance of the Fountain can be found in Roy Turner’s words:

It is clear that Duchamp’s submission of the urinal to a New York exhibition in 1917 was a profoundly witty *gesture*. As a gesture, it had an enormous capacity to disturb those described by Nietzsche as ‘cultured philistines’, and identified by the complacency and smugness they brought to their understanding of art [...]. [I]t is surely obvious that it is essential for the success of the gesture as a witty and provocative act that the object precisely not be an art object. What is to be appreciated is not the object itself, but the provocation of placing it in an environment normally reserved for painting and sculpture. Duchamp himself denied aesthetic properties to the readymades, even going so far as to say that they need not even be seen. (Turner, 2008)

Therefore, also Duchamp’s artwork is not to be blindly praised for its artistic value, it needs to be appreciated for what it truly has been: a humorous prank that shattered thousands of years of authority’s certainty. These three art-related examples of using humour to trigger a reflection, and to obtain a new perspective on reality make for a good link to the larger topic of the presence of humour in art.

Chapter II

HUMOUR IN THE ART WORLD

In this chapter, I will be discussing the presence of humour in art. In particular, I will dwell upon how the comedic aspects are (or, better, are not) taken into consideration by critics. Further, I will examine the possible reasons for such a disregard, supporting these assertions with excerpts from the writings of professional authors. Finally, I will provide some examples of artworks in which humour plays a crucial role, in order to highlight this aspect as a significant standard of judgement.

When discussing the problem of the presence of humour in the field of art and how it is taken into account by art critics and historians, Diack found an

overwhelming reluctance to take humour seriously as an issue of aesthetic consideration and art-historical research — particularly given the discipline of art history's foundation in the celebration of individual genius, mastery, and connoisseurship. Humour systematically works to undo and take apart each of these dimensions. Topics considered light or ephemeral, playful or derisive, have generally been seen as aesthetically problematic in their *unseriousness* and have therefore been rejected as antithetical to the *object* of art history. (Diack, 2012: 75)

In her words, Diack generally suggests that the blame for the disregard of comedy in art be laid on the perception by critics of humour as diametrically opposed to the supposed seriousness of the “object” of art history.

When people enter a museum and find themselves in front of inestimable masterpieces, the predictable feeling that this abundance of artistry may instil is awe and almost submissive reverence. Superbly crafted works of art that conceal a noble idea or an acute social, political or cultural commentary certainly do not inspire humorous responses or remarks, let alone laughter. In fact, very rarely people enter a museum expecting to be amused or entertained, and surely they don't expect to find themselves laughing in front of an artwork. Everything that is inside a museum is art, and thus must be taken with the utmost seriousness. The general public does not associate a museum with the idea of fun,

and there seems to be no place for humour and laughter in an exhibition. But, who said so? Certainly not artists themselves. For example, one of the artists who most famously employed humour in art, Marcel Duchamp, expressed his opinion regarding this matter. He declared that

People took modern art very seriously when it first reached America because they believed we took ourselves very seriously [...]. A great deal of modern art is meant to be amusing. If Americans would simply remember their own sense of humour instead of listening to the critics, modern art will come into its own. (Tomkins, 1996: 226)

Other authors dig deeper into the causes of why humour may not be taken completely into consideration by art critics and historians. One of the reasons why comedy may not be given the right importance is given by Jessica Brier in an online article in which she analysed the “Trouble with Funny Art”. She believes that those who tend to evaluate art consider the concept of humour in art to be “out of fashion”, and therefore simply ignore it. In her own words:

One of my theories about this scholarly oversight is that, in the current landscape of art criticism, it is simply out of fashion. Not unlike talking about beauty in contemporary painting, it seems that analyzing a strategy as basic as making someone laugh is perhaps considered shallow and/or too subjective. Contemporary art criticism, particularly the kind found in the pages of Artforum or Frieze, is steeped in theoretical analysis solely interested in conceptual content.¹ To the casual-but-curious reader unarmed with an encyclopedic knowledge of art theory and a good dictionary, Artforum may as well be a medical journal on neuroscience. [...] I point this out in an effort to isolate why criticism in particular has ignored the humorous. (Brier, 2011)

Art historian Ernst Gombrich’s opinion is not distant from that of Brier. He also supports this notion of humour as “out of fashion”. In his 1974 ‘Huizinga’s Homo Ludens’ he described the situation of his working environment with regards to this topic. He asserted that

[i]n [his] own field, the history of art, [they] have become intolerably earnest. A false prestige has come to be attached to the postulation of profound meanings or ulterior motives. The idea of fun is perhaps even more unpopular among [them] than is the notion of beauty. (Gombrich, 1974: 295)

The topic of finding fun in a museum is also tackled by writer Alan Bennet, in his “Going to the Pictures”, a transcription of his 1993 conference at the National Gallery in London, when he was appointed trustee of the museum. In his speech, he confessed that he discovered a new way to improve his visits to museums and a new perspective through which to look at paintings. With a comical eye. He thought that we can look at the depictions of people in paintings and obtain information about them in the same way people gossip nowadays. He uses humour to talk about art, even high-brow, ancient art. He funnily describes how saints are always portrayed in various religious paintings with the instrument of their martyrdom in plain view, sometimes directly pointing at them, almost as if fearing we would not recognise them. Bennet says they are portrayed as if they were saying «Hey, hello everyone! [...] Do you know who I am, right?» (Bennett, 2005: 21). The writer also mentioned how finding this new point of view «comforted» him (*ibid.*: 18) and that he

sometimes find it hard to silence his sense of the ridiculous, even though, with time [he] understood that laughing at a painting doesn't mean not appreciating it. (*ibid.*: 18)

This argument that laughing at a painting can be seen as a method to appreciate the painting is extremely important. It offers a solution to regimented fruition of art.

Another possible reason why humour is discarded as a primary criterion for the evaluation of an artwork is that it may be considered to be a primitive instinct, and therefore unworthy. For some historians and critics, the concept of comedy is not to be associated with the purity of artistry, which for thousands of years has always been seen as being inspired by a godlike entity, such as a muse, or directly by God itself.

An answer to this argument is given by professor Gordon, who is convinced that

although laughter is likely to have evolved from play signals of primates, humour is a distinctively human phenomenon that involves the ability to enjoy cognitive shifts and appreciate incongruities. (Gordon, 2014: 16)

This way, the argument could simply be dismissed by drawing a line to divide the action of laughter from the intellectually charged concept of humour.

However, even if we admitted that humour was a primitive instinct, the origin and nature of a concept should not be a parameter by which we could evaluate the concept itself. Though laughter is an indisputably primal instinct, we cannot simply dismiss it and ignore it because of its nature.

Moreover, we have to keep in mind that most of the drives that push people to make art are primal instinct as well (hatred, love, sexual drives, sadness, ...). If we did not take into consideration the primal feelings that rule art and creativity, there would not be any art to evaluate at all.

The world of art is full of examples of humorous works. One of the earliest portrayals of artistic humour can be traced back to the Middle Ages. This historical period is described as the “golden age” of manuscripts. These handwritten documents were the strenuous creation of the amanuensis (or scribe), mostly religious figures, who filled entire books by, in most of the cases, copying the texts and tales of ancient times in order to preserve them. The professional figures who brought humour inside (or better, around) these texts were the *miniatores* (or, miniaturists). In fact, all around the writings, small hand-painted miniatures usually illustrated what was being narrated. Codicologist, paleographer and digital medievalist Dr. Johanna Green said that this type of illustration acted «as a mnemonic for the reader» (Burgess, 2017). There are some examples, on the other hand, in which the drawings appear to be quite obscure and not so strictly connected to the story. Sometimes, the marginalia were just «a bit of scribbling» (Levith, 2017), while other times they depicted weird scenes or «rather prurient or scatological» (*ibid.*) images, like «disembodied leg, posterior, or penis pointing at salient parts of the text» (Burgess, 2017).

Most importantly, however, it is crucial to take into account the comical nature of this kind of illustrations. British Library Imaging and Research Assistant Sarah J. Biggs, when describing the meaning and the purpose of these drawings, wrote that

The margins may have been a safe place for subversion against cultural norms, a sort of carnival on the page. They might serve as demonstrations of artistic skill, or as creative parody, intended to evoke the laughter that they still succeed in drawing from us today. (Biggs, 2012)

She also provided other insights as to what they were meant to achieve, stating that «many kinds of marginalia also functioned as additional commentary on the text that they surround, or as anti-examples, moral guides about what not to do» (*ibid.*).

In some instances, the illustrations were not added at the moment of writing, but a blank space was left and the drawings were added later on by future readers. However, given the obscene nature of some of them, it was not unusual that the opposite happened, with repulsed readers being the ones removing them. Once again, Biggs tackles this topic in a British Library online blog and writes that

[she] was frequently asked whether these kinds of images were created by later 'vandals' to undermine the sacred nature of the original texts. In reality, the reverse is often true; it is not uncommon to find that subsequent owners of a manuscript have either erased or defaced paintings that they presumably found particularly troubling. (*ibid.*)

The images provided below as an example have all been retrieved from online collections of medieval marginalia and miniatures. Two of the three examples are taken from Psalters, 14th-century manuscripts. Even though these books served as a book of Psalms, and were intended for personal religious observance and prayers, various indecent illustrations can be found in their margins.



1. *Les Voeux du Paon*, Jacques de Longuyon (Belgium, probably Tournai, ca. 1350), New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS G.24.



2. *The Rutland Psalter*, ca. 1260, London, British Library, Add MS 62925, f. 87v.



3. *The Gorleston Psalter* (1310-1324), London, British Library, Additional MS 49622, f.82r

The history of art is studded with examples of humorous art. In order to demonstrate this, I can only propose a few of the many examples that dotted history. Following the chronological course of history, the next example of humorous art can be Pieter Bruegel the Younger's, also known as Hell Bruegel for his bleak subjects, *The Flatterers* (4). Painted in 1592, the artwork is a satirical jab at the attitude of suck-ups, who are pictured submissively crawling through the behind of a bigger figure who is holding a bagful of money. The message is as clear as it can be, a humorous poke at people who would do anything to please a person, in the hope of receiving something in exchange, be it fame, money or power.



4. *The Flatterers* (1592), Pieter Bruegel the Younger

Further on in history, caricaturist and printmaker James Gillray, active between 1792 and 1810, presented England with a considerable amount of satirical illustrations regarding the political scene of the time. His witty, political etchings are fully charged with humour and he is regarded as one of the most influential caricaturist and the father of the political cartoon. In his famous *The Plumb-pudding in Danger* (5), he depicts the British Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger and the newly-crowned Emperor of France Napoleon in

the act of physically cutting out their share of the world's spheres of interest. Napoleon is taking Europe, while Pitt is getting Oceania.



5. *The Plumb-pudding in Danger* (1805), James Gillray

Continuing over this comical quick tour of history we encounter René Magritte who, in 1936 painted *La Clairvoyance* (6). In this self-portrait, he depicted himself painting a bird but looking at an unhatched egg for reference. As the title suggests, the artist is portraying himself as an oracle, able to predict the future and paint it. It is a clear statement about Magritte's view on the role of the artist, who is able to see more than what lies in front of him. The possibility, the potential, the future are the subject of his oeuvres, which are not bound by their earthly appearance.

However accurate and complete the above description is, it is still neglecting a great portion of the painting's and the artist's nature, humour. It is impossible to deny the sense of the absurd and ludicrous that *La Clairvoyance* evokes. It is no surprise that many comedians have mentioned Magritte as a great inspiration in their performances. Film director and former Monty Python member Terry Gilliam said in an interview:

It wasn't until I'd seen Magritte's work collected together in an exhibition at the Tate, at the end of the 1960s I think, that I realised just how incredibly funny his stuff was. People walk around these exhibitions in a religious state of awe and I just walked round this one laughing uncontrollably. Until then, I'd always thought of Magritte as having an interesting and intriguing mind – the way he would turn things inside out or make that which was solid suddenly not solid. But suddenly here he was, this wonderfully dry joke teller. (Carter, 2011)

Another comedian, Noel Fielding, has spent appreciative words for the Belgian artist, and their intrinsic comical nature:

Magritte's paintings always make me laugh. I don't care if other people say they're not funny. I find it ridiculous when you walk around a gallery and people are just looking at something obviously funny and stroking their chins. A Magritte painting such as the reverse mermaid [Collective Invention, 1934] is like a stand-up joke. Comedians do those reverse jokes all the time. (*ibid.*)



6. *La Clairvoyance* (1936), René Magritte

The final example of comical art is a British contemporary visual artist, David Shrigley, whose artworks range from prints to sculptures, from paintings to conceptual installations and even musical instruments and a football team's mascot. In my opinion, the art form in which he can best express his humorous judgements on society and humanity are his paintings. He had a fine arts education background, and he affirmed that he admired the Dada movement and Marcel Duchamp, and especially appreciated the comedy of the absurd they proposed in their art.

He was nominated for the Mercury Prize in 2013 and in 2016 he was commissioned the creation of the 11th Fourth Plinth artwork in Trafalgar Square. He sculpted a not-so-reassuring giant thumbs-up called "Really Good". It is possibly a jab at Brexit, being unveiled just a few months after the results of the vote.

His «take on existence» has been described as something that «veers between the grimly comic and the cynically absurdist» (Jones, 2016), while

[t]he humour in his work conceals a vision of humanity which is derived from religious allegory and the deep absurdities which accompany notions of moral edification or social conditioning. (Bracewell, 1995: 149)

Bracewell goes on, describing how the artist developed

a graphic style in which the banal or the absurd could be used to make statements about the capriciousness of fate, producing anecdotal drawings [...] in which the punch lines described the irony of moralising in situations which made no moral sense. (*ibid.*)

Chapter III

HUMOUROUS ART TO CHALLENGE AUTHORITY

Although, as we established at the beginning, his viewpoint on laughter and comedy was a not particularly positive one, Plato made great use of humour in order to contradict his intellectual opponents. Many writers have analysed his relationship with humour and we can be certain that, even though far from nowadays', humour was one of the weapons of his wit.

In fact, evidence has shown that

some of the words Plato uses were more commonly found in comedic works, and some were normally reserved for such use. He indulges freely in word-play, including puns and running jokes, as well as coining his own words (sometimes obviously for comedic purposes). He has philosophic jokes, comic imagery, even whole burlesque dialogues. Farce, parody, and satire can all be found in his writings. He even appears to use some of the actual ideas of the comedy of his day. (Jones, 2005, 15)

In his theories about humour, three notions stand out. They can be linked to the examples I will provide later, in which satirical art attacks authority.

The first notion is more of a behaviour that Plato adopted and by which, through comedy, he could prove the inefficiency and fallacy of his opponent's point of view. Plato, «instead of telling his reader that a view is incorrect or arguing for its falsity, he [...] *shows* how it leads to absurdity and ridiculousness» (Jones, 2005: 17).

The second notion is Plato's view on who can easily be subject to comedy, that is to say, who we laugh at. In his «*Philebus* (48-50)» (*ibid.*: 3), Plato

says [...] that, for a person to be ridiculous, she must have two features. First, she must be ignorant of herself in some way. This can take three forms: she may be ignorant about her wealth, physique, or virtue. Plato thinks that people are most commonly mistaken about their virtue; they imagine themselves more virtuous people than they really are. (*ibid.*: 3-4)

Or again, as Greene puts it, «self-deception, whether about one's wealth, or about one's personal appearance or about one's wisdom and virtue, is the essence of comedy» (Greene, 1920: 116). In short, the second notion is that people who think too much of themselves are bound to be made fun of.

The third and final notion deals with the aim of comedy and what it intends to accomplish. It is strictly connected to the second one because, according to the philosopher, the very objective of comedy is to unveil the false claim to knowledge of the self-ignorant people described above. There is a battle between «the true philosopher ranged against the sham pretender, [...] for comedy means, as Plato tells us, the exposure of all pretensions» (ibid.: 67). «[I]t is in the nature of comedy to expose pretension, including the false claim to knowledge, on the stage and in life» (Brock, 1990: 40).

The last two notions, dealing with a similar topic, can be merged together, so as to form a single one, in which the nature of comedy is to expose the pompous ostentatiousness of those who are 'ignorant of their wisdom and virtue'.

Keeping these two notions on humour and comedy as a parameter, I am going to present the following artworks, which were specifically created to challenge a form of authority. I am going to divide these artworks into two groups. The first group has a social and political intent. The object of ridicule of these works is a political figure or a social class. The second group, instead, is aimed at authority figures in the artistic field.

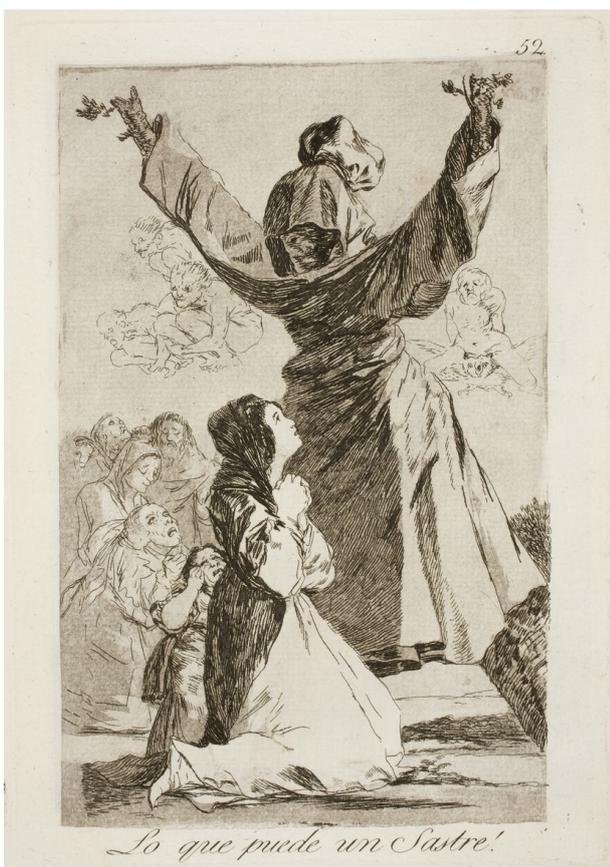
The first group includes the satirical prints of Francisco de Goya, Honoré Daumier and a particular episode that occurred while Michelangelo was painting his famous Last Judgement. The second group is comprised of paintings by artists in the style of the *singerie* and the famous Italian art hoax of the fake heads of Amedeo Modigliani.

Between 1797 and 1799, Francisco Goya printed and published a set of 80 aquatints and etchings that portrayed the follies and absurdities of the Spanish society of the time. The title of this collection is *Los Caprichos* and throughout this work, his satire particularly strikes the higher social classes and the clergy.

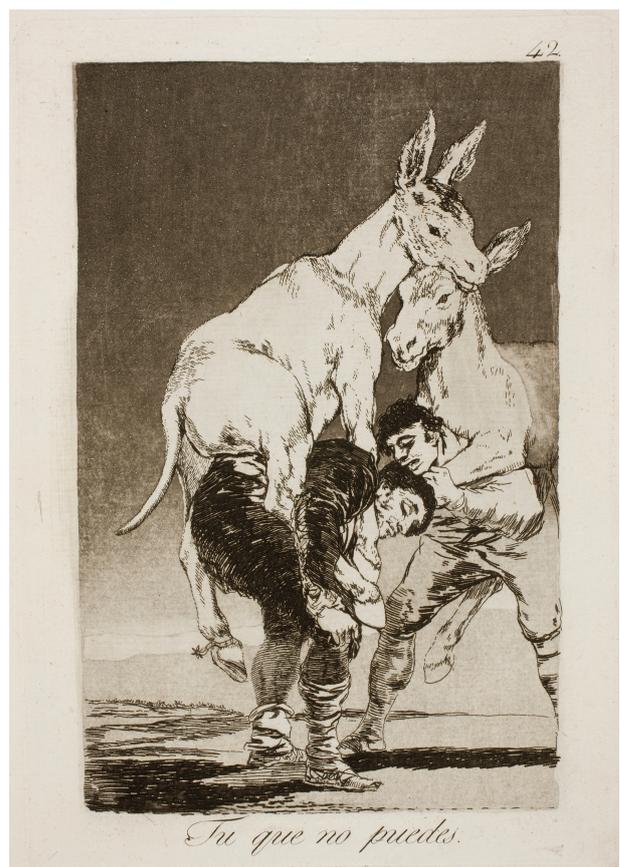
In the first example, *Lo Que Puede Un Sastre!* (What A Tailor Can Do!) (11), he portrays a supposed priest, which is, in fact, a tree stump dressed in a monk's tunic, being idolised by a young girl among a crowd of Christians. The message is a clear attack on Christians and

their lack of questioning or doubt regarding religious figures. The woman in the foreground is the symbol of this religious blindness and cannot tell the difference between a religious leader and a cloaked tree. Her ability to think critically seems to have been completely corrupted by her faith in the Church.

The second illustration, *Tu Que No Puedes* (You Who Cannot Do It), is a jab at aristocrats and the social elite. It depicts members of the lower class strenuously trying to carry donkeys on their back. The donkeys are a representation of the aristocracy and higher social classes, as it happens in other examples of the *Caprichos*. In this instance, they are pictured while carelessly taking advantage of the poor in order to maintain their social status, and quite literally growing rich on the backs of the poor.

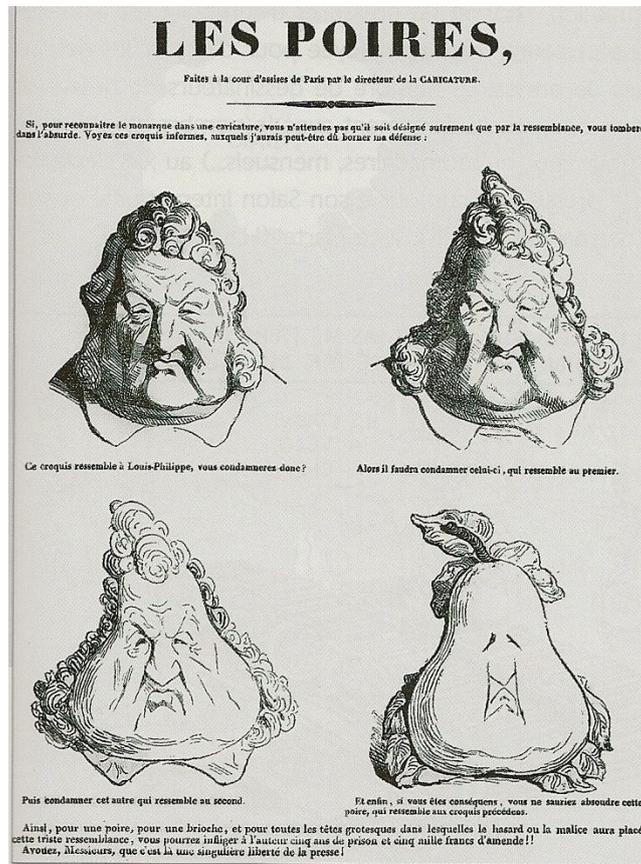


11. *Lo Que Puede Un Sastre!* (1799), Francisco Goya



12. *Tu Que No Puedes* (1799), Francisco Goya

Honoré Daumier worked for two of the first successful satirical magazines in history, called *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari*, both of which appeared in the 1830s in Paris. In it, the main target of the satire and of the humorous illustrations was the ruling class, especially the king, Louis-Philippe, which was one of Daumier's favourite victims. The king was often ridiculed for his looks and usually depicted as pear-shaped, because of the shape of his face. An excellent example is a famous cartoon, appeared in *Le Charivari* in 1835 and titled *Louis-Philippe se transformant en poire* (13).



13. *Louis-Philippe se transformant en poire* (1835),
Honoré Daumier

These satirical magazines, however, not only mocked the king's appearance but pushed their satire even further by attacking his behaviour and politics. In another Daumier representation, *Gargantua* (14), the king is portrayed as 'Gargantua', a famous French character in a 1500s series of satirical novels, *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel*. The characters became synonymous of greediness and gluttony, spending most of their time eating.

Louis-Philippe is represented as a gargantuan figure, feeding off the people who are portrayed while carrying the only food they own directly into the king's mouth, while the aristocracy is catching the leftovers that are falling from the king's mouth.



14. *Gargantua* (1831), Honoré Daumier

Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (15) fresco, painted behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel, represents the salvation and damnation of the human souls after being judged by Jesus Christ. In the upper part, angels welcome the Saved, while in the bottom part, devils push the damned towards the entrance of Hell. At this entrance, referencing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Michelangelo puts the figure of Minos, who wrapped his snake tail around his body to indicate the circle of Hell in which the damned had to descend. The following episode is narrated in two versions of the *Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari, the most important art historian and biographer of Italian Renaissance artists. While the artist was frescoing the wall, Pope Paul III came in the room to check on the work in progress.



15. *Last Judgement [detail]* (1536-41), Michelangelo
Buonarroti

He was accompanied by his master of ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena. However, Biagio was less than impressed by Michelangelo's work and considered the nudity of the figures to be unworthy for such a sacred place, deeming them better suited for a "bagnio" (a brothel). Michelangelo, deeply offended by this, took his revenge on the master of ceremonies portraying him as Minos, at the gates of Hell, with huge donkey ears and its snake tail biting his genitals. The snakelike tail has a further meaning, since it

twice encircles Minos's body before biting his genitals, implying that the artist condemned Biagio to the second circle of hell, where he will dwell among the lustful, those who allow carnal desire to overcome reason. Seemingly, Vasari's Michelangelo believes that Biagio lacks good judgement and belongs in a brothel. In the artist's eyes, Biagio, an inept critic and a hypocrite, damn himself. (Land, 2013: 16)

The second group of artworks, rather than against political or social authority, aims its satire against authority in the art field, art critics in particular. It is composed of two examples, the first one being an artistic genre called *singerie* and the second one being an art hoax that took place in Italy in 1984.

The first examples of *singerie* (monkey trick) can be traced back to antiquity, but the movement gained great popularity in France in the early 18th century. These kinds of paintings feature primate subjects mimicking the behaviour of humans and engaging in human activities. In Decamps' *The Experts* (16), the monkeys represent so-called art experts, probably the academy's selection jury of the French Academy of Painting that rejected a lot of Decamps' paintings. They are shown while examining «a landscape in the style of the seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin» (Met Museum website), «a baroque painting – a painting which is designed to be easily understood – an act which represents [their] inability to recognise true art» (Smithe, 2017). In the foreground, the book is showing the exorbitant cost of their services.



16. *The Experts* (1837), Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps

In 1984, upon the centenary of Amedeo Modigliani's birth, the *Museo Progressivo d'Arte Contemporanea* in Livorno decided to honour him with an exhibition of his sculptures. Vera Durbé, curator of the museum, and her brother Dario, superintendent of the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, were asked to organise it. On seeing that the exhibition was not gaining that much attention — only four sculptures were displayed — the curators decided to dust off an old myth that said that in 1909 Modigliani, discouraged by the judgment of his friends in Livorno, threw some of his sculptures in the *Fosso Reale* canal. The municipality of Livorno, hoping to attract attention and tourists to the city, funded the dredging up of these head sculptures.

What was considered to be just a myth, after a few days had been confirmed and three heads carved on stone (18) came out of the canal. The art world celebrated and praised this discovery. Vera Durbé immediately recognised the genius of Modigliani in one of the statues lineaments. Dario Durbé published a catalogue of the heads in just two weeks. Below are some of the other comments by the art world at the discovery of the sculptures.



17. *The presentation of Dario Durbé's book, where the public came to admire the three heads (1984)*

«“The first one is the most wonderful, with its noble nose, while the second one looks like a painting.”

Vera Durbé

“Immediately, it was clear to me that those sculptures were Modigliani's.”

Dario Durbè

“The sleeping one is wonderful, really moving: there’s a glare, a feeling of resurrection!”

Jean Leymarie (director of the French Academy in Rome)

“Sketches, but sketches by Modigliani. Who else, even the most capable of forgers, could have sketched those two heads so roughly, but so lightly, so that they shine an inner light [...]?”

Cesare Brandi (History of Art professor at the Università della Sapienza in Rome)

“These stones possess a soul.”

Enzo Carli (former supervisor at the Galleria di Siena)» (Cerrai, 2014: 22)

There was only one problem with all of this excitement: none of the three heads was carved by Modigliani. One of them, the one in the centre in picture n.18, was the product of three students who simply wanted to poke fun at the people who were expecting something to come up from the canal. Little did they know, they were able to fool a large number of art critics who readily attributed it to Modigliani and proudly showed it to the public before organising exhibitions dedicated to these heads all around the world. A simple act of harmless fun, like forging an old sculpture for fun using a drill, was capable of exposing the vanity and hollowness with which critics treated these artworks.



18. *The Fake Modigliani Heads* (1984)



19. *The three students posing with their fake* (1984)

The other two heads, the ones on the left and right in picture n.18, were the creation of Angelo Froglià, an unlucky artist and port worker, who had the same idea as the playful students. However, while they thought nobody would believe their fake head to be true, Froglià had a detailed plan. He was sure that his fakes would be dredged up and declared to be authentic and, as he says in his own words, his

intent [was] to emphasise how, through a process of collective persuasion, through national television channels, newspapers, word of mouth, it was possible to influence people's beliefs. [I] wanted to spark a debate on the art system and I accomplished it. It was a conceptual operation, a work of art in a way, [...] I just wanted to show how the influence of mass media and the so-called experts on the art world could lead to gaffes. (Bellandi, 2016)

Conclusion

I hope this text, though quick and rather general, can both be a good panoramic view on humour in art and an effective resource for acknowledging its use as a means against authoritarian figures.

Hopefully, I have been able to foster the importance of considering humour in art an essential instrument and a crucial evaluation parameter. Even though something as intricate and sublime as art may instil reverence and seriousness, there is still another way, humour, to observe reality and what it offers us. A new perspective that can trigger rational thought and that can spark so many new debates and discussions.

In other words, it is not all about laughing.

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