A Sociologist Walks into a Bar (and Other Academic Challenges): Towards a Methodology of Humour

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Abstract
Humour and laughter have been regarded as suitable topics for research in the social sciences, but as methodological principles to be adopted in carrying out and representing the findings of research they have been neglected. Indeed, those scholars who have made use of humour – wit, satire, jokes etc. – risk being regarded as trivial and marginalised from the mainstream. Yet, in literature the idea that comedy can tell us something important about the human condition is widely recognised. This neglect of the potential of humour and laughter represents a serious omission. The purpose of this article is to make a sensible case for the place of humour as a methodology for the social sciences.

Introduction

While there have been many sociological and psychological studies of humour and its functions it is fair to say that not many of these have been very funny. Humour may be regarded as a legitimate topic for the sociologist but by and large they prefer to present their research – and expect it to be taken – seriously. Genres of academic writing do not readily admit the humorous and those who employ it may find themselves dismissed as lightweight and trivial. Even so eminent a sociologist as Erving Goffman has come up against this charge. Goffman is still regarded by many within his discipline as

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an entertaining writer but a second-rate sociologist, his work amusing but minor: 'the sociological jester, whose jokes always contain a shrewd observation on social life-but also a caricature and a denial of the real substance of that life' (Dawe, 1973: 248); a view echoed by Smith (2006: 2), who notes 'the extremes of assessment' Goffman has aroused. The problem, as Strong (1983: 346) sees it, is this: 'In neither its style nor its content does it fit the disciplinary norm, and many of the problems in its reception may be traced to its academic oddity.' The 19th-century economist Thorstein Veblen is another whose unorthodox prose style offended the academy. When Veblen's most famous work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994), was first published in 1899 'it was frequently mis-read as a *literary* satire of the nouveaux riches of the period' (Conroy, 1968: 605; original emphasis) which missed entirely the seriousness of his social *and* economic critique. Indeed, to mainstream economists 'mesmerized by technique', Veblen's work is not con-sidered to be economics (Samuels, 1979: 455). These examples highlight the way in which genre expectation acts powerfully as an ideological effect in the social sciences.

    This prejudice is clearly revealed in work by Sagi and Yechiam (2008) on the citation of humorous research paper titles, which demonstrates that 'highly amusing' titles (as rated by panels consisting of four psychology graduate students at Haifa University) received around a third fewer citations than non-humorous titles. Sagi and Yechiam spec-ulate that this may be due to the damage to credibility occasioned by such lack of serious-ness or that these papers 'may simply be less important'. Whichever, they warn 'authors should be cautious about including humorous contents in article titles' (2008: 686). Damage to credibility may arise from a number of sources. Morreall (1989) lists three objections that could limit the appeal of humour for the sociologist: that humour is hos-tile and hence unethical; that it is linked to the absurd and hence irrational; and that it is non-serious and hence irresponsible.

    While all this may be so it does not provide an explanation for why this attitude pre-vails in the social sciences. Bakhtin (1984), in *Rabelais and his World*, points to a semi-nal shift in attitude towards humour and laughter that occurred as the Renaissance gave way to the age of the Enlightenment. During the period of the Renaissance, laughter had 'a deep philosophical meaning' enabling the world to be seen 'anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint' (1984: 66). According to Bakhtin, however, in the 17th century the sphere of the comic lost its universal, philo-sophical form, and the belief grew that 'the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter' (1984: 67). Thus, with the emphasis on reason and the growth of empiricism, what counted as knowledge became increasingly circumscribed.

    This is more than just a missed opportunity for otherwise fun-loving academics, it represents a rather more serious omission. In the disciplines concerned with literature it is widely accepted that the absurd is an inherent part of human existence so that 'comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot' (Sypher, 1956: 194–5). If humour is such a fundamental aspect of human experience and our understanding of what it is to be human, then to ignore the humorous as an analytical attitude, or the comic as a mode of representation, is at the very least to reject a potentially insightful methodo-logical approach. Worse, to exist in a state of denial, failing to admit of the presence or utility of the humorous, the comic, the ludic etc. in the human activity we call 'research',

is to undermine research itself, placing us, like one of Kafka's heroes, in the absurd position of someone 'seeking to unravel the mystery of the irrational by rational means' (Reiss, 1949). The purpose of this article then is to make a serious case for the place of humour as a methodology for the social sciences. But the task presents a paradox: if I attempt to do this humorously I may be dismissed as trivial. If, on the other hand, I do this without humour I negate my thesis. Either way I risk alienating my audience. My strategy will therefore be to present the article as seriously as possible in the hope that some readers will take it to be deeply ironic. In conventional fashion then I start by briefly outlining the main theories of humour and laughter before moving on to examine the use of humour in the social sciences. I conclude by considering the implications and importance of these findings for the social sciences.

Theories of Humour

In line with many contemporary scholars I use the expression 'humour' here as 'an umbrella term to cover all categories of the funny' including wit, satire and jokes (Lippit, 1994: 147). As a field of study, humour has been subject to considerable scrutiny. By general complacency, theories fall into three broad categories, though Raskin (1985) argues that these should be regarded as overlapping and complementary rather than competing or contradictory. These are the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory. The relationship between humour and laughter is contested (Shaw, 2010). Clearly, they are complexly related though not synonymous or inevitably linked, yet in an everyday sense what is perceived as funny tends to elicit laughter in some form. I have therefore, as the theorists considered here tend to do, discussed humour and laughter together within these three categories. Later, I effect a (temporary) separation in order to consider what might be particular to each and therefore how each might function within a methodology for the social sciences.

Superiority

The superiority theory holds that we find humour in the misfortunes of others. Many accounts trace the antecedents of this theory to Plato and Aristotle, who warned of the ethical dangers of such causes of laughter (Perks, 2012), and Hobbes, who writes in *Leviathan* (2008: 38; originally published 1651) of the 'pusillanimity' of derisive laughter – presumably regarding this as just another demonstration of man as nasty, brutish (and short). Freud, too, who classified jokes according to whether they were hostile in intent (the 'tendentious' joke), or 'innocuous', regarded the tendentious joke as the one more likely to achieve 'those sudden outbursts of laughter that make tendentious jokes so irresistible' (2002: 94) and goes on, 'By making our enemy small, mean, contemptible, comical, we take a roundabout route to getting for ourselves the enjoyment of vanquishing him' (2002: 100).

From an ethical point of view this would certainly limit the use of humour for the social scientist. However, while it is true that some humour may occur at the expense of others it is by no means the case that all things we find funny depend on this. Moreover, laughter as a response to the misfortune of others may be more complex than the

superiority theory would admit, since such laughter may arise out of identification, through a process in which we are confronted with a materialisation of the human condition, so that what we end up laughing at is precisely the absurdity of it all – an insight which has prompted Solomon (2002), in arguing that 'The Three Stooges' are funny (yes, really), to propose an inferiority theory of humour. This materialisation in which 'a concrete universal becomes subject' is, Zupančič (2008: 37) suggests, what distinguishes comedy from tragedy. Whereas tragedy starts with a heroic character through whom 'some universal idea, principle, or destiny shine[s]', comedy moves in the opposite direction, taking as its starting point some aspect of the human condition and realising it in and through the subject. In Hegelian terms then (Chambers, 1989: 592), what the superiority theory points to is 'the recognition of the fragility of humanity's invention of itself'. In thus revealing the kind of constraints, both social and cultural, that humanity imposes on itself comedy has clear relevance for the sociological project.

Relief

The relief theory of humour says that we laugh to release emotional or psychic tension and this produces pleasure. The theory was famously elaborated by Freud in his *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (2002; originally published in 1905). In this book Freud argues that it is hard work keeping all our inhibitions in check and that when we experience pleasure in a joke these inhibitions are temporarily removed and the energy that is saved becomes available to be released as laughter. However, different types of laughter situations (which, in addition to the joke, Freud gave as the comic and humour) result in different types of psychical savings. Comic pleasure arises from 'savings in the imagining of ideas': thus, we laugh at the exaggerated movements of the clown because 'imagining something large requires a greater effort than imagining something small' (2002[1905]: 187); while humorous pleasure arises from 'savings in expenditure on feeling' (2002[1905]: 228) through the arousal of emotion which is then found to be unusable.

The relief theory has been the subject of some critique. In dismissing Freud's account, Morreall (2009: 394) says 'there is no systematic way to sort laughter situations into Freud's categories' or indeed even to test the hypothesis; and Freud himself was not wholly convinced, unable to arrive at a satisfactory synthesis of the three laughter situations within a workable theory of the psyche (Gunter, 1968). However, while Freud's theories may seem to present a bizarre economy of laughter, in terms of developing a methodology of humour for the social sciences the focus in the joke on the signifier and its relation to the unconscious with 'its possibility to play on the fundamental non-sense of all usage of sense' (Lacan, 1994, quoted in Zupančič, 2008: 142) looks like it may have something important to contribute to the argument.

The humorous pleasure occasioned by the arousal of emotion 'which is then found to be unusable' links the relief theory to the incongruity theory. In *The Critique of Judgement* Kant (2008[1790]: 161) talks about laughter as 'an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation being reduced to nothing'. In simple terms, if we think of jokes, we set off down one line of thought but this is undermined by the punch line which shows we have been misled, as in this example:

Q: What's brown and sticky?
A: A stick

Thus, the anxiety induced by our scatological anticipation is dissipated: 'the bubble of our expectation was extended to the full and suddenly burst into nothing' as Kant (2008[1790]: 161) (or at least his translator) beautifully puts it, and we laugh. What gives rise to this, however, is, Kant suggests, 'something absurd' (2008[1790]: 161). This something absurd which arises in the 'overload of signifying structure' (Pye, 2006: 56) takes us to the incongruity theory of humour and laughter.

Incongruity

In the genealogy of humour the incongruity theory is most often traced to Kant and Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer says:

> The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. (Quoted in Lippitt, 1994: 147)

The incongruity theory provides a different explanation for what is found funny from the superiority theory. Thus, Morreall (1989: 248) suggests that what makes someone slipping on a banana peel funny, as considered within the superiority theory, is our feeling superior to the person who slipped; while in the incongruity theory, it is funny because it 'clash[es] with our idea of someone walking'. (Perhaps it's the way he tells them.) Slipping on a banana skin is clearly a deviation from convention but this simplistic analysis denies the complex cultural, historical – and indeed intertextual – motives for laughing at this misfortune.[1]

While both superiority and relief certainly have their place in academia it is probably the incongruity theory that is of most obvious interest, from a methodological point of view, to the social scientist, since incongruity is clearly at work in the rhetorical device of irony which Kierkegaard regards as the most serious form of humour, not to be confused with 'silly guffaws or the ability to tell a popular joke' (Zook, 2008: 410]). (I am already feeling chastened.) Though the incongruity theory is widely held to offer the most complete theory of humour there are criticisms. Thus Morreall (2009) detects a certain 'sloppiness' among some scholars in terms of defining exactly what they mean by incongruity, which may cover a range of related but not synonymous concepts including discrepancy, inconsistency, inappropriateness and absurdity. Indeed, Shaw (2010) suggests tentatively that the success of the theory is precisely because it never specifies what humorous incongruity is. Aside from questions of definition, however, there are further objections to the incongruity theory not least because it overemphasises the cognitive dimension of humour. Moreover, it cannot explain why all incongruities are not funny, nor does it provide insights into the reason incongruity gives us pleasure. However, Zupančič (2008: 58), who like Kant locates incongruity in the absurd, does not necessarily conceive of incongruity as the violation between 'what is and what ought' (Fine, 1994: 465). Rather, she defines the absurd as the 'joint articulation' of sense and

nonsense, 'between a reality and its other side'. Zupančič draws on the metaphor of the Möbius strip as the plane in which both sense and nonsense are mutually implicated and says, 'their truth is their joint articulation, which is never visible in the given reality, yet is constitutive of it'. This highlights the intimate relationship between the rational and the irrational and the discursive construction of both, which clearly has relevance for research in the social sciences.

Taking each theory separately then, it appears that while each may capture some aspects of what is found humorous none provides a compelling comprehensive account. As a corrective, Veatch (1998) presents a theory for which he makes the bold claim that 'there appears to be no case of either perceived humour or lack of perceived humour which the theory does not explain'. Veatch's theory states that there are three 'necessary and (jointly sufficient) conditions for the perception of humour' (1998: 163). These are:

V[iolation]: the perceiver has in mind a view of the situation as constituting a violation of a 'subjective moral principle' … That is, some affective commitment of the perceiver to the way something in the situation ought to be is violated.

N[ormal]: the perceiver has in mind a predominating view of the situation as being normal.

Simultaneity: the N and V understandings are present in the mind of the perceiver at the same instant in time.

Thus, incongruity alone is not held to be sufficient; whether the receiver finds the incongruity amusing, Veatch argues, is linked to their moral perception. Veatch's is a curious paper: is it a serious proposition or a savage satirical critique of empirical research in the social sciences? Either way, there aren't many laughs, though he does have one good line: 'Why don't adults like elephant jokes? They don't see the point – the principles being violated are not matters that they care about or have emotional commitments to …' (1998: 194). And in discussing satire Veatch says 'it appears that most written satire actually fools most of its readers, so that, far from being persuasive, it is often not even understood' (1998: 203). This could be a statement of fact, or a really clever reflexive comment on his own paper, since, of the hundred or so papers citing Veatch, none of an admittedly not very representative sample I have looked at seem to have considered the possibility that it might be satire. Veatch's two insights sum up the problems attending humour in the social sciences. To present social science as comedy is a violation, but if the reader doesn't get it, they end up being affronted, baffled or taken in rather than amused. A further challenge for the acceptance of humour as making a serious contribution to the social sciences arises in Morreall's theory of humour as 'cognitive play', which predicates that humour is a 'non serious activity' in which 'we are not trying to discover the truth or even make sense of what we experience … all that matters is the mental jolts are enjoyable' (2009: 252). While this view is certainly open to question, the fact that it is an opinion that many will subscribe to indicates the extent of the challenge to the thesis that humour has a potentially serious role within the social sciences.

Despite Veatch's laudable attempt at unifying the field within a single overarching theory it seems plausible to assume that jokes, the comic and humour (to draw on Freud's flawed typology), not to mention laughter, interact complexly – if not

incongruously – and that this complexity needs to be maintained in understanding humour as methodology. However, in order to examine this it is necessary to take an analytical approach. In the next section of this article I therefore conduct an empirical investigation which analyses social science research texts for their humorous content and ability to elicit laughter before turning to consider the function of laughter itself within the social sciences.

Incongruity and the Social Sciences

Incongruity, Burke argues (1964: 96), is 'the law of the universe': 'we could say that a table is incongruous with a chair'. However, he goes on, this would be a purely technical definition. What we are interested in are 'moral' or 'aesthetic' incongruities which offer 'interpretive ingredients':

> We could imagine a table and two chairs: on one chair there might be a bloated, profiteering type such as Grosz draws – and opposite him, as his female guest, a long-lashed manikin dressed as they are in in the window displays. Table, chairs and diners are congruous, since experience has made them so. But table, chairs, living diner, and a dining lady manikin are incongruous … The picture, by its *planned incongruity* would say, in effect, that Grosz's profiteer is typically himself when entertaining the simulacrum of a woman.

Kenneth Burke defines 'planned incongruity' (or elsewhere 'perspective by incongruity') as a form of 'verbal atom cracking' (1964: 94) used to disrupt discursively produced meaning. Burke says, 'a word belongs by custom to a certain category – and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category'. Planned incongruity involves 'coaching' a word 'beyond its customary barriers, often with valuable interpretive results' (1978: 401) (though Burke's illustration also points up the possibilities for visual applications of planned incongruity). Planned incongruity employs 'the methodology of the pun':

> 'Pun' is here itself metaphorically extended. Literally, a pun links by tonal association words hitherto unlinked. 'Perspective by incongruity' carries on the same kind of enterprise in linking hitherto unlinked words by rational criteria instead of tonal criteria. (Burke, 1964: 94)

This, it can be argued, is a methodological principle to be employed by the social scientist which provides analytical purchase, thereby acting as a method of discovery (Schneider, 1971: 68). Arguably, it does this through recourse to the rhetorical trope of irony which Suto (1979: 445) helpfully defines as 'the representation through a figure of speech so patently absurd as to cast doubt on the overt claims of that which is being characterized'. Burke gives as an example of planned incongruity Thorstein Veblen's term 'trained incapacity', defined by Burke (1984: 7)[2] as: 'that state of affairs whereby one's very abilities can function as blindnesses'. Through a deliberately induced incongruity, the apparently rational is undermined, re-emerging as irony (ironically).

A more recent example of planned incongruity is furnished by Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) stupidity-based theory of organisations in which they develop a theory of

'functional stupidity' as 'a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and "safe" terrain' (2012: 3). Functional stupidity creates a sense of certainty through which organisational order is maintained and even strengthened. By way of illustration, the authors examine organisations' commitment to information. Organisations demand information, yet the fetishisation of information also prevents people asking critical questions about what it is for. Alvesson and Spicer conclude, 'Such a strong focus on information gives the impression of full use of cognitive capacity, and a sense of competence and organisational rationality. However, at the same time, it hides the functional stupidity in confusing information with rationality' (2012: 9). In the paper, functional stupidity, as planned incongruity, operates in three ways: it provides explanatory power; it offers a critique of the 'common field assumption' that maximising cognitive capacity is key in organisations; and it opens up a space for further research.

Another example of planned incongruity is provided by Slavoj Žižek's (1998) elaborated concept of inter*passivity* – the outsourcing of enjoyment through the delegation of passivity to some other object, which becomes incongruous through its relation to inter*activity*. Žižek says:

> I am passive through the Other. I concede to the Other the passive aspect (of enjoying), while I can remain actively engaged. (Žižek, 1998: 10)

Žižek gives as examples the VCR (video cassette recorder) that watches television for you thereby enabling you to get on with your work; the 'canned laughter' that replaces your own in situation comedies; and 'the artist that eats your sandwich for you' (cited in Van Oenen, 2008: 3) – a notion I found fanciful until observing the sommelier's custom, in the very classiest joints, of drinking your wine for you as part of their elaborate conjuring. Veblen's 'vicarious leisure' (1994[1899]), whereby 'a man may work himself to death earning the money to help his wife be useless for the both of them' (Burke, 1969: 129), may also qualify as an example of interpassivity.

Illustrating how such planned incongruity can act as a method of discovery, Johnsen et al. (2009) draw on the concept of interpassivity as providing explanatory power in their empirical study of cynicism in the workplace. In this paper they propose that the cynical employee is one who recognises 'the power interests behind the injunction to self-actualize at work' (2009: 203) but goes along with it anyway. This depends on the construction and maintenance of 'an authentic self' who interpassively delegates (the passive) enjoyment of work to a 'corporate self'. Cynicism is theorised as the mechanism through which this exchange is enabled and sustained.

In both these examples – functional stupidity and interpassivity – planned incongruity arguably gives rise in the reader to what Morreall (2009: 252) describes as a pleasurable 'mental jolt'. Though neither paper is written for laughs, in both cases the planned incongruity is humorous and arouses pleasure.

The use of the term 'pun' in Burke's definition of planned incongruity might imply that he recognises humour as integral to incongruity, but this does not seem to be the case. Indeed, Burke castigates Arnold's book, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (1937) (which he otherwise regards as exemplifying the use of planned incongruity), at the points where he judges Arnold descends into farce, seduced 'again and again' by his 'showmanship'.

Burke says, 'I should call this the dubious aspect of Arnold's book, though it contributes much to its value as entertainment' (1978: 401). Likewise, Burke describes Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994[1899]) as 'satire-masked-as-science' (1969: 131). Here again we see, as with Goffman, the effects of the ideology of genre, and the dismissal of 'entertainment' as a legitimate aim of the social scientist. It is as if, Lewis and Sebberson say, Veblen's 'rhetorical abilities stand at odds with [his] abilities to write economic theory' (1997: 417). (Perhaps in grounding economic theory in social action Veblen was ahead of his time.) At any rate, what goes unrecognised is that it is in, and through, his rhetoricality that he theorises economics; that is, he constructs his economic theory (of the 'leisure classes') within a (satirised) theory of economics in which each is mutually constitutive, thereby revealing the absurdity inherent in both social systems and economic theory itself. In other words, it is the rhetoric, which Burke takes to be so much 'showmanship' in Arnold and as 'satire-masked-as-science' in Veblen, that constitutes the methodology by which their work was pursued and from which the planned incongruity emerges.

Planned incongruity can be considered a method for constructing an ironic opposition. Irony is 'a metaphor of opposites, a seeing of something from the viewpoint of its antithesis' (Brown, 1989: 174), and it is the ability to do this which constitutes the art of social science. Indeed, Brown contends that 'the prime instrument of sociological knowledge is an eye for paradox, contradiction and reversals that are latent beneath the more obvious manifest content of action' (1989: 178). Veblen's extensive use of irony, Fine argues, 'cloaks him in a "*sociological imagination*"' (1994[1899]: 466, emphasis added). Indeed, Walton (1979: 436) goes so far as to say that 'No American before or since has had Veblen's gift of sociological imagination'. It is the sociological imagination, C. Wright Mills (1967: 6) says, which 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' and he adds 'that is its task and its promise. To recognise this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst.' Arguably, it is in Veblen's rhetoricality that the sociological imagination is given rein. In effect Burke, through his scientistic metaphor 'verbal atom cracking', succumbs to a modernist inspired *test tube envy* (Brown, 2005), wrenching the planned incongruity (as ironic device) from its setting, and ignoring the satiric genre in and through which the incongruity is constituted.

Planned incongruity, as ironic device, can therefore be seen to inhabit a range of academic texts which more or less overtly satirise their objects. Northrop Frye writes that 'the chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured' (1957: 223). By contrast, 'the ironist … has no object but his subject' (Frye, quoted in McFarlane, 2011: 160). Thus, satire functions as a form of critical analysis, with a moral target, while irony contributes to the development of theory and 'paradigm innovation' (Brown, 1989). The relationship between satire and irony is therefore an intimate one. However, as Kreuz and Roberts (1993: 106) point out, 'Irony is not a literary genre but a device that can be used in a variety of genres' and they add, 'Because satire … share[s] several salient features with irony, confusion about these concepts has arisen'. Satire can thus be seen as a form for representation of research, while irony is an analytical tool. However, such satirical narratives can themselves constitute analyses.

Mulkay's (1985) fictional acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize is a case in point. See also Watson (2011a: 142–3), who presents an analysis of academia as an exchange (based on actual dialogue) between an academic and senior management.

Laughter and the Social Sciences

'Irony' Zook (2008: 409) says in a study of Kierkegaard's apparently well-developed sense of humour:

> … undermines the pretence of control or power over the meaning of civic discourse and social parlance, thereby disengaging the speaker as a civic participant and freeing her or him from the proclivity to conform to social practice and the hegemony of social ritual.

An eye for irony can therefore be considered a requisite for the sociological imagination. However, Zook says, Kierkegaard regards irony by itself as insufficient to bring about a *change of outlook*. There is thus, 'a realm of humour beyond that of irony that seems to imply that laughter is a force to be taken seriously in the construction of self and society' (Zook, 2008: 410). For Kierkegaard, laughter is what is required to guard against the 'seductive powers of social conformity'. Laughter frees us, however briefly, from the grip of the discourses within which we are immersed and enables us to glimpse something else; when hegemonic discourse renders critical argument 'unavailable' then 'a laughter of *non-discursive dismissal* can liberate us from the sense of feeling obliged to argue against the System *on its own terms'* (Lippitt, 1999: 461; emphases added). Laughter therefore has the capacity to bring about an ironic epiphany, which Nealon defines as 'the postmodern rescue of the ontological moment of wonder from its subordination to knowledge' (2005[1970]: 130).

This is amply illustrated in the preface to *The Order of Things*, in which Foucault (2005[1970]: xvi) famously writes about his response to reading Borges' exuberant taxonomy of animals in 'a certain Chinese encyclopedia':

> The laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.

I had a similar experience (though not as eloquent – or widely quoted) on reading Ulisse Aldrovandi's *Ornithologiae*, published in 1610. This includes *Vespertilio*, a genus of bats, while engravings of Harpies sit alongside ostriches and parrots. I recall the involuntary spasm that rang out in the otherwise silent and Gormenghast-like space of the 'Special Libraries and Archives' as I laughed with delighted astonishment at being brought face to face with this pre-Linnaean world, now so thoroughly erased by the idea of 'natural classification' – an ordering which for all its explanatory power has inevitably resulted in an intellectual loss (Watson, 2008). Thus, my reading of Aldrovandi's text constituted a joke, pointing up 'the paradoxical, "illogical", nonlinear and precarious constitution of our (symbolic) universe' (Zupančič, 2008: 142).

Another philosopher who, like Kierkegaard, recognised the importance of laughter was Nietzsche. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1969[1885]) Nietzsche refers to two forms of laughter: the derisive laughter of the crowd who mock Zarathustra as he tries to deliver his message to them in the market place, and the elevated 'laughter of the heights', the affirmative laughter of one who can will the eternal return, representing the position 'from which one can laugh at all tragedies, real or imaginary' (Lippitt, 1996: 65). Drawing on the work of Georges Bataille, Borch-Jacobsen (1987) argues that Nietzsche's laughter of the height is not the laughter of superiority (which is more clearly located in the mocking crowd) nor yet the laughter of release in the strictly Freudian sense, though it may partake of elements of both. Rather, it arises in the sudden revelation of something inherently absurd in humanity which is revealed in 'the fall', such that 'my being presents itself to me slipping away, in a glorious slide on a banana peel' (Borch-Jacobsen, 1987: 753); an insight which enables us to realise, at last, the significance of the banana peel gag as the ultimate metaphor for humanity.

Nietzsche and Kierkegaard may seem an unlikely double act but, Lippitt argues, both arrived by very different routes at similar conclusions with respect to laughter. Thus, in Kierkegaard's thought, 'existential laughter' responds to the realisation of the fundamental absurdity of existence and hence enables us to see the limitations of temporal desire. In Nietzsche's case the laughter of the heights is in response to the realisation of the limits to all '*human* objects of desire' (Lippitt, 1996: 70; original emphasis). Desire, conceived in Lacanian terms as the desire of the Other, is located in and through the master narratives that position us within historically and socially constructed discourses. Laughter interrupts this desire as the narrative force of human existence, and in this interruption can be posited the release of the sociological imagination, as the identificatory thread interpellating us to hegemonic discourse momentarily releases its tension.

It should not be concluded from all this, however, that humour as methodology is without its limitations. Clearly, not all topics of research are amenable to this form of treatment. As the superiority theory avers, laughter can be a form of bullying and used to ridicule. It follows that in ethical terms it should not be used against the 'non-hegemonic' (as a perspicacious reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper pointed out). But this renders it especially useful in sociological terms for examining individuals in relation to institutions. For example, Stronach (2007) presents a humorous analysis of the workings of academia and the absurdity of the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) and Watson (2011b, 2012) has similarly used humour to analyse the university as an institution. Moreover, humour and laughter also have a role in the conduct of research. (Space precludes a discussion of this but see, for example, Grønnerød, 2004; McPherson, 2008.)

Conclusion

Following Malinowski (1966: vii) we can say that sociology, no less than anthropology, is 'the science of the sense of humour'. Humour and the laughter it engenders function separately and together within a methodology for the social sciences. While laughter is the interruption which brings about a change of outlook, humour ensures an attitude of play and an awareness of the comic potential of the human condition on the part of the academic as both producer and consumer of research. We should therefore take seriously our

responsibilities as producers of research to entertain, and as consumers to read for fun. Whitlock argues that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is 'lighthearted' and should be read as a comic text in which 'Zarathustra's antics of self-coronation and holy pronouncements are [seen as] a comical celebration of the triumph of zarathustran lightness over rival nihilistic and desperate philosophies' (Whitlock, quoted in Lippitt, 1999: 65). To view Nietzsche as a comic genius is not to engage in some perverse indulgence, rather it is to defy Zarathustra's nemesis, the Spirit of Gravity, which seeks the imposition of rational theory on wayward complexity and so to circumscribe thought. It enables us to keep in mind, reflexively, the fundamental irony of all scientific (as human) endeavour for, as Lacan (2006: 139) says, 'if a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so'. Similarly, to represent research humorously is not to trivialise, rather it is to deliberately infuse the text with incongruities, to overload the signifier and so point up the ambiguities of language; to provoke, as repetition, the laughter of non-discursive dismissal. In this way the representation of research is always understood as parody.

The importance of play as an orientation to research is very little recognised in academia. We locate our desiring identities in the serious – never so securely interpellated into the discourse (desiring what the Other desires of us) as when wading through the terminally dull paper or experiencing the interminable glacial time period of the departmental seminar. All the while, the playful attitude we need to cultivate in order to re-see the world eludes us. What genuinely delights and sparks the sociological imagination is rare. Meanwhile, the clock ticks, the life blood drains out of us and we form the great academic army of the not quite dead yet, but looking more and more that way.

Funding

Notes

1. The obscure origins of the banana peel gag are set out at length in Dan Koeppel's (2008) work, *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit that Changed the World*. New York: Hudson Street Press.
2. Reflexively, Machalek (1979: 462, citing Schneider, 1975) points to some *unplanned* incongruity in Veblen's work, i.e. the work constitutes a *self-disconfirming analysis* – 'wherein the analysis as response generates its own [disconfirming] response'. Thus another of the terms Veblen coined – *conspicuous consumption* – can bring about a change to the behaviour observed precisely because of its satirical bite.

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