

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE  
Department of Political and Social Sciences

**Situating Laughter:  
Amusement, Laughter, and Humour  
in Everyday Life**

by  
**Eduardo S. Jauregui**

Thesis submitted for assessment with  
a view to obtaining the Degree of Doctor of the  
European University Institute

Florence, March 1998

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE  
Department of Political and Social Sciences

**Situating Laughter:  
Amusement, Laughter, and Humour  
in Everyday Life**

by  
**Eduardo S. Jauregui**

Thesis submitted for assessment with  
a view to obtaining the Degree of Doctor of the  
European University Institute

Examining Jury:

Prof. Pier Paolo Giglioli (Università di Bologna)

Prof. Steven Lukes (EUI - supervisor)

Prof. Gianfranco Poggi (EUI)

Prof. Greg Smith (University of Salford - co-supervisor)

Florence, March 1998

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the Spanish Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores for the research grant which has allowed me to pursue this project, and to the European University Institute, especially its Department of Social and Political Sciences, for providing me with its trust, support, services, and the ideal work environment.

I also thank the following people and institutions, without whom this thesis would not have been what it is:

Steven Lukes for his encouragement, advice, and counterinstances, and for believing in the project throughout; Greg Smith for his detailed, caring, and constructive criticism of these many pages, and for giving me the chance to air some ideas in public; Gianfranco Bettin, Bernard Giesen, Pier Paolo Giglioli, Marina Mizzau, Gianfranco Poggi, Arpad Szakolczai, and Matthieu Williams for their support and suggestions; Jason Rutter for providing us humour researchers with a cyberspace forum and a vast and ordered bibliography; Eva Breivik for much advice, information, and help in the SPS corridor; Ellen Robson, for bestowing upon me the computer on which these words were written; the libraries from which I so enormously benefited -- the British Library in London, the John Rylands, Lewis, and University of Salford libraries in Manchester, and the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence; all those who more or less intentionally provided me with empirical material and thoughts on laughter, including many a researcher whose work I ransacked for data and ideas; the Northcott, I.H., and Oña gangs, with whom I have had the pleasure of sharing more laughter than humans should be allowed; mamá, papá, Pablo, Javi, Elena, Maite, Luna, Boston, los Jaureguis y los Narvaez; and Emanuela for helping me to learn, among other things, that a thesis is not everything in life, and for living many of those other bits with me.

### **Note on the use of gender-biased pronouns**

My treatment of everyday social interaction has required frequent references to unspecified or hypothetical social actors. I have employed the masculine terms 'he' and 'his' throughout to refer to such individuals, despite the gender bias inherent in the convention, because I find the alternatives ("the person", "he/she", "s/he"... ) awkward and cumbersome when used frequently. Wherever 'he' or 'his' are used in this way, therefore, the reader is asked to understand 'he or she'.

## **Dedication**

To the memory of Barbara Allaway,  
Who had a funny little sausage dog.

## Summarized Table of Contents

### **PART ONE**

<b>Chapter One: Preliminaries</b>	<b>page 19</b>
1. Introduction	page 21
2. The Thesis	page 23
3. The Laughter Triad	page 39
4. Conclusions	page 55
<b>Chapter Two: Causal Theories of Amusement</b>	<b>page 59</b>
1. Introduction	page 61
2. Traditions in Amusement Theory	page 63
3. Amusement Theory and its Validation	page 83
4. Conclusions	page 107
<b>Chapter Three: The Discrediting of Actors' Self-Claims</b>	<b>page ;Error!</b>
Marcador no definido.	
1. Introduction	page 111
2. Claim-Discredit Humour Theory	page 113
3. The Sociology of Erving Goffman	page 127
4. Mutual References	page 139
5. Conclusions	page 147

### **PART TWO**

<b>Chapter Four: A Hypothesis of Amusement</b>	<b>page 151</b>
1. Introduction: The Hypothesis	page 153
2. Self-Claims	page 157
3. Claim-Discredits	page 177
4. Conclusions	page 195
<b>Chapter Five: A Typology of Funny Events</b>	<b>page 199</b>
1. Introduction	page 201
2. Funny Events in Untransformed Reality	page 211
3. Funny Events Within Transformed Reality	page 261
4. Conclusions	page 277

**Chapter Six: Elaborations of the Model** page ;Error!  
Marcador no definido.

- 1. Introduction page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 2. The Requirement of Identity Distance page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 3. The Requirement of Involvement page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 4. Amusement Modifiers page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 5. Combinations of Funnies page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 6. Conclusions: The Full Hypothesis page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**

**PART THREE**

**Chapter Seven: Laughter and Humour** page ;Error!  
Marcador no definido.

- 1. Introduction page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 2. The Meaning and Deployment of Laughter Displays page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 3. The Meaning and Deployment of Humour Displays page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 4. Conclusion page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**

**Chapter Eight: Effects of Amusement, Laughter,  
and Humour** page ;Error!  
Marcador no definido.

- 1. Introduction page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 2. Effects of Amusement page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 3. Effects of Humour Pieces page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 4. Effects of Laughter and Humour Displays page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 5. 'Functions' of Amusement, Laughter, and Humour page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**
- 6. Conclusions page ;Error!  
**Marcador no definido.**

**Chapter Nine: Situating the Laughter Triad** page ;Error!  
Marcador no definido.

1. Introduction		page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>		
2. Summary of Proposals		page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>		
3. Cross-Cultural Validity		page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>		
4. Situating the Laughter Triad		page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>		
5. Conclusions		page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>		
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>page ;Error!</b>
	Marcador no definido.	

# General Table of Contents

## **PART ONE**

### **Chapter One: Preliminaries** **page 19**

- 1. Introduction page 21
- 2. The Thesis page 23
  - 2.1. Subject page 23
  - 2.2. Aims page 24
  - 2.3. Scope and Method page 27
  - 2.4. Rationale page 29
  - 2.5. Preview page 33
- 3. The Laughter Triad page 39
  - 3.1. Amusement page 39
  - 3.2. Laughter (Display) page 48
  - 3.3. Humour page 51
- 4. Conclusions page 55

### **Chapter Two: Causal Theories of Amusement** **page 59**

- 1. Introduction page 61
- 2. Traditions in Amusement Theory page 63
  - 2.1. Monistic Theories page 63
    - 2.1.1. Aggression/Superiority Theory page 63
    - 2.1.2. Incongruity Theory page 67
    - 2.1.3. Tension-Release Theory page 70
    - 2.1.4. Play Theory page 74
  - 2.2. Pluralistic Theories page 77
  - 2.3. 'No Theory' page 80

3. Amusement Theory and its Validation	page 83
3.1. Amusement and Conventional Scientific Methods	page 84
3.2. Aggregate Introspection	page 86
3.3. Aggregate Introspection in Humour Research	page 87
3.4. The Method in Detail	page 91
3.4.1. Development and Testing of a Hypothesis	page 91
3.4.2. Individual Assessment	page 96
3.4.3. Aggregate Assessment	page 97
3.5. A Successful Precedent	page 99
4. Conclusions	page 107
<b>Chapter Three: The Discrediting of Actors' Self-Claims</b>	<b>page ;Error!</b>
Marcador no definido.	
1. Introduction	page 111
2. Claim-Discredit Humour Theory	page 113
2.1. False Fronts: Plato, Moore, and Pirandello	page 113
2.2. Bad Art: Aristotle, Carritt	page 117
2.3. Unfulfilled Ends: Baillie	page 121
2.4. Deviance: Bergson, Klapp, Powell, Jauregui	page 123
2.5. Others	page 125
3. The Sociology of Erving Goffman	page 127
3.1. Self-Claims on the Everyday Stage	page 128
3.2. Discredit and the Sacred Self	page 131
3.3. Frames of Experience	page 134
3.4. Summary	page 137
4. Mutual References	page 139
4.1. Goffman on Humour Research	page 140
4.2. Humour Research on Goffman	page 145
5. Conclusions	page 147
 <b>PART TWO</b>	
 <b>Chapter Four: A Hypothesis of Amusement</b>	 <b>page 151</b>
1. Introduction: The Hypothesis	page 153

2. Self-Claims	page 157
2.1. Definition of 'Self-Claim'	page 157
2.2. Self-Claim Variables	page 160
2.2.1. <i>Origin</i> of Self-Claims	page 160
2.2.1.1. Independent Self-Claims	page 160
2.2.1.2. Role Self-Claims	page 161
2.2.1.3. Universal Self-Claims	page 163
2.2.2. <i>Content</i> of Self-Claims	page 165
2.2.2.1. Self-Claims of Skill	page 165
2.2.2.2. Self-Claims of the Mind	page 166
2.2.2.3. Self-Claims of Territory	page 168
2.2.2.4. Self-Claims of Appearance	page 170
2.2.2.5. Self-Claims of Biography	page 171
2.3. Claim Makers and Claimants	page 173
2.4. Self-Claims and Social Norms	page 174
3. Claim-Discredits	page 177
3.1. Definition of 'Claim-Discredit'	page 177
3.1.1. Requisites of Discredit Perception	page 179
3.1.2. Catalysts of Assessment	page 182
3.1.3. Uncertainty, Disagreement, and Bias	page 183
3.2. Claim-Discredit Variables	page 186
3.2.1. <i>Cause</i> of Discredit: Accident / Agent	page 186
3.2.2. <i>Claimant</i> Discredited: Self / Other	page 187
3.2.3. <i>Location</i> of Discredit:	
Untransformed / Transformed Reality	page 188
3.2.3.1. Levels of Reality	page 188
3.2.3.2. Types of Transformations	page 189
3.2.3.3. Frame Structures	page 192
4. Conclusions	page 195

## **Chapter Five: A Typology of Funny Events** **page 199**

1. Introduction	page 201
2. Funny Events in Untransformed Reality	page 211
2.1 <i>Type I</i> . The Accidental Discredit of an Other's Self-Claims	page 213
2.1.1. <i>Type I</i> - Independent Self-Claims	page 213
2.1.2. <i>Type I</i> - Role Self-Claims	page 217
2.1.3. <i>Type I</i> - Universal Self-Claims`	page 219

2.1.4. Summary of <i>Type I</i> Funny Events	page 228
2.2. <i>Type II</i> . The Agent-Caused Discredit of an Other's Self-Claims	page 229
2.2.1. <i>Type II</i> - Independent Self-Claims	page 231
2.2.2. <i>Type II</i> - Role Self-Claims	page 232
2.2.3. <i>Type II</i> - Universal Self-Claims	page 232
2.3. <i>Types III and IV</i> . The Accidental and Agent-Caused Discredit of the Perceiver's Own Self-Claims (Special Cases)	page 237
2.3.1. Bodily Mismanagements	page 240
2.3.2. Perceptual Mismanagements	page 244
2.3.3. Natural Frame Mismanagements	page 246
2.3.4. Social Frame Mismanagements	page 248
3. Funny Events Within Transformed Reality ( <i>Types V-VIII</i> )	page 261
3.1. Retellings	page 262
3.2. Play Acts	page 272
3.3. Imagined Sequences	page 273
4. Conclusions	page 277

**Chapter Six: Elaborations of the Model** page ;Error!  
 Marcador no definido.

1. Introduction	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
2. The Requirement of Identity Distance	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
3. The Requirement of Involvement	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
3.1. Definition	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
3.2. Causes of insufficient Involvement	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
3.2.1. Independent Discredit of the Perceiver	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
3.2.2. Misfortune for the Claimant	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
3.2.3 Other Implications of the Discrediting Fact	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
3.2.4. Non-Discredit Interpretations	page ;Error! Marcador
<b>no definido.</b>	
3.2.5. Amusement-Consciousness	page ;Error!
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	

3.2.6. Intentional Distraction <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.2.7. Cognitive and Emotional Carry-Over <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.2.8. Additional Causes <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4. Amusement Modifiers <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
5. Combinations of Funnies <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
6. Conclusions: The Full Hypothesis <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!

## PART THREE

### Chapter Seven: Laughter and Humour page ;Error! **Marcador no definido.**

1. Introduction <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2. The Meaning and Deployment of Laughter Displays <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.1. Laughter as Communication <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.2. The Audience of Laughter <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.3. The Meaning of Laughter <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.4. Main Connotations <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.4.1. The 'Discredit' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.4.2. The 'Knowledge' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.4.3. The 'Identity' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.4.4. The 'Involvement' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.5. The Display of Laughter <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.5.1. The Natural Display <b>no definido.</b>	page ;Error! <b>Marcador</b>
2.5.2. The Officially Appropriate Display <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2.5.3. The Desired Display <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!

2.5.4. The Achieved Display <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3. The Meaning and Deployment of Humour Displays <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.1. Humour as Communication <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.1.1. Humour Pieces <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.1.2. Humour Displays <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.2. The Audience of Humour <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.3. The Meaning of Humour <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.4. The Display of Humour <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4. Conclusion <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
<b>Chapter Eight: Effects of Amusement, Laughter, and Humour</b>	<b>page ;Error!</b>
<b>Marcador no definido.</b>	
1. Introduction <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2. Effects of Amusement <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3. Effects of Humour Pieces <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4. Effects of Laughter and Humour Displays <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.1. Derived From the 'Discredit' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.1.1. Broadcasting Discredit <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.1.2. Provocation of Amusement and/or Laughter <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.1.3. Transmission and Reproduction of Social Norms <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.1.4. Maintenance and Reinforcement of Social Norms <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.2. Derived From the 'Knowledge', 'Identity', and 'Involvement' Connotations <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!

4.2.1. Social Classification <b>no definido.</b>	page ;Error! Marcador
4.2.2. Affiliation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.2.3. Dissaffiliation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.3. Derived From the 'Identity' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.3.1. Protection From Unintentional Self-Discredit <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.3.2. Protection From Intentional Self-Discredit <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.3.3. Protection From Discrediting Attacks <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.3.4. Consequences of Excessive Defensiveness <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.4. Derived From 'Involvement' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.4.1. Revealing Callousness/'Toughness' <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.4.2. Revealing Moral Character <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.4.3. Denying a Particular Interpretation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.4.4. Revealing the Focus of Attention <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.5. Derived From the 'Entertainment' Connotation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.5.1. Self-claim of Ability To Amuse <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
5. 'Functions' of Amusement, Laughter, and Humour <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
5.1. Functions in Sociology <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
5.2. Functions in Humour Research <b>no definido.</b>	page ;Error! Marcador
5.3. Biological Functions <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
6. Conclusions <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
<b>Chapter Nine: Conclusions</b> Marcador no definido.	page ;Error!

1. Introduction <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
2. Summary of Proposals <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3. Cross-Cultural Validity <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.1. The Emotion Debate <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.1.1. The Question of Distinctiveness <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.1.2. The Question of Universality <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.2. Amusement as a Basic Emotion <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
3.3. Cross-Cultural Variation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4. Situating the Laughter Triad <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.1. The Return to Situation <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.2. Amusement and Situated Interaction <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
4.3. The Field and Its Placement <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
5. Conclusions <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
<b>Bibliography</b> Marcador no definido.	page ;Error!
Part I: Academic Sources <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!
Part II: Data Sources <b>Marcador no definido.</b>	page ;Error!

*Situating Laughter:  
Amusement, Laughter, and Humour in Everyday Life*

# PART ONE

In this introductory part of the thesis,  
I introduce the subject and the field of study,  
consider a number of traditional theoretical approaches,  
propose an appropriate methodology,  
and introduce a lesser-known contender to explanation.

## **Chapter One**

### Preliminaries

## **Chapter Two**

### Causal Theories of Amusement

## **Chapter Three**

### The Discrediting of Actors' Self-Claims



# Chapter One: Preliminaries

1. Introduction	page 21
2. The Thesis	
2.1. Subject	page 23
2.2. Aims	page 24
2.3. Scope and Method	page 27
2.4. Rationale	page 29
2.5. Preview	page 33
3. The Laughter Triad	
3.1. Amusement	page 39
3.2. Laughter (Display)	page 48
3.3. Humour	page 51
4. Conclusions	page 55



## 1. Introduction

Certain phenomena seem obstinately hidden from the lenses of scientific tools and microscopes. Least visible of all, perhaps, lurks the man behind the lens; and within him, behind his eye, his seeing, thinking, and feeling 'I.' In recent times, the scientific (and social scientific) endeavour has been shaken by glimpses of self-awareness, the deforming retina raised as gross evidence of the uncertain nature of all its prized research results. This will not be my purpose.

I turn the mirror on the scientist to have him observe certain features shared with other apes of his species, those features furthest removed from what he considers the 'serious work' before the test tubes. (And I assume that such things can, after all, be profitably studied). In this regard, it could be argued that the true 'furthest reaches' of science are not to be found in outer space but bordering the chit-chat between these men and women in the lab coats (or in the pin-striped suits, uniforms, aprons, and overalls); in the bars, cars, and homes to which they retire after work; among the gossip, temper tantrums, joking, and lust which colour their daily experience.

Laughter is something the reader will need little introduction to, as a human being. Nevertheless, to the scientist it represents a baffling and objectionable intruder; an embarrassing glimpse of himself. The emotions, less rational and less susceptible to objective inspection than other aspects of human behaviour, have long been shunned by Western science. Modern medicine ignores the person to hunt the microbe; economics and other social sciences model humans as rational decision-makers; psychology builds computerized 'minds' that can play chess but cannot judge art.

Humorous amusement, however, holds a particularly accursed place among the emotions. Unlike anger, happiness, or fear, it appears to lack a simple, commonsense cause or purpose. An infinite miscellany of trivialities may trigger off this often explosive and strongly pleasurable bodily reaction, confounding attempts to understand its seeming unity at the subjective and physiological levels. Its evolutionary significance for our laughing species appears equally mysterious. Its association with all things unserious, moreover, relegates laughter to a uniquely ignominious corner. The phenomenon has

remained largely unstudied throughout the development of the human and social sciences.

To be sure, laughter has been the subject of consideration by a long and honourable list of thinkers, from the Greek philosophers to modern psychologists, literary critics, and sociologists. In recent years, empirical research in the nascent field of 'humour research' has been growing at a considerable rate. Nevertheless, many of the most basic questions remain unanswered, including the most basic question of all:

What does it take for something to be 'funny'?

This thesis will propose a tentative answer, deriving from it a general scheme within which to classify the varied research findings of a currently scattered field. It is hoped that the proposal will find resonance both among investigators in the humour research field, and in all those who hold its mirror up to themselves with curiosity.

## 2. The Thesis

This section will introduce the subject of the dissertation, the aims it seeks to pursue in relation to this subject, the scope of the study, the methodology that has been employed, the rationale for undertaking such an endeavour, and a preview of the work to be presented over nine chapters.

### 2.1. Subject

Most human beings **laugh** --smile, smirk, snicker, giggle, chuckle, cackle, guffaw-- almost every single day of their lives. Sometimes this laughter corresponds to some measure of real **amusement** --an automatic bodily response to a 'funny' perception, including a pleasant subjective sensation of 'funniness' or 'hilarity'--, while other times the laughter may be relatively 'hollow' --feigned or exaggerated at something not truly considered amusing. On the other hand, humorous amusement which arises may remain unexpressed, with laughter being actively suppressed where it might have been more easily released. As for the things which may be considered 'funny,' these include spontaneous, unintentional laughables such as harmless blunders or deflated pretensions, but also words or actions openly intended to provoke amusement, displays of **humour**.

Amusement, laughter, and humour together conform what I will refer to as the **laughter triad**.<sup>1</sup> The phenomena corresponding to this set of closely interrelated terms can be briefly summarized as:

- (1) the pan-human emotion responsive to 'funny' or 'comical' objects (amusement);
- (2) its visible and more-or-less faithful expression (laughter); and
- (3) the attempt to stimulate amusement (humour).

---

<sup>1</sup> Identifying the entire triad with the label of 'laughter' is not entirely unjustified. In common speech, the word 'laughter' is often used to denote the expression of genuine amusement, or even a manifestation of amusement itself which is not expressed or observable (ie, 'laughing up one's sleeve'). It is also

These three phenomena will be the subject matter of the present thesis.

## 2.2. Aims

As hinted in the title, the aim of these pages will be to 'situate' the laughter triad, in a number of senses. Firstly and most generally, I will attempt to provide a collection of theoretical mappings of an area which has been long traveled but remains largely uncharted. The history of what has come to be known as 'humour research' can be traced back at least to classical antiquity, when Plato and Aristotle left their musings on comedy and the nature of 'the ridiculous.' The role-call of subsequent distinguished pioneers includes Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Herbert Spencer, Henri Bergson, Luigi Pirandello, Sigmund Freud, Arthur Koestler, and Umberto Eco. In the present century, many areas have been explored in a more empirically-minded fashion, culminating in the last two or three decades with an unprecedented volume of research and a number of moves toward the institutionalization of an interdisciplinary field.

Nevertheless, a generally accepted understanding of contours, features, and relative position of specific points within the field has not yet arisen. Theoretical disorientation has persisted throughout the centuries:

Neque hoc ab ullo satis explicari puto, licet multi tentaverint.<sup>2</sup>

(Quintillian, 1st Century AD)

There is remarkably little acknowledged agreement about the nature of humour.

---

occasionally employed in reference to at least some types of humour --'laughing at' as a synonym for satirizing or ridiculing-- when no actual laughter has been displayed.

<sup>2</sup> "None have yet satisfactorily expressed what it [laughter] is, though many have tried." *De Institutione Oratoria*, vi, 3. Cited in Grieg, 1923, p. 227.

(Michael Mulkay, 1988)

With this thesis, I seek to ameliorate the situation. On the basis of certain rare or misunderstood sketches by early theorists, the elaborate ground plan drawn up for the study of the 'interaction order' by Erving Goffman, the reports of numerous professional and lay observers, and my own surveys of the area, I have developed a preliminary guide which may serve to orient current and future humour theory and research. Through the use of this conceptual topology, it is hoped that investigators originating in different disciplines or at work in distant areas will obtain a more accurate grasp of their shared interests and relative positions, and perhaps thereby develop new channels of communication and the mutual interchange of tools and ideas.

From the outset, I admit the tentative and incomplete nature of this theoretical map, which is offered only in the hope that subsequent work will fill out gaps, elaborate rough approximations, and correct distortions. Assuming only such relatively minor adjustments will be necessary, its validity will be supported, and the major aim of the thesis fulfilled.

A more literal take on the 'situating' metaphor is also intended. Too often, the relevant phenomena in this field have been studied as abstractions, or in sterile laboratory environments. There is no doubt that interesting research can be (and has been) conducted by analyzing the structure of joke-book gags and by testing the reactions of subjects exposed to humour under varying conditions. The ideas and results of many such studies will be cited in later chapters. Nevertheless, it seems likely that many of the most essential features of amusement, laughter, and humour will be missing from this sort of work. Characteristics of the experimental laboratory, such as the need for systematic procedure or the subject's awareness of being under surveillance, represent the antithesis of the informal, spontaneous, closed-off environments where the phenomena in question tend to flourish. Anthony Chapman (1983) provides one telling detail (p. 137):

An index as to the artificiality and sterility of much of the humor research to date is that the majority of researchers do not incorporate any measure of *laughter* in

their work. One suspects that this is because they know from experience that many of the persons they are observing will not actually laugh.

Laughter (and its kin) must be observed where they occur, in everyday situations: on bus queues, in bars, across the sales counter, in comedy clubs, over the telephone lines, and under the bedcovers. These phenomena should be, quite literally, situated --placed back into the interactional space which provides their natural home: the face-to-face encounter<sup>3</sup>.

Studies of a more naturalistic slant do exist, of course, including relatively unobtrusive experimental observation, participant observation in varied settings, diaries recording self-observation, and analyses of accurately transcribed conversation. Many will be cited in the coming pages. Nevertheless, the emphasis --especially in the more theoretical approaches to the laughter triad-- has generally been on data far removed from real-life situations. The wide body of relevant empirical facts has rarely been harnessed to support a general theory of amusement, laughter, and humour. In this thesis, I have made every effort to maintain theorizing at ground level.

Finally, 'situating laughter' will mean suggesting an essential, and not merely contingent, relationship between the laughter triad and the characteristics of the social situation. Here I refer to the features of 'situated interaction' as analyzed by the sociologist of everyday relations in public, Erving Goffman. It is not merely that displays of laughter and humour fall under the category of situated behaviours, and may be affected by situational factors even when performed in utter privacy. More fundamentally, it will be suggested that amusement itself reacts to interactional failures, to the mismatch between someone's self-presentation and the attributes he actually exhibits. Goffman's analysis of embarrassment will emerge as complementary to the suggested analysis of amusement, and many of his key references --the self as a ritual object, social life as drama, the insane asylum, frames of interpretation-- will be drawn on as resources throughout the thesis.

---

<sup>3</sup> Greg Smith (1997, personal communication) deserves credit for this phrasing.

### 2.3. Scope and Method

The scope of the thesis has been dictated by the basic phenomena themselves. I have attempted to refrain, as far as possible, from limiting my data by preconditioned ideas and boundaries, seeking to track amusement, laughter, and humour wherever they might have taken me. The study has been guided by a set of basic questions, pursued more-or-less systematically, in whichever domains they seemed to apply. Some questions found ready answers or tentative solutions, some were rephrased or led to further questions, and others proved unanswerable. Those which remained consistently prominent throughout included:

1. What are amusement, laughter, and humour?
2. What causes or influences their manifestation?
3. What meanings are attributed to their observed manifestation?
4. What effects do they provoke in different circumstances?
5. To what uses can they be put?
6. What are the links between these varied features and the concerns of the social sciences?
7. What methods can be used in their study?
8. What are the limits of our knowledge regarding these phenomena?

The enterprise will be limited quite closely in scope to the laughter triad itself, perhaps a minor concern of science, but one sufficiently demanding to merit exclusive treatment on occasion. Admittedly, amusement should really be considered within a more general context of psychological reactions. Though relevant to and oriented towards the literature on the emotions --especially that other social emotion, embarrassment--, this thesis will focus on the single case at hand. Similarly, laughter and humour belong to wider fields of communication studies which will be only alluded to in passing, not to mention the further connections to countless sociological concerns. The sheer number and magnitude of potential ramifications forbid a general treatment which devotes more

than a minimal reference to each. The risk of trivializing topics as enormous and controversial as 'social control' or 'emotional expression' has been taken in the interest of thesis size and complexity, leaving remaining work of detail to more capable others.

Though most of the observations to which I have had access concern 'Western' society, and particularly the United States and Britain, they range across numerous cross-cutting planes of variation, each an immense and unique expanse: class, age, occupation, ethnic background, geographical location, immediate context, type of funny stimulus, goals of actors, distribution of power, and, of course, academic background and research aims of the observer. Moreover, relevant ethnographic fieldwork and historical fact from farther-flung corners of anthropological and chronological inquiry have also been consulted and integrated into the analysis, from classical Greece to present day African hunter-gatherers. The ideas proposed are in principle intended to apply to the human race as a whole, however well or badly they may fare in this ambitious intention.

The method employed could be described as an ongoing theoretical experiment. The questions detailed above, together with certain initial hypotheses and intuitions, were used to guide observation. Observations were compared against the early hypotheses, with refinements and alterations being made to the developing theory. This testing process was repeated, once and again, with new and ever more varied sets of data. 'Observations' included my own direct observation of both myself, others, and products labeled 'humorous' or 'non-humorous,' second-hand reports found in scholarly, journalistic, and other printed works, and in some cases 'plausible' fictional or hypothetical accounts. This admittedly unstructured and intuitive procedure, which I have followed since an initial project in 1993 (Jauregui, 1993), has resulted in the growth of a theoretical classification by no means complete or secure. The distinctions and relations suggested in these pages will be validated or not according to their usefulness in the context of further research in the field. I have made every effort to present them as clearly as possible, with the aid of numerous empirical illustrations, in order to facilitate this work.

As will be argued in a further chapter, this unorthodox but wide-spread methodology --most notoriously and brilliantly exploited by Erving Goffman-- is

particularly suited to the study of emotional expression and other aspects of situated interaction. Its main justification resides in the status of most adult human beings as 'experts' in such matters. For example, though we may not be able to describe verbally what funniness is, we intuitively 'know' and recognize such stimuli every day --how else could we experience amusement at all? An accurate theoretical description of the laughter triad, therefore, should be able to trigger off many moments of 'recognition' in the widest variety of readers. In this genre of theory, every reader is involved in the 'scientific' process, becoming a sort of individual experimenter testing the validity of the theory for himself. As no judgment is final, and results of each 'test' are not fully shareable, the theory will not be 'falsifiable' in the general, objective, Popperian sense. Nevertheless, this method delivers the best type of account which can be hoped for in these areas of science: individually falsifiable theories.

#### 2.4. Rationale

Before launching into the main body of the thesis, there is a final question to be addressed: why laughter? The enterprise requires justification on a number of levels. Most generally, it might be asked why should anyone devote substantial effort to humour research in the first place. What purpose does it fulfill? What good might it do? What is the point?

There exists a veritable sub-genre, in the field, of embarrassed prefatory excuses provided to demonstrate the seriousness of a topic stigmatized by its association with the unserious. This suggests that studying the laughter triad is generally considered somewhat improper, somewhat ridiculous, a fact supported by the teasing and laughter which humour researchers tend to suffer when divulging their academic interests at dinner parties. Nevertheless, the amusement having subsided, these same dinner guests tend to display a genuine interest in the subject, an interest grounded in the surprising awareness that the most familiar of events can seem the most foreign, even the most mysterious; an interest, moreover, shared by thinkers of the stature of Aristotle, Plato,

Hobbes, Kant, Bergson, and Freud. For this reason alone, the enterprise seems worthwhile.

It is not merely, however, that the widespread curiosity about these curious behaviours deserves feeding. The ubiquitousness of the laughter triad in the widest range of human environments makes it relevant to an unusual variety of disciplines. Some of those which, at one time or another, have dabbled in and contributed to its study include aesthetics, anthropology, computing science, ethology, history, linguistics, medicine, philosophy, politics, psychology, and sociology. A better understanding of amusement, laughter, and humour, therefore, may contribute indirectly to research and theory in many of these areas.

In the present study, my pursuit of the laughter triad has also forced me to cross interdisciplinary borders. Nevertheless, the rooting of these phenomena in the social situation seeks to demonstrate their special significance for the social sciences. A second level of justification, tied to our specific academic surroundings, can thus be addressed: Why laughter in a department of social and political sciences? It will be argued that amusement, though itself a psychological mechanism, relates closely to the self-claims which make up the social personas of individual actors. The communication of alleged amusement by means of laughter and humour, in turn, connects all three terms to central sociological concepts and to the realities behind them: socialization and social control, group culture, identity, status, and power. An underlying theme of the thesis will thus be to clarify in what precise sense laughter might be considered 'social in nature', as Henri Bergson and others have suggested.

A third question, concerning the reasons for choosing to develop a general theory of the field rather than taking up a more manageable subtopic, has been addressed briefly in the discussion of aims. Such a theory appears necessary both for the undertaking of any single subtopic, and in general within a field characterized by fragmentation and disorder. Humour research is presently conducted in the midst of an evident theoretical maelstrom, within which specific ideas, findings, and pieces of research float in isolated clusters, sometimes vainly grasping at each other in the hope of coherence. Neither the four major 'global theories' of amusement --superiority, incongruity, tension-release, and

play--, nor any of the 'multicausal' theories proposed have succeeded in reconciling views over what causes this psychological reaction, or how it relates to humour and laughter. Nevertheless, one or other of these is often relied upon by investigators, who generally select the perspective most convenient for their specific object of study.

Until the early part of this century, theoretical approaches to the field were common. Grieg in 1923 was able to list over 90 different views. On the other hand, empirical research was rare, and theoretical works could not often be characterized as empirically-grounded, systematic, thorough, and coherent: “The problem of humor has always been a special field of play for the irresponsible essay writer, and the literature that adorns it is notoriously inconsequential” (Eastman, 1921). In the past thirty years, a contrary pattern has developed. Serious empirical humour research has increased at a considerable pace, particularly in the United States. The creation of The International Society for Humour Studies (ISHS), a journal of Humour Studies (*Humor*), and a humour research list on the internet (at the *mailbase.uk* server), all attest to the growing interest and work in this field. Attempts to classify and interrelate this rapidly expanding body of work have not followed suit, however. Indeed, it has become a standard tenet of humour research that no general theory is attainable or even necessary.

I will not contest the notion that specific research into joking relationships, children's play, or the deployment of humour cues can illuminate important aspects of the laughter triad. I am skeptical, however, that the mere accumulation of facts will result in a better understanding of the field as a whole or even in a full understanding of any single observation. Finding the connections between isolated areas of research, on the other hand, will allow such areas to benefit from the exchange of methods, results, and ideas, and from an improved understanding of their location in various theoretical spaces. It seems to me that narrowly-focused analyses conducted free from any conceptual foundation will always remain superficial in some regard, blind to the elements shared with closely-related cousins. The search for a general perspective should not be wholly abandoned.

A final justification is required: how can the present writer presume to offer a theory which has escaped the minds of weighty thinkers for centuries? Here I offer my

true reason for selecting the laughter triad as my object of analysis. In early 1993 I began to test the idea, borrowed from Jose Antonio Jauregui's *The Emotional Computer* (1990)<sup>4</sup>, that amusement was a response to the 'violation of social norms' (See Jauregui, 1993). Though the notion of 'social norm' had to be specified and modified substantially, I discovered that the idea had a surprisingly wide applicability, and that it seemed to clarify ever more numerous relevant phenomena. In subsequent years, this impression has only grown, and I have found additional support from thinkers who have proposed similar notions (Plato, Aristotle, Bergson, E.F. Carritt, J.B. Baillie, Luigi Pirandello). Moreover, the rough ideas with which I began flourished in the fertile ground prepared by Erving Goffman, which I found not only uniquely suited to the task, but essential to its successful accomplishment. In short, the theory proposed is neither essentially new, nor unrelated to existing social theory. I have merely developed, as thoroughly as I have been able, an ancient but often neglected conception of the laughter triad which has come of age with the advent of Goffmanian sociology. It will be the charge of humour researchers, both professional and lay, to judge its validity.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jauregui treats amusement within the context of a general theory of human decision-making (with its effects on both individual and social behaviour) which emphasizes the role of affect over cognition.

## 2.5. Preview

The thesis is broadly divided into three main parts. **PART ONE** (Chapters One to Three) presents essential introductory material.

**Chapter One**, the chapter in progress, introduces the thesis as a whole, as well as the three basic terms of the laughter triad, which have not always been carefully distinguished:

1. Amusement (the emotion reacting to funny stimuli).
2. Laughter (its visible and more-or-less faithful expression).
3. Humour (the attempt to stimulate amusement).

**Chapter Two** will provide a critical introduction to the most influential theories of amusement, including the four main monocausal accounts --superiority, incongruity, tension-release, and play--, multicausal accounts, and agnostic stances. It will argue that none of these approaches is satisfactory. It will then discuss the possibility and character of a general amusement theory in the abstract, how such a theory might be developed and validated, and what historical precedents could support such an approach. Specifically, due to the nature and empirical location of the laughter triad, a methodology similar to that employed by Erving Goffman in his analysis of the interaction order will be suggested as the single viable alternative. In this procedure, a continuous mutual comparison and adjustment of theory and data results in an ordered and richly illustrated description, a structured classification of concepts closely grounded in empirical detail, which if successful trigger off recognition and identification in prospective readers.

**Chapter Three** will introduce the reader to the type of amusement theory to be proposed, with a historical review of what will be called 'claim-discredit' interpretations of amusement. Plato, Aristotle, William Moore, Luigi Pirandello, E.F. Carritt, J.B. Baillie, Henri Bergson, Orrin Klapp, J.A. Jauregui, and others will be credited with variations on the view that amusement reacts to the discredit of an individual's claims about himself. A close kinship will then be noted between these ideas and the themes

elaborately developed by Erving Goffman regarding the 'interaction order', the order which regulates human relations in public surroundings. A brief introduction to Goffman's thought will be offered.

**PART TWO** (Chapters Four to Six) develops the central account of amusement, expanding upon the ideas of the claim-discredit theorists.

**Chapter Four** presents the main idea, the necessary condition for amusement (the *sufficient* conditions being reserved for Chapter Six):

1. Amusement is provoked only when a perceiver observes that a self-claim put forward by a claimant has been discredited.

The Goffmanian notion of a self-claim --the attribution of some predicate by a claim-maker to a claimant he represents, typically himself-- will be specified in detail, and classified according to two variables: origin (method of claim-making) and content. An analysis of the requirements for perceiving the discredit of such a self-claim will be undertaken. This analysis will engender a number of further variables related to the circumstances of discredit, including its cause, the identity of the discredited participant, and the location of the event among various levels of interpreted reality.

**Chapter Five** will apply this interpretation of amusement to hundreds of 'funny stimuli'. The immense variety of amusing events can be derived from the single definition of the necessary conditions proposed in the previous chapter. This single 'claim-discredit' cause results in apparent differences on the basis of variables relevant to the type of self-claim discredited and the circumstances of the discredit and its observation. The distinctions already noted --origin and content of self-claim, cause of discredit, identity of discredited participant, and location of event-- will be employed to illustrate some of the possible dimensions of variability. Absent-minded errors, irony, tickling, satire, practical jokes, and many other diverse examples of funny stimuli will be related to each other along these axes.

In **Chapter Six**, the explanation of amusement will be elaborated with a number of additions to the basic proposal. Firstly, two amendments are considered to complete the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for amusement:

2. The perceiver of discredit does not identify himself with the claimant at the moment of perception.
3. The perceiver is sufficiently involved in a definition of events which places the discrediting in the foreground.

If condition '2' does not hold, and the perceiver identifies himself with the claimant, the former will experience embarrassment, unless condition '3' additionally fails to hold. If condition '3' does not hold, the perceiver will experience the cognitive and/or emotional processes stimulated by his dominant foci of attention.

Two further complications will be discussed: the possibility that several emotional reactions may be stimulated simultaneously, and the possibility that a single episode of observed activity, or even a single event, may include multiple potentially amusing stimuli.

**PART THREE** (Chapters Seven to Nine) will broaden the focus to include the whole of the laughter triad.

**Chapter Seven** will treat laughter and humour displays as communicative expressions with closely synonymous meanings:

Laughter = "I am experiencing amusement at cause X"

Humour = "I can experience amusement at cause X (and so can you)"

The direct allusion to amusement in both of these basic meanings permits the derivation of a number of additional submeanings associated with laughter and humour displays.

These connotations, arising from the features of amusement-perception described in Part Two, include:

The 'discredit' connotation: "According to my current interpretation, claimant C's self-claim S has been discredited by fact F"

The 'knowledge' connotation: "I possess the knowledge necessary to appreciate the amusing elements referred to by the laughter/humour"

The 'identity' connotation: "I do not feel identified as the claimant(s) discredited"

The 'involvement' connotation: "I am (or could be) sufficiently involved in the funny elements of the situation to enjoy amusement"

Humour displays express an additional submeaning:

The 'entertainment' connotation: "I am delivering a communication which can produce amusement at cause Y in my target sharing audience"

These meanings provide the crucial link between laughter/humour displays on the one hand, and amusement on the other, suggesting the futility of treating the former two without some conception of the latter.

The process by which an actor displays laughter or humour to an audience of observers will also be analyzed, with regard to the influence of physio-psychological and situational pressures, individual aims and skills, and the distribution of power.

**Chapter Eight** will provide a lengthy though certainly not exhaustive list of the effects which amusement, laughter, and humour may have on individual experience and behaviour, the immediate situation, social relationships, and society at large. In relevant cases, intentional uses of these phenomena to provoke particular effects will be discussed.

Particularly attention will be paid to the effects and uses of laughter and humour displays. As communications, their consequences depend on meanings expressed, including those detailed in the previous chapter. This will permit the organization of large bodies of research according to a single theoretical scheme, simultaneously grounding such research in a unitary conception of amusement. Effects of laughter and humour include the broadcasting of an actor's discredit to others; the provocation of further amusement and/or laughter; the transmission and reproduction of social norms shared by a group or society; the creation of boundaries between and around social groups; the creation or reinforcement of affiliation/disaffiliation between two parties; the protection of an actor from discredit; the giving off of certain impressions to others; etc. These effects, and their related uses, will be classified according to the signification(s) from which they derive.

'Functionalist' approaches to these topics, which have been dominant until recent times, will be criticized as methodologically careless and conceptually vague.

**Chapter Nine** will bring the thesis to its close by summarizing proposals, considering their cross-cultural validity, and suggesting how they may be used to situate the laughter triad and its field of study. Amusement will be presented as one of the 'basic' and universal emotions of humankind, and an explanation will be given of cross-cultural variability in the experience of this emotion, and in the display of laughter and humour. Finally, I will offer a tentative classification of the humour research field, based on the proposed account of the laughter triad.



### 3. The Laughter Triad

Our everyday familiarity with the phenomena and vocabulary of laughter and humour requires special care and attention in the definition of basic terms, often overused, vague and/or ambiguous. In this section I will set out and delimit the three fundamental concepts to be treated, justifying and making explicit any assumptions made along the way. Some basic well-confirmed facts will be presented, along with the major unanswered questions.

#### 3.1. Amusement

The spontaneous, unconscious behaviours of the human body --sensations, reflexes, feelings, and emotions-- have a single nature but a double appearance. Each event of this type is associated with two aspects which, though often separated conceptually, linguistically, and methodologically, can be treated as referring to an identical occurrence.

On the one hand, there exist the objectively observable signs of the event: the knee spontaneously jerks up the lower leg when the hammer hits the right spot; the eyes water and the corners of the mouth sag when a tragic situation is perceived. Sophisticated instruments may permit the detection and monitoring of less obvious physiological changes, such as alterations in brain and nervous system activity, skin conductance, heart beat rate, and chemical composition of the blood.

On the other hand, the subject of consciousness encased in this altered physical body can observe the phenomenon 'from the inside.' Having one's knee jerk 'feels' particular, while experiencing the dozens of physiological changes associated with sadness is a qualitatively unique subjective experience.

I will assume that both of these perspectives --objective and subjective-- refer to the same event. When a person 'feels sad,' his subjective feelings are no more, and no

less, than the first-person perception of certain bodily processes brought about by the tragic stimulus<sup>1</sup>.

The Cartesian mind-body dualism widespread in Western society resists such conclusions. Intuitively, it seems that we cry because we are sad, or that we draw back because we feel pain. One reason is that there inevitably exist two languages corresponding to the subjective and objective identification of bodily events. Happenings and features in objective reality are describable by reference to other exterior happenings and features. The subjective characteristics of guilt, however, (i.e., what it *feels* like to be guilty) can only be described in terms of other feelings. There is an empathic or 'internal' understanding of such terms as pain or guilt which is irreducible to and irreconcilable with observable 'external' physiological or behavioural events. Moreover, many of the possible bodily correlates of affect --i.e., the release of endorphins into the blood, specific alterations in neurological activity-- are invisible to the naked eye, and others will continue to escape any conceivable advances in medical technology. Finally, we are often aware of a dissociation between feeling and its most evident bodily signs: we may 'counterfeit' smiles or frowns. The subjective aspects of emotion and feeling, therefore, appear much more salient or even exhaust the attention of most actors when considering such events. Thus, it seems only natural to believe that subjective feeling causes any observable bodily changes, or that in any case the two are separate.

I will maintain, however, that crying is a constitutive part of the sadness process, and that drawing back is a constitutive part of a defensive mechanism which includes bodily occurrences perceived as pain. William James (1890) first proposed this conception of affect (743-44):

Our natural way of thinking about these coarser emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, on the contrary, is that *the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting*

---

<sup>1</sup> I make a distinction here between the raw experience of emotion and subsequent cognitive interpretations, which I take to be secondary.

*fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion. (...) If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no 'mind stuff' out of which the emotion can be constituted and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains.*

Within the set of spontaneous bodily reactions, emotions are distinguished by the cognitive character of their stimuli. Sneezing, yawning, pain, or the taste bud messages resulting in 'sweetness' all react to physical, directly perceived stimuli of one type or another. Fear, happiness, nostalgia, and regret, on the other hand, follow the perception of events which normally require some interpretation. The concept that "my house is burning" has to be cognitively processed and understood, its implications assessed and valued, in order for emotions such as fear or sadness to arise. The 'appraisal' process leading to various emotional reactions has become a central issue in recent theorizing about emotions (Oatley and Jenkins, 1996: 99-102). As will be argued more fully in Chapter Nine, **amusement**<sup>2</sup> can be considered within the set of basic human emotions.

Amusement is defined firstly as a unique bodily emotion, associated (in its stronger manifestations) with the following characteristic bodily movements and sounds:

...the mouth is opened more or less widely, with the corners drawn much backwards, as well as a little upwards....the cheeks and upper lip are much raised.... The sound of laughter is produced by a deep inspiration followed by short, interrupted, spasmodic contractions of the chest, and especially of the diaphragm. From the shaking of the body, the head nods to and fro. The lower jaw often quivers up and down...

---

<sup>2</sup> There is no word in English which precisely and unambiguously covers the concept identified here. It continues to be, as Hobbes pointed out, "a passion that hath no name," (1640: 45). 'Laughter' has been the most common label, but this term refers primarily to the observable signs of the emotion, which do not always reflect the actual bodily state.

My usage of 'amusement' will refer exclusively to humorous amusement, and in no case will be intended in the sense of 'enjoyment.' Moreover, it is intended to cover the phenomenon as a whole, in its observable bodily manifestations and interiorly felt dimensions.

(Darwin, 1902: 211-215)

These observable signs, which I will refer to as **laughter** (See Section 3.2), are merely the grossest physical manifestations of a much wider range of bodily events constitutive of amusement, including epinephrine secretions and changes in heart rate, skin conductance, muscle tension, respiration, and patterns of brain activity (McGhee, 1983: 16-19).

The observable bodily process of amusement corresponds to a unique subjective emotional experience, which I will refer to as the amusement feeling/experience, or simply as **funniness**.

Funniness can be further described as pleasurable. Seemingly spontaneous laughter which is experienced without pleasure is considered 'pathological' by medical science and "results in management problems for friends, family, or caretakers [of the patient] who are unable to comprehend the absence of inner well-being" (Duchowny, 1983: 91). It has been argued that other subjective feelings accompany amusement, either always or in some cases: aggression, sexual arousal, general excitation, wonder, a 'sense' of the incongruous, relief, joy. None of these seems intuitively basic to funniness itself, however (though 'joy' might be considered a close relative).

Amusement, as other emotions, varies in intensity. Graded scales for measuring 'felt funniness' in psychological experiments have been devised (La France, 1983: 2). Positive relationships have been found between variations in such funniness ratings and variations in heart beat rate, galvanic skin response, and muscle tension (McGhee 1983: 16-19). Fluctuations in perceived funniness also often correspond to the directly observable expressions of laughter: "a graduated series can be followed from violent to moderate laughter, to a broad smile, to a gentle smile" (Darwin, 1902: 216). This correlation is complicated by the ability of subjects to consciously control the display of laughter (See Section 3.2). In many experimental studies of humour, for instance, the two measures do not coincide, as the laboratory situation itself appears to inhibit laughter (Chapman, 1983: 137). In 'naturalistic' research, where observation is less intrusive, a closer fit has been found between felt funniness and observed laughter (ibid.).

Considerable evidence suggests that amusement is an involuntary, unlearned, and innate behaviour. For example, stimulation of the hypothalamus and diencephalic region of the brain has been repeatedly demonstrated to provoke "well-developed laughter" (Duchowny, 1983: 97). Patients with Bell's Palsy, an affliction in which half of the face becomes slack, can only smile voluntarily with one side of the face, but "once amused, then there is bilateral symmetry in their performance" (Miller, 1988: 8).

The possibility that infants learn to laugh through imitation seems unlikely: "Laughing as well as joyful shouts appear at a time when the laughing of adults does not facilitate the same behaviour in the baby but startles it more than anything else, or can even cause the baby to cry when it has been laughing" (D.W. Ploog, in Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1975). It has been documented that deaf and dumb children, who could not have learned the behaviour, exhibit laughter in what seem to be typically amusing situations:

Goodenough observed that on one occasion, a doll was dropped inside the neck of a 10-year old child's dress: "When she got it out, she threw herself back into her chair...There were peals of hearty laughter."

(Black, 1984: 2995)

Amusement is commonly attributed universality throughout the human species, and the facts seem to support this claim. Not only laughter but joking, clowns, mimicry, and ridicule have been described in a wide range of societies (Apte, 1983). In a review of the admittedly sparse anthropological literature on the subject, Mahadev Apte concludes that "humour and its appreciation appear to be panhuman traits" (p. 194). Another question is whether all peoples are amused in the same situations, and how such sameness or difference should be described. The answer to this remains open, though the aforementioned evidence of recognizable humour in divergent cultures suggests at least some similarities.

A related and equally common assertion holds that amusement is unique to humanity. This claim, however, is less certain, in view of some of the literature on

primate behaviour. The "relaxed open-mouth display" or "play face" of a number of species closely related to *Homo Sapiens* is used during

the boisterous mock-fighting and chasing involved in social play.... It is often accompanied by quick and shallow rather staccato breathing. In some species, the breathing may be vocalized (e.g. the chimpanzee). The vocalizations then sound like 'ahh ahh ahh.'

(Van Hooff, 1972)

In the case of chimpanzees, this expression

can easily be elicited by tickling.... Many authors (e.g. Darwin, 1872; Foley 1935; Kohts, 1937; Grimek, 1941; Yerkes, 1943) were struck by its resemblance both in form and context with our laughter.

(Van Hooff, 1972)

The precise relations, evolutionary or conceptual, between human amusement and these animal behaviours remains unknown, and will probably continue to do so. It is impossible to determine, for instance, if chimpanzees subjectively experience funniness. Undoubtedly, Aristotle's 'laughing animal' (*de partibus animalium*, 673a8) reacts to a much wider range of stimuli. Nevertheless, the expressive and contextual similarities of his laughter to that of apes suggests that the behaviour may not be unique to humans.

Primate data does, however, support the common supposition that laughter and smiling constitute distinct expressions. Ethologists have distinguished between the "relaxed open-mouth display" and the "silent bared-teeth display" or "grin face." As in the case of humans, the latter is used primarily in social situations of "affinity." (Van Hooff, 1972). Separate phylogenetic origins for the two are suggested by this evidence. Subjective experience also confirms the notion that these behaviours differ, particularly in their extreme forms: "Surely we can distinguish between a pure, intense smile from

pure, intense laughter, and the two expressions are then very different indeed” (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1975).

As for the cause or causes of amusement, there is little agreement, as will be seen in Chapter Two. The question “what provokes amusement?” has accounted for much of the debate in the field.

One utterly basic point can be advanced with some confidence: amusement reacts to a definite stimulus. However heterogeneous the array of events that may provoke it generally, each specific case seems to have been triggered by some specifiable event. Indeed, social actors must be able to account for outbursts of this type, as unmotivated laughter is considered a symptom of mental illness (Duchowny, 1983: 92-93).

It has been occasionally argued that even this may not always be the case; for example, that one may laugh with real amusement but 'for no reason' or out of 'pure joy' or 'nervousness.' However, actual examples of these phenomena are rare. Most of the evidence is to be found in the literature on children:

A brief observation of three-year-olds at play suggests that laughter is a highly contagious reaction that may suddenly erupt in the midst of rough and tumble play, running, jumping, chasing and so forth. In these situations there is nothing that is actually funny to the child.

(McGhee, 1979: 126-27)

Such interpretations are questionable, however, on grounds of both vagueness of the description offered and a more essential methodological problem. How could it possibly be determined whether nothing, or on the other hand something, may be “actually funny to the child” in this case? Child's play constitutes a complex interpersonal activity presenting the individual participant with any number of physiological, cognitive, and emotional contingencies. Without a detailed analysis of 'rough and tumble play' behaviour, we have no way of judging, independently of McGhee's conclusion, how random or mirthless these instances of laughter might be. Furthermore, the rudimentary communication and self-awareness skills of children present obvious methodological

difficulties to the researcher interested in unraveling such psychological processes, as McGhee himself concedes<sup>3</sup>. Merely assuming away the cause in this case seems a hasty procedure.

In one of the few naturalistic studies of actual amusement reactions as reported by adult subjects (Kambouropoulou, 1930), the instances which appeared to lack a definite cause made up only 1.3% of the total (p.24). An examination of these uncommon cases, furthermore, reveals that they either did not constitute amusement ("Laughed numerous times to be polite, but not because I was amused", p.15) or, more commonly, were vague or partial explanations of complex events remembered long after the facts ("At a tea everybody talking and laughing," p.15). Another telling detail from the conclusions of this study is the finding that "a lower academic standing accompanies the greater proportion of laughing with no objective cause" (p. 79). Perhaps the subjects who provided more examples of 'unmotivated' laughter were wanting in the types of skills or attitudes conducive to an accurate and detailed record of events.

The stimuli which provoke amusement can further be specified, at least in most cases, as *cognitive* stimuli: perceptions or mental states of some type. Jokes, puns, stage comedy, everyday mishaps and mistakes --these must be perceived and mentally processed in some way by the subject of laughter to have been amused. On this point, at least, the different schools of humour theory will agree<sup>4</sup>. Debate has centered rather on whether it is a single cognitive elicitor or rather several which may result in amusement -- and what this/these elicitor(s) might be. A single appraisal process for amusement has not yet been agreed upon, casting some doubt on the very status of the phenomenon as an emotion.

The adjective 'funny' will be used to characterize stimuli of amusement, with the caveat that speaking in general of 'a funny story,' indicates only that it is *potentially* amusing, that it may provoke or may have provoked amusement in some individual. 'A

---

<sup>3</sup> "It is impossible to determine in any particular situation whether an event was perceived as humorous by a young child.... We can only make an educated guess" (pp. 95-96).

<sup>4</sup> Outside of neuropsychological disturbances (brain damage, electrical stimulation, laughing gas), 'tickling' is the only exception that occasionally appears, but not according to all interpretations (see Koestler, 1964: 79-80; and this thesis, Chapter Five, 2.3.1).

funny story' additionally indicates that the story in question is *actually* amusing only when an actual or supposed instance of amusement has been explicitly indicated (i.e., "It was sooo funny; we laughed all afternoon."). Thus, '**funny X**' refers to the object or event in the world (X) to which an instance of actual, supposed, or potential amusement is attributed by some actor.

### 3.2. Laughter (Display)

Amusement cannot be directly observed, or at least not by anyone other than the subject of amusement who perceives the sensations of funniness. Only its outward manifestation as the movements and sounds of laughter can be seen and heard by other actors. These observable signs of apparent amusement I will refer to as a **laughter display** or simply as **laughter**.

As I have already pointed out, laughter displays are not always or even commonly equivalent to the spontaneous expression of actual amusement:

Although people laugh when they find something funny, they also laugh when a 'joke' is seen to be anything but funny. Moreover, people can be very straight-faced in a truly humorous situation, giving little sign of felt mirth.... The person laughing the loudest may be the least amused, while the person smiling the least may be suppressing full-flow fun until a more appropriate context can be found.

(La France, 1983: 2)

Laughter is, to some extent, subject to conscious control. This point, in its most general form, is obvious from the performances of professional actors and from our own subjective experience. The conclusions of researchers in the field of facial displays of emotion will surprise nobody:

The facial nerve is connected to the very old and to the newer parts of the brain. Facial expressions of emotion are at times an involuntary automatic response, and at other times, a voluntary, well-managed response system.... Facial expressions are language-like in that they often are voluntary, and the involuntary facial expressions are vulnerable to interference or modification by custom, habit, or choice of the moment. People can and often do put on false expressions to play with or seriously mislead another.

(Ekman, 1978: 141)

Laughter can be consciously overstated or counterfeited on the one hand, understated or suppressed on the other. And not only its intensity, but its form and timing can be modified. Researchers in the field of conversation analysis have convincingly demonstrated that speakers modify their productions of laughter in line with the structural requirements of orderly talk (see, for example, Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff, 1987). A display of laughter may therefore be more or less **spontaneous** --i.e., corresponding more or less closely to the level of amusement actually experienced.

A further complication has been suggested by Hochschild (1979), who convincingly argues that not only do actors consciously modify the facial and bodily *expression* of emotions with 'surface acting,' but actually *manage the emotions themselves*, with learned and practiced 'deep acting.' Surprisingly familiar accounts are related by Hochschild's interviewees: "I psyched myself up....I squashed my anger down....I tried hard not to feel disappointed....I made myself have a good time....I tried to feel grateful....I killed the hope I had burning...I let myself finally feel sad" (Hochschild, 1979: 561). Thus, the relationship between a particular instance of laughter and its supposed amusement becomes even more problematic: not only laughter displays, but amusement itself may be more or less spontaneous. Even if, as some have suggested (Ekman, 1978; La France, 1983), there may be ways of discerning true from feigned emotional expressions through careful attention to facial details, these may not necessarily distinguish between truly spontaneous reactions and adulterated ones.

Two important consequences follow for observers of laughter. Firstly, social actors can never be certain of the relationship between 'real' and 'apparent' amusement in any observed other. Secondly, humour and laughter researchers can never be certain of the relationship between amusement and laughter displays in their experimental subjects or observed 'natives.' In both cases, specific circumstances or techniques may increase the probability of accurate judgment (i.e., secret or unobtrusive observation, a request for 'funniness ratings'), but doubts and conflicting opinions may always remain. Again in

both cases, some level of trust, based partly on subjective experience of honest emotional expressions, must be adopted in order to consider others' amusement at all.

The reality of conscious emotional display also has its consequences for the behaviour of social actors and for the societies they populate. The various possibilities of control over laughter permit, as with other emotions, both the influence of culture, social structure, and interactional requirements on this behaviour, and its strategic use by individuals. One striking example of the former is provided by crude cross-cultural comparisons:

We know that some tribes are said to be dour and unlaughing. Others laugh easily. Pygmies lie on the ground and kick their legs in the air, panting and shaking in paroxysms of laughter.

(Douglas, 1971: 387)

As Douglas argues, there exist great differences in the extent to which societies inhibit or stimulate bodily expression, perhaps related to the role played by individual bodies in communicating social messages. The more ceremonial or ritualized the situation, for instance, the heavier the expressive content of bodily movements, and the less tolerance will exist for spontaneous outbursts. Specific cultural meanings, ritual practices, social hierarchies and structures of power, the requirements of conversation and social interaction, all of these may affect the ways in which actors seek to manage amusement and display laughter.

### 3.3. Humour

'Humour' (Humor to Americans) has been often used to denote all funny things, all sources of amusement (for example, in the very label 'humour research'). What is in practice often meant by 'humour,' however, is rather *communicative presentations intended (by the communicator) to provoke amusement*. I will, accordingly, use the term to mean this and only this<sup>5</sup>.

Instances of humour can thus be categorized as examples of artistic/communicative creation. A humorous piece can be regarded both as a piece of individual workmanship and as an instance of a cultural form of expression. Trends, styles, and genres of humour can be critiqued, analyzed, and compared across single performers, historical periods, and cultural settings. The same variety of analytical frames to which other cultural forms such as literary prose or table manners might be subjected - -aesthetic, historical, anthropological, moral, economic, political, psychological, semiotic-- has also been applied to humour. Identifying the specific 'techniques' of humourists and comedians has been another major concern of researchers: the question 'what provokes amusement' becomes 'how do they (try to) provoke amusement'.

Humour, in this narrow sense, has been the main focus of 'humour research.' Though often acknowledging and including unintentionally funny stimuli within the bounds of this field, researchers have concentrated overwhelmingly on productions intended to be amusing: i.e., jokes, puns, ironic remarks, comedy, wit, clowning, mimicry, ridicule, satire. These humorous communications are both perceptually salient and methodologically appealing: Salient because humour is consciously created and discussed, culturally valued, and in Western society commercially produced and advertised; methodologically appealing due to the ease which humour can be reproduced or displayed in the experimental lab and written texts, or sought and identified in naturalistic studies (i.e., of joking relationships, comedy shows, children's play, etc...).

---

<sup>5</sup> The only exception will be the case of 'Humour research' itself, on the basis of the increasingly established nature of the field and its label.

Even in discussions of so-called 'unintentional' humour, the very need to specify a modifier implies that 'humour' by default refers to 'intentional humour.' The bias is so strong that in many analyses which include clear examples of unintentionally funny stimuli, the dominant wordings often continue to imply some sort of conscious volition behind the source of amusement. For example, Zillmann (1983: 87) mentions unwilling circumstances such as "misfortunes and setbacks...ugliness, stupidity, and ineptness" among possible causes. But his general description of this category is a festival of transitive verbs: "humor that disparages, belittles, debases, demeans, humiliates, or otherwise victimizes" (ibid.: 85). Though Zillman does not state that it is a person (but rather the 'humour') which disparages or belittles, the terminology is misleading in a way congruent with the general bias towards humour. Can we say that a clumsy person is 'belittled by the humour' of his clumsiness in the same way a target of satire is belittled by a caricature? Perhaps, but a distinction between accidental and willed disparagements is thereby fudged, in favour of the latter. Zillman's description closely fits the majority of research in the area of disparagement humour, which has tested reactions to disparaging cartoons and jokes, but it seems less apt for unintentionally funny events, persons, and objects.

Moreover, several authors have explicitly relegated such potentially amusing stimuli to the status of 'non-humour,' as if placing them outside the bounds of study. Chapman (1983: 151) speaks of "nonhumorous laughter" in his mention of episodes when "people...laugh *at* others." Koestler (1964: 60) similarly dismissed as "entirely mirthless and humourless" laughter at mispronounced words, falls, poor dancing, and various other events from Kambouropoulou's (1930) study. Some have even classified such stimuli as provoking 'primitive' laughter within an evolutionary scale, more 'harmless' or 'sympathetic' wit and joking supposedly characterizing modern man:

The 'primitive' person enjoys his aggression directly, the 'civilized' individual enjoys his aggression indirectly.

(Feinberg, 1978)

The amusement that laughter has finally released from its ungracious heritage of triumph, cruelty, and scorn marks a line of mental advance.

(Gregory, 1923: 344)

The relegation of funny stimuli which do not classify as humour to an inferior theoretical status has hardly been noticed by scholars, let alone justified or supported by empirical evidence. The few facts collected regarding causes of amusement in everyday life, however, reverses the scale of values. The category of events from Kambouropoulou's study which Koestler dismisses as "entirely mirthless and humourless" included 53% of the total instances of self-reported amusement and laughter by 100 university students over a seven-day period, a category defined as "instances where the cause is the inferiority or predicament of a person, the diary author included; awkwardness, stupidity, mistakes, ignorance, absent-mindedness, blunders, social breaks, unfortunate dilemmas, and calamities" (Kambouropoulou, 1930: 14). The next largest category, accounting for 28% of the total, included unexpected and incongruous events or turns in the situation, whether "voluntary or not" (pg. 14). These results were confirmed forty years later with a replication of the procedure by two researchers (Graeven and Morris, 1972) who found "striking...the similarity in the distribution of humorous incidents for the two time periods" (p. 409). These studies indicate that the almost exclusive focus on intentional humour that has characterized the study of amusement may exclude from analysis the majority of real-life cases.

Such facts suggest that the 'humour' question is not merely terminological. The pervasive and rarely noticed bias against unintentionally funny stimuli has almost certainly misled and distorted theoretical analysis in the field. A broader outlook that encompasses not only the many varieties of humour but the wide range of naturally-occurring funny stimuli must be adopted if any serious progress is to be made. Not only empirically but also logically, the latter deserve an important role in the study of

amusement and laughter (if not pride of place): The intentional provocation of an emotion or reflex presupposes the workings of the bodily process itself<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> It might be possible that amusement requires such interactional contingencies as perceived provocation, but this cannot be merely (even if implicitly) assumed. Considering the aforementioned empirical evidence, this possibility seems in any case highly unlikely.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this preliminary chapter, I have introduced the aims, methods, scope, and rationale of the thesis, anticipated its major points, and provided detailed definitions for the three basic and interrelated objects of study.

The thesis seeks to situate the **laughter triad**, a set of three closely interrelated phenomena familiar to all of us through everyday experience: amusement, laughter, and humour.

**Amusement** is a mental and bodily process characterized by the feeling of 'funniness' and the production of certain movements and sounds. It is an involuntary, unlearned, innate response to a cognitive stimulus or stimuli, as of yet unspecified by humour theory. It seems universal to mankind, though perhaps not unique, as similar behaviours have been observed in the closest simian relatives of *Homo Sapiens*. The interactional situation appears to be an important effect on the likelihood and degree of amusement. It can be classified as an emotion.

**Laughter**, or **the laughter display**, refers to the observable signs of apparent amusement. These may or may not accurately reflect the true emotional state of the individual producing them. In other words, laughter may be either relatively spontaneous or otherwise overstated, counterfeited, understated, or suppressed. Its form and timing may also be manipulated. Finally, 'deep acting' may allow the individual to intentionally modify amusement itself.

These possibilities present problems of interpretation for social actors and humour researchers, and allow for the influence of culture, social structure, and interactional requirements on laughter, as well as its strategic use by individuals.

**Humour** refers to productions intended by an actor to cause amusement, which can be regarded as pieces of individual workmanship and instances of cultural forms of expression.

The aim of the thesis will be to 'situate laughter.' This will mean first of all to observe and analyze this triad in its natural home, the everyday interactional situation. It will be argued, moreover, that the manifestation of amusement is itself essentially

contingent on fundamental features of situated interaction: the self-claims which make up situated self-presentations, and related concepts. Finally, in its broadest sense, situating the laughter triad will involve developing a topology of the field within which each member of the triad, their many varieties, and related phenomena will be located in relation to each other, to the social sciences, and to existing humour theories and research.

The scope, though narrowly focused on the laughter triad itself, will thus be broad in the sense of encompassing all possible instances of amusement, laughter, and humour in any human society. It will also span the interests of numerous academic disciplines, with an emphasis on the social sciences resulting from the pursuit of the phenomena themselves.

The method used has been an unorthodox and intuitive sort which nevertheless represents the most viable alternative for the study of humour and other elements of everyday behaviour resistant to objective observation. It consists of successive comparisons of theoretical description with a growing body of empirical data gathered from the most heterogeneous set of situations possible. Validation depends on the recognition by other subjects of the features described from their own experience with them, and on the general utility of the theory for specific projects within humour research.

The topic of the thesis, which suffers from an evident whiff of impropriety, has been justified by its inherent interest to all individuals, and by its relevance to a wide range of areas within the social sciences and other disciplines. The thesis also answers a need for general theorizing in the field of humour research, characterized by fragmentation and diversity of approach. My confidence in proposing such an account is rooted in my own experience with its application, in its complementarity with the proposals of Erving Goffman's theory of the interaction order, and in its close kinship with the ideas of numerous both well-known and less prominent humour theorists.

A brief preview of the proposals has also been provided. Amusement will be portrayed as reacting to the perception that an actor's claim about himself has been discredited, providing the perceiver attends sufficiently to the discrediting event and does

not feel identified with the discredited claimant. Laughter and humour will be described as communicative signs whose meanings include a reference to amusement. This reference will serve as the basis for an analysis of the effects and uses of laughter and humour. A general ordering and placement of the humour research field will emerge from these considerations.



# Chapter Two: Causal Theories of Amusement

1. Introduction	page 61
2. Traditions in Amusement Theory	page 63
2.1. Monistic Theories	page 63
2.1.1. Aggression/Superiority Theory	page 63
2.1.2. Incongruity Theory	page 67
2.1.3. Tension-Release Theory	page 70
2.1.4. Play Theory	page 74
2.2. Pluralistic Theories	page 77
2.3. 'No Theory'	page 80
3. Amusement Theory and its Validation	page 83
3.1. Amusement and Conventional Scientific Methods	page 84
3.2. Aggregate Introspection	page 86
3.3. Aggregate Introspection in Humour Research	page 87
3.4. The Method in Detail	page 91
3.4.1. Development and Testing of a Hypothesis	page 91
3.4.2. Individual Assessment	page 96
3.4.3. Aggregate Assessment	page 97
3.5. A Successful Precedent	page 99
4. Conclusions	page 107



## 1. Introduction

The great and long-standing riddle in the field of laughter and humour research concerns the 'spark' or 'trigger' of amusement. Known causes abound, of course: puns, jokes, mishaps, absurdities, paradoxes, tickling, obscenities, silliness, and rollercoasters, among others. What has evaded theorists is a general, formal, coherent description of the stimulus (or stimuli): what makes something funny?

The question has been rightly treated as *the* question of amusement, laughter, and humour; its solution, the key to a general theory of some type. Understanding amusement is the first step towards understanding laughter and humour, for both of these communicative displays refer back to the basal emotion. In subsequent chapters, I will suggest an answer to the question of amusement (Chapters Four to Six), on which a theoretical scheme integrating laughter and humour will be based (Chapters Seven to Nine).

In this chapter, I will review the most common theoretical approaches to amusement. The four most popular single causes attributed to amusement have been 'superiority,' 'incongruity,' 'tension-release,' and 'play.' The failure of each of these to account for all cases of funny event has led some authors to develop equally unsatisfying multicausal theories, or even to abandon the search for any sort of encompassing description. None of these approaches has been successful in reconciling views on the subject.

I will also provide some suggestions regarding theory and methodology in the search for the cause(s) of amusement. I will argue that the nature of the phenomena under study, and specifically their opacity to objective observation, precludes the application of conventional scientific paradigms (i.e., objective tests of hypotheses). The methodology I will label 'aggregate introspection' represents the most promising alternative, and indeed will be shown to have been tacitly adopted throughout the history of humour theory. This procedure begins with a continuous process of testing and reworking of the emerging theory with a growing body of empirical data from the theorist's own experience and those of others. The applicability of the resulting concepts and relations can then be tested by numerous others who are exposed to the theory, who together provide a

judgment (a kind of 'aggregate test') of its validity. A widely-acclaimed application of this unorthodox method will be described: Erving Goffman's theory of the interaction order.

## 2. Traditions in Amusement Theory

### 2.1. Monistic Theories

The reflexlike character of amusement, and the apparent unity of both exterior and interior manifestations, strongly suggests that the mechanism must be describable in terms of a single stimulus-response model. Many authors have been driven by this intuition to develop global monocausal theories. Though dozens could be listed, most of them have traditionally been classified under one of four general categories: aggression/superiority, incongruity, tension-release, and play.

#### 2.1.1. Aggression/Superiority Theory

One common view presents laughter as an aggressive instinct which reacts to the errors, deformities, or vices of others.

This school of thought is commonly traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers. According to Plato, "when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we are mixing pleasure...with malice" (*Philebus*, 50a). Aristotle identified "a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others" as the source of amusement (*On Poetics*, v, I). It was Thomas Hobbes, however, who stated the proposal most directly:

Laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly.

(1640: IX, 13; See also 1651: I, 6)

Hobbes' short words have been expanded upon by a number of 'superiority' theorists (see Bain, 1880; Carus, 1898, Dunlap, 1925; Leacock, 1935; Rapp, 1949; Sidis, 1913). Gruner (1979), a recent example, holds that the expression of amusement as laughter represents a kind of survival of the atavistic 'victory cry' which early hominids supposedly

experienced after defeating their enemy. In the present day, any situation of felt superiority over another would provoke amusement. Other writers have merely proposed an aggressive 'spark' in all funny stimuli: Whenever humor occurs, an element of aggression is present --on a broad spectrum ranging from the mild satisfaction of twisting the language out of shape to the malicious pleasure of watching a humiliating practical joke" (Feinberg, 1978).

Superiority and aggression theories can be discounted as global explanations of spontaneous laughter. One reason is that wit, puns, nonsense, and other apparently non-aggressive forms of humour cannot be plausibly accounted for by such a view. If we consider the abovementioned claim by Feinberg, for instance, his use of the loaded phrase "twisting the language out of shape" fails to convince the critical reader of any obvious similarity between laughing derisively and laughing at a pun. Rather, what seems twisted out of shape is the concept of 'aggression.' Without justification, Feinberg has assumed that people universally personify language and/or bear ill will towards the words they use. Moreover, verbal humour often provokes the most violent and explosive extremes of laughter, not just Feinberg's "mild satisfaction."

Gruner (1979) has proposed a more ingenious account of wit and incongruity : its perceiver laughs at a victory over himself, a self which has been fooled by a verbal ambiguity or trick. 'Victory,' or 'superiority' seems an inappropriate description of the relation between the amused self and the self to which the laughter responds, however. Triumphs and victories in their purest forms, whether over exterior enemies or over the self, do not necessarily or even usually result in amusement. Though derisive laughter may not be absent from football grounds, military battlefields, and election campaigns, victory in these arenas typically leads to expressions of shared joy: cheering, applause, shouts of triumph, smiles, and the like. Similarly with moments of great personal achievement, in which the victorious self will be able to perceive lesser previous selves. Naturalistic studies have not been conducted to determine what moments during a competitive or individual struggle may lead to amusement and which to joy. Everyday observation and subjective experience, however, suggest that the immediate reaction to victory, even sudden and unexpected victory, is other than humorous amusement.

The superiority explanation contains additional embarrassing consequences. For example, we may laugh at persons which we consider, despite their mistakes, better than ourselves in the relevant characteristic. Laughter at an opera singer's missed note does not require the audience member to consider his own singing abilities superior. Such a situation cannot be characterized as a 'victory.'

If not quite satisfying as general explanations of amusement, aggression/superiority theories contain undeniable value, and have led to intriguing experimental discoveries. Firstly, they draw attention to a set of stimuli which other theories (i.e., incongruity) either ignore or struggle with: the mishaps, mistakes, disparagements, defects, and blemishes of others. In these cases, the funny object is another social actor, or in some cases the perceiver himself --we have seen that both Hobbes and Gruner take this latter possibility into account. The casting of this interpersonal relation as one of superiority/inferiority or aggressor/victim has proven unsatisfactory, but the identification of such a relation at all continues to hold theoretical promise.

Such hopes are grounded in some of the best-confirmed empirical evidence in the humour research literature, what have been called '**dispositional**' effects (see Zillman, 1983, for a review). These effects are relevant to 'disparagement humour,' that is, "humour that disparages, belittles, debases, demeans, humiliates, or otherwise victimizes" (ibid.: 85); in other words, funny stimuli which include a human object that is 'disparaged' in some way. In most of the studies, jokes which disparaged the representative(s) of some social or ethnic group were presented to subjects who held varying attitudes towards these groups. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that amusement before such stimuli depends on the affective disposition towards the object of disparagement, in the following manner:

1. The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth.
2. The more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaged agent or entity, the smaller the magnitude of mirth.

(ibid.: 91)

Additionally, similar effects have been found regarding the agent provoking the disparagement:

3. The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaging agent or entity, the smaller the magnitude of mirth.
4. The more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaging agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth.

(ibid.: 91-92)

The finding that the perceiver's attitude towards a human object of amusement varies his overall level of amusement raises the question of how this perceiver-object relation may fit within a general theory of amusement, if such a theory is possible. Considering Hobbes' point that "men laugh at the follies of themselves past," (1640: IX, 13) and Gruner's analysis of wit, the possibility of 'self-disparaging humour' should also be taken into account.

### 2.1.2. Incongruity Theory

Perhaps the most popular approach holds that amusement results from the perception of an 'appropriate' incongruity, an unusual or surprising relation between two contrary or unrelated phenomena. John Locke's discrimination between judgment and wit represents the earliest statement:

For *wit* lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting these together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy; *judgment*, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully, one from another, ideas wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another.

(1690: II, xi)

Locke refers here to wit, the *creation* of funny stimuli, but implies that amusement is provoked when the perceiver of wit is "misled by similitude," when incongruous phenomena are joined in the mind by apparent congruity. This implication was developed by a number of eighteenth-century writers (Addison, 1711 and Gerard, 1759, in Grieg, 1923), most elaborately by the Scottish philosopher and poet James Beattie:

Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts of circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them...unless when the perception of it is attended with some other emotion of greater authority.

(1776: 320/419)

Schopenhauer in 1819 issued an almost identical and influential restatement of the proposal, and in the recent years it has been taken up and refreshed by cognitive

psychologists and linguists (Monro, 1951; Milner, 1972; Jones, 1970; Schultz, 1972; Suls, 1972; Wilson, 1979; Raskin, 1985; Norrick, 1986).

In line with current conceptions of cognitive interpretative mechanisms, the latest versions describe the incongruity as taking place between two 'schemas,' 'scripts,' or 'frames,' mental classifications of real-world objects and events, rather than between the real world phenomena themselves. Raskin (1985) claims that a text is a joke-carrying text if it satisfies the following two conditions:

(i) the text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts

(ii) the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposing scripts

(p. 99)

For example in the one liner, "I used to be an atheist but I gave up --no holidays" (Davis, 1993: 82), the 'script' covering the reasons for identifying with a religious idea is combined with an opposing script covering the reasons for holding a job.

Incongruity theories have been found most helpful in the understanding of verbal and visual wit. Their proponents, however, have rarely intended them as general explanations of amusement. Raskin attempts to put forward "a formal semantic theory of verbal humour" (p. xiii). Beattie distinguished the laughter aroused by ideas from that aroused by tickling, and both of these were contrasted with laughter at the "ridiculous". Suls admits that "the incongruity-resolution model is not a complete account, it describes a part of the humor experience" (p. 55). I have included incongruity accounts under the label of 'monocausal theories' firstly because in some fields (i.e., in linguistics) they are often employed as such in practice, and secondly because not all authors have been so modest:

All laughter is occasioned by a paradoxical, and hence unexpected subsumption, it matters not whether this is expressed in words or in deeds. This in brief is the correct explanation of the ludicrous (...) There will be no question that here, after so many fruitless attempts, the true theory of the ludicrous is given, and the problem propounded by and given up by Cicero definitely solved.

(Schopenhauer, 1819; 1:58-59; 2:92)

As a general explanation, 'appropriate incongruity' flags precisely where 'superiority/aggression' excels. The interpersonal aspect of amusement has no place in such theories, which consider the psychology of a single individual. Furthermore, they ignore or fail to account properly for the 'disparagement' elements of humour, or for funny events in which real or fictional actors make mistakes, display incompetence, or suffer attacks by fate or other actors.

### 2.1.3. Tension-Release Theory

Release theories propose that amusement is the body's way of discharging excess nervous energy, aggression, sexual excitement, or any number of other physiological emotions or tensions. The origins of this idea, though foreshadowed by Kant<sup>1</sup>, are normally attributed to Herbert Spencer: "Laughter is a form of muscular excitement, and so illustrates the general law that feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action...strong feeling of almost any kind produces this result...joyous emotion...mental distress...tickling...cold, and some kinds of acute pain" (1891: 458). The claim that strong feeling of 'almost any kind' produces amusement lacks detailed empirical support and is contradicted both by intuition and by the paltry list of feelings enumerated by Spencer himself (i.e., where is fear? anger?). Nevertheless, the subsequent account of funny stimuli of the incongruity type has been influential. Spencer identified, "descending incongruities" as a major source of amusement, events which defeat built-up expectations to which the body had been emotionally attuned, such as a misbehaved goat that suddenly appears on stage and sniffs at the actors during a climactically poignant theatrical love scene (p. 461-63). The "large amount of nervous energy...suddenly checked in its flow" is released by the "half-convulsive actions we term laughter" (p. 462).

A recent version of this idea was developed by Arthur Koestler in *The Act of Creation* (1964). Koestler uses the metaphor of an inner 'pipeline' which carries emotions as an individual interprets a given narrative: "When the pipe is punctured [by a funny stimuli], and our expectations are fooled, the now redundant tension gushes out in laughter" (p. 51). Koestler is more specific than Spencer in the identification of both the accumulated feeling and the triggering cognitive mechanism. Though "a bewildering variety of moods" may be included in the emotional tension, "it must contain one

---

<sup>1</sup> In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790: 203), he states that

thoughts,...as far as they seek sensible expression, engage the body also. In the exhibition involved in jest, the understanding, failing to find what it expected, suddenly relaxes, so that we feel the effect of this slackening in the body by the vibration of our organs, which helps to restore their equilibrium and has a beneficial influence on our health...*Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.*

ingredient whose presence is indispensable: an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension" (p. 51-52).

As for the 'spark' that ignites laughter, it is *bisociation*, "the perceiving of a situation or idea...in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (p. 32-37). In other words, elements of both aggression and incongruity theories are ingeniously combined.

More in line with current conceptions of physiological processes, Daniel Berlyne (1960, 1969, 1972) proposed that amusement results when an arousal 'boost' that produces unpleasantly high levels of arousal, is followed by a sharp drop or 'jag.'

Relief theories have been popular with medical practitioners, child psychologists, and some sociological fieldworkers. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, substantial evidence suggests that amusement helps to reduce stress and threat-induced anxiety, with consequent benefits to overall health. Furthermore, laughter in early infancy typically follows the exposure to highly arousing stimuli, previously found threatening, which are now judged to be 'safe': tickling, monster masks, jumping off a 'high' platform, etc... (Sroufe and Wunsch, 1972; Rothbart, 1973; McGhee, 1979: 127). A number of sociologists have also observed joking and laughter being used by social actors in real-life situations to relieve tension and anxieties. An example is the aforementioned study by Coser (1959), in which hospital patients used "jocular griping" to strip risky or dangerous situations of their threatening aspects.

Like other monocausal amusement theories, the 'relief' explanation seems more plausible in some cases than in others. Fear-related laughter of the type commonly observed in children can also be observed in adults who watch horror films, engage in 'danger sports' or ride rollercoasters. In these cases a truly strong emotional state is followed by relief and amusement, once the situation is perceived as safe. However, while 'nervous laughter,' Coser's 'jocular griping,' or Spencer's example of tragedy upstaged by a goat might be included in such a category of events, generalizing to other funny stimuli, such as jokes and puns, seems far-fetched. The 'tension' that a short nonsensical phrase ('a knife without a blade that has no handle') can produce in a hearer must be minimal, yet the laughter produced by such stimuli can be as explosive as any. In such cases, Koestler is forced to assume, ad hoc, the existence of unconscious reserves of

emotion: “a minute cause can open the tap of surprisingly large stores of energy from various sources: repressed sadism; repressed sex; repressed fear; even repressed boredom” (1964: 60). The only evidence provided for such stores is the amusement itself.

It is also unclear how this type of theory might account for humorous appreciation of the mistakes, slips, and blunders of the self or of others. As has been pointed out above, Koestler excludes these from analysis as 'entirely mirthless and humorless.'

Unlike most other amusement theories, empirically testable physiological claims are additionally made by relief explanations. These have failed to stand up to experimental scrutiny. Deckers, Jenkins and Gladfelter (1977) found that changes in the difficulty of a test presented to subjects (presumably affecting tension) had no effect on laughter at the incongruous resolution of the test. Moreover, it appears that Berlyne's arousal 'jag,' or the reduction in nervous or emotional 'tension,' does not occur with the onset of a punchline or with laughter itself. Measures of physiological responses to humour have shown amusement to be correlated *positively* with increased heart rate, increased skin conductance, increased muscle tension, altered respiratory patterns, and characteristic EEG changes (McGhee, 1983: 16). The idea that the build-up of an amusing narrative produces a tension 'burst' by its unexpected conclusion seems implausible. Godkewitsch (1976) found that arousal was related mainly to the punchline of a joke, rather than to its body.

Sigmund Freud proposed a slightly divergent 'relief' interpretation in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). Freud viewed 'tendentious wit' (i.e., disparagement, 'toilet,' sexual, or 'black' humour) as a technique for liberating repressed aggressive or sexual desires. Jokes were considered a socially acceptable way of expressing certain taboo topics or sentiments, thus serving (like dreams) as a kind of 'escape valve' for the unconscious.

Needless, to say, this theory cannot be applied to all types of funny stimuli. In fact, Freud did not provide a global and consistent definition for the techniques of wit, and admitted the existence of 'nontendentious humour'; this 'relief' interpretation was only meant as a part of a lesser-known theory encompassing what he called 'wit,' 'comedy,' and 'humour.' Nevertheless, a number of followers have taken its proposals to implausible extremes:

*Question: Why did the moron jump off the Empire State Building?*

*Answer: Because he wanted to make a smash hit on Broadway.*

The huge phallic shape is the father's penis, the sight of which impels the child to competitive exhibition. He hopes to have a sensational success, but also fears a catastrophic defeat. Unable to abandon his ambitions, he pays in advance.

(Martha Wolfenstein, cited in  
Gruner, 1979: 78)

#### 2.1.4. Play Theory

The fourth most commonly cited global explanation of amusement dates from 1902, when both M. Dugas (see Grieg, 1969: 271-72) and James Sully independently proposed that it follows the adoption of a 'play-mood' or playful point of view towards a particular object: “Even if the laughable spectacle does not wear the look of a play-challenge...it may so present its particular feature as to throw us off our serious balance, and by a sweet compulsion force us to play with it rather than to consider it seriously” (Sully, 1902: 150).

A more fully developed statement of the theory was provided by Max Eastman in his *Sense of Humour* (1921). Eastman considers the ability to create humour to be a human instinct in itself: “The sense of humor is a primary instinct of our nature...a very inward indispensable little shock-absorber...for making the best of a bad thing” (p. 226/21). According to Eastman, amusement reacts to the observation of failures, disappointments, and other unpleasant stimuli, when they are viewed through the playful lens of humour. This humorous interpretation of events supposedly allows actors to 'free' themselves from the constraints of social norms and 'serious' thought and behaviour, and to overcome anxiety by recasting threats as absurdities.

Gregory Bateson (1955), William Fry (1963) and Michael Mulkay (1988) have recently revived interest in the 'play' interpretation. According to Mulkay, the play-mode is characterized by an absurd multiplicity of meanings:

in the serious realm we normally employ a unitary mode of discourse which takes for granted the existence of one real world, and within which ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative diversity are problems. In contrast, humour depends on the active creation and display of interpretative multiplicity. When people engage in humour, they are obliged to collaborate in the production. They temporarily inhabit, not a single, coherent world, but a world in which whatever is said and done necessarily has more than one meaning.

(Mulkay, 1988: 3-4)

To prompt the audience for such collaboration, it has been pointed out that comics and humourists of every type provide humour 'cues' to signal that what is to take place is 'not real' or 'not serious' (Fry, 1963; McGhee and Johnson, 1975).

'Play' theories reduce all funny stimuli to 'humour,' in the sense I have defined it -- *intentional* provocations of amusement, whether created by others or by the subject of laughter himself. Such a reduction strains credibility, however, in the case of amusement at spontaneously occurring mishaps, incompetence, or discredited claims. When laughter is directed at an individual, the laughter may sometimes be taken as 'not serious,' as 'just a tease/joke,' but other times may actually 'hurt' and be taken very seriously indeed.

Such examples are rarely even considered by play theorists, attention being almost exclusively focused on jokes, friendly teasing, comedy routines, and the like. Mulkay does occasionally attempt an explanation, as with the following excerpt from a political speech:

Conservative politician: The Labour Prime Minister and his colleagues are boasting in this election campaign that they have brought inflation down from the disastrous level of twenty-six per cent. But we are entitled to inquire who put it up to twenty-six per cent?

Audience: (laughter and applause for 8 seconds)

(example from Atkinson, 1984;  
cited in Mulkay, 1988: 207)

According to Mulkay, such attacks by politicians represent a competitors' "version of the world as unreliable, illusory or not to be taken seriously." It would be more accurate to say, however, that the cited jibe presents the Labour Party's definition of the situation ('Labour keeps inflation down') as unambiguously *false* --indeed, Mulkay later describes the quip as attempting to "reveal the 'true character'" of Labour's claims (p. 207). This type of discrediting move cannot be described as 'playful,' and neither can the victim's

actions or words be seen as 'nonserious.' The audience is not presented with a multiplicity of meanings but with a clarification of reality: a clarification which to the right audience, nevertheless, is funny.

The specific trigger of amusement is never properly specified in 'play' accounts. 'Entering into a playful/humorous mode,' in this context, provides not an explanation but a tautology. Humour cues are not necessary to amusement; neither are they sufficient for it. As for the switching of contexts and the creation of ambiguous or multiple meanings, these are common occurrences in nonhumorous creative writing and other expressive arts such as poetry or abstract painting. They are also experienced in imaginative fancies and even true 'play' which is non-amusing.

Nevertheless, 'play' theory calls attention to interesting phenomena. The distinction between 'serious' and 'joking/play' modes may be a valid and significant one, even if we do not always laugh 'in jest.' How to characterize this binary contrast becomes an additional problem for any account of amusement. Relatedly, attention is drawn to the 'humour cues' which indeed recur under various guises in performances and presentations of humour. The play of children (and of adults) itself deserves more detailed observation than it has received.

## 2.2. Pluralistic Theories

The failure to achieve a single-cause explanation of amusement has driven many researchers to abandon the possibility altogether:

It is interesting to notice how, in the literature of laughter, the more ambitious contributors have vainly attempted to bring the varieties of forms of humorous experiences under some definite laughter-causing principle... In order to bring causes of laughter into the desired category attempts are made which are, in themselves, frequently humorous... It is a hopeless task...to secure anything approaching a common principle.

(Kimmins, 1928: 1)

In some cases, the diversity of causes posited is accompanied by the proposition that the explanandum behind felt funniness and observed laughter, therefore, can be divided into various essentially different phenomena.

It may be that, despite the apparent subjective and physiological unity of 'amusement,' and certain contextual similarities, various independent causes lead to its occurrence or to several species of it. Unfortunately, however, there has been little consensus regarding the classification of the various 'types' of amusement according to stimuli. Here follows a partial list of lists:

Quintillian: (1) urbanitas, (2) venustum, (3) salsum, (4) facetum, (5) iocus, and (6) dicacitas. (in Grieg, 1923: 227)

Hazlitt (1818): (1) the laughable --incongruous, (2) the risible --incongruous and contrary to custom, and (3) the ridiculous --incongruous and contrary to sense and reason.

Cordaveaux (1875): (1) slight imperfections, (2) slight annoyances, (3) the unexpected or surprising, (4) the indecent or obscene (in Grieg, 1923: 259)

Michiels (1886): (1) bodily vices or perturbations, (2) disrupted equilibrium among human faculties, (3) disadjustments of a person to the world (4) disadjustments of a person to his own society (in Grieg, 1923: 259).

Freud (1905): (1) wit (tendentious and nontendentious), (2) the comic, (3) humour.

Sidis (1913): (1) ascending laughter --difficult things become easy for the laugher, (2) descending laughter --easy things become difficult for others.

Gregory (1923): evolutionary scale of increasing "humanization" of laughter, from more aggressive to more sympathetic forms.

D.T. Wieck (1967): (1) laughter where there is no object, (2) laughter at someone, and (3) laughter at something.

Giles and Oxford (1970): (1) humorous, (2) social, (3) ignorance, (4) tension-release, (5) derision, (6) apologetic, (7) tickling.

Poyatos (1993): (1) affiliation, (2) aggression, (3) social, (4) anxiety, (5) fear, (6) joy, (7) comicality and ludicrousness, (8) amusement, (9) self-directedness, (10) certain random interactive occurrences.

Critical examination of any such list will find it no more adequate a description of the facts than one of the monocausal theories. "A priori," to Giles and Oxford "it would appear that laughter principally occurs under seven mutually exclusive conditions" (p. 97), as enumerated above. Are they truly 'mutually exclusive'? Amusement at the blunder of a long-standing enemy, for instance, might qualify as both 'derision' and 'tension-release.' Would an ethnic joke be classified under 'humour' or 'derision'?

None of these typologies has proved particularly helpful in understanding the phenomena. None has achieved general recognition. Most of them seem relatively arbitrary, while the others discriminate according to either trivial or patently misguided

principles. However, at least they recognize the existence of real differences between funny stimuli which monocausal theorists have often ignored or fail to treat convincingly.

### 2.3. 'No Theory'

More prudent, and perhaps more popular today, is the agnostic stance, which withholds judgment on general theories or classifications until more is known about particular areas. Or rather, a pluralistic theory is generally assumed, without commitment to any particular classification:

If we have learned anything from the study of humor it is that oversimplified, global explanations are inadequate to the task.... The focus on specific issues within the broad area of humor, laughter, and comedy liberates the theorist and basic researcher from premature and unwarranted generalizations. By restricting their field of view, students of humor are better able to deal with the complexity of the phenomenon.

(McGhee and Goldstein, 1983, vol. I, p. vii)

For many, such an attitude will suffice. One need not always see the wood if it is a single tree that requires attention. Nevertheless, such statements seem post hoc justifications for a situation into which humour researchers have been forced. A general overview of the field would be of undeniable value, and such a perspective must be possible. Though laughter may not be a simple stimulus-response reflex describable in a single way, there must be some manner in which the various current or perhaps future theories can be integrated to form a coherent field. The relationship between incongruity and disparagement humour, for instance, must be clarified: are they to be subsumed under a larger explanation, divided by some subtle boundary, combined into a new structure, or fractionated into lesser elements along some undiscovered plane?

The current situation can perhaps then be characterized as one of increasing but disorganized or at least divided knowledge. Experimental and other types of data, interesting in themselves, continue to grow, but there lacks an encompassing framework within which to discuss the findings. Inevitably, without a coherent way to express the relationships between different isolated fields, individual researchers tend towards one or another of the general, outdated and unsatisfying old theories of superiority, tension-

release, incongruity, and the like. Or worse, they combine elements from each in a more or less unprincipled manner. There is no general agreement as to what the best questions to ask are, how the basic phenomena should be defined, or how the different types of stimuli should be classified. The search for a general theory has been abandoned as unrealistic, but the existing subtheories cannot be reconciled with each other.



### 3. Amusement Theory and its Validation

The preceding discussion constitutes a typical example of a popular sub-genre in the humour-research field, the critique of past and present causal theories (especially in preparation for the unleashing on the reader of a new-and-improved attempt). What has been less common, indeed rare, is the consideration of the general criteria and methodologies that can, have, or should be used for assessing or validating theories.

It will be argued in this section that most humour theorists have intuitively followed a methodology which, though distant from the ideal of scientific practice, represents the most promising procedure for understanding phenomena such as amusement. Making this procedure explicit, however, may be of use both to better follow it through and to better compare and assess its results. The methodology, which I will call 'aggregate introspection,' is most suitable for studying features of everyday thought, emotion, and experience which are familiar to all human beings but inaccessible to controlled and objective observation. The first step of the procedure is for the theorist to gradually develop a description of relevant phenomena through a process of continuous testing and modification of the description with an expanding body of diverse empirical facts derived from everyday experience. He must then communicate his results in a manner --normally by the use of many and varied illustrations-- which will allow others to understand his proposed concepts and relations, and to put them to the test themselves. The validity of the resulting theory can then be assessed by all those who read and consider its proposals, by an identical process of testing with reference to their own experience. A successful theory of this type is one with which the largest and most varied body of competent readers will identify.

The aggregate introspection method is that which has been used to develop (and should be used to assess) the amusement theory proposed in Part Two of the thesis, as well as its extension (covering laughter and humour) in Part Three.

### 3.1. Amusement and Conventional Scientific Methods

A causal theory of amusement claims that a particular cause (the amusement stimulus) leads to a particular effect (the amusement response). Can such a relation be demonstrated? And if so, how?

In conventional scientific practice, causal relations ('A causes B') are proposed as hypotheses which may then be tested against empirical cases. Tests may be engineered by the artificial provocation of appropriate circumstances (i.e., in an experimental laboratory) or carried out by seeking, collecting, and reporting observations of naturally occurring events. Researchers will attempt to see if it is the case that when 'A' occurs or is brought about 'B' always follows, and whether occurrences of 'B' are always preceded by 'A'. These tests should be objective, in the sense that observations are of events external to the mind of the observer, and thus shareable by other observers. 'A' and 'B' should be describable in such a way that any trained researcher could carry out and report tests. If predictions are not borne out by any proper test, the hypothesis may be discarded or modified. Additional hypotheses may also be generated to account for variability of effects under different circumstances. A hypothesis which is highly falsifiable and yet remains unfalsified across all or most successive tests may be established as a theory.

In the case of amusement, this procedure cannot be undertaken in the same manner. A theory attempting to characterize the cause(s) of amusement is *not testable* in the conventional scientific sense, due to the obstacles to objective observation of the basic phenomena. In the testing of amusement theories, there can be no interobserver agreement regarding the observation of either cause or effect (at least in most cases).

Amusement, as we have seen, reacts to a cognitive stimulus of some type, that is, to a mental event. 'Appropriate incongruity,' 'non-seriousness,' or 'superiority over an other' all attempt to characterize certain perceptions experienced by a subject, who does not ordinarily conceptualize them in such terms himself. Without science-fiction brain scans or telepathy, these events cannot be observed directly, except by the subject himself. Thus, two observers can never agree sensibly on whether a particular period of mental activity within one of them, let alone a third party, could be plausibly

characterized as a case of 'superiority,' 'incongruity,' or whatever. Only one of the two observers would have direct sensorial access to the mental activity in question.

Amusement itself, of course, is an equally elusive phenomenon. As we have seen, laughter cannot be taken as a transparent sign of its occurrence, and neither can the assertions of an actor. Again, therefore, we encounter the essential impossibility of inter-observer agreement. Moreover, the expression of amusement is highly sensitive to observation itself. The experimental paradigm is notoriously effective in eliminating laughter from interaction. Subjects, often isolated in the experimental room, nervous, and aware of their condition of observed 'subjects/lab rats' rarely exhibit the uninhibited displays of laughter common in social interaction:

An index as to the artificiality and sterility of much of the humor research to date is that the majority of researchers do not incorporate any measure of *laughter* in their work. One suspects that this is because they know from experience that many of the persons they are observing will not actually laugh.

(Chapman, 1983: 137)

In my own short experience with the experimental approach (Jauregui, 1993) I noticed substantially more (and more suggestive) laughter in the few minutes before and after the procedure than during.

### 3.2. Aggregate Introspection

As objective tests of amusement theories appear unfeasible, the remaining alternative is for subjective tests to be employed. Any subject of amusement --that is to say, any human being-- may develop and test a theory of amusement by mere introspection. Normally, individuals do not devote much thought and effort to such endeavours, but they are nevertheless capable: at an intuitive level, all of us know what makes something funny (as well as many other features of the laughter triad), and can draw upon large pools of experience to make this intuitive knowledge more explicit.

Moreover, if a relatively accurate causal theory of amusement is presented in detail to any individual, he is likely to recognize its accuracy and prefer it to less accurate ones, by reference to his own experiences. In possession of an inexhaustible fountain of first hand data (i.e., past and present knowledge of his own amusement) as well as of second- and third-hand data (others' apparent/alleged amusement), he is sufficiently equipped to judge whether the theory accounts for the facts in a plausible way. Indeed, an individual *must* look inwardly to make any such decision. Only when considering his own experiences can he be certain of the presence and degree of amusement, as well as of the object of amusement and/or laughter. Only by reference to such experiences, by a process of identification or 'projection,' can he understand the potential reality behind others' laughter display (whether observed naturalistically or measured with a 'laugh-o-meter').

If causal theories of amusement can only be tested by an individual scientist, the results of any test will be valid only for himself. A more general validity may be obtained, however, *if many individuals carry out the relevant testing and agree on the result*. In practice, though not always explicitly, this **aggregate introspection** method has been the usual procedure applied in the field of humour (and, incidentally, in other areas of social and human sciences).

### 3.3. Aggregate Introspection in Humour Research

All amusement theorists have been driven to the 'aggregate introspection' procedure, though it has rarely been discussed explicitly. An analysis of the texts of humour theorists, from Plato to Raskin, will reveal a common attempt to engage the reader's imagination and self-reflective abilities. The use of hypothetical examples forced on the reader by the second-person 'you,' for example, is common:

Take a case. You are sitting in a theatre, absorbed in the progress of an interesting drama.... There appears from behind the scenes a tame kid, which...walks up to the lovers and sniffs at them. You cannot help joining in the roar which greets this *contretemps*.

(Spencer, 1891: 461)

If you feel that such distortions of the human face do not really exist, that Daumier, deliberately exaggerating, merely pretended that they exist, then you are absolved from horror and pity and can laugh at his grotesques. But if you feel that this is indeed what Daumier saw in those de-humanized faces, then you are looking at a work of art.

(Koestler, 1964: 70)

Equally rife is the inclusive 'we':

For most of us laughter bubbles to the fore only rarely when there is no one else around. These are occasions when we relive amusing accidents or when in daydreams we conjure up thoughts of others. Sometimes an author can levitate us so that we 'lose' ourselves in the story and imagine ourselves as first-hand witnesses to funny events. When we laugh it is as though we were actually present.

(Chapman, 1983: 148)

Such assertions are wholly unsubstantiated, except by the author's own personal experience and perhaps his knowledge of a few other cases. Nevertheless, humour theorists feel confident enough about their typicality and generalizability to offer them as 'stories' in which the reader himself is included. Even when the author retells examples from his own perspective, or uses the impersonal third-person terms 'he,' 'subject,' 'speaker/hearer,' 'actor/observer,' and the like, the use of hypothetical examples in itself invites the reader to consider the plausibility of the author's words by reference to personal experience. Such hypothetical examples are perhaps the most universal feature of humour theory writing:

If I see a character in a film accidentally lean against the lever of a slot machine and thereby hit the jackpot, I might be amused by this incongruity. But if I were to do the same thing accidentally in a gambling casino, my laughter might be all the greater because my enjoyment of the incongruity would be boosted by my positive feelings toward my sudden good fortune.

(Morreall, 1982: 251)

These may even be supplemented with direct requests to exercise the imagination, as in the excerpt from Spencer quoted above ("Take a case..."), or this further example from Morreall's article: "Even adult laughter need not involve incongruity; *consider* our laughter on winning a game or on anticipating some enjoyable activity" (p. 245, my italics).

Such true or imaginary anecdotes are often complemented by a second common technique for stimulating audience participation. Particularly in the case of verbal and pictorial humour, the reader can be engaged directly by being offered examples of amusement stimuli to be consumed on the spot for immediate analysis. Indeed, many books and articles in the field could be profitably ransacked by comedians for material and inspiration. Victor Raskin, for example, includes no less than 400 jokes in his *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985).

The substantive strategy employed by these authors has varied little. Commonly, illustrations are provided of funny events, which are interpreted according to the theory proposed (i.e., jokes contain incongruities, mistakes are incongruities, etc). As a contrast, situations where the causal factor is lacking or disappears are sometimes suggested, with claims that amusement in these cases is also absent or curtailed (i.e., scientific discoveries resolve incongruities, producing surprise and admiration). Illustrations may also be offered to demonstrate that variations in the causal stimulus cause variations in amusement (i.e., the greater the incongruity, the greater the amusement). The quotes by Spencer, Morreal, Chapman, and Koestler cited above include examples of all three types. Implicit in this procedure is the claim that if these descriptions of reality find resonance in readers, who thus find the theory plausible, such support will be evidence of its validity.

In such theoretical works, experimental evidence, statistics, and documented cases of amusement are rarely to be found. These types of observations are more common in analyses of topics at one remove from the question of the causes of amusement, analyses which often admit their indirect link to the central concerns of the field. Towards the end of a review of the experimental study of 'disparagement humour,' associated with 'superiority' theories, Dolf Zillman (1983: 103) concludes that "dispositional considerations (...) project *how funny* a disparaging event will be to whom; but they fail to predict whether or not it will *be funny* in the first place." In a review of research on cognitive models of humour, Jerry Suls admits that though this type of analysis "describes a part of the humor experience,...[it] is not a complete account" (1983: 54-55). For the reasons provided above in section 3.1, such research is fundamentally unsuited to the task of validating a general account of amusement.

When discussing the validity of theories, authors again most often resort to the presentation of hypothetical anecdotes and directly amusing stimuli, allowing the reader to falsify where supposedly appropriate:

The familiar instance of a man joining in the laugh against himself makes nonsense of the [aggression] theory.

(Baillie, 1921: 272)

Others, with Locke, have supposed that heterogeneity or ... incongruity is naturally comic. Yet nobody need laugh at the combination of a hot sun with a cold wind.

(Carritt, 1923: 554)

Reference to the aggregate level of assessment also takes place, most often during introductions which bemoan the lack of a generally satisfying explanation for amusement:

No all embracing theory of humour and/or laughter has yet gained widespread acceptance and possibly no general theory will ever be successfully applied to the human race as a whole.

(Chapman and Foot, 1976)

In the first century the Roman Quintillian complained that no one had yet explained what laughter is, though many had tried. And even with all the philosophers and psychologists who have tackled the problem in the intervening centuries, the story is pretty much the same today -- we are still without an adequate general theory of laughter.

(Morreall, 1982: 243)

These types of statements leave unsaid the implied conclusion that a theory of amusement which 'generally' does not convince is almost certainly untrue. Most readers will intuitively agree with the implication, however, especially after exposure to the theories themselves.

### 3.4. The Method in Detail

The 'aggregate introspection' method may be described as a three-stage process: (1) Development and testing of a hypothesis by its creator; (2) individual assessment; and (3) aggregate assessment.

#### 3.4.1. Development and Testing of a Hypothesis

In the beginning, there is the untested hypothesis and its originator. Attempting to trace amusement theories to such roots would be pointless, considering the ancient interest in the subject, but we may assume that such roots exist. For the sake of simplicity, let us consider the case of a monocausal theory:

*'X, and only X, causes amusement in all cases of X'*

(i.e., the perception of incongruity, and only such a perception, causes amusement in all cases where incongruity is perceived)

The creator of this hypothesis, then, would be immediately able to test it against numerous events recorded from past experience in his memory; and against subsequent events as they occur in his unfolding daily life.

Causal relations can never be directly demonstrated in science, but they can easily be disproven. Thus, the above hypothesis would be supported if both of the following proposals should resist falsification over many trials:

- a) In cases of amusement, amusement always follows X
- b) In cases of X, amusement always follows

If both statements were found to be supported by events for all cases encountered over a reasonable period, our scientist would have transformed his hypothesis into a tested theory, albeit an *individually* tested one.

For example, if 'the perception of incongruity' were to be tested as the only and consistent cause of amusement, the assessor could consider his various experiences of amusement --verbal jokes, satire, parody, spontaneous mishaps, tickling-- and attempt to decide whether these antecedent events could be characterized as 'incongruities' in some consistent sense. Conversely, he could attempt to imagine 'incongruities' of varied types and observe whether and how amusement is related to them.

### Guidelines for Testing

The testing procedure should be conducted according to three basic considerations. Firstly, the causal factor should be defined as precisely as possible. Vague concepts such as 'rigidity,' 'incongruity,' 'superiority,' 'tension-release,' or 'play,' may prevent a researcher from discriminating efficiently between relevant and irrelevant phenomena. They facilitate, rather, the application of the relevant term wherever convenient --not as undesirable a state of affairs in scientific practice as it is in scientific theory.

Secondly, the theorist should seek, as far as possible, to include within the testing programme the widest range of diverse instances of both the proposed cause (i.e., 'incongruity') and amusement itself. Though obvious, this guideline can prove difficult to achieve due to cultural and theoretical biases, as well as practical problems.

One common failing is the excessive focus on amusement, rather than the proposed causal event. Perhaps due to the greater saliency of amusement itself within their overall project, most theorists have organized their data according to a set of stimuli already known to be funny. The set of events generated by the definition of the cause, however, often seems to have been left unexplored. As we have seen, 'superiority' theorists have restricted their use of the term to certain misfortunes of others or to 'victory' in 'contests of wit' (i.e., Gruner, 1979), disregarding such events as success in sporting matches, or an army general's perception of relative rank when confronted with a private.

Regarding the full range of 'funny things,' the tendency to identify amusement with humour (i.e., *intentional* attempts to provoke it) has already been discussed in

Chapter One. In addition to the hugely varied range of unintentionally funny events, other relatively rare elicitors such as tickling, sensory illusions, magic tricks, amusement rides, or 'brain teasers' often escape mention. Certain instances of mirth may be difficult to test merely due to practical problems in overcoming barriers of distance: the laughter of young children or of peoples from radically different cultural backgrounds. Many situations also escape easy analysis due to their involving nature. Laughter is a pleasant experience occurring most often in relaxed, informal settings. These, however, are precisely the settings where an analyst will find the greatest obstacles to achieving the attitude of an observer. The nature of the hypothesis itself may make certain stimuli more salient and others relatively invisible. Furthermore, temptations (of a more or less conscious nature) to ignore certain events which do not fit comfortably with a favoured scheme may obstruct a fair survey. Finally, disliked mental occurrences (i.e., 'cruel' laughter) may be repressed or disguised by the mind of the theorist.

The third proposed guideline recommends that when testing particular cases, the analyst should seek to apply the definition of the cause of amusement in a consistent way. This uniformity will only be possible, of course, if a sufficiently clear and precise definition has been constructed. If the meaning of this definition must be stretched or distorted to accommodate a particular fact, the hypothesis is falsified.

### Non-Falsification of the Hypothesis

If these three principles have been followed, and neither statement 'a)' nor statement 'b)' falsified, the hypothesis is confirmed by the researcher. In this case, the hypothesis should not only describe an element common to the range of funny events (and lacking in non-funny ones), but also plausibly account for and successfully characterize the evident diversity of amusing stimuli in terms of the definition proposed. Differences between jokes, tickling, gaffes, and other phenomena should be directly attributable to typical or logical variations in the characteristics or form of the cause identified.

### Falsification and Reformulation

If statement 'a)' and/or 'b)' were falsified by facts, the researcher could attempt to modify the definition of X, yielding 'X<sub>1</sub> causes amusement.' Another option would be to add one or more 'exception clauses':

- a) 'In cases of amusement, amusement always follows X (except when it follows Y)'
- b) 'In cases of X, amusement always follows (except if G is also the case, and then Q follows instead)'

The new revised hypothesis could then be tested as before. If such revisions yielded no better result, the hypothesis would have to be abandoned altogether.

In this process, a hypothesis guides the theorist to the empirical facts, and in turn these guide the theorist back to refreshing his hypothesis. The cycle may be repeated numerous times, ideally yielding an ever-closer fit between the two.

### Supporting Evidence

Additional confirmation of the hypothesis could be obtained if it led to the explanation or understanding of well-known facts surrounding amusement, laughter and humour. Psychological, communicational, and social effects of amusement, laughter, and humour, as well as their uses and possible 'functions' (See Chapter Eight); the influence of 'affective disposition' on amusement at disparagement humour; the common presence of ambiguous or clashing elements in verbal and other types of humour; the use and effectiveness of humour 'cues' by comedians; the influence of interpersonal and interactional variables on amusement. If such phenomena can be accounted for naturally by a specific causal hypothesis of amusement, or its logical corollaries, the hypothesis would warrant additional credibility. In themselves, however, these sorts of elucidations cannot provide full validation of a thesis. It might be expected that a good theory will constitute a hub connecting many recurrent facts in the field, but the main test of its

validity continues to be its explanatory power regarding the varied range of amusement-provoking situations.

---

<sup>1</sup> This line would yield a 'pluralistic' hypothesis (See Section I.B.)

### 3.4.2. Individual Assessment

I have outlined in some detail the first stage of the proposed validation procedure, the testing of a hypothesis by its originator. Stage 2 is, in form, practically identical to stage 1: A proposed cause of amusement is carefully defined and then considered as a description of events over as wide a range of phenomena as possible, leading to acceptance, falsification, or reformulation/retesting.

In this case, however, the hypothesis has been borrowed by a reader or hearer from the more-or-less developed theory of an originator. Faced with an explanation such as 'appropriate incongruity provokes amusement,' an individual can exploit his exclusive access to his own mental processes in order to test the idea.

As documented above in section 3.3, every theorist of amusement invites his audience to participate in the scientific endeavour by checking the facts presented for himself, and on himself. A successful humour theorist ideally constructs his text as a systematic soliciting of recognition from his readers. Indeed, humour theorists often refrain from providing actual cases of amusement as evidence, aware of the emptiness of such proof. Hypothetical cases and examples of humour will suffice, as the crucial testing is to be done in the reader's head. When facts are produced, these serve merely as illustrations to clarify a point. If the illustrations are well chosen, and the argument well-developed, the reader will have all the tools and materials necessary to follow the author's testing procedure. Whether in the end he agrees with the author's conclusions is another matter. As an experimenter himself, he may abandon the hypothesis or perform new modifications upon it.

### 3.4.3. Aggregate Assessment

The third stage of the testing process occurs at a higher level of analysis. Assuming a theory comes to be tested by numerous individuals, the proportion of these who generally accept/reject the hypothesis represents a kind of aggregate assessment of its validity, a meta-test. The theory as originally distributed can be considered as a sort of questionnaire of unusually large size (and only one rather leading question). In conventional science, a theory can be tested publicly, by a prediction or set of predictions which are either borne out or falsified by an appropriate experimental procedure. In the realm of the emotions, intentions, motivations, and thought, the experimental procedure must be carried out privately, but the *results* can be shared publicly.

For a theory of amusement to be considered validated, an extremely high proportion of 'experimenters' would have to agree on its validation. Mere numbers, however, cannot be the sole criterion. Particular weight should be granted to the opinion of professional social scientists, and especially those with experience in humour and related academic fields (i.e., emotion, communication, and other areas of psychology and sociology). Attention should also be paid to the possible adhesion to the view of assessors from widely divergent theoretical, disciplinary, ideological and other backgrounds and leanings. Ideally, and allowing for cases of poor comprehension of the theory and shoddy application of tests, an almost complete unanimity would be required. In less abstract terms, this could be achieved by the general acceptance of a single paradigm by the main of humour research.

Admittedly, the procedure is wanting in scientific rigour. The variability in completeness, quality, and method of individual 'tests' cannot be assessed in practice. Many extraneous factors are likely to bias these procedures: variable exposure to theoretical alternatives, preconceived ideas on amusement, time and effort devoted to the task, self-reflective and analytical skills, cultural distance from the idioms used in the theoretical text. There exists no higher authority, furthermore, charged with the task of 'counting heads' and deciding upon the outcome of the aggregate test, nor any systematized procedure for such head-counting or for the weighing of the relative importance of opinions.

Three justifications can be used to defend the method, though none of them will satisfy a committed skeptic. The most decisive of these, perhaps, is the lack of alternatives for humour theory. Due to reasons outlined above, traditional methods fall short of the task, and 'aggregate introspection' seems altogether less ineffectual. A case could be made, certainly, for abandoning the amusement project altogether. I will assume, on the other hand, that the search for answers may be worthwhile --though the certainty of such answers should not be overestimated.

The second reason is the historical derivation of the first: as documented above, proposals of causal amusement theories have always employed a more-or-less sophisticated version of this method. This 'safety in numbers' argument does not improve the intrinsic credibility of the approach, but it does bolster its claimed status as 'least awful of several evils.'

Finally, on a more positive note, 'aggregate introspection' has actually been used in other fields with great success, even acclaim (as well as, admittedly, considerable puzzlement and resistance towards the method itself). A case will be considered below.

### 3.5. A Successful Precedent

It could be argued that silence on matters requiring such methods would be more prudent. On the other hand, they have in the past achieved results which have been widely recognized and applauded.

One outstanding example of aggregate introspection can be found in the work of Erving Goffman. This American sociologist developed a theory of the behaviour of individuals during social interaction which has had an enormous influence throughout the social sciences. Despite its success, however, his work has baffled researchers since its publication due not only to the novelty of the topic he treated, but also to the methods employed. These methods fit well with the description provided above of 'aggregate introspection.' Goffman's texts can accurately be characterized as following a systematic solicitation of recognition from his readers, a recognition which moreover has been largely achieved in the widest of academic and non-academic circles.

Goffman routinely made claims about social behaviour without what might be called 'proper empirical support.' Indeed, the bulk of his writings consist of such claims, and Goffman had no qualms about admitting the fact:

Throughout the papers in this volume unsubstantiated assertions are made regarding the occurrence of certain social practices in certain times and among peoples of various kinds. This description by pronouncement is claimed to be a necessary evil. I assume that if a broad attempt is to be made to tie together bits and pieces of contemporary social life in exploratory analysis, then a great number of assertions must be made without solid quantitative evidence.

(1971: xiii-

xiv)

In this and other passages, Goffman implies that (despite his own practice) empirical support *could* be obtained for his assertions, a possibility that many of his commentators have seconded: "Whether people share the interactional concerns identified by Goffman, and whether they orient to such concerns in the manner he suggests, are frequently

questions which await further inquiry” (Drew and Wooton, 1988: 6). As Drew and Wooton suggest, however, these questions still 'await' inquiry --they have not in fact been tested. Indeed, though many of his concepts have become widely accepted and applied, there has been little empirical work explicitly aiming to test and follow up on his ideas, no Goffman 'school' or research centre to study his 'interaction order' (Drew and Wooton, 1988: 2). Why is this the case? Considering "the breadth of Goffman's appeal and the popularity of his writings" (Burns, 1992: 1), and his alleged status as "one of the leading sociological writers of the post-war period" (Giddens, 1988: 250), it seems highly unlikely that mere lack of interest could explain such a state of affairs almost forty years after *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

I would argue that the nature of Goffman's assertions makes unfeasible, problematic, or merely superfluous any conventional empirical study. The everyday events, practices, and situations which he excelled in describing and classifying -- attempts to control bodily outbursts in public, the uses and meanings of eye-contact, the cues used by actors to interpret 'what is going on'-- together constitute precisely the types of phenomena least amenable to controlled, objective observation. How does one go about 'proving,' for instance, that people universally display 'greeting behaviour' in the manner that Goffman suggests (1971: 62-94)? Trying to reproduce the possible variables in 'the laboratory' (merely one of the infinite possible situations considered by Goffman) seems as far fetched as experimenting with the full range of laughables. Neither could any respondent (nor, hopefully, any researcher) possibly take seriously a questionnaire on the subject...

When bumping into a friend on the street (you see him, he sees you), do you

- A) Immediately make a sign of recognition ('Hello', waving, smile...)
- B) Wait until he makes a sign, then reply.
- C) Go about your business as before
- D) Consciously look away.

It is not that empirical corroboration of these sorts of findings, or at least some of them, would be impossible. Rather, such corroboration would be somewhat naive and superfluous, considering the immediate forcefulness of Goffman's technique at its best. Even naturalistic observation of a conventional kind, while missing what actors hide (arguably the very focus of Goffman's work), could offer only additional cases of the 'already evident.' All of us know, by an intuition founded on masses of first-hand experience, how and when people engage in greeting behaviours, or how and when we experience embarrassment, manage a three-way conversation, or consider someone a bit lunatic. There seems little need to carry out further tests to prove these things to us when a few choice illustrations by this "untiringly perspicacious" observer (Burns, 1992: 2) will suffice to convince each reader of such obvious (if not always verbalized) facts.

Goffman's unorthodox use of empirical data has been widely discussed. He drew his examples from a veritable ragbag of sources: "Some data have been drawn from a study of a mental hospital (hereafter called Central Hospital), some from a study of a Shetland Island community (hereafter called Shetland Isle), some from manuals of etiquette, and some from a file where I keep quotations that have struck me as interesting" (Goffman, 1963: 4). All of these (and other) sources seem to have been given equal weight, and no less than that given to countless hypothetical examples, such as the following:

The social situation then may be the scene of potential or actual conflict between the sets of regulations that ought to govern. Note the famous conflict of definitions in the situation between summer tourists, who would like to extend summer-resort informality to the stores in the local town, and the natives, who would like to preserve proper business decorum in such places.

(1963: 20)

A similar strategy seems to be in operation, therefore, as in the case of humour theory. The object of providing these examples being merely to illustrate ideas, their origin could be no less than wholly irrelevant: "By and large, I do not present these anecdotes, therefore, as evidence or proof, but as clarifying depictions..." (1974: 15).

Regarding the actual process by which he arrived at his ideas, Goffman left few hints. His books and articles represent complete and self-contained concept structures for which the 'building instructions' seem to have been thrown away. Robin Williams (1988), in attempting to distill them from the substance of Goffman's work, argues that a continuous restructuring of theoretical models was undertaken. Comparisons of a tentative model with a growing body of empirical data would prompt modification of the theory, which in turn would feed back on the range of facts to be analyzed. This technique (the very same I have recommended in my description of 'aggregate introspection') has been called "reciprocal or double-fitting" by W.W. Baldamus: "This may be envisaged by imagining a carpenter alternatively altering the shape of a door and the shape of the door frame to obtain a better fit, or a locksmith adjusting successively both the keyhole and the key" (cited in Williams, 1988: 74-75). A progression of ever-more-precise concepts emerges from a chronological analysis of Goffman's texts. Many critics have expressed puzzlement at the apparently cavalier way in which terms and definitions carefully crafted in one book are altered or abandoned in the next. This lack of cumulation is a feature of the method employed. The same field of events is attacked from various fronts to yield the most accurate description possible, each new thrust strengthening and refining a core of basic concepts while risking other, more tentative, innovations. All throughout, Goffman avoided overestimating the validity of his discoveries. These were to be treated as "exercises, trials, tryouts, a means of displaying possibilities, not establishing fact" (1981: 1).

The relevance of the 'aggregate introspection' process to Goffman's method can best be appreciated by reflecting upon the experience of reading his ideas. Commentators on Goffman have remarked upon the way in which the reader is stimulated to fill out the text with examples from his own experience, and 'seduced' by Goffman's prose into reaching the author's conclusions:

Many of his more impressive achievements ... consisted as much as anything in the way he organised his subject matter so as to produce an array of instances immediately recognisable to his readers.

(Burns, 1992: 358)

Goffman is the master of the darting observation, in a kind of analytical pointillism. His method seems to involve 'sociology by epitome'. It is a powerful method; it yokes the reader to its purposes; it impresses the reader's mind and experience into its service. It works in something like the following way.

His observations achieve their sense of typicality, however exotic their scenes may actually be, by using but a stroke or two, an observation or two, a detail or two, to indicate the scene which we as readers are to call up from memory, personal experience or imagination. If he succeeds, that is if *we* succeed in calling such a scene to mind, our very ability to do so from his detail or two is 'proof' of its typicality. The typicality of the scene or action has not only been 'shown', but has been enlisted and exploited, and the adequacy of his description, the bit or two of characterization, has *ipso facto* been demonstrated.

(Schegloff, 1988: 101)

These moments of 'recognition' are confirmations for the individual scientist (but *only* for him) that a proposed theory, or some element within it, describes certain events correctly.

As for 'aggregate assessment' itself, it can be argued that Goffman's work has both undergone such a procedure and, what is more, has generally achieved validity through it:

No one would question the claim that Erving Goffman was one of the leading sociological writers of the post-war period. His writings have been more or less universally acclaimed for their luminosity, their charm and their insight. Probably no sociologist over this period has been as widely read both by those in neighbouring social-science disciplines and by the lay public. (...) I want to propose that Goffman should indeed be ranked as a major social theorist, as a writer who developed a systematic approach to the study of human social life and one whose contributions are in fact as important in this regard as those of [Parsons, Merton, Foucault, Habermas, or Bourdieu].

(Giddens, 1988: 250)

[At the time of the publication of his last book *Forms of Talk*, 1981] the breadth of Goffman's appeal and the popularity of his writings outside the special interests of social scientists had been apparent for many years.... Sales of *The Presentation of Self* were over half a million, *Stigma* was reaching towards its thirtieth reprinting, and translations existed in over a dozen languages.... It was surprising to find the theatre critic of *The Guardian* adopting the term "Goffmanesque" for occasional use and, what is more, leaving it unexplained.

(Burns, 1992: 1)

Such statements of Goffman's "universally" acknowledged success attain their true significance when contrasted with the orthodox body of methodological complaints usually leveled against this unique sociologist. His bizarre and heterogeneous set of empirical examples do not prove his theories, his definitions shift and shimmer, the results seem difficult if not impossible to 'test' --and yet, the 'brilliance' of his insights is everywhere admired, within and without the academic circles. Even his 'enemies' speak well of him:

Rarely, if ever, are these weaknesses described by critics in order to undermine Goffman's whole endeavour. More often, the criticisms serve to legitimate the parceling out of some part of Goffman's work and make it possible for this part to be pressed into service for the critic's own project.

(Williams, 1988: 72)

A wide consensus, then, holds that many of Goffman's descriptions accord with the realities of everyday social interaction. Less clear are the precise aspects of Goffman's legacy which have been best corroborated by individual tests on a grand scale. Many will agree that "the conceptual apparatus he made use of proved defective on occasions" (Burns, 1992: 6), but no statistic exists to determine possible patterns in the assessment of success and failure. The generalizability of his findings also remains unknown: Which

elements of the 'interaction order' he described might be common to social interaction everywhere and which to lesser groupings? Though these questions of detail and scope suggest the limits of 'aggregate introspection,' the overwhelming success of Goffman's work demonstrates the considerable potential of this method.



#### 4. Conclusions

I have considered a number of theoretical treatments of the possible cause or causes of amusement. **Monistic explanations** have identified a single cause -- **aggression/superiority, incongruity, superfluous tension, or a playful attitude**-- but none of these has proven convincing for all cases. Each of them, however, has drawn attention to thought-provoking phenomena, which should be taken into account by any theory: superiority theorists to amusement which is directed toward an object/victim, and to dispositional effects; incongruity research to amusement resulting from the mental union of clashing mental frames --as in jokes and wit; tension-release theories to amusement triggered by the inappropriateness of a felt emotion; 'play' interpretations to 'humour cues,' the serious/non-serious distinction, and the activity of play itself.

**Pluralistic Theories** have attempted to separate amusement into different types according to cause, but no single classification has proven satisfactory. The most common current attitude seems to be that of **non-committal** to any general theory at all, in view of the implausible explanations available. Nevertheless, some answer (whether monist or pluralistic) to the causal question of amusement is certainly desirable to researchers in the field, and almost certainly possible.

In the second half of the chapter I have considered the question of how a causal theory of amusement might be constructed and assessed, in preparation for the proposal of such an account in Part Two of the thesis.

I have argued that such a theory will not be testable according to the conventional scientific paradigm, due to the essentially private nature of the major phenomena. Full confirmation for the complete range of amusement scenarios is only possible by tests carried out by and valid only for an individual scientist. General validity of a hypothesis may be established by aggregate assessment, a consideration of the proportion of individual tests which the hypothesis passes/fails.

Despite the problems associated with this method of **aggregate introspection**, it seems the only viable option for amusement theory. The authors considered in Section I of this chapter, in fact, all resorted to this approach. Further justification has been offered

in the form of an outstanding example of its application in the social sciences: Erving Goffman's thought on everyday social interaction.

In Chapter Three I will suggest that Goffman's relevance to humour research goes far beyond the methodological.

# Chapter Three:

## The Discrediting of Actors' Self-Claims

1. Introduction	page 111
2. Claim-Discredit Humour Theory	page 113
2.1. False Fronts: Plato, Moore, and Pirandello	page 113
2.2. Bad Art: Aristotle, Carritt	page 117
2.3. Unfulfilled Ends: Baillie	page 121
2.4. Deviance: Bergson, Klapp, Powell, Jauregui	page 123
2.5. Others	page 125
3. The Sociology of Erving Goffman	page 127
3.1. Self-Claims on the Everyday Stage	page 128
3.2. Discredit and the Sacred Self	page 131
3.3. Frames of Experience	page 134
3.4. Summary	page 137
4. Mutual References	page 139
4.1. Goffman on Humour Research	page 140
4.2. Humour Research on Goffman	page 145
5. Conclusions	page 147



## 1. Introduction

In this thesis, I will develop a theory of the laughter triad based on a fifth candidate to a 'cause of amusement': the discrediting of a social actor's self-claims. The central idea, to be developed fully in Chapters Four to Six, proposes that amusement follows the assessment, by a subject, that a claim made by a person about himself --about his intelligence, knowledge, beauty, strength, courage, possessions, history, or any other characteristic or competence-- has been discredited. A political speaker who portrays himself as a champion of environmental defense can draw laughter from environmental activists aware of his resistance to 'green' legislation in the past. Anyone claiming to be 'on a diet' is vulnerable to the mirth of others if spied secretly tucking into temptation at a pastry shop. Moreover, most self-claims are made tacitly: surgeons claim manual dexterity and care for patients; fashion models claim beauty, grace, and poise; university professors claim certain pools of knowledge and a substantial 'academic curriculum'; and all of us claim 'common knowledge,' 'common sense,' and the ability to see and hear accurately, think logically, coordinate and control our bodies, and talk properly. For these reasons, typical objects of amusement include surgeons who forget tweezers in patients, fashion models who stumble on the catwalk, university professors caught out as ignorant, and any of us found to be uncultured, scatterbrained, muddleheaded, oafish, or inarticulate.

The idea is not new. Indeed, in this chapter I will demonstrate that its history can be traced back as far as any of the better-known theories. Plato, Luigi Pirandello, and William G. Moore described the ridiculous individual as one who believes or presents himself to be different than he actually is. Aristotle and E.F. Carritt identified aesthetic defects --the failure to express what is intended-- as the essence of funniness. J.B. Baillie portrayed amusement as reacting to a perceived incongruity between a goal and its achievement. Henri Bergson, Orrin Klapp, Chris Powell, and J.A. Jauregui have argued that deviance from social norms of thought, appearance, or behaviour provokes hilarity. All of these suggested stimuli of amusement share a close kinship with the notion of 'self-claim discredit.'

Despite such proposals, this theoretical perspective has largely escaped attention. The neglect may have been partly due to the heterogeneity of metaphors and phrasings employed by theorists. A more important factor, however, may have been the lack of an encompassing theoretical framework or field within which such a view might have been more fully developed or understood. From 1959 to 1983, just such a framework was developed by the American sociologist Erving Goffman, around what he called the 'interaction order' (Goffman 1959; 1961; 1963; 1963b; 1967; 1969; 1971; 1974; 1981; 1983). In the second half of the chapter, I will present an introduction to Goffman's work, suggesting that it provides a general understanding of the area within which 'claim-discredit' theorists have struggled, and thus the opportunity for such a view to be more firmly established as an alternative to the better-known accounts of amusement.

## 2. Claim-discredits in Humour Theory

Numerous scholars and comic artists have developed one or another variety of what I will call 'claim-discredit' theories. The images and metaphors employed by these theorists have varied substantially: seeing behind the deceptive mask of a stage character, judging a work of art to be ugly, noticing a mismatch between ends and achievements, detecting the infraction of a social norm of propriety. This conceptual variety occludes an essential convergence of perspective rarely noticed either by commentators or by the authors themselves. In this section I will present some of the more notable versions of the claim-discredit theory of amusement, under a few basic headings.

### 2.1. False Fronts:

Plato, Moore, Pirandello

Plato and Aristotle are frequently cited as the respectable forefathers to theories of superiority or aggression (See, for instance, Zillman, 1983; Ziv, 1984). The original texts, however, do not fit comfortably with such a portrayal. In Plato's *Dialogues*, we find the following exchange between Socrates and Protarchus:

*Socrates:* That being so, observe the nature of the ridiculous.

*Protarchus:* Be kind enough to tell me.

*Socrates:* Taking it generally it is a certain kind of badness, and gets its name from a certain state of mind. I may add that it is that species of the genus 'badness' which is differentiated by the opposite of the inscription at Delphi.

*Protarchus:* You mean, 'Know thyself', Socrates?

*Socrates:* I do. Plainly the opposite of that would be for the inscription to read, 'By no means know thyself.'

(...)

*Socrates:* If anyone does not know himself, must it not be in one of three ways?

*Protarchus:* How so?

*Socrates:* First, in respect of wealth, he may think himself richer than his property makes him.

*Protarchus:* Plenty of people are affected that way, certainly.

*Socrates:* But there are even more who think themselves taller and more handsome and physically finer in general than they really and truly are.

*Protarchus:* Quite so.

*Socrates:* But by far the greatest number are mistaken as regards the third class of things, namely possessions of the soul. They think themselves superior in virtue, when they are not.

*Protarchus:* Yes indeed.

*Socrates:* And is it not the virtue of wisdom that the mass of men insist on claiming, interminably disputing, and lying about how wise they are?

*Protarchus:* Of course.

(*Philebus*, 48-49)

In this dialogue, Plato describes a kind of laughter which is directed *at* another individual. In a later passage he furthermore characterizes it as "delight in [others'] misfortunes" and as a kind of "malice." For these reasons, Plato's words have been classified under the 'disparagement' interpretation of laughter. The above lines, however, far from suggesting that mere disparagement, victory, or superiority result in amusement, specify *the discrediting of unjustified conceit* as the effective cause.

In the dialogue, Socrates defines the ridiculous individual as one who claims to be more/better than he actually is. Usually this occurs because he wrongly believes himself to be so, but the case of "lying" about the self is also considered. The cause of laughter implied in such a definition is **the observation, by a perceiver, that a socially valued self-claim put forward by an actor is false.**

A similar idea emerges from a twentieth century study of Moliere by Will G. Moore (1949). In this work of literary criticism, Moore adopts a new approach to the classic analyses of Moliere's theatre by emphasizing not the social critique they contain but rather the comedy itself. In doing so, he implicitly constructs a theory of amusement based on a theatrical metaphor of 'parts' and 'masks':

All of us play many parts; comedy delights in the situations that force us to abandon or interrupt the part, to remove the mask. Moliere is endlessly inventing such situations, in which men get excited or angry, and cannot keep up the part.

(p. 104)

Despite such general statements, Moore applies these ideas only to Moliere's own plays, which indeed provide countless fitting illustrations. In the case of *Le Malade Imaginaire*, for example,...

Argan, by nature a healthy man, is persuaded to act as if he were ill. Diafoirus pere devotes all his energies to proving that black is white. His son is a nitwit pretending to be clever. Beline protests an affection she is all too ready to disavow. Toinette adopts a disguise that deceives nobody but her master. The suitor gets into the house under false pretences. Louison feigns death. Argan's doctors parade a power they do not really possess.

(p. 75-76)

Far from being restricted to the works of a French playwright, Moore's account can be applied even more generally than Plato's. Many of Moliere's characters fall neatly under Plato's category of people who turn out to be less venerable than they claim. However, the mask metaphor encompasses a wider range of amusing situations if applied not only to stage characters but also to 'social actors.' Plato gave examples only of standard, socially-valued self-claims such as wealth, wisdom, or physical beauty. Moore, on the other hand, recognizes that all manner of specific self-claims, even socially undesirable ones such as being ill or dead, can be funny when the mask falls or is torn off. The stimulus of amusement implied here is **the observation, by a perceiver, that a self-claim put forward by an actor is false.**

Forty years earlier, Luigi Pirandello had defined the role of the humourist in similar terms. The Sicilian comic playwright described his trade as one of creating and then unmasking fictional characters, who are merely reflections of real human 'mask-wearers':

Unwillingly, unknowingly, [man] is always wearing the mask of whatever it is that he, in good faith, fancies himself to be: handsome, good, courteous, generous, unhappy, etc., etc. To think of it, all this is so ludicrous ... yet we lie psychologically just as we lie socially. Everybody straightens up his mask the best he can -- that is, the external mask, for we also have the inner mask, which often is at variance with the outer one.

The humorist readily perceives the various simulations used in the struggle for life; he amuses himself by unmasking them, but he does not become indignant: it's the truth!

(1908; 132, 134, 139)

## 2.2. Bad Art: Aristotle, Carritt

Aristotle provided a slightly different perspective on the claim-discredit idea. Though his full thoughts on 'Comedy' have been lost, a short passage in *Poetics* provides a tantalizing clue:

As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.

(*On Poetics*, V, 1)

This view has been taken to depict a particularly cruel and unfair sort of laughter: mockery at the gross deficiencies of fellow human beings. I suspect that Aristotle has been misunderstood in this regard, however, the short paragraph that remains of his thoughts on Comedy having been interpreted without reference to the philosopher's wider views on relevant topics.

The above passage does not actually offer a theory of amusement, but rather a description of stage comedy. If a 'cause of amusement' is to be read into these words, however, Aristotle defines it as "one particular kind of [fault in men] which is a species of the Ugly" -- in other words, an *aesthetic fault*. Specifically, it is that set of ugly things (in persons) which are not productive of pain or harm to others, the 'harmlessly ugly.' What does it mean to say that something is ugly? Though Aristotle did not provide a definition or theory of beauty, his writings on the arts provide some keys to his understanding of the notion and its contrary (see *Poetics*; and Butcher, 1902, for a detailed commentary).

According to Aristotle, objects in nature all tend towards, but rarely achieve, some ideal prototype. All things have a permanent essence, partly occluded by minor deficiencies, damage, and decay: each of a dozen apples, for example, is a slightly flawed

example of the same perfect 'appleness.' Artists attempt to 'imitate nature,' not by copying the observable objects around them, but by discerning and reproducing the ideals towards which nature strives. Similarly, practitioners of the 'useful arts' (scientists, educators, doctors...) attempt to actually supplement the work of nature with activities that build on the existing state of events to produce outcomes ever closer to the perfect model.

If we assume that Aristotle saw beauty as the outcome of a successful work of art, then the beautiful would be that set of things, natural or man-made, which most resemble the ends at which nature aims. Ugliness in persons, then, would be found wherever an aspect of a person (a characteristic or a behaviour), left much to be desired in comparison with the hypothetical 'perfect human being.' If such a shortcoming was not seen as harmful (to either the observer, the actor, or to anyone else), it would be found amusing. Two categories of human ugliness were offered by Aristotle: mistakes and deformities. Following from the above analysis, mistakes can be considered failures to achieve a minimum standard (i.e., sufficient closeness to perfection) regarding a particular skill or competence. Deformities constitute failures to achieve a minimum standard regarding appearance.

Considering the wide range of activities embraced by the label of 'art' in Greek thought (from painting to politics), 'mistakes' and 'deformities' could include a vast array of varied mishaps, errors, and distortions. Aristotle's view of amusement, therefore, probably went beyond the sorts of unseemly images that the phrase 'laughing at ugliness' evokes in the modern reader:

Taking account of the elements which enter into the idea of beauty in Aristotle, we shall probably not unduly strain the expression [ugliness], if we extend it to embrace the incongruities, absurdities, or cross-purposes of life, its blunders and discords, its imperfect correspondences and adjustments, and that in matters intellectual as well as moral.

(Butcher, 1902: 374)

The notion that nature 'tends' towards a single perfect ideal may well be doubted. In this century, the social sciences have torn apart the idea of a single, objective, 'correct'

and 'natural' ideal of behaviour or appearance: such ideals vary from culture to culture, and from one generation to the next. A more relativized version of the 'ugliness' concept would be required for the Aristotelian view to withstand modern scrutiny.

Just such a perspective was developed in a little-known paper by political theorist E.F. Carritt (1923) who also defined 'the ludicrous' as an "aesthetic defect." Carritt did not recognize the closeness of Aristotle's view to his own, drawing his inspiration rather from Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic* (1901). According to the Italian philosopher, all fields of human endeavour --logical, moral, economic-- have their aesthetic side. Ugliness was defined by him as a failure in expressiveness, and Carritt identified this failure as the cause of amusement (p. 561):

A vice, a fallacy, a blunder are, from the moral, logical, economic points of view, serious enough; they are in fact wicked, false, dangerous; and the man who cannot see this is fatuous. Regarded as incoherencies of expression, bits of mechanism adhering to life, faults of style, so to speak, they are ugly and absurd. The man who cannot see this has no sense of humour.

(...)

What, then, is the typically amusing thing? I should say a work of art that misses its mark. The most immediately and undeniably funny thing in the world is what seems to us a bit of high-faluting tragedy or unintended bathos. Of the same kind is any breakdown of dignity or intensity, whenever a man has wished to present himself or his position as venerable or tragic or passionate and is betrayed into words or action inconsistent with the part he would play. (...) Next comes the failure of life, especially in its bodily aspects, to express congruously either the human spirit, which we naturally assume a body should express, or some definite feeling which we expect it to express in a given context.

Carritt holds that when an individual regards the aesthetic side of any human state, action, or production --a work of art, a political speech, a business transaction, a plate of *spaghetti alla carbonara*-- the discovery of ugliness provokes amusement, that is, the discovery that what was meant to have been expressed has not been: the composition of

the painting is confused, the prime minister stutters, the spaghetti turn out to be overcooked and pasty.

Noticing an aesthetic defect is equivalent to discovering that an artist has not produced beauty, that he has **failed to fulfill an expressive self-claim**. In the eye of the beholder, an artist can be held accountable for not only explicit claims about what he sought to achieve (such as the artist's words, cues in the work itself, or its title) but also for implicit self-claims applicable to every artist in the relevant society, and others applicable to artists within the relevant genre or school (i.e., specific standards of quality and style applicable to the mode and genre of expression).

According to Croce, however, every man, in so far as he thinks and acts, can be considered an 'artist': as a manager running a business, as a professor giving a lecture, or as a pedestrian gracefully ambulating and avoiding collisions. What is conventionally labeled 'art' is merely the specialized activity in which expression constitutes the primary aim. Plato's self-deluded boasters and Moore's mask-wearers are objects of ridicule because they fail to actually express what they explicitly or implicitly claim about themselves. Thus, the Aristotelian view can be subsumed under the earlier general statement: **amusement results from the observation, by a perceiver, that a self-claim put forward by an actor is false** (i.e., has not been expressed).

### 2.3. Unfulfilled Ends: Baillie

J.B. Baillie (1921) developed a further variation on this basic idea. In his words (p. 259),

Laughter arises when the character or process of an object, which is considered to refer to an end, real or supposed, is judged to be partially or wholly incongruent or incoherent with the end in view. It is important to note that the end must not be given up but must still hold good in spite of the incongruity; and also that the object laughed at must not give way and must be none the worse for its incoherence with the end.

Baillie illustrates with the image of "a malicious wind playing havoc with a dandy's dignity and carrying his hat by leaps and bounds far down the street, with its owner in hasty pursuit." The man insists on the relation between him and his hat, while the forces of nature continue to deny the existence of such a relation.

This theory can be considered a close relation of those discussed so far. A precondition to amusement stipulated by Baillie is the 'appreciation' of an object: "The peculiar character of this mental attitude [appreciation] towards the situation is that we look at it in the light of an end which it seeks to fulfill" (p. 257). In the view developed by Carritt, the mental process exercised upon an object by the individual could well be labeled 'appreciation' in this sense, though he would have added the adjective 'artistic.' Baillie defines 'the ludicrous' as that which falls short of the end aimed at, congruent with the earlier definition that we laugh at that which falls short of expressing the intentions of an 'artist,' or the quality attributed to himself by a stage character.

Baillie's formulation takes for granted the interpersonal nature of the amusement situation. By making this element explicit, the conclusions of Aristotle/Carritt are again reached. The concept of an 'end' implies the existence of (normally human) volition; the concept of 'appreciation' assumes a human appreciator. The fact that "the end must not be given up" and is aimed at "certainly" (p. 259) communicates to the observer that this end is claimed by the actor as his --as in the case of the dandy claiming the ownership of his

hat by running after it. To judge the actual achievements of a person in relation to the intended outcome is to treat the former as aesthetic creations (in Croce's sense).

This particular version, however, helps to clarify an important point: Two different stances may be adopted towards a work of art, and only one may result in amusement. Firstly, the object can be merely perceived or experienced, the individual opening himself up towards it in a freely accepting, non-judgmental way. Secondly, the object may be *judged*, given a critical treatment on the basis of stylistic criteria. The naive museumgoer and the jaded art critic personify the two opposing attitudes, though in practice, of course, both are exercised to various degrees and at different points during an aesthetic experience<sup>1</sup>.

It is only when an observer adopts the critical stance that amusement may result, once a shortcoming is spotted. Noticing an expressive fault *as a fault* requires such an attitude of critical assessment. Though the point is implicit in Carritt's article, and even in the ideas of Plato, Moore, and Pirandello, Baillie's focus on the mental attitude of 'appreciation' brings it to the fore.

---

<sup>1</sup> This distinction has been made by a number of philosophers who have dealt with aesthetic questions. Gadamer (1966: 5) writes:

...when we judge a work of art on the basis of its aesthetic quality, something that is really much more intimately familiar to us is alienated. This alienation into aesthetic judgment always takes place when we have withdrawn ourselves and are no longer open to the immediate claim of that which grasps us. Gadamer, of course, was interested in emphasizing the moment when a work of art 'grasps' the observer; in the case of amusement, it is rather the distanced 'judgement' which must be applied.

## 2.4. Deviance:

Bergson, Klapp, Jauregui

Only one variation of this 'claim-discredit' cause of amusement has received much attention among humour researchers and beyond, that of Henri Bergson (1900). For Bergson laughter constituted a corrective for inelasticity in man's behaviour. Social actors are expected by each other to adapt continuously to changing situations, their failures in this regard provoking mirth in others. The trigger of amusement is identified (p. 21) as,

a certain rigidity of body, mind, and character, that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. The rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective.

Bergson's personification of society and his identification of an exclusive social 'function' of amusement jar with current sociological thinking. His struggle to extend the idea of 'rigidity' to diverse types of amusing stimuli eventually itself becomes a prime example of risible mental rigidity. Nevertheless, the work contains an unusually exhaustive analysis of the range of amusing events, and many thought-provoking passages.

As Carritt and Baillie, Bergson considers laughter a kind of judgment, indeed an aesthetic one, and makes the distinction between this judgment and the consideration of serious (i.e., tragic) consequences. He also closely paraphrases Plato, identifying "vanity" as "the one failing that is essentially laughable," (p. 174) and arguing that, "however unconscious [an individual] may be of what he says or does, he cannot be comical unless there be some aspect of his person of which he is unaware, one side of his nature which he overlooks; on that account does he make us laugh" (p. 146). In many passages, Bergson could be said to agree that amusement is provoked by the discrediting of actors' self-claims, though the analysis is limited to cases of *socially valued* self-claims. His 'elasticity' requires the achievement of conformity to the many characteristics expected of actors by society in specific situations, to the social norms of proper behaviour<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> More will be said about the relationship between self-claims and social norms of 'demeanour' or 'propriety' in Chapter Four, 2.4.

Deviance from these rules, to which most actors claim allegiance, provokes the amusement of others. In this case, Bergson falls closely in line with the Platonic view, which fails to encompass specific self-claims of neutral or negative social value.

Baillie (p. 289) recognizes a "vague insight" of his theory in Bergson's essay, and Carritt (p.560) finds some sections "extraordinarily near the truth". However, the unfortunate metaphor of 'rigidity' or 'mechanism' is applied in so many other senses that the former considerations often seem lost within a large and incoherent whole. For example, his treatment of verbal humour requires the acceptance of a forced notion of language as a living thing and the joke-work as a 'mechanism' or 'rigidity' encrusted upon it (pp.103-131, esp. 129-30).

The evidently misconceived central metaphor<sup>3</sup> has prevented *Le Rire* from serving as the foundation for a theory of laughter, despite the wide-ranging popularity of the work. It has, nevertheless, exercised a considerable influence, primarily in stressing the social aspects of laughter: the idea that amusement is directed at human beings, whether others or the self; the influence of other participants on mirth; the conception of laughter as a social corrective.

Several other theorists have proposed a view of amusement in terms of violated social norms. Orrin Klapp (1950) described a 'social type' which he claimed was universal throughout human society, a kind of person who is laughed at and ridiculed everywhere (p. 157):

The fool is distinguished from the normal group member by a deviation in person or conduct which is regarded as ludicrous and improper. He is usually defined as a person lacking in judgment, who behaves absurdly or stupidly. The antics of the fool, his ugliness, gracelessness, senselessness, or possible deformity of body represent departures from corresponding group norms of propriety. The fool is the antithesis of decorum, beauty, grace, intelligence, strength, and other virtues...

---

<sup>3</sup> Bergson's reliance on the mechanism/life contrast stemmed from his wider philosophical programme, often referred to as 'vitalism.' Bergson (1907) viewed the cosmos as infused with an *elan vital*, a vital impetus or force responsible for the development of time (ie, of events). Human intelligence, through the process of a guided evolution, was a product of this vital force. Within this scheme, amusement could serve a corrective function by punishing deviations (ie, rigidity) from the natural and creative vital flux.

This conception of the fool identifies the infraction of social "norms of propriety" as (at least) one cause of spontaneous laughter. Citing *Le Rire*, Klapp also agreed with Bergson in his identification of "social control" as one of the chief functions of the fool.

Chris Powell (1977) has defined humour as "a cornerstone of everyday social order" (p.55) which is targeted at deviant or unconventional individuals and behaviours: "We respond with humour where our attention is drawn to 'events' in the widest sense, which from our perspective seem to break some kind of rule, be it of 'rational' opinion, taste, manners or behaviour" (ibid.: 53). Powell further suggests that to be found funny, such deviance should be perceived as not "too serious" or threatening (p. 53).

Jose Antonio Jauregui (1990) has recently proposed a similar view more explicitly as an amusement theory, within a general model of the emotions. According to Jauregui, the brain is "bionaturally programmed to trigger off the emotional mechanism of laughter --urges to laugh-- each time it receives information through its sensory channels of the infraction of a social norm...with the object of drawing attention to, judging, and penalizing the infraction" (p. 158). Though the precise nature of the 'social norms' referred to is not specified further, both the illustrative anecdotes offered and the examples of codes alluded to ("norms of dressing, walking, reasoning...talking" --pp.162-63) appear to circumscribe a similar domain to that of Klapp's 'impropriety,' Bergson's 'inelasticity,' or Powell's 'non-serious' deviance.

## 2.5. Others

The views cited above document the existence of a rarely mentioned<sup>4</sup> tradition in humour theory identifying the discredit of self-claims as the cause of amusement. Plato, Will Moore, and Pirandello, with their reference to masks and pretense, provided some of the most direct statements of this interpretation: amusement reacts to the failure by an actor to be who he claims to be. Aristotle and E.F. Carritt phrased the argument in terms of failures by an actor to *express* what he overtly intends (i.e., aesthetic faults), and J.B. Baillie as failures to *achieve* what he overtly intends. Henri Bergson, Orrin Klapp, Chris Powell, and J.A. Jauregui, on the other hand, have couched the theory in the language of normative deviance: amusement follows failures by an actor to achieve what he *should* intend.

This historical introduction to the idea of a 'claim-discredit' theory of amusement is not meant to be comprehensive. It represents a personal selection which will inevitably leave out relevant contributions. Henry Fielding (1742: 249) wrote in preface to *Joseph Andrews* that "the only source of the true Ridiculous ... is affectation". According to Hegel (1842), "any contrast between the essential and its appearance can be ridiculous." Emerson (1843) defined the source of amusement as a contrast between 'being' and 'seeming.' Murray Davis (1993) devotes three chapters of his book to a comic form characterized by the "debunking [of] social units that have become idealized in various ways" (p. 218). It would be surprising to find that several other similar views did not exist, either as monocausal hypotheses, parts of multicausal ones, or implicit ideas in various works. Too many have expressed an opinion on the pan-human topic of laughter for full credits to be allotted. My principal aim has been to illustrate the basic idea with a range of varied attempts to describe it, and to document the support which this theory has enjoyed through the ages.

---

<sup>4</sup> 'Claim discredit' accounts have been generally excluded from reviews of amusement theories. Davis' mention of "humour theories...that unmask the ideal self to reveal the actual self" (1993: 219; see also pp. 149-306) is an unusual exception. The authors of these theories have also rarely cited each other.

### 3. The Sociology of Erving Goffman

The expressive dimension of human behaviour, as such, has not received much attention from social scientists, particularly as it impinges on ordinary interaction. Only limited aspects of the topic have been studied, by some linguists, sociologists of religion, anthropologists interested in symbols and ritual, and researchers in the field of face-to-face communication. Croce's 'Science of Aesthetics' (1901) has not materialized. This may have been one reason why the 'claim-discredit' ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Baillie, Carritt, Bergson and others have not yet found their proper place in humour research.

One sociologist, however, devoted his entire career to delineating a field of study that would focus specifically on the expressive aspect of everyday action: Erving Goffman. In my view, the accounts of amusement that have been presented in this chapter can best be understood in relation to his theory of the 'interaction order,' a theory which according to Anthony Giddens has earned him a place among the "major social theorists" (1988: 250).

Goffman described participants of social interaction as actors who present particular images of themselves before specific audiences. Smooth social interaction, as well as the social standing and emotional stability of participants, depend crucially on maintenance of the individual self-claims which make up these 'stage characters.' Consequently, much is made of situations where self-claims are discredited, and of the resulting embarrassment, ritual reparations, and relevant sanctions. As might be gathered from the preceding discussion, this is the point at which amusement theories of the 'claim-discredit' variety intersect with the analysis of the interaction order.

Before returning to the question of laughter, I will present a short summary of Goffman's thought.

### 3.1. Self-Claims on the Everyday Stage<sup>1</sup>

Self-claims and their discredit are primarily relevant to human behaviour in situations of **co-presence**, where persons are close enough to mutually observe each other in whatever they are doing. A group of co-present individuals composes a **gathering** located in a **situation**, the spatial environment within which co-presence exists: the driver and passengers on a bus compose a gathering within the situation of the 'bus interior.' If a gathering shares a focus of attention, such as a conversation or a team pickpocketing operation, it becomes an **encounter** (one or more of these may exist within the larger gathering of the 'bus riders'). Co-presence allows each interactant not only to give and receive linguistic messages but to **give off** information about himself and about the way in which he perceives the situation; in fact, even if no **linguistic messages** are transmitted, no participant can avoid giving off such **expressive messages**: clothing may speak of profession, respect for the occasion, and/or vanity, among other things; accent may reveal social class, region, or ethnicity; facial features and expression may give away nervousness, illness, age, and/or gender (1963).

Individuals are generally aware that others will look to these sorts of signs for information about themselves, and thus will manipulate them more or less strategically to give **performances** (including setting, appearance, and behaviour) which they consider to be useful, truthful, appropriate, or desirable in some way. They can be conceived of as **actors** who represent various **parts** to particular **audiences**.

**Self-claims** are the constitutive elements of such parts (or **self-presentations**), the building blocks out of which these 'stage characters' are constructed for others. Self-claims are attributions explicitly or implicitly made by the actor about himself: self-claims of skill, of possession, of appearance, of experience, of knowledge, of intelligence, of identity, or of any other characteristic imputable to a person. They may be made verbally ("I can drive a large bus through heavy traffic") or non-verbally (bus driving = "I can drive a large bus through heavy traffic"). Self-claims are also, to a great extent,

---

<sup>1</sup> The remainder of Section 3 will be based entirely on Erving Goffman's writings. His name will thus be omitted from citations, and I will include only the date of the relevant work at the end of each section dealing with ideas from a different book. Citations will rarely be exhaustive, as many of the ideas are treated in several texts under different labels.

imposed from without, as many are automatically associated by the relevant culture with social roles and categories, or simply with the status of a 'normal' individual. Most of us, both on and off buses, do and are expected to claim a respectable and well kept appearance, control over 'our' spaces and things, the possession of what are referred to as 'common knowledge' and 'common sense,' and competence in walking, talking, and controlling emotional and bodily outbursts, among other attributes. A bus driver, by assuming this specific role, may further be held responsible by his passengers and others for fulfilling numerous requirements implied as self-claims of the post: the ability and willingness to drive his vehicle quickly, safely, and competently along a predetermined route, the ability and willingness to enforce passenger discipline if it should exceed certain limits, the abstention from alcohol or drug intoxication during work, and the possession and readiness to share information about bus routes and city streets.

Performances are carried out by teams (of one or more members) on a **front stage**, where facts incongruent with the qualities of the enacted self are concealed; these performances are planned and rehearsed in the **back stage** regions, where the impression generated by an act is contradicted "as a matter of course." For example, a bus driver may put on an appearance of calm dexterity at the wheel, of respect for his passengers, of toughness, of cool professionalism; with his companions at the bus depot, however, he may freely slander passengers who arrive with no change or perhaps even share half a bottle of whisky before returning to the job.

This 'dramaturgical model' of interaction does not imply that individuals do not act in earnest: belief in the part one is playing varies from cynical acting and deception to heartfelt sincerity. The bus driver may become quite involved in his tough, cool, dexterous, professional act; on the other hand, the pickpockets in the back will be sharply aware of the discrepancy between their normal appearances and the fancy handiwork going on 'under cover' (1959). Neither is this model a restatement of role theory. Performances of a front include the enactment of a claimed relationship between the self and relevant institutionalized roles. For example, the bus driver may express **role-distance** when an old friend jumps on board, by jokingly putting on a caricatured version of his own 'bus driver' behaviour. Such an act is carried out to demonstrate to others that

there is a complex self behind the mask worn, different from and detached from the role itself (1961).

### 3.2. Discredit and the Sacred Self

The complex organization of modern Western societies, with their well-bounded and protected spaces, permits individuals to develop many different 'selves' for different situations, audiences, and moments, without excessive danger of having their constitutive self-claims continuously discredited by leakages of damaging information (1959). On the other hand, it could also be said that complex societies positively require the performance of numerous, often contradictory characters which will be discreditable. Each category within the system of social classification --father, friend, husband, bus driver, male, Protestant, British, human being-- includes "a complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members." Inevitably, there are attributes held by every individual which conflict with expectations for one of his relevant categories, **stigmas**, and these should be hidden if the person does not wish to be rejected by the relevant social group. If a stigma cannot be hidden and affects a major category (physical disfigurement is the prototype), the person may become practically cut off from normal social interaction. However, all individuals are vulnerable to such discrediting (1963B).

Goffman treats the self not only as an actor, but also as a ceremonial object, in the Durkheimian sense. Everyday interaction habitually includes many minor ritual offerings, tributes, and avoidances designed to protect the sensitive and fragile self-presentation projected by each participant. The 'sacredness' of the self is nevertheless 'spoilt' occasionally, intentionally or otherwise, and must be repaired by further ceremonial work.

An actor's performance makes an evaluation of the situation and its participants, especially himself. **Face** is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact (...); an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes". Every individual is emotionally attached to his own face and to those of certain others: if events establish a better than expected face, he experiences positive feelings; if a worse than expected face, negative ones. Goffman in fact concentrates throughout his work on events which threaten or damage face, and the feeling which these events cause in those emotionally attached to the face is **embarrassment**. If a sudden jerk of the bus causes a well-groomed

executive to topple awkwardly over an elderly lady, the qualities of politeness and grace he had been projecting and to which he is attached will be discredited, and this will cause him great unease and perhaps to fluster.

Two basic types of **face-work** may be undertaken to counteract such incidents. One set is composed of **avoidance** practices, which keep the person at a safe distance from threats: avoiding certain persons or topics of conversation, modesty, ignoring the threatening event, etc.... Riders on the bus may, for instance, grab onto handles and bars not only for the sake of physical safety but to avoid unseemly encroachment on others' personal space. If the incident cannot be avoided or overlooked, however, the self will find itself in a state of ritual disgrace, requiring some sort of repair. This **corrective process** consists of 4 "classic moves": (1) a **challenge** calling attention to the misconduct; (2) an **offering** by the offender; (3) an **acceptance** of the offering; and (4) an expression of **gratitude** by the offender. This basic model varies in practice. Continuing our example of the businessman's fall, he may immediately offer apologies and self-recriminations, reassure the aggrieved woman that his intentions were far from those implied by the sudden bodily contact, and ask concernedly about her physical state -- these would combine a self-initiated challenge with the offering stage. She may reply with a forced smile and an acceptance of the apology (stage 3) or perhaps continue the challenge with a scolding speech, which would necessitate further apologies. Gratitude may be expressed by word or gesture (such as a deferential nod and an embarrassed smile), or be merely implied (1967).

Gatherings are ordered, their participants being subject to the norms of what Goffman variously calls the **communicative, expressive, public, ceremonial, or interaction order** (1963, 67, 71, 83). These norms are different from **substantive norms**, which guide conduct in matters felt to be important in their own right, roughly covering such concepts as 'morality' and 'ethics.' Ceremonial norms limit the performances of actors and protect the sacredness of each individual in two ways.

Rules of **deference** define what action must be taken to convey the appropriate respect and appreciation to other persons. These include all manner of respectful avoidances, tact, and verbal or physical offerings necessary to safeguard the sanctity of these others. Willfully transgressing such norms can be interpreted as an aggression.

Rules of **demeanour**, on the other hand, relate to the upkeep of the individual's own sacredness. Individuals must not claim a face which they cannot sustain, and must struggle to sustain it at all times or be subject to disgrace. Dress, personal hygiene, discretion and sincerity, modesty, sportsmanship, command of speech and physical movements, self-control over emotions and desires, poise under pressure, and other behaviours must constantly reinforce the line taken by the actor. When his front is discredited, his self is spoiled, and embarrassment may result (1967).

A general conformity (or at least apparent general conformity) to the exigencies of the ceremonial order is essential to social life. Norms of deference and demeanour seem trivial and arbitrary, 'mere' matters of etiquette, but these conventions create a symbolic world by which to guide our every action. We can usually assume that people who wear certain uniforms, sit in the driver's seat of a bus, and act within certain behavioural limits have been trained to maneuver these large vehicles through city traffic and will do so along a predictable path, with the greatest concern for the security of passengers. Thus, the latter can feel safe in the belief that by boarding bus 171 they will reach a stop at Trafalgar Square within a reasonable time, though in fact it could easily be crashed into a wall or driven in the opposite direction. A bus driver wearing a loud T-shirt and bathing trunks, or who steered the vehicle while bouncing on his seat, hooting and neighing loudly, would not inspire such confidence: Passengers would be likely to supervise his behaviour closely for further alarming signs and perhaps step off at the first possible stop or challenge his right to continue driving. Individuals who routinely violate the norms of the public order are threats to the predictability of the environment necessary for the efficient pursuit of goals by others. In Western society, such deviants may be labeled 'insane' and confined to mental asylums, powerful proof of the importance of 'mere' etiquette (1967).

### 3.3. Frames of Experience

An individual perceives the world at any one time according to a particular definition of the situation, a socially constructed **framework** of interpretation which gives meaning to unfolding events. Performances, whether in gatherings or in encounters, express such a definition of the situation. Conversely, the framework which actors agree on (this agreement being basic to interaction) determines the type of performance which will be appropriate. This **official** definition of the situation can differ from the private frames actually applied by specific individuals.

There are **natural** frameworks, describing an unconscious and deterministic universe (i.e., about the world of 'things'), and **social** frameworks, interpreting events incorporating "the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence" (i.e., about the world of people). All actors perceive events by use of such frames, but not always are they in agreement over the correct frame to be applied. Most passengers of our bus would presumably (1) assume the vehicle to be a man-made machine powered by fossil fuels and guided by a conscious, trained driver at the instruments (natural frame); and (2) see the 'bus situation' in terms of a public transport service along a set route, useable by individuals for the purpose of traveling from one programmed stop to another (social frame). A small child, on the other hand, might well (1) believe the bus to be a magically powered device, or even a living being; and (2) see the event as an amusement ride designed for everyone, for children, or perhaps even just for himself.

The natural and social varieties are **primary** frameworks, "seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful." These may be contrasted with **keyings**, which are ways of transforming events already meaningful according to some primary framework into something else. Playfully pretending to ride a bus, a filmed bus ride, a bus driver's driving practice --these are all keyings of a real bus ride, patterned on but distinguishable from the original event. Another type of transformation is a **fabrication**, the managing of activity by one party to deceive others about what is going on. The behaviour of the group of three pickpocket artists who enter the bus is designed to reinforce the definition of events applied by most passengers: The thieves enter the crowded bus from separate doors, and two act as shields

for the third who, looking abstractedly in another direction, will surreptitiously direct his hand towards a promising pocket or purse. Clearly the pickpocket and his victim apply very different interpretations to the behaviour of the former, one having more information about the real state of affairs than the other. The interaction order is vulnerable to such pretenses of normality because people inevitably depend on a limited number of signs on which to base their judgments.

Different types of framing troubles are common. One may apply the wrong frame (a bus passenger who calmly ignores the pickpocket as his wallet disappears). Or events may be ambiguous and permit a confusing multiplicity of contradictory frames to be applied (a bus passenger suspects the pickpockets of deceit but is not quite sure). A **frame break** may take place when events are perceived which cannot be managed by the frame (a passenger notices a foreign hand in his pocket). Finally, open contests and debates may flare up over the correct frame to be applied (a passenger challenges the pickpockets and they claim innocence in outraged tones). People who, due to frame breaks, are left devoid of any coherent framework on which to base their behaviour, undergo **negative experience**, a situation of flustered confusion which is the opposite of an "organized and organizationally affirmed response" (1974). Another possible problem is the excess or insufficiency of **involvement** in a frame, the psychological engrossment in framed events, for which an appropriate level is normally defined.

Frame analysis is relevant to self-claims and their discredit in at least two separable senses. On the one hand, social frameworks include the specification of the self-claims applying to all participants in a situation, and of the criteria by which to judge their fulfillment. Self-claims are the constitutive elements of self-presentations, and these in turn form a major part of the content of social frameworks. Thus, the official framework defines what events participants openly agree would discredit which self-claims within the situation to which the frame applies. For example, the definition of a bus situation includes the bus driver's self-claim of driving skill and passengers' self-claims to maintain balance and sufficient interpersonal distance despite the movements of the vehicle. Each participant's private individual frame will simultaneously provide him with his own criteria on these subjects.

Frameworks do not only include self-claims, however, but are also *included within* their domain. The possession of frames, and frame management as an activity and a competence, are themselves attributes about which self-claims may be made: "I'm very good at figuring people out," "I'll tell you what your problem is...," "No one fools me," "I know these streets like the palm of my hand," "I *am* paying attention." These kinds of self-attributions, which regard the claimants' mental possessions and abilities, can indeed be considered among the most fundamental claims that can be made about the self. Failures to know basic facts about the natural or social world, to interpret events correctly, or to display an appropriate level of involvement in framed events, can itself result in discredit, or can lead to discrediting behaviours (1974: 308-321).

### 3.4. Summary of Goffman's Thought

Individuals are actors who create and maintain self-presentations before specific audiences, usually in accord with socially given frameworks of interpretation defining the relevant situations of co-presence. These characters are built out of claims about the self which may be supported or discredited by events. Actors are emotionally attached to the social value associated with these self-presentations, so that their emotional peace depends on their own and others' behaviour and on unfolding events continuously supporting the current character and the framework within which it fits. The interaction order is the result of actors jointly trying to maintain these public projections, and it provides actors with a continuous guide for action. Embarrassment is the common result of failure, and confinement to a mental hospital is the common Western remedy for those who provoke too many failures.



#### 4. Mutual References

There exists an evident congruency between Erving Goffman's thought and the 'claim discredit' notions of amusement. The concept of the self-claim --a claim implicitly or explicitly made by an individual about himself-- is central to Goffman's theory, and the vicissitudes of maintaining self-claims and managing their discredit constitutes one of the main themes of his work. It is no mere coincidence that Carritt, Pirandello, and Moore resorted to the dramaturgical description of individuals as part-playing actors. Goffman's writings examined and dissected the very perspective on human behaviour which had been applied by the claim-discredit theorists. With this lens, one focuses neither on the grand and distant social institutions of sociology nor on the individual in the immediate foreground. Rather, it is a rarely-seen middle ground which comes into view: the actual *situation* in which two or more individuals interact. The very fact of mutual observability which defines a 'situation' transforms every participant into both performer and audience. Each of his characteristics and behaviours becomes an expressive sign, while he himself becomes a potential critic of the everyday 'stage' or 'exhibition.' Thus, Goffman's field covers precisely the aesthetics of social life.

Two questions immediately arise:

- 1) Did Goffman have anything to say about the laughter triad?
- 2) Have humour researchers had anything to say about the sociology of Erving Goffman?

The remainder of this chapter will concern itself with their answers.

#### 4.1. Goffman on Humour Research

Goffman himself did not address the question of amusement directly. Outside of scattered comments and his extended treatment of 'embarrassment' (1967), his emphasis was on the conscious attempts of interactants to manage situations, rather than on the less-controllable eruptions of emotion. His pursuit of the interaction order and its establishment as a field separable from the study of not only social structure but also of the individual social actor excluded, as far as possible, the psychological underpinnings of phenomena from analysis. Moreover, his concerns lay more on the side of participants as performers than as audience members.

However, there are countless implicit references to amusement in the form of mirth-provoking illustrations used in the texts. The discussion of the interaction order inevitably placed a strong emphasis on examples of 'disorder': interactional disasters, breakdowns, and sabotage. As we have seen, embarrassment often results when certain types of these disordering events occur. However, according to Baillie, Carritt, and the other claim-discredit theorists, an observer's reaction to happenings or behaviour of these types should be amusement, however upsetting they might be for the participants responsible.

Indeed, wherever Goffman's analysis turns to events which discredit a front, to errors of frame, situational improprieties, ceremonial blunders, or the unusual behaviour of mental patients, humorous examples abound. Chapter 9 of *Frame Analysis*, entitled "Ordinary Troubles" and dealing with ambiguities and errors of frame application, is a good source:

[excerpt from The San Francisco Chronicle, 11/29/1967]

The way Dave Niles reported it on KNBR, this guy is lying face down on Powell St., with traffic backed up for blocks. A Little Old Lady climbs down from a stalled cable car and begins giving him artificial respiration -- whereupon he swivels his head and says: "Look lady, I don't know what game you're playing, but I'm trying to fix this cable!"

(1974, p.310)

The "classic cases" of embarrassment cited by Goffman (1967) --changes of role or status, being in the 'wrong' social scene, inordinate physical proximity, the lack of basic skills or attributes of society, and clashes of one role with another-- are no less classic comic situations. Similarly with many of the examples of minor inconsistencies between projected front and performance:

Men trip, forget names, wear slightly inappropriate clothes, attempt to buy a too-small amount of some commodity, fail to score well in a game, arrive a few minutes late for an appointment, become a trifle overheated in argument, fail to finish a task quite on time.

(1961, p.92)

An entire essay in *Forms of Talk* (1981), a case study of radio announcers' mistakes, draws its empirical illustration "mainly" (p.242, footnote) from "eight of the LP records and three of the books produced by Kermit Schafer from his recording (Jubilee Records) of radio bloopers" (p. 197, footnote) which presumably were prepared for sale as 'humour':

"In Pall Malls, the smoke is traveled over and under, around and through the tobacco; thereby giving you a better tasting smoke..." (ENGINEER FLIPS WRONG SWITCH AND PICKS UP UNSUSPECTING DISC JOCKEY) "...How the hell can smoke go through a cigarette, if it don't go over, under, around and through the tobacco?"

(p. 268)

Merely by exposing individuals as actors with embarrassing secrets to hide, Goffman causes the reader to find amusement at his own secret discredit, as well as to feel some measure of unease. Emanuel Schegloff has commented on this experience

(1988: 89): "How many readers, and hearers, felt revealed and exposed, gave out embarrassed giggles at the sense of being found out by [Goffman's] accounts?"

Even in his own dealings with others, it appears that Erving the social actor, at least in his younger days, derived pleasure from playing with the projected selves of others. Paul Bouissac has characterized him as a "comedian-experimenter" who "enjoyed straining social interactions by obnoxious behavior in order to gain some insights into the 'frames' at stake" (1990: 417). He cites Paul Ekman's anecdote about a psychology experiment:

I pointed to Erving some of their more interesting expressions which we would be able to dissect later when reviewing the videotape. He however was taken with the fact that serious people were willing to engage in such conversation in a laboratory setting, and decided to test how much interference they would tolerate. Dressed in his usual casual style, he posed (quite credibly) as a janitor. He walked into their room, saying that he had to remove some of the furniture. He removed one piece of furniture after another while they continued their argument, until finally he took away the chairs in which they were sitting. They continued their argument standing up!

(Ekman, in Bouissac 1990: 417)

In addition to such implicit references to amusement in Goffman's work (and life), his interest in the laughter triad is also reflected more explicitly in his writings. From one of his first publications (1955), a (not very favourable) book review of Martha Wolfenstein's (1954) *Children's Humour*, mentions of humour theory and of its domain recur frequently throughout his books and articles. He considers, among other topics, strategic use of laughter displays (1981: 88, 118), informal social control through ridicule (1961: 77), clowns and jokers (1961: 64-65; 1963b: 141-142), the acting out of improprieties 'in jest' (1967: 86; 1974: 48-53, 188-97, 515; 1981: 154), the appearance of subversive ironies and gallows humour (1961: 76-77), the use of humour to carry embarrassing or critical messages (1967: 26-30), the surreptitious communication of amusement through 'collusive by-play' (1961: 62-63; 1963a: 179-88; 1981: 154), the

possibility of laughter (among other emotions) 'flooding out' and causing an actor to lose his expressive control (1961: 55-61; 1974: 350-59), the use of joking to create 'role-distance' (1961: 'Role Distance', esp. 98-117), joking with strangers following an impropriety (1963a: 125), techniques of fictional comedy (1971: 296-7; 1974: 327, 369-74, 381-382, 444; 1981: 81), pranks and other 'benign fabrications' used to fool a victim (1974: 87), different 'types' of amusement depending on frame level (1974: 130), amusement caused by the 'upkeying' of a situation (1974: 359-368), and amusing wordplay (1974: 441-443).

As will be seen in later chapters, these scattered ideas can be integrated within a theory of the laughter triad based on a claim-discredit account of amusement. The very relationship between self-claims and hilarity, however, is more directly hinted at by Goffman himself on a number of occasions. In "Radio Talk" (1981), he considers the major self-claim attaching to the role of a radio announcer, "the production of seemingly faultless fresh talk." As seen above, Goffman obtained the empirical illustrations of announcer claim-discredits from a set of 'bloopers' records marketed as humour. And indeed, Goffman asserts that in managing the basic capacity required of radio announcers, the behaviours that must be avoided go beyond committing clearly identifiable errors: "...the progression from faults to faultables must be extended to the *risibly interpretable*, and this last appears to be the broadest category of all" (p.244, my emphasis). In this passage Goffman clearly equates (1) the production of a fault which discredits the self-claim to a specific competency (according to the fair or unfair valuation by an observer); (2) embarrassments; and (3) (at least one type of) funny stimuli<sup>1</sup>. Subtitled, "a study of the ways of our errors," this article focused on announcer talk merely as a case study of the countless abilities and characteristics that may be claimed by an individual in public. Thus, this tantalizing suggestion could have easily been (but was not) generalized and expanded upon by Goffman to refer to all self-claims.

It is also significant that the only extended discussion of humour theory regards one of the claim-discredit theories treated in Section 2 of this chapter: Henri Bergson's "fine essay" on the comic (1974: 38). After agreeing that "individuals often laugh when

---

<sup>1</sup> This equivalence is alluded to again in the same article (pp. 253, 307, 321-322).

confronted by a person who does not sustain in every way an image of human guidedness," Goffman adds the tie to his own ideas:

Bergson only fails to go on and draw the implied conclusion, namely, that if individuals are ready to laugh during occurrences of ineffectively guided behaviour, then all along they apparently must have been fully assessing the conformance of the normally behaved, finding it to be no laughing matter.

(1974, p.38)

Interestingly, Goffman also once requested a translation of another of the 'claim-discredit' theories of comedy mentioned in Section 2 of this chapter, Luigi Pirandello's *L'Umorismo* (Pier Paolo Giglioli, personal communication).

His brief mention of Freud's interpretation of jokes (1961: 60) is also revealing. It occurs during a discussion of the suppressive work carried out by participants of interaction, who normally attempt to ignore events 'officially' irrelevant according to the current definition of the situation. Goffman agrees with Freud that when the official frame of interpretation changes radically, the liberation of actors from the need to suppress certain aspects may result in laughter. However, he adds in a footnote: "Freud, of course, saw the suppressive function as associated often with sexually tinged matters, instead of *merely socially irrelevant properties that disrupt identity-images*, one instance of which is the sexual" (ibid.; my emphasis). Though Goffman refrained from providing his own view of amusement in general terms, these comments on humour theory suggest his probable sympathy for claim-discredit accounts --at the very least as partial explanations.

#### 4.2. Humour Research on Goffman

From the time of the first major publications by Erving Goffman, humour researchers have recognized the interest of his work to their own. In a footnote of her celebrated article "Laughter Among Colleagues: A Study of Humor Among the Staff of a Mental Hospital" (1960), Rose Laub Coser expresses her gratitude to Goffman, who is cited both in this and in an earlier article (Coser, 1959), for a critical reading. Alfred Walle (1976) considered "Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis...a useful model" (p. 203) for dealing with the use of jokes by clients at an all-night diner, as have Joan Emerson (1973; 1975) and Robert A. Stebbins (1993) in similarly ethnographic studies of specific 'situated activity systems.'

Examples can be multiplied. Greg Smith has explicitly attempted to "explore the potential of some of Goffman's writings as an analytical resource for the close sociological examination of laughter" (1996) and humour (1993). Marina Mizzau (1984) has partly grounded her analysis of irony use on Goffmanian conceptions of strategic and ritual interaction. Isabelle Van de Gejuchte (1996) has defined the limits of amusement elicited by political satire in terms of Goffmanian 'frames.' Zajdman (1995) has employed the terms 'face' and 'face-threatening acts' in order to study joking behaviour and its possible consequences. Bouissac (1990) has analysed the performance of comedian George Carl as a "systematic violation of the rules of performance" (p. 426). These and other authors<sup>2</sup> have recognized the benefits of studying amusement, laughter, and humour in their natural environment, the domain of face-to-face interaction which Goffman so tenaciously explored.

At least one writer on humour has argued, as I have done, for a more profound relevance of Goffman's work to humour theory:

The foremost contemporary theorist to expose the discrepancy between our ideals and our actuality, to unmask our current vanities, was the late sociologist Erving Goffman. Although seldom mentioning humor,... Goffman's sociological studies

---

<sup>2</sup> Some authors have recognized these benefits without a direct reference to Goffman. Pollio (1983), for instance, proposes the need for a humour theory that takes account of laughter as an "embodied activity," and as one which takes place in social situations.

clearly parallel humor theories and practices...that unmask the ideal self to reveal the actual self. No other social scientist's work has produced as much amusement as Goffman's, especially through the particular examples by which he illustrates his general insights.

(Davis, 1993: 219)

Davis' grouping of "humour theories...that unmask the ideal self to reveal the actual self" is rare, and he devotes a number of chapters of his book (pp. 149-306) to funny stimuli which involve discredit --though this is treated as only one category of funniness. In the following chapters, I will develop a detailed account of all amusement in these terms, and on this basis a larger theory also encompassing laughter and humour.

## 5. Conclusions

I have presented a historical introduction to a causal theory of amusement substantially different from the traditional views discussed in Chapter One: **the discrediting of a claim made by a social actor about himself**. There have been four main keys in which the idea has been proposed by different authors:

1) Plato argued that we laugh at those who claim to be more than they actually are, in terms of possessions, appearance, or virtue. W.G. Moore generalized this idea in his analysis of Moliere by identifying *the falling off or removal of any 'mask' worn by an individual* as the source of mirth. Pirandello described the role of the humourist as the tearing away of such masks.

2) Aristotle, and in this century E.F. Carritt, presented *aesthetic defects* as the cause of amusement. If viewed as failures of expression, in Croce's sense, such defects can be held equivalent to the discrediting of self-claims.

3) J.B. Baillie developed the idea in terms of an *incongruity between the end sought by an individual and his actual achievements*, highlighting the specific attitude of 'appreciation' that must be adopted by a perceiver in order to notice such an incongruity.

4) Bergson, Klapp, Powell, and Jauregui have written instead of *deviance from a certain class of social norms*, those regulating conduct and appearance proper to specific social situations (i.e., propriety as opposed to morality).

I have briefly summarized Erving Goffman's theory of the interaction order, which shares an evident affinity with this school of humour theory. Goffman presents individuals as performers enacting situated selves made up of constituent **self-claims**. If a self-claim is **discredited** by events, the discredited individual feels **embarrassment** and his 'sacred' self becomes spoilt and in need of ritual repair. Respect for norms of deference and demeanour (i.e., of propriety) safeguards all projected identities within a

relevant situation. Such norms are internalized in the minds of participants as situationally-specific **social frameworks**, providing them with both a guide for action and for interpretation of others' actions. The result of general conformity to these apparently trivial rules is an ordered social world intelligible to participants --continuous deviation may result in the confinement of the transgressor to a psychiatric institution.

In the final section, I have identified a number of mutual references between Goffman and humour research, supporting the proposed link between the two. Though Goffman did not treat the question of amusement directly, occasional comments or allusions to the laughter triad can be found in most of his books and articles, as well as countless amusing anecdotes and illustrations. These tend to express ideas congruent with those of claim-discredit theorists of amusement.

Conversely, humour research has been increasingly rummaging through Goffman's theoretical toolbox, with a growing recognition of the essential belongingness of the laughter triad within the realm of situated interaction. One writer, Murray Davis, has recently argued for the profound relevance of the 'interaction order' to amusement itself. In the following chapters, I will attempt to describe the nature and extent of this relevance, reconstructing the amusement theory Goffman himself did not write, and proposing a new way forward for humour research.

*Situating Laughter:  
Amusement, Laughter, and Humour in Everyday Life*

## PART TWO

In this central part of the thesis,  
I develop a causal account of the amusement emotion,  
based on the notion of the self-claim discredit.

### **Chapter Four**

A Hypothesis of Amusement

### **Chapter Five**

A Typology of Funny Events

### **Chapter Six**

Elaborations of the Model



# Chapter Four: A Hypothesis of Amusement

1. Introduction: The Hypothesis	page 153
2. Self-Claims	page 157
2.1. Definition of 'Self-Claim'	page 157
2.2. Self-Claim Variables	page 160
2.2.1. <i>Origin</i> of Self-Claims	page 160
2.2.1.1. Independent Self-Claims	page 160
2.2.1.2. Role Self-Claims	page 161
2.2.1.3. Universal Self-Claims	page 163
2.2.2. <i>Content</i> of Self-Claims	page 165
2.2.2.1. Self-Claims of Skill	page 165
2.2.2.2. Self-Claims of the Mind	page 166
2.2.2.3. Self-Claims of Territory	page 168
2.2.2.4. Self-Claims of Appearance	page 170
2.2.2.5. Self-Claims of Biography	page 171
2.3. Claim Makers and Claimants	page 173
2.4. Self-Claims and Social Norms	page 174

3. Claim-Discredits	page 177
3.1. Definition of 'Claim-Discredit'	page 177
3.1.1. Requisites of Discredit Perception	page 179
3.1.2. Catalysts of Assessment	page 182
3.1.3. Uncertainty, Disagreement, and Bias	page 183
3.2. Claim-Discredit Variables	page 186
3.2.1 <i>Cause</i> of Discredit: Accident / Agent	page 186
3.2.2 <i>Claimant</i> Discredited: Self / Other	page 187
3.2.3. <i>Location</i> of Discredit:	
Untransformed / Transformed Reality	page
188	
3.2.3.1. Levels of Reality	page 188
3.2.3.2. Types of Transformations	page 189
a. Retellings	
b. Play Acts	
c. Imagined Sequences	
3.2.3.3. Frame Structures	page 192
4. Conclusions	page 195

## 1. Introduction

In Part One of the thesis, I defined amusement as the pan-human emotion the manifestation of which is observable as laughter, and which may be provoked by humour or by other types of funny stimuli. I argued that an understanding of the laughter triad -- amusement, laughter, and humour-- required a valid and coherent account of the cause of amusement, which has not yet been agreed upon despite a large catalogue of proposed theories. Finally, I proposed some general guidelines for developing a causal theory of amusement --the procedure of 'aggregate introspection'-- and identified a promising alternative to the most well-known causal accounts: amusement as triggered by the perception of another's self-claim having been discredited.

In Part Two I will present a detailed exposition of this 'claim-discredit' hypothesis of amusement for 'aggregate assessment' by readers. Following the guidelines set out in Chapter Two, I will define as precisely as possible the proposed cause of amusement (this chapter), and attempt to apply it consistently throughout the widest range of funny stimuli (Chapter Five), distinguishing these also from closely related unfunny phenomena (Chapter Six). In Part Three, a general theory of the laughter triad will be developed on the basis of this causal hypothesis.

The basic proposal can be briefly stated as follows:

*Amusement is provoked only and always in a subject when he perceives that a self-claim put forward by a claimant has been discredited, provided that 1) the perceiver does not identify himself as the claimant at the moment of perception; 2) the perceiver is sufficiently involved in a definition of events which places the discrediting in the foreground.*

Discussion of the latter two points will be reserved for Chapter Six. These amendments, which distinguish between funny and unfunny claim-discredits, are secondary to an understanding of what claim-discredits consist of in the first place.

In this chapter I will specify, in great detail, the meaning of the two central concepts: the self-claim and its discredit. A self-claim will be defined as the ascription of

some attribute to a claimant by himself (or by a legitimate agent): "My name is Napoleon Bonaparte"; "I can beat you at chess"; "my other car is a Porsche"; "I have never used illegal drugs"; "my arm hurts"; "I can read and write"; "I'm a trustworthy kind of person"; "I don't believe in marriage"; "this is my seat"; "I hate spinach"; "don't move or I'll shoot." The discredit of such a claim will be said to take place when events fail to confirm the attribution: the claimant (respectively) proves to be other than Napoleon, repeatedly fails to beat his opponent at chess, does not own a Porsche, was once a regular cannabis smoker, faked the pain, is illiterate, proves a scoundrel, marries, lacks a valid ticket for the seat, enjoys the taste of spinach when he actually tries it, or does not have the nerve to fire a gun. Both a self-claim and its discredit are realities in the mind of a single perceiver, whose observation of these phenomena depends on the social frameworks of interpretation he applies to the current situation. Different opinions on what 'pain' or 'literacy' mean or entail, for instance, will lead to varying judgments as to whether a bee sting could possibly be considered a cause of claimed discomfort, or whether a certain written text constitutes proof of great literacy or glaring illiteracy.

Much of the analysis will be devoted to identifying and describing the main variables relevant to self-claims and their discredit. This will not only allow the reader to obtain a better conceptual grasp on the phenomena at issue, but also provide an order with which to classify the heterogeneous range of funny stimuli in the following chapter.

Self-claims may be classified according to perceived 'origin' and 'content'. The **origin** of a self-claim is the way in which (according to the perceiver) the attribution has been ascribed by a claimant to himself: by explicit assertion (**independent**), by role membership (**role**), or by mere participation in human society (**universal**). The **content** of a self-claim is the actual substance of the attribution: the skill, quality, emotion, mental state, identity, possession, relationship, or other characteristic that is claimed. Five types will be distinguished: **skill**, **mind**, **territory**, **appearance**, and **biography**.

Self-claim discredits will be said to vary according to their perceived 'cause,' 'claimant', and 'location'. The **cause** of a discredit can be either mere **accident** or the intentional actions of an **agent**. The **claimant** affected by discredit can be either the **perceiver** himself or some **other** individual. The **location** of the discredit may be either **untransformed reality** or some **transformation** of events such as oral recountings,

literature, theatrical representations, film or audio recorded material, rehearsals, games, or mental imaginings/distortions.

This discussion of variables will permit, in Chapter Five, the development of a typology of amusing stimuli on the basis of the natural variability of claim-discredit situations. In this way, I will attempt to systematically account for the vast range and diversity of funny objects from the starting point of a single eliciting cause of the emotion. Jokes, gaffes, wind-ups, coincidences, tickling, theatrical comedy, nonsense rhymes, satire, slapstick, and other triggers of amusement will be shown to cause, constitute, or include claim-discredits of one type or another.

Clearly, not all self-claim discredits lead to a perceiver's amusement. Being 'caught out' in a lie or exaggeration may be experienced as deeply embarrassing. Political corruption scandals involve the discrediting of a public servant's basic role self-claims of honesty and commitment to public interests, but result in humiliation (for the accused) and moral outrage (for the general public). Accidentally driving a car off the edge of a cliff, while constituting a clear failure to maintain one's claim to drive properly, is anything but funny to the passengers or to their families.

The differences between amusing and non-amusing claim-discredits will be treated in Chapter Six. To anticipate, these differences will be accounted for by two further variables relating to the perception of claim-discredits: perceiver-claimant **identity** and perceiver-discredit **involvement** --that is, the extent to which the perceiver identifies himself as the claimant, and the extent to which the perceiver attends to discrediting events (as opposed to other features of the situation)<sup>1</sup>. A pedestrian who walks into a lamppost while talking to a friend may be laughed at by his friend for this failure to keep up self-claims of watchfulness and competent ambulation. The careless pedestrian may also experience amusement himself, due to his ability to detach and disown (i.e., not identify himself as) the part of himself which was so careless. On the other hand, if the accident was witnessed not by a friend but by a first-time acquaintance before whom the pedestrian wished to make a good impression (a sexual interest, a prospective employer), he might find such detachment more difficult, and feel acute and unpleasant embarrassment instead. Moreover, if the accident was quite serious, involving

severe pain, loss of consciousness, or bleeding, the victim's laughable/embarrassing carelessness would probably be ignored (i.e., not the main focus of cognitive involvement) by most participants, with pain, fear, concern, empathic suffering, and the like dominating reactions.

A full discussion of the boundaries between funny and unfunny claim-discredit situations will be held off for the moment. The following pages will focus on the meaning and variability of such self-claims and claim-discredits in general.

---

<sup>1</sup> See the brief statement of the causal hypothesis above.

## 2. Self-Claims<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Definition of 'Self-Claim'

During interaction the individual is expected to possess certain attributes, capacities, and information which, taken together, fit together into a self that is at once coherently unified and appropriate for the occasion. Through the expressive implications of his stream of conduct, through mere participation itself, the individual effectively projects this acceptable self into the interaction, although he may not be aware of it, and the others may not be aware of having so interpreted his conduct. At the same time he must accept and honor the selves projected by the other participants. *The elements of a social encounter, then, consist of effectively projected claims to an acceptable self and the confirmation of like claims on the part of the others.* The contributions of all are oriented to these and built up on the basis of them.

(Goffman, 1967: 105-06  
my emphasis)

One way of viewing social interaction is in terms of the self-claims being made by participants before each other, and the subsequent attempts to sustain them. A **self-claim** is defined as *a skill, quality, emotion, mental state, identity, object, relationship, territory, or any other attribute ascribed to a **claimant** by a **claim-maker** who is either the claimant himself or someone seen to legitimately represent the claimant.* The phrase 'making a self-claim,' or simply 'claim-making,' will refer to the action of ascribing such an attribute to the self. To simplify the exposition, I will consider initially only cases where the claim-maker and the claimant are one and the same person.

Self-claims may be made verbally and explicitly, in such typical forms as "I am...", "I can..." or "I have...". A random assortment of examples follows.

---

<sup>1</sup> The use of the term 'claim-making' in this chapter and in the thesis is in no way related to the concept of 'claims-making' in the social problems literature (ie, Spector and Kitsuse, 1977: 73-96).

I am...

the king of the mountain  
 polish  
 chaste, humble, and obedient  
 pretty good at chess  
 just joking  
 ill  
 a rationalist  
 going to the office

I can...

drink while making my ventriloquist doll whistle  
 beat you up  
 prove the existence of an infinite set of prime numbers  
 walk  
 convince Maggie to come to the party  
 smile in the face of adversity  
 handle snakes

I have...

brown eyes  
 a daddy who can beat up your daddy  
 nothing up my sleeve  
 a Visa Gold card  
 10,000 beer cans from all over the world  
 secrets you will never know  
 an answer to your question  
 this here piece o' land  
 three brothers and one sister

Writing curriculum vitae or application forms, and introducing oneself to a stranger, are common activities which involve much claim-making of this explicit type. Most self-claims, however, are made non-verbally, and often even unconsciously. Any aspect of a participant's performance --setting, dress, accent, poise, manner-- may express self-claims of one type or another. For example,

Leaving a coat on a chair: I have temporary rights over the use of this chair; I own this coat; I will be returning to this chair shortly.

Walking up a pavement confidently: I am walking in this direction; I know where I am going; I can walk; I have temporary rights to the space immediately in front of me.

Being attired as a policeman: I am a policeman; I have respect for the law; I have good knowledge of the criminal code; I am willing to risk my life in the battle against crime.

Even though not always consciously aware of having made such self-claims, actors can be held accountable to them, and may on occasion be confronted with or even forced to defend them.

Individual self-claims constitute the elements or building blocks of the various 'presentations of self' (i.e., 'faces,' 'parts,' 'routines,' 'projections') put forward by a participant on the various stages of social interaction. The self-claims I make define who I am. Relatedly, the fact that I make self-claims determines my being someone at all: a person who makes a point of claiming the least possible is said to have "no personality."

The 'existence' of a self-claim, the question of it having been made or not in actual fact, is *always relative to the opinion or point-of-view of an individual or group of individuals*. Self-claims cannot exist in a void, being subjective interpretations of social action or being. No self-claim is possible in the absence of an observer, if only the claimant himself. During an interactional situation, the self-claims seen to have been made by a single participant may vary from one observer to the next, and from any observer to the observed claimant. Thus, when speaking of self-claims, a subjectivity is always implied, whether real or hypothetical, within the world of an anecdote retold, within a specific reality, or merely in the minds of the theorist and/or reader. It is worth noting that this feature of self-claims creates the potential for confusion between the supposed initial imputation of an attribute to the self ("I'm the hottest thing in town") and the secondary attribution of this attribution by an observer to the claimant ("He thinks he's the hottest thing in town").

## 2.2. Self-Claim Variables

The foregoing examples illustrate another feature of self-claims. Covering no less than the entire range of characteristics that may be attributed to a person, self-claims are not only infinite in number but enormously varied. Two theoretical distinctions may be found useful in ordering this concept: the **origin** of a self-claim --whether it has been made independently or else by virtue of a role membership or mere 'humanity'; and the **content** of a self-claim, the actual substance of the attribution (i.e.: Is it about skills, mental contents and abilities, owned territories, appearance, or biography?).

### 2.2.1. *Origin* of Self-Claims

Firstly, self-claims can be classified according to their **origin**. On what basis is a particular self-claim attributed to an actor by an observer? How has it been made? Where does it 'come from'? Three types of origin can be distinguished: independent, role, and universal.

#### 2.2.1.1. Independent Self-Claims

At one extreme are singular or exceptional assertions which the claimant is not bound by rule or expectation to make. An actor independently chooses to make this sort of self-claim, adding an element to his sense of self-determination, his individuality, and his personal identity. Independent self-claims are not necessarily exceptional in the sense of 'extraordinary,' though they may be. "I can walk a tightrope between two skyscrapers," "I saw *The Seven Samurais* last night," and "I'm hungry" may qualify as independent self-claims in the sense that (and in so far as) they are not strictly required of the relevant participant by social constraints.

Another necessary qualification regards the freedom of 'choice' I appear to have attributed to such self-claims by the use of the word 'independent'. This freedom is severely limited by the fact that almost any action or feature of an actor presented before others will express an assertion about the self. Idle pieces of chit-chat express all manner

of claims about what the speaker knows, has experienced, or believes; attempts to perform ordinary activities such as automobile driving or museum visiting constitute self-claims of competence in specific areas; even disclaimers represent assertions of inability or non-possession. Making independent self-claims (not to mention other types) is an unavoidable side-effect of interaction.

Thus, there is more freedom regarding which independent self-claims to make than regarding whether to make them at all (the latter will vary roughly with the amount of presence and activity undertaken in public). Moreover, all manner of pressures, limitations, and difficulties may influence choices made regarding independent self-claims. It may be quite desirable, for instance, to make a certain claim ("Yes, I have seen *The Seven Samurais*") in the light of currently accepted values (i.e., among a group of film enthusiasts). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is *other participants* of interaction who attribute 'independent' volition to the claimant, rather than the claimant himself. Nevertheless, the claimant does at least potentially have some scope for carving out a unique self-image out of such assertions.

As will be seen, only this type of self-claim may be expressed verbally (though even here non-verbal expression is most common).

#### 2.2.1.2. Role Self-Claims

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories.

(Goffman, 1963: 2)

By fate and by life-choices individuals are classified by themselves and others according to various schemes of social roles<sup>2</sup>: professional, kinship, age, sexual, territorial, political, ideological, artistic, religious, organizational, and situational. A role, from one perspective, can be viewed as a projected image of self shared by all

---

<sup>2</sup> By 'role' I will mean no more than a socially-defined category of persons associated with a set of attributes. In *Stigma* (1963: 1) Goffman uses the term 'social identity.'

roleholders. All doctors enjoy the prestige and the financial rewards of belonging to this restricted group. All gain prestige from the publicized successes of a few, and all suffer from the publicized errors of a few. More relevantly to the current discussion, any doctor is expected to fulfill the self-claims attaching to this role: a history of successful medical studies (preferably framed and displayed on the wall of his practice); accuracy in reaching medical diagnoses; a commitment to care; emotional tolerance to sights of nakedness, blood, disease, deformity, and death; adequate, clean, and sterile equipment and surroundings. No one can escape making countless self-claims by virtue of membership to the various social groupings with which he is identified.

Roles vary in specificity from the most particular to the most general. At one end of the spectrum we find characteristic parts or routines regularly enacted before certain audiences by a single individual: 'Jo Smith with his office colleagues', 'Dr. Twistbone with a patient,' 'Attila the Hun on the battlefield,' 'Attila in private with his concubines.' These individual routines are built up on the sediment of countless past independent self-claims, on consistencies of behaviour and appearance observed over several performances.

Progressing towards greater generality, we find roles shared among larger groups of people: antique car collectors, skiers, Mormons, plumbers, Frenchmen, contract killers. Each of these categories is associated with a set of self-claims expected of members. In his article "Radio Talk" (1981: 197-330), Goffman analyses the vicissitudes of maintaining the central claim attributed by radio broadcasters to themselves: "the production of seemingly faultless fresh talk" (p. 242). At the opposite extreme from individual routines we find such inclusive categories as 'male' and 'female' or 'child' and 'adult.'

Role self-claims cannot, by definition, be established verbally: the very fact of belonging to a social role is the effective assertion of such self-claims, and their verbalization provides mere redundancy.

It should be clarified that the self-claim of *membership* to a role is not necessarily or even usually a role self-claim itself. 'I am a trapeze artist' or 'I belong to Amnesty International' would qualify as independent self-claims (of membership to a role), unless implied in the definition of a super-ordinate role. As an example of the latter 'I am white'

could be seen as a role self-claim associated with the independent self-claim 'I am a neo-nazi.'

### 2.2.1.3. Universal Self-Claims

The concept of 'person' or 'human being' can be considered a role in the sense I have been using the term (i.e., as a collective 'self-presentation'), the most general of all roles.

This 'universal' role is not free from requirements. Most of us normally remain unaware of the many self-claims we make and are expected to make by mere virtue of being persons in society. On the other hand, some individuals suffer crippling handicaps in dealing with simple everyday activities due to failures in this regard: physical deformities, stigmatized racial or ethnic backgrounds, problematic sexual identities, psychological disorders, or criminal records (Goffman, 1963B). Occasionally all of us become sharply aware of these basic expectations, finding ourselves in situations which expose a particular deficiency:

The most fortunate of normals is likely to have his half-hidden failing, and for every little failing there is a social occasion when it will loom large.

Competency in regard to common-human abilities is something we tacitly allot to all adults we meet with, an achievement and qualification they are taken to start with, credit for which they receive in advance. An individual's failure to sustain these 'normal' standards is thus taken as evidence not only that he doesn't (or might not) measure up in these respects, but also that as a claimant he has tacitly presented himself in a false light. With reappraisal goes discrediting and an imputation of bad faith.

(Goffman, 1963B: 126; 1981: 202)

A universal self-claim is one assumed to be made by 'everybody' or 'all normal people.' They are not necessarily truly cross-cultural self-claims. Every society creates

and defends its own version of what constitutes 'normal' behaviour, appearance, and other characteristics of personhood. A self-claim is 'universal' only from the point-of-view of a single individual or of a social group. However, there may be a number of basic requirements to social interaction:

Participation in any circuit of face-to-face activity requires the participant to keep command of himself, both as a person capable of executing physical movements and as one capable of receiving and transmitting communications.

(Goffman, 1961: 93)

There is a special family of competencies seen to be common to the human estate by virtue of involving ongoing requisites for living in society: the ability, for example, to walk, see, hear, dress appropriately, manipulate small physical objects and, in literate societies, write, read, and compute with numbers.

(Goffman, 1981: 201)

In the following discussion regarding the substance of claims about the self, some general categories of claims will be suggested which all societies require of members. In each case, however, the specific substance of requirements will vary. For example, the level of competence and detailed characteristics associated with 'walking' in an urban environment, with its hard surfaces, broad but restricted pedestrian areas, and crowds of people, differ from those associated with walking in arctic, mountain, or tropical forest surroundings. Social definitions of what 'walking' competence entails will vary accordingly.

As in the case of role self-claims, and for the same reasons, universal self-claims cannot be made verbally.

### 2.2.2. *Content* of Self-Claims

Self-claims can additionally be classified according to their **content**, though here the choice of distinguishing criteria tends to be rather more arbitrary. Plato, as we have seen (Chapter Three, Section 2.1), identified 'virtue,' 'wisdom,' 'wealth,' and 'physical beauty' as the four aspects regarding which a man may or may not 'know himself'. I will adopt a somewhat different division, including self-claims of **skill**, self-claims of the **mind**, self-claims of **territory**, self-claims of **appearance**, and self-claims of **biography**.

#### 2.2.2.1. Self-Claims of Skill

Self-claims of skill assert a specific level of ability by the claimant regarding some observable and/or complex activity: tennis-playing, nation-conquering, lock-picking, speech-giving, or brain-transplanting. "I can do..." would provide a verbal statement of this type.

From the point of view of a particular individual or society, certain self-claims of skill will be associated with certain claimants by virtue of role-membership or merely by virtue of being human beings. In Europe, parents must be able to teach their children 'proper manners,' dentists to pull teeth and fill cavities, and males to play football (soccer). In Italy, *all* individuals are expected by most natives to be able to cook a proper pot of pasta, in Brazil to dance the samba, in Great Britain to tolerate the ingestion of large quantities of beer.

Certain self-claims of skill must be demanded of all members (i.e., will be considered 'universal') by almost every human society. In order to be able to interact at all, or to interact at an adequate standard, social actors must demonstrate competence in a number of domains. Firstly, they must be able to produce **language** and other accepted means of communication efficiently. Errors may occur at various levels: pronunciation, handwriting, spelling, lexicon, syntax, style, interest of content, relevance of topic, continuity of thought, conversational turn-taking<sup>3</sup>. **Sensory-motor coordination** is a

---

<sup>3</sup> See "Radio Talk: A Study of the Ways of Our Errors" in Goffman (1981) for a consideration of speech as a basic human competence.

second basic category of universal skills, including such abilities as walking, orientation, guiding the various bodily parts through space, and manipulating objects<sup>4</sup>. Thirdly, each society sets an optimum level of **control over the body**, restricting freedom in regards to acceptable bodily movements, emotional expression, and 'creature releases'<sup>5</sup>. Individuals must therefore develop the necessary competence in managing their body.

#### 2.2.2.2. Self-Claims of the Mind

Self-claims of the mind assert either

- a) the possession of a fact, belief, memory, desire, opinion, attitude, or other latent mental state or property by the claimant; or,
- b) a specific level of ability by the claimant regarding some mental activity (including perception): calculating square-roots, forecasting stock market tendencies, appreciating modern art, recognizing musical notes, communicating telepathically, understanding Slovenian.

Verbalized statements would be of the types "I think...", "I believe...", "I feel...", "I understand...", "I want...", "I know...", "I can see/hear/smell/touch/taste...".

Again, social roles are typically associated with certain self-claims of the mind. Charity workers are required to possess philanthropic ideals and motives; geometry teachers to know the formula for calculating circumferences. Other mental self-claims will apply to whole societies: knowledge of earthquake emergency procedures in Japan, pride of 'being an American' in the United States, understanding three languages in Switzerland.

It is possible to distinguish a number of categories of mental self-claims which all societies demand of the individual<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> At least the ability to maneuver the body through space as a pedestrian has been discussed at some length by Goffman (1971: 5-18).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Douglas (1971) has treated the social control of the body from a cross-cultural perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) can be interpreted as a study of such claims.

Firstly, individuals must be able to report with some accuracy on what occurs within their perceivable environment, a mental competence I will term **immediate perception**. They are expected to perform to a certain level with their 'exterior' senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch; likewise with their 'interior' senses of hunger, thirst, pain, itchiness, and such bodily messages. They must be able to offer reasonably accurate judgments of colour, bitterness, sharpness, weight, size, tone, loudness, and other culturally-relevant sensory characteristics of stimuli.

Secondly, individuals must possess and, when relevant, apply the 'correct' (i.e., culturally defined) **natural frameworks of interpretation**. Natural frames, as mentioned in Chapter Three, are those which we use to view things in terms of an unconscious, mechanistic universe. In Western society, our scientific theories tell us, among other things, that billiard balls pushed off a table drop down towards the ground. A force called 'gravity' prevents them from floating in space or spiraling up towards the ceiling. Individuals should interpret events within the conceptions and ideas currently held about how the world 'works.'

Thirdly, individuals should be seen to possess and correctly apply the appropriate **social frameworks of interpretation**. Social frames are ordered classifications of knowledge by which actors interpret events guided by conscious action, the social world. Individuals are expected to possess the frames considered 'common knowledge' by their society, and to apply them with 'common sense.' They are expected to be 'cultured,' knowing about their own personal histories, the history and geography of the world around them and of their society, the laws of fashion and good taste, practical information essential to everyday life, the rules of morality and etiquette, and the various types of social occasion and their workings. Individuals must additionally manage these matrices of knowledge according to accepted procedures. One thing is to know that cups are designed for drinking. Another is whether they are actually used accordingly or rather as hats, juggling balls, or representations of a deity. Thus, social frame discredits would include not only revealing a lack or incompleteness of a basic social frame, but also using the wrong frame to interpret events, failing to identify an element from a particular frame, misjudging a particular item (according to values attached to the item within the frame),

or using items (objects, ideas, or activities) from one frame in an inappropriate context (i.e., mixing frames).

Fourthly, individuals should be able to decode verbal and other forms of symbolic communication efficiently, when such messages are offered competently within the receiver's range of attention. **Language interpretation** is a subset of the interpretation of situations, but it is an important one, for language is the main tool used by participants to intentionally communicate meanings to each other.

Fifthly, a participant in a situation is expected to display **appropriate cognitive and emotional involvement** in the frame shared with other participants. Indeed, participation is synonymous with involvement. Situations --card games, board meetings, funerals-- seem real only as long as participants generally appear to be genuinely engrossed in them. On the other hand, a situation may be threatened by overinvolvement (i.e., by 'excessive' emotional displays). Thus, all societies must require a self-claim of 'appropriate' involvement.

Finally, individuals must be required to display **logical and consistent thought**, what might be called calculation 'within the parameters of a frame.' The simple rules of rational computation must be followed by members of a society if they are to be considered fully capable for social interaction.

### 2.2.2.3. Self-Claims of Territory

Self-claims of territory concern the control over certain 'fields of things' which Goffman (1971) refers to as the "territories of the self": personal possessions, clothing and the body itself, permanently-owned spaces such as homes and gardens, occupied areas such as phone booths or tables at a cafe, the 'place' held in a queue, guarded information, the right to talk during a discussion.

A territorial self-claim belongs to one of two complementary types:

a) Self-claims of *control* over the claimant's own preserves.

A self-claim to control is a claim of ability and willingness to defend and protect the preserve from unauthorized intrusion. Examples include purchasing a

commodity, 'saving' a place at a canteen table, conquering a castle, and the child's taunt "I've got a secret."

b) Self-claims of *respect* for the preserve of another.

A self-claim to respect is a claim of intention to avoid intruding upon a preserve without previous authorization. Examples include shows of tact and deference, pledges of allegiance/obedience, a door-to-door salesman's "This will only take a minute of your time...", a politician's vow to abstain from increasing taxes, a bank robber's "Nobody's going to get hurt (if everyone cooperates)...", and a peace treaty between two nations after a war of territorial conquest.

Certain territorial self-claims accompany specific social roles. A shopkeeper claims control over the goods displayed, and respect towards the customer's questions and requests. A customer, conversely, claims control over the shopkeeper's attention (at least as much as any other customer), and respect towards the goods displayed.

Other territorial self-claims are considered universal within a single society. In Great Britain, for instance, unacquainted individuals passing each other on the street respectfully avoid 'staring' at each other --only the briefest scan is permitted for purposes of maneuvering and possible identification. The more prolonged looks common in Mediterranean countries would be seen as invasions of privacy, transgressions of one's right to be ignored.

Five categories of territorial self-claims can be applied cross-culturally.

**Material territories** include personal possessions, objects to which the owner has temporarily lain claim to, human dependents, and the controls of creature comfort systems such as lights, heating, or music players.

**Spatial/bodily territories** include the body of an individual, the space immediately surrounding it, and all spatial preserves which he is responsible for protecting.

During focused interaction (encounters), and even during unfocused interaction, there are a number of bounded **interactional territories**, both in space and in time, which participants have a duty to protect and/or respect. The encounter itself can be thought of

as a closed unit which outsiders may enter and participants may leave only according to certain rituals of entrance and exit. Similarly, interaction is organized sequentially in time, as a series of turns, and certain rules of turn-taking must be enforced if individual selves are to be preserved undamaged. (Goffman 1961, 1971, 1981)

**Informational territories** refer to the facts, ideas, or feelings which an individual is expected to maintain private, or secret, concealed from certain others. Personal information about sexual, toilet, and criminal activities, for example, are commonly withheld (and, by others, not requested) during public interaction in our society. Physical blemishes and deformities are also normally disguised, if not hidden altogether (and, by others, ignored). More generally, any information known to clash with an image of self being presented, should be concealed by the actor and disattended by fellow interactants.

The **ego territory** is the symbol or idea of the very self, sometimes referred to as 'honour' or 'dignity'. This can be damaged or mistreated in various ways. What we call an 'insult' is a direct affront to the self, and it is something which an actor should not tolerate, and which others should avoid causing. Insults may be 'active' (a sign of disrespect is offered) or 'passive' (a sign of respect due is not offered).

#### 2.2.2.4. Self-Claims of Appearance and Condition

These refer to the physical aspect and condition of the claimant (or the possessions and settings for which he is considered responsible), and may be verbalized as "I look...", "my things look..." or "My physical condition is...". Some elements include the beauty, cleanliness, and orderliness of possessions and owned spaces, bodily and facial configuration, posture, body odour, audible qualities of voice, skin/hair colour and texture, dress, hygiene, age, constitution, and health.

Role self-claims of appearance and condition include the fashionable standards of beauty required of 'top models,' the advanced age typical of national leaders, the large size of night-club doormen, the cleanliness of a chef's kitchen, the colourful suit and elegant poses of a bullfighter, the stamina of long-distance runners, and the scars, piercings, tattoos, stretchings, flattenings, and other bodily disfigurations applied to initiated members of several Western and non-Western social groups.

Universal self-claims of appearance vary from one society to another. In the United States, standards of teeth whiteness and straightness are extremely high in comparison to European standards. Europeans, on the other hand, are much less tolerant regarding obesity than Americans. All societies, however, impose some basic norms of appearance 'universally'. A few basic cross-cultural categories can be obtained from the above listed 'elements' of appearance.

#### 2.2.2.5. Self-Claims of Biography

The types of self-claims presented thus far concern *potentialities* of the claimant (I *can* do, I *can* control...), which may or may not be realized in actual circumstances. This fifth category, on the other hand, regards allegations of actual fact, of events that did, do, or will take place (whether visibly to observers or not).

Biographical self-claims describe the circumstances, activities, mental and bodily states, relationships (to objects, persons, or categories), or mere presence of the claimant at more or less specific points in space and time. They may be put into words in these and similar ways: "I was there (at that time)", "This happened to me (then)", "I felt/am feeling...", "I did it (this many times/for the first time at this age)", "I am now doing this", "I am going to do this (within this amount of time/as soon as possible)", "I am/was a friend/nephew/colleague/business partner of...".

Specific roles demand particular 'careers' to be undergone by individuals within a specific time frame. In some cases, this required history may extend beyond the individual's life through his genealogical roots. The process of recruitment for specific occupational roles, for instance, often includes testing not only of abilities, knowledge, and appearance, but also of such biographical facts as specific types of education undertaken, work experience undergone, residence taken up, gender, and, in some cases, socio-cultural/hereditary background. Once part of a role, continued membership may require further biographical additions --publications in the case of academics, supernatural perception, protection, and healing in the case of Amazonian shamans.

Each society expects specific biographical facts from all individuals. Some 'universal' expectations of this type which are almost unique to the Western world include

the experience of 'falling in love' (to be had at least once in a lifetime) and the fact of having traveled at least several hundred miles from one's birthplace. In many other societies, undergoing a prolonged initiation ceremony into adulthood and forming part of vastly extended matri- or patri-lineal families would seem equally obvious biographical essentials.

There are also a number of basic cross-cultural categories of such self-claims that may be identified:

a) **typical experiences** which are taken for granted by members of the society: rites of passage, socialization practices, typical economic, recreational, and ritual activities, emotional and physiological events, first-hand perception of typical natural and social phenomena. In the Arctic, for example 'dressing warmly' and 'walking in snow' might constitute basic life experiences; these would be lacking, however, in members of a Pacific island society, where swimming naked in bright, clear, warm water would seem equally 'basic'.

b) **typical places** where each individual is expected to have been at appropriate times. These include not only specific locations, such as 'London' or 'Red-Rock Mountain' but abstract concepts such as 'home', 'a city', or 'outdoors.'

c) **typical social relationships** with categories such as 'mother,' 'friend,' or 'object-of-sexual-desire.'

d) **typical possessions**, which among nomadic hunter-gatherers would be no more than a few hand-made portables, and in middle-class suburban America might include a large closetful of clothing, an automobile from age 16-20, and a large furnished house with front and back garden from 25-35.

### 2.3. Claim-makers and Claimants

Most often, the individual who actually makes a self-claim by word, deed, or observable condition is also the one about whom the self-claim is made. This will invariably be the case if the attribution is of role or universal origin. Thus, unless specified to the contrary, I will use phrases such as 'X makes a self-claim' in a loose sense, meaning 'X makes a self-claim *about X*.'

It is possible, however, that with some independent assertions claim-maker and claimant are not equivalent. Performances on the everyday stage are sometimes given by groups of individuals or **teams** (Goffman, 1959: 82-100) who share a set of self-claims that apply to the group as a whole. The self-claims to be made may be discussed in private, but once in public any self-claim made by a single member of the team must be supported by all others --a front of agreement must be maintained at all times. Thus, one individual may be a claim-maker for a large group of claimants which includes himself. A specialized role of director or spokesperson may institutionalize this relation.

Another possibility is for one person or group to act as claim-maker for a separate claimant. This may occur if the former is seen to have taken the role of legitimate agent or representative. Examples include the agent of an author or performer, the lawyer who represents a client, the slave auctioneer, the football player advertising a brand of sports shoes, and the employee who tries to 'sell' a friend as a candidate for an available job in his company. In this case, the claim-maker is not a claimant himself --or at least not of the same claims-- and yet the actor represented will be held responsible for the self-claims made on his behalf.

## 2.4. Self-Claims and Social Norms

Self-claims are involved in the maintenance of social order. As suggested above in section 2.2.1, many such claims --specifically, those of 'role' and 'universal' origin-- derive from a social definition of who the claimant is. A lawyer does not need to verbally declare his knowledge of basic legal theory, or his respect for the law, but if questioned will readily provide such declarations (perhaps in an offended tone). These self-claims are implicit, but they are most certainly present, and their discredit will elicit the same sorts of consequences as if they had been explicit. Our society has previously associated the role of 'lawyer' with a whole host of essential attributes, and likewise with all other conceivable roles, including the universally applicable role of 'human being.'

These associations can also be characterized in terms of the social **norms** (rules, expectations) applying to a specific role, or to all people generally. Social norms, which can be defined as socially shared ideas about the required or recommended actions or characteristics of individuals. Not all social norms are related to self-claims, however. A contract killer, for instance, does not violate any self-claims when he 'rubs out' each new victim, though he breaks both criminal laws and widely-shared moral codes. On the contrary, he fulfills his self-claims to competence at his job and willingness to carry it out despite moral and criminal prohibitions. In other words, he is punctilious in observing the norms of appropriate behaviour for a person of his office.

What kind of norm would we be referring to in this latter case, and how might it be distinguished from other kinds? Goffman treated this question in his essay "The Nature of Deference and Demeanour" (1967: 47-95). Here he defined in detail the type of norm which arises from the association of particular self-claims with particular social categories: norms of demeanour. These norms are one of two types of what have been variously characterised in sociological and anthropological theory as 'expressive', 'ceremonial,' or 'ritual' norms: "A ceremonial rule is one which guides conduct in matters felt to have secondary or even no significance in their own right, having their primary importance --officially anyway-- as a conventionalised means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation" (p. 54). These norms are to be distinguished from

‘substantive’ (also ‘instrumental’ or ‘intrinsic’) rules, which cover matters important in their own right: thou shalt not kill, injure, steal, deceive, etc. Substantive norms are not based on what we expect others to have claimed about themselves, but rather on absolute (i.e., moral) ideas of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ Violations of substantive norms may sometimes constitute violations of ceremonial norms (as when an ‘upright’ citizen poisons his spouse), but they may also constitute the *fulfillment* of ceremonial norms (as with our contract killer’s immoral and criminal routine).

A second distinction within the set of ceremonial norms is between those by which the individual “conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation” - norms of **deference**-- and those by which he “expresses his character” --norms of **demeanour**. Norms of deference include rules about tact, politeness, offerings of respect, and other behaviours by which the dignity of others is protected. They involve taking care to avoid discrediting the self-claims of others. Norms of demeanour, on the other hand, are designed to protect the standing and dignity of the actor himself, by upholding the “character” or self-presentation he has created for public display. They involve the fulfillment of self-claims, normally of role or universal origin<sup>7</sup>.

This relationship between self-claims and social norms is relevant to a number of issues in humour research. For example, in Chapter Three, 2.4, it was seen that some of the ‘claim-discredit’ theorists of amusement phrased their account in terms of rule-violation. These theorists focused on the discredit of role and especially universal self-claims, but otherwise provided accounts of amusement closely akin to that being proposed in this thesis. Another relevant point concerns the social ‘conformity’ or ‘control’ effect/function that has often been attributed to laughter and humour. This issue will be discussed further in Chapter Eight, 4.1.3 - 4.1.4.

---

<sup>7</sup> Independent self-claims are by definition made independently of social expectations.



### 3. Claim-Discredits

#### 3.1. Definition of 'Claim-Discredit'

Assuming a self-claim has been made by (or for) a claimant, how may this claim be discredited? What does it mean to say such a thing? It should be recalled that the existence of a self-claim depends on the opinion of a single perceiver (or group of perceivers). Likewise, the discrediting of a self-claim can only occur relative to a perceiver, and moreover to the same perceiver of the original claim.

Noticing a discredit is the result of an assessment of a self-claim's truth by the claim's perceiver. This assessment consists in a comparison of a self-claim's meaning with all available facts relevant to the claim. Such facts include those previously known to the perceiver, those currently observable, and those which become accessible with the passing of time.

The assessment of a self-claim's truth may have one of three outcomes. If a self-claim is supported by known facts, and the perceiver has no further reasons or disposition to doubt the claim, it may be accepted (at least temporarily) as true. Another option would be for the perceiver to doubt the truth of the self-claim, without deciding on its falsity --the agnostic position. This could be due to a suspicious nature or habit, concrete grounds for skepticism (such as past deception or error by the claimant), importance of the assessment, scarcity of relevant facts, or any combination of these elements. Such a state of indecision may give way to either positive or negative outcomes after additional information becomes available or 'testing' is performed.

Finally, the perceiver may conclude that some observed event or circumstance contradicts the self-claim, revealing its inaccuracy or falsehood. In this case, the self-claim is said to be **discredited**. The circumstance which contradicts the self-claim will be referred to as the **discrediting fact**, and the occurrence of its coming to light as the **discrediting event**. As the shortfall between claimed reality and the reality disclosed by the discrediting fact may be greater or lesser, discredits admit of degrees. Thus, I will refer to the greater or lesser **seriousness** of the discredit.

It should be noted that the act of 'perceiving a discrediting event' does not only include discredits of self-claims made before the perceiver himself, but also of claims made before third parties. The perceiver may be aware of many self-claims made by participants to each other (not all of which will apply to himself), and will be able to recognize situations where one's perception will result in the other's discredit. For example, John might know that Henry is being unfaithful his wife, and could witness Henry's discredit if she found incriminating evidence of the fact --even though this would not discredit Henry in John's eyes. From this possibility, it follows that the same discrediting fact may allow a single perceiver to witness a number of discrediting events, as additional participants become aware of the new information. Someone who spreads gossip observes a new discrediting of its subject with each retelling of the 'juicy' story to a different audience.

### 3.1.1. Requisites of Discredit Perception

Experience, in a general sense, can be defined as the subjective mental continuum of an individual, composed of the perceptions of all objects in the world which become available to the senses and attention throughout his conscious lifetime. Individual perceptions are not directly and automatically provided by the senses, but rather mediated by cognitive frameworks of interpretation, which direct attention and provide relevant meanings, values, and contexts<sup>1</sup>. The same running man, for instance, could be perceived as 'a moving object,' 'a human organism at maximum speed,' 'someone who is late,' 'a pursued criminal,' 'a reckless pedestrian,' 'a trained athlete,' 'a symbol of our stressed-out urban life,' 'a difficult target,' 'an interesting photographic subject,' 'a sexy guy,' 'a growing speck in my field of vision,' 'Jeremy,' 'an orthodontist from Ohio,' 'the spitting image of Harrison Ford,' 'Cynthia's husband,' and 'a selfish lout.'

Frames of interpretation, shaped largely by the social environment to which the individual has been exposed, can be divided into natural and social frames (See Chapter Three, 3.3). Self-claims and claim-discredits clearly relate to the latter category, and thus they can only be noticed when a social framework is being applied to a situation by a perceiver.

The requirements necessary for a perceiver to detect the discrediting of a self-claim can be listed as follows:

a) The observation through sensory means of a circumstance interpretable as the making of a particular self-claim.

A potential observer of a discrediting could fail to detect the event if he was not present or not paying appropriate attention when the original self-claim was made; or if barriers to sensory reception prevented the perceiving of the relevant circumstances.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term 'perception' (ie, of a claim-making or a claim-discredit event) will be intended throughout in this wide and 'constructivist' sense: 'perception' as the end-point and output of a cognitive interpretation rather than as a direct and unprocessed sensory imprint.

b) The observation through sensory means of a circumstance interpretable as the discrediting of the self-claim (i.e., a discrediting fact).

Again, physical presence, attention to relevant details, and absence of barriers are essential.

c) The possession of an 'appropriate'<sup>2</sup> social framework.

According to this framework, the observed occurrence required by point 'a' should constitute the making of a particular self-claim, and the observed occurrence required by point 'b' should constitute a more-or-less serious contradiction of the claim.

What are seen as self-claims by some are not seen as such by others. In Southern European 'classroom' situations, students do not often contribute to the class discussion. Speaking to the class implies a self-claim of substantial knowledge about the current topic, and thus a risk of embarrassment by the professor or other knowledgeable pupils. In the Anglo-American educational system, on the other hand, offering opinions is actively encouraged. An Italian 'Erasmus' student at a British university, therefore, was continuously surprised by the 'shameless' and 'ridiculous' displays of classmates who constantly revealed their ignorance with ungrounded contributions. In this case, the British students did not possess a framework under which speaking publicly in a classroom situation would constitute a claim of knowledge on the current topic.

Even if a self-claim has been perceived as such by an observer, a potentially discrediting event may be interpreted otherwise by the use of frameworks possessed. Consider the case of a French citizen of African descent. A xenophobic French nationalist may agree with a more tolerant compatriot that the man claims to be French. Their varying social frameworks, however, could lead to disagreements over whether the man's ancestry discredits his self-claim of nationality.

---

<sup>2</sup> By 'appropriate' in this context I mean only appropriate for an interpretation of the percept in question as the discrediting of a self-claim. No connotation of 'correctness,' truth, or accuracy is intended.

d) The application of the 'appropriate' social framework.

The same strip of activity could be experienced by the same individual in twenty different ways depending on the framework of interpretation applied to the scene. It is not enough that the individual *possess* the appropriate framework of interpretation; he must also *apply* it at the relevant moment.

For a claim-discredit to be perceived, an observer must engage in an assessment of a self-claim's truth. In other words, he must apply a framework which establishes the requirements of a self-claim (seen to have been made) to a set of facts known about the claimant; and, he must judge whether these facts 'fit' with the requirements. Though such assessments are routine aspects of mental behaviour, they cannot take place always and for all the self-claims that could potentially be assessed at any given moment. There are severe limits to the allotment of attention by a human individual.

During a radio programme, for instance, many spoken errors by an announcer could be overlooked by a listener interested by the content of the transmission itself. These mistakes, on the other hand, would not pass undetected by the programme director as he judges the announcer's performance. Such errors have also been compiled and sold as 'humour' by various entrepreneurs, and bought by consumers who presumably listen with a continuously critical attitude.

### 3.1.2. Catalysts of Assessment

Testing the truth of observed self-claims seems to be a routine mental activity carried out by human beings, whose accurate knowledge of their social surround is essential to their safe and effective pursuit of ends<sup>3</sup>. Generally, it takes place almost unconsciously, either closely following the observation of a self-claim, or closely following the observation of new relevant information which subsequently comes to the attention of the perceiver. In certain environments where little trust is placed in self-presentations --i.e., those of international espionage (Goffman, 1969: 3-84), police or judicial inquiry, journalistic investigation, and, of course, social science research-- it may occur more frequently and intentionally.

In some cases, the behaviour of third parties may elicit a moment of claim-assessment by the perceiver. One example is provided by agents who intentionally attempt to cause discredit by testing or disproving self-claims. The mere appearance at a situation of a new participant may also cue the perceiver to re-assess the informational state of affairs regarding self-claims made by all present towards the new arrival, and vice-versa. Also, a discrediting event may be retold, verbally or otherwise, to the perceiver, often stressing or exaggerating the extent of the discredit (See Section 3.2.3.2). Gossip, satire, and much comedy and humour can be classified here. The mere labeling of an upcoming performance as 'humour' predisposes the audience for claim-assessment in the directions suggested by the performer --as was seen in Chapter Two, such humour 'cues' are a common feature of attempts to stimulate the amusement of others. Relatedly, the sounds and images of others' laughter or embarrassment can incidentally act as 'alarm signs' (Goffman, 1971: 238-328) for the perceiver, to which he may respond by consciously testing the self-claims active in his immediate environment. Eyebrow-raises, finger-pointings, 'significant' stares, whispered messages, and other collusive or open communications may also put the perceiver on guard, in these cases more intentionally.

---

<sup>3</sup> In "Normal Appearances," (1971: 238-328) Goffman suggests that actors continuously monitor their current situation for a match with their concept of what is 'normal' --an activity he labels "dissociated vigilance." He presents a number of phenomena, such as the practices and tribulations of con-artists and other conscious 'fakers' as powerful evidence of this idea.

### 3.1.3. Uncertainty, Disagreement, and Bias

An assessment of fit between self-claim and fact shares many features of judgments, including the possibility of bias and error, a certain amount of decisional leeway, ultimate uncertainty, scarcity or abundance of relevant facts, and limits of time and attention. Disagreements among a multiplicity of observers as to the funniness of any single event are intrinsic to the process.

In the case at hand, the major issue whose outcome will be influenced by such features may be stated as follows: 'Has self-claim X been discredited by fact Y, and if so, to what extent?' This general problem, however, may be broken down into two constituent points at which disagreement, error, and the like may be more specifically located.

The first concerns the question of whether or not the self-claim has actually been made by the alleged claimant, and if so how strongly. Was it made recently or years ago? Has it been repeated often? Do other witnesses corroborate the existence of the self-claim, or is it the perceiver's individual belief? Has the 'claimant' perhaps made a point of offering disclaimers? Are alternative interpretations of the claiming act possible? How well does the perceiver know the alleged claimant personally? How familiar is the perceiver with the alleged claimant's cultural background? If a role self-claim, how familiar is the perceiver with the expectations of the role in question, and with the claimant's membership status? The story about the 'shamelessly ignorant' British students --from the Italian perspective-- exemplifies the type of disagreement which may arise.

Secondly, the issue of whether or not the facts at hand represent the self-claim's discredit must be decided. Is the claimant just pretending? Is he knowingly and intentionally breaching rules merely to make a point? Is the event in question an exception? Are other alternative interpretations possible? Is the perceiver aware of the claimant's interpretation? Does the perceiver have all the evidence at his disposal? How large is the gap between self-claim and fact? Are other participants in agreement with the perceiver's version of the event?

These decisional variables, of course, are merely abstract possibilities of uncertainty or disagreement. They do not normally engage the perceiver's attention at the

time of assessment, this being primarily an unconscious process. In practice, most of these questions are taken for granted, or have been resolved previously to the moment at which the assessment takes place. In other words, this high-speed, semi-automatic judgment is based more on prejudice --i.e., on the use of internalized frames of interpretation-- than on conscious sifting and weighing of evidence. A perceiver may believe rationally that laughing at a blind man's stumble is unfair --the blind cannot claim the same kind of walking competence as the sighted-- and yet he may find himself smiling or snickering at the unexpected event against his own better judgment. Similarly, new employees at a mental home must probably undergo a learning period before they may cease to react with amusement, shock, and outrage at the pathological behaviour of patients, and begin to accept them as 'normal' in this context<sup>4</sup>.

One major source of bias, however, can be confidently identified: the opinion of other participants in the situation, for example as expressed by their laughter or non-laughter. It appears that the assessment process, though too rapid to allow much reasoning, may allow the influence of others' assessment outcomes. If other individuals sharing the social situation of the perceiver --particularly if these are friends or liked individuals-- appear to find an event funny, the perceiver's probability and intensity of amusement will increase. Varied empirical findings, such as the psychological experiments carried out by Anthony Chapman and Hugh Foot on 'companion effects' (See Chapman, 1983) and the effectiveness and widespread use of 'canned laughter' (Fuller, 1977) testify to this phenomenon (see Chapter Eight, 4.1.2). The opinion of culturally 'close' others confirms the perceiver's own suspicions or beliefs that a self-claim has been discredited according to the appropriate frame of interpretation, tipping the scales of assessment in the positive direction. The presence of an unamused friend, or of strangers/outgroup members, may on the other hand reduce amusement, as the perceiver may be less sure of his judgment.

In cases where the discredit has been caused by an agent, or retold as 'humour', the action of the agent/teller reveals his assessment of the event in question as funny, and thus exerts an identical effect on the perceiver. As noted in Chapter Two (2.1.1), it has been demonstrated that amusement varies proportionally with the positiveness of the

---

<sup>4</sup> And indeed, it appears that such reactions are never completely eliminated (See Chapter Eight, 4.1.4)

perceiver's affective disposition towards the disparaging agent. A skillful comedian is able to guide his audience's interpretations, and thus their amusement reactions.

### 3.2. Claim-Discredit Variables

Situations in which a self-claim's discredit is perceived, following a process of claim assessment, may be classified according to at least three variables: the **cause** of the discredit, which may be mere chance or accident on the one hand, some conscious agent on the other; the personal identity of the **claimant** discredited, which may be that of the perceiver himself or else some other actor; and the **location** of the event in one of many types of framed reality --either 'untransformed' reality or some kind of 'transformation' (book, story, film, imagining, play, etc.).

#### 3.2.1 *Cause* of Discredit: Accident/Agent

A discrediting fact may be exposed spontaneously over the course of everyday events. The claimant may let something 'slip,' challenging situations may arise which test his self-claim beyond the breaking point, or others may unintentionally trespass his 'backstage' regions and witness normally hidden parts of his self. These types of circumstances give rise to what I will call **accident**-caused discrediting. On the other hand, discrediting facts may be sought and/or publicly exposed intentionally by fellow participants, for various reasons: to discomfit the claimant, ruin his reputation, or 'teach him a lesson' in humility/honesty; to learn the truth of a self-claim when much is at stake (as in the case of espionage); for sheer pleasure, fun, or 'malice'. Various strategies (i.e., 'uncovering moves' --Goffman, 1969: 11-27) may be adopted: the claimant may be put under 'pressure' by engineering situations that will test his self-claim, information may be sought from other sources, illicit trespassing of backstage regions may be undertaken, and 'evidence' may even be invented, deliberately misinterpreted or exaggerated, 'planted,' or faked. In such cases I will refer to the discrediting as **agent**-caused.

### 3.2.2. *Claimant* of Discredit: Perceiver/Other

Another variable concerns the personal identity of the discredited individual. Normally we envisage a perceiver who observes the discredit of someone else, but occasionally he may also find *his own* self-presentation damaged by some fact. Every actor is frequently aware of himself from the perspective of an observer. Indeed, his ability to see himself 'from the outside' is crucial to his development of his own concept of self, and for managing social interaction (Mead, 1974). Thus, on this basis we may distinguish between **perceiver** and **other** discredits.

As will be seen in Chapter Six (Section 2), discredits of the perceiver often lead to embarrassment rather than amusement (See also Goffman, esp. 1967: 97-112). Nevertheless, when the perceiver does not closely identify with the part of himself discredited (i.e., it was 'just a silly mistake', 'not the real me'), amusement is also possible.

### 3.2.3. *Location* of Discredit: Untransformed/Transformed Reality

#### 3.2.3.1. Levels of Reality

The location of a discredit refers to its place within the layered framework of interpretative matrices through which individuals experience the worlds of fact and fantasy (Goffman, 1974; see also this thesis, Chapter Three, 3.3). This variable is considerably less straightforward than the causes and claimants of discredit, and will thus require a more elaborate presentation.

By saying that a perceiver 'observes' the discrediting of a self-claim, I do not necessarily imply his physical presence at the scene of the discrediting. He could be watching a television newscast, reading a novel, listening to 'gossip,' scrutinizing a photograph, or recalling an old memory. Much observation of social events takes place at one or more removes from the actual happenings in question --which need not have even occurred in 'real life.'

How may a social event (or indeed, any event) be positioned in relation to its perceiver? The most basic distinction to be made is between events which take place in **untransformed reality** and those which take place in any number of **transformed realities**.

'Untransformed reality' refers to the level which a perceiver would refer to when asked what was 'really going on' in a particular situation<sup>5</sup>. It is the most basic level of interpretation, beyond which the natural or social world would cease to have meaning: in Goffman's terms, a 'primary framework,' either natural or social. What is seen as real warfare, with real weapons and real deaths, occurs in untransformed reality. By contrast, the warfare within a film such as *Apocalypse Now* is a 'transformation' of this primary frame, as is the warfare in a board game such as *Risk*, the warfare in a military drill during peacetime, or the warfare we imagine now as I use the word 'warfare.'

---

<sup>5</sup> The term 'untransformed reality' does not imply events within this 'reality' have not actually been transformed in some way by a perceiver. All experience (or at least, all shareable experience) is mediated by cognitive frameworks of interpretation. The label 'untransformed' alludes rather to *the perceiver's own* separation of the 'real' world from less real ones: it is he who would label it so.

It is a remarkable fact that perceivers can and do become engrossed in worlds they know to be 'unreal': they not only follow events in these worlds, but even become emotionally involved in them. The theatre, film, and fictional literature are obvious and familiar examples within our culture, but the range of 'non-real' types of realities commonly available to experience is truly vast, and the potential range infinite. These genres are not absolutely removed and disconnected from the primary frameworks that perceivers use to interpret an otherwise meaningless universe. If they were, they would cease to have meaning themselves. Rather, each of them constitutes a transformation, a particular type of frame with certain standard, consistent, and well-known deviations from reality, which are conventionally disattended in order to 'enter into the spirit' of the framed reality. To enjoy a film properly, one must forget about the seat he is sitting on, the room in which the film is projected, the people with whom he has come, the events before and after the projection, the technical and stylistic considerations of the film, the scandalous love lives of the flesh-and-blood actors on screen, and all other distractions. If successful, he becomes an observer and even participant of another social world.

Within transformed realities, all manner of events may take place, and varied emotions elicited in perceivers. Tragic deaths of the virtuous may lead to tears, the triumph of underdogs may provoke joy, and the threat of violence may frighten. More relevantly to this thesis, the quirks of eccentrics, the clumsiness of oafs, the downfall of the pompous, and fooling of the gullible may bring on the audience's laughter. Discrediting does not necessarily have to be 'real' to provoke laughter, so long as the perceiver has accepted the conventions of the transformed frame and finds himself engrossed within it.

#### 3.2.3.2. Types of Transformations

Transformations can take many forms. One way of classifying this variety is according to the relationship between the perceiver of transformed events and the production of the frame by some actor or group: a **retelling** is a transformation observed by a passive perceiver; a **play act** is a transformation observed by a perceiver who collaborates in its very production as part of a group who perform to each other; an

**imagined sequence** is a transformation observed by a perceiver who mentally produces it for himself. In the following analysis, I will describe each of these in more detail, identifying some of the further variables which might be used to generate sub-categories.

a. Retellings

A **retelling** is the exhibition of a strip of activity to a passive audience. In this case the perceiver merely observes a reality that has been transformed and presented by others.

Retellings can vary according to the **medium** of retelling. Events may be recounted,

- by written description in notes, letters, newspaper and magazine articles, books, advertisements, faxes, encyclopedia entries, e-mails.
- orally in conversation, after-dinner speeches, conferences.
- in static visual depictions: photographs, drawings, paintings, comics.
- in moving visual depictions: feature length films, shorts, cartoons, documentaries, 'home movies,' closed-circuit TV images.
- by role-playing: theatrical productions, imitation during talk, and instructive, examined, practiced, or commercial demonstrations of an activity.

The **purposes** of an exhibition may also vary widely: entertainment of the audience, instruction of pupils, persuasion of consumers, ridicule of political figures, enlightenment of the masses, deceiving a 'mark,' obtaining criminal evidence, shocking the art world.

The **complexity** of the exhibition may range from the improvised anecdote told by a fellow conversationalist to the staging of a lavish London West End Musical.

The exhibition may be more or less **grounded in 'reality,'** i.e., in events that did actually take place in untransformed reality. It may consist of (in approximate order of decreasing depth of grounding),

- a direct recording of real events: 'live' filming or videotaping, audio recording, recorded measures of bodily changes recorded in real time, sonar records.
- a description of observed fact: a fieldworker's notes, a diary, an eyewitness police report, an oral recounting of observed events.
- an description of unobserved but allegedly true facts: reported 'hearsay', a 'gossip column', urban myths.
- a fictional description based on some verified facts: films or novels 'based on a true story,' police 'reconstructions' of a crime.
- fiction in a relatively factual world: 'realist' fiction
- fiction in a relatively fictional world: fantasy, science-fiction, surrealism and other similar genres.

A final variable concerns the **intentionality** of the exhibition. Most are designed for display (conversational contributions, scientific research, art and literature), but there may be limits on the audience for whom display is intended. An anthropological text may be targeted for social science circles, less so to the general public, and certainly not (in most cases) to the natives under observation.

#### b. Play Acts

A **play act** refers to the acted exhibition of a strip of activity by a group of participants to which the perceiver belongs. In these cases, the actors who create the transformed reality also react to the events within it. The perceiver is part of the team who transform and present the framed events in question for the appreciation of all participants of the encounter.

Some purposes of play acts include:

- Entertainment: child's play, 'role-playing' and 'board' games.
- Improving mental health: psychoanalytic role-playing sessions.

- Practice: simulations of surgical operations, fire-drills, play or concert rehearsals, football training, military exercises.
- Ceremonial: rites de passage, etc.

With regards to other variables suggested above, play acts are by definition intentional and role-played, but, the complexity of the frame's production may vary widely, from that of a child's game of 'police and thieves' to a sophisticated and costly military exercise over a whole continent. Also, the play act may be more or less grounded in reality. A simple game of 'police and thieves' is more 'realistic' in this sense than elaborate fantasy role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*.

### c. Imagined Sequences

An **imagined sequence** is the mental exhibition of a strip of activity by a perceiver for himself.

These exhibitions include what we call 'reminiscing about' or 'remembering' past events, 'daydreaming,' 'imagining' stories, 'fantasizing' about future possibilities, dreaming, and hallucinating. Another possibility is merely the distorted (i.e., poetical, symbolic, or metaphoric) interpretation of currently observable or reported events. For example, animals or natural objects might be anthropomorphized (a group of penguins seen as a 'black tie' party).

The **intentionality** of these sequences may vary, from conscious attempts to recall a particular experience to unbidden associations, drug-induced hallucinations, or dreams during sleep.

They may also be more or less **grounded in reality**. For example, memories are usually considered to be deeply rooted in fact (however illusory this may turn out to be), whereas predictions for the future have only weak ties with confirmable truths, which become increasingly tenuous the further in time one projects.

### 3.2.3.3. Frame Structures

Transformations may be retransformed. A boy may blow out the candles of his birthday cake. The candle-blowing scene may be videotaped; this home video may be used as evidence in a child-molestation trial; the using of this video may be commented upon in a legal text; this commentary may be photocopied for use in a law course.... Such recursive 'nesting' of frames can continue almost indefinitely, though a perceiver may not necessarily be aware of all intervening transformations. Increasing depth of a particular frame within such a layered **frame structure** may create greater difficulties for involvement, but perceivers nevertheless routinely penetrate even quite complex structures: The reader of the abovementioned 'final photocopy' may be able to imagine the child-molestation trial, various legal hypotheses, and the initial candle-blowing scene quite 'realistically,' even when many of these imaginings might be objectively different from the original sources.



#### 4. Conclusions

I have provided a basic statement of a proposed causal hypothesis of amusement, an alternative to the more well-known theories listed in Chapter Two. It follows the line of the claim-discredit accounts described in Chapter Three:

*Amusement is provoked only and always in a subject when he perceives that a self-claim put forward by a claimant has been discredited, provided that 1) the perceiver does not identify himself as the claimant at the moment of perception; 2) the perceiver is sufficiently involved in a definition of events which places the discrediting in the foreground.*

Dividing this statement into an initial central assertion and two subsequent amendments (points '1' and '2'), it is the former which has been the topic of this chapter.

I have clarified in detail the concepts of 'self-claim' and 'claim-discredit,' as well as what their perception entails. Furthermore, I have identified five variables which account for the vast heterogeneity of claim-discredit situations: the *origin* and *content* of self-claims and the *cause*, *claimant*, and *location* of claim-discredits.

A **self-claim** has been defined as *a skill, quality, emotion, mental state, identity, object, relationship, territory, or any other attribute ascribed to a claimant by a claim-maker who is either the claimant himself or someone seen to legitimately represent the claimant.* These verbal or non-verbal attributions are the basis of the self-presentations constructed by participants before each other.

Self-claims may be classified according to their origin and content. The **origin** of a self-claim (i.e., how it has been made) is **independent** if the claimant was not bound by rule or expectation to have made it. Otherwise, a self-claim may derive from membership to a particular **role** which implies it, or merely due to the consideration of its content as a **universal** possession.

Self-claims may also be distinguished by **content** into those concerning competence in specific **skills**; mental content, attitudes, abilities, dexterity and other

possessions of the **mind**; control over and/or respect for various types of **territory**; **appearance and physical condition**; and details of **biography**.

I have distinguished between the concepts of **claim-maker**, the agent who actually executes the attribution in question by word or deed, and the **claimant**, the participant(s) to whom the self-claim applies, and who will be responsible for maintaining it. Though often equivalent, the claim-maker and claimant may be separate in cases of independent assertions.

The requirements and variables concerning the perception of a self-claim's discredit have also been discussed. Noticing a **discrediting event** follows an assessment of a self-claim's truth by a perceiver, a judgment arrived at by the comparison of the claim's meaning with all available relevant facts. The shortfall between the self-claim and the reality disclosed by the discrediting fact constitutes the **seriousness** of the discredit. The claim discredited may have been intended for the perceiver himself or for other audiences present. Perception of a discrediting event requires the physical perception of relevant informations and the possession and timely application of appropriate social interpretative frames.

Claim assessments, though a normal part of social participants' mental routines, may also be stimulated by specific events, such as new arrivals, others' laughter, humour cues, and collusive or overt signaling. The assessments are subject to indecision, uncertainty, bias, and disagreement regarding two questions: 1) Has a self-claim in fact been made by the claimant?; and 2) Has the claim been discredited by facts? Though such questions are not normally confronted rationally, but rather settled by prejudice or immediate appearances, they may be strongly biased by the social context. The opinion of other --and especially socially close-- participants has an important influence on the perceiver's assessment.

Variables of discredit include the **cause** of discredit, the personal identity of the **claimant** discredited, and the **location** of discrediting events within the various possible cognitive frameworks used by a perceiver to interpret reality. The cause of a self-claim's discredit may be pure chance or **accident**, or else the intentional actions of some **agent**. The claimant whose self-claim is discredited may be either the **perceiver** himself or else some **other** actor. The location of the discrediting event may be either what is seen as

**untransformed reality** or else any number of **transformed realities**. The latter category refers to the exhibition of a strip of activity, based on but removed from what we would consider 'real' events, either to a passive audience of perceivers (**retellings**), by a group of participants to each other (**play-acts**), or by a single participant to himself (**imagined sequences**). Transformed events may be retransformed.

Table 1 summarizes the variables relating to the perception of a discrediting event.

<b>Object of Variation</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Possible Values</b>
Discrediting Event	<i>Location</i>	Untransformed Reality / Transformed Reality
	<i>Cause</i>	Accident / Agent
	<i>Claimant</i>	Other / Perceiver
	<i>Origin</i>	Independent / Role / Universal
Self-Claim	<i>Content</i>	Skill/ Mind / Territory / Appearance / Biography

Table 1. Variables relating to the perception of a discrediting event.

Combining the possible outcomes of each of these five variables results in 120 categories, which provide a starting point for coping with the immense variability of claim-discredit situations (See table 2). The viewed televised accusations of financial corruption by one politician to another could be described as a transformed agent-caused discredit of an other's role claim to respect certain material territories (•). A stutterer's perception of his own linguistic troubles could be described as the accidental discredit (in untransformed reality) of the perceiver's own self-claim to the universally required skill of correct speech production (\*). In Chapter Five, this multiple intersection of variables will be used as the basis of a classification of funny stimuli.

Table 2. Classification of discrediting situations on the basis of the five self-claim and claim-discredit variables identified (See Table 1)

Location of Discredit	Claim												Situations					
	Discredit						Untransformed Reality						Transformed Reality					
Claimant Discredited	Other						Perceiver						Other					
Cause of Discredit	Accident			Agent			Accident			Agent			Accident			Agent		
Origin of Self-Claim <sup>1</sup>	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U
Content of Self-Claim: skill						*												
mind																		
territories																		
appearance and condition																		
biography																		

<sup>1</sup> I = self-claims of Independent origin, R = self-claims of Role origin, U = self-claims of Universal origin.

# Chapter Five:

## A Typology of Funny Events

1. Introduction	page 201
2. Funny Events in Untransformed Reality	page 211
2.1 <i>Type I</i> . The Accidental Discredit of an Other's Self-Claims	page 213
2.1.1. <i>Type I</i> - Independent Self-Claims	page 213
2.1.2. <i>Type I</i> - Role Self-Claims	page 217
2.1.3. <i>Type I</i> - Universal Self-Claims`	page 219
2.1.4. Summary of <i>Type I</i> Funny Events	page 228
2.2. <i>Type II</i> . The Agent-Caused Discredit of an Other's Self-Claims	page 229
2.2.1. <i>Type II</i> - Independent Self-Claims	page 231
2.2.2. <i>Type II</i> - Role Self-Claims	page 232
2.2.3. <i>Type II</i> - Universal Self-Claims	page 232
2.3. <i>Types III and IV</i> . The Accidental and Agent-Caused Discredit of the Perceiver's Own Self-Claims (Special Cases)	page 237
2.3.1. Bodily Mismanagements	page 240
2.3.2. Perceptual Mismanagements	page 244
2.3.3. Natural Frame Mismanagements	page 246

2.3.4. Social Frame Mismanagements	page
248	

3. Funny Events Within Transformed Reality ( <i>Types V-VIII</i> )	page
261	
3.1. Retellings	page 262
3.2. Play Acts	page 272
3.3. Imagined Sequences	page 273
4. Conclusions	page 277

## 1. Introduction

In this Chapter I will describe, illustrate, and classify self-claim discredits which stimulate amusement when perceived: funny claim-discredits. As has already been conceded, not all perceived discredit events are experienced as funny. In Chapter Six, unfunny claim-discredits will be considered, including those where the main focus of attention is other than the discredit itself (the boy's bleeding head rather than his clumsiness on the bike), and those where discredit affects the perceiver himself ('the real me is discredited' rather than 'someone else is discredited').

It will be argued, however, that amusing claim-discredit percepts exhaust the set of amusing stimuli. A typology of funny claim-discredits is also a typology of all funny events. This does not mean that jokes, tickling, irony, Punch and Judy shows, and banana-peel slips should be treated 'in the same way' or that they are, in the end, 'the same thing.' The crude application of a single-cause explanation to lists of funny stimuli can only meet with disappointment, as the heterogeneity of such phenomena is real and evident. I will try to demonstrate, however, that this variety arises from the natural diversity of self-claim discredit situations, as they may appear to a single individual, the **perceiver** of the discredit. It is not 'the same thing' to crash into a lamppost while walking, distracted by the simultaneous reading of a fascinating historical article about the sinking of the Titanic, as it is to read the article itself, in which the Titanic promoters' loud boasts about their ship's 'unsinkability' are recounted. The reader of the Titanic article and victim of this crash could interpret both of these events as claim-discredits, and find both funny. However, in one case the discredit is perceived in the primary interpreted world of the individual himself, in the 'real' here and now, requires self-observation, affects his own universally claimed skill of sensory-motor coordination, and it is perceived while still reeling from a bump on the head. In the second case, discredit took place decades before, is experienced through the symbolic world created by a magazine writer, and involves the failure to keep a bold, verbal, independent claim of appearance and condition about the claimant's property. Different again would be the perception by the crash victim, momentarily impressed by the synchronicity between reading about a crash and crashing in reality, that he has mentally accepted some kind of

causal connection between the collision of a cruise liner and an iceberg in the remote past and the impact between his own body and an urban lighting fixture. Such a violation of his self-claim to appropriate interpretation of natural events could also lead to an experience of hilarity. I believe that all manifestations of amusement can be accounted for in a similar way, as reactions to claim-discredit perceptions of one type or another.

This chapter represents a protracted demonstration of how a claim-discredit theory of amusement can be used to account for funny stimuli of all the types imaginable. In the literature of humour theory, as has been noted in Chapter Two (3.3), such demonstrations have been standard practice, and have been the main tests of theory validity. The reader is invited to consider the plausibility of the descriptions offered, and thus test for himself the usefulness of the classification for the task of engaging in thought and discussion about amusement, humour, and laughter.

The typology has been developed directly from the two self-claim and three claim-discredit variables identified in Chapter Four (2.2, 3.2), and thus adds little theoretical novelty to the preceding discussion. In fact, it is identical in form to the typology of claim-discredit situations provided in the ‘Conclusions’ of this previous chapter (See Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of funny events on the basis of the five self-claim and claim-discredit variables identified (see Chapter Four 2.2, 3.2)

	Events																							
	Funny												Transformed Reality											
Location of Discredit	Untransformed Reality						Transformed Reality																	
Claimant Discredited	Other			Perceiver			Other			Perceiver														
Cause of Discredit	Accident		Agent		Accident		Agent		Accident		Agent		Accident		Agent									
Origin of Self-Claim*	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U						
Content of Self-Claim:	skill																							
	mind																							
	territories																							
	appearance and condition																							
	biography																							
Classification Type	I			II			III			IV			V			VI			VII			VIII		

**Assumed:** A perceiver has identified the discrediting of a self-claim, and has thereby experienced amusement.

Type I: The accidental discrediting of an other’s self-claim, in untransformed reality.

Type II: The agent-caused discrediting of an other’s self-claim, in untransformed reality.

Type III: The accidental discrediting of the perceiver’s own self-claim, in untransformed reality.

Type IV: The agent-caused discrediting of the perceiver’s own self-claim, in untransformed reality.

Type V: The retold, play-acted, or imagined accidental discrediting of an other’s self-claim.

Type VI: The retold, play-acted, or imagined agent-caused discrediting of an other’s self-claim.

Type VII: The retold, play-acted, or imagined accidental discrediting of the perceiver’s own self-claim.

Type VIII: The retold, play-acted, or imagined agent-caused discrediting of the perceiver’s own self-claim.

\* I = Independent Self-Claim; R = Role Self-Claim; U = Universal Self-Claim.

The first three variables relate to the perceiver's interpretation of the claim-discredit event, and their combined possible values result in eight main types of funny stimuli (referred to as *Types I-VIII*):

- *Location of Discredit: Untransformed Reality / Transformed Reality*

A discrediting event may take place either in what the perceiver takes to be 'real' everyday life (Untransformed Reality) or in some 'transformation' of real life: retelling, play act, or imagined sequence (Transformed Reality).

- *Cause of Discredit: Accident / Agent*

The discrediting may occur accidentally --by mere chance-- (Accident) or may be caused intentionally by a conscious agent (Agent).

- *Claimant Discredited: Other / Perceiver*

The claimant discredited may be or may have been the perceiver himself (Perceiver), or another participant (Other).

Each of the eight main types of funny stimuli has been subdivided into 12 classes on the basis of two further variables, this time relating to the self-claim discredited:

- *Origin of Self-Claim: Independent / Role / Universal*

A self-claim may be seen to have been made independently (Independent), by virtue of a role which the actor assumes (Role), or by mere virtue of being a social actor who must interact in society (Universal).

- *Content of Self-Claim: Skill / Mind / Territory / Appearance and Condition / Biography*

Self-claims may be made in regard to five basic types of attributes: specific levels of competence in particular skills (Skill); specific mental contents, attitudes, abilities, and dexterity (Mind); control over owned territories, and respect for the territories of others (Territory); a specific physical appearance and condition (Appearance and Condition); specific facts about the actual history of the individual (Biography).

Table 1 shows how the combined outcome possibilities of these five variables result in 120 types of funny stimuli. In addition, some of the content classes for self-claims of universal origin will be subdivided in the discussion according to the basic types listed in Chapter Four:

- Universal Self-Claims of Skill:
  - \* Language production
  - \* Sensory-motor coordination
  - \* Control over the body
  - \* Other culturally-specific skills considered 'universal'
  
- Universal Self-Claims of the Mind:
  - \* Immediate perception
  - \* Possession/correct application of natural frameworks of interpretation.
  - \* Possession/correct application of social frameworks of interpretation.
  - \* Language interpretation
  - \* Appropriate cognitive and emotional involvement
  
- Universal Self-Claims of Territory:
  - \* Material territories
  - \* Spatial/bodily territories
  - \* Interactional territories
  - \* Informational territories
  - \* Ego territory

In the remainder of the chapter I will provide numerous examples of funny stimuli to illustrate the classification. Many categories will be left 'blank,' in the sense of no illustration being specifically provided. This has been purposefully done in order to avoid excessive redundancy. Once the full range of Type I stimuli has been illustrated,

providing an equivalent coverage for each of the remaining eight main classes will be unnecessary. The differences between discredits affecting claims of the three 'origin' and five 'content' types should have been made clear, and the possible resulting combinations of these variables should be imaginable for Type II stimuli, as for the remaining classes. In other words, Type I illustrations may serve as Type II illustrations in all but a single aspect --the identity of the claimant discredited; Type I and Type II illustrations, in turn, map onto Types III and IV, but for the existence of an agent causing the discredit; and I-IV, of course, can be transformed into IV-VIII by a shift in the location of the discredit. Successive examples, therefore, will focus primarily on the effects of each new complicating variable introduced, with occasional reference to particularly novel or interesting categories.

As a preliminary guide, a short sketch of the Eight main types can be advanced:

- *Type I: The Accidental Discredit of an Other (In Untransformed Reality)*

Here are included the spontaneous everyday errors, slips, accidents, failures, gaffes, faux pas, unwanted revelations, misinterpretations, stigmas, deformities, awkward moves of those around us (friends, acquaintances, and co-present strangers). The first-hand observation of a braggart's failure to fulfil his boast, of a sportsman to display elegance and skill on the field, of a speaker to construct a decent English sentence --such constitute typical examples.

- *Type II: The Agent-Caused Discredit of an Other (In Untransformed Reality)*

In this type we find similar events, but for which some responsibility can be attributed to the actions of a third party: the tripping of a pedestrian with an outstretched leg, the throwing of a custard pie in a victim's face, the calling of a bluff, the stripping of a friend naked in a public place, the questioning or testing of a supposed expert, the publication of a private letter, the engineering of a hoax, illusion, or practical joke. Such events, witnessed first hand by an observer, can be considered examples of Type II.

- Types III and IV: The Accidental (Type III) and Agent-Caused (Type IV) Discredit of the Self (In Untransformed Reality)

These two types include the very same sorts of events as Types I and II (respectively), but from the point of view of the person whose self-claim has been discredited: *one's own* errors, gaffes, misunderstandings, deformities, and the like, whether occurring spontaneously (Type III) or due to the trippings, questionings, challengings, hoaxings, trespassings, or other claim-discredit activities of an agent (Type IV).

Worthy of special mention are certain funny events to which the self has unique or privileged access, due to his private 'interior' perspective on his own mental and bodily processes: 'fear games' (from peek-a-boo to horror films and rollercoasters) provoke errors of emotional management, tickling causes a bodily control lapse, sensory illusions cause perceptual failures, magic tricks and coincidences cause natural frame management mistakes, and jokes, puns, irony, absurdity, twist endings, and other phenomena cause social frame management errors. Each of these errors or failures is experienced in a unique way by the subject/observer.

- Types V-VIII: Transformed Self-Claim Discredits of an Other or of the Self, either Accidental or Agent-Caused

Here we find the same types of events listed for Types I-IV, but experienced at second or third hand from what the perceiver considers 'the real here and now': incompetence, gaffes, misunderstandings, debunkings, failures, and the like which are recounted in gossip, literature, staged plays, home video recordings, and motion pictures; re-enacted in child's games, group psychotherapy meetings, improvisational theatre interaction, ironic and joking interchanges; or conjured up mentally in memories, daydreams, fantasies, distortions, and the like.

It is worth pointing out that the reader himself will probably not find funny all or even many of the jokes and anecdotes listed as illustrations. Some may simply not appeal

to him, or may be 'badly' retold. In addition and for reasons to be developed in Chapter Six, their very location within a 'serious' academic text should tend to dull their humour globally. The purpose, however, is not to entertain the reader, and so any amusement experienced should be taken as a pleasant epiphenomenon. All illustrations fulfil the requirement that someone --a joke-teller, a publisher, a theatre critic, an audience, the current author-- at some point found them funny. The elements which that perceiver reacted to should hopefully be apparent.

More serious would be the impression that the source of amusement has been misattributed. For example, it might seem that the explanation provided for a joke is insufficient, accounting for perhaps some of the humour, but disregarding what seem to be crucial elements. In this regard, I should clarify that actual events, anecdotes, and jokes may include several amusing stimuli at various conceptual levels, each of which may or may not make an impression on any single perceiver. The telling of a verbal joke may include not only an amusing punchline, but also minor silliness, disparagement, obscenity, parody, and funny 'faces' and accents along the way. These 'complex stimuli' will be analysed more fully in Chapter Six. I have avoided them as far as possible, but some inclusions have been inevitable. If 'additional sources' of humour are noticed, therefore, these should be temporarily ignored in order to focus on the type of funny stimulus at hand.

Even after weeding out such irrelevancies, however, it may be felt that a particular example has been misclassified, or that it is inherently ambiguous according to the terms of the model. The purpose of the classification, however, is not to provide a convenient filing system into which amusing events can be correctly, unambiguously, and unproblematically slotted. I am not claiming the existence of distinct, well-bounded categories of funny stimuli. On the contrary, the aim is to establish the unity of such events, while accounting for *apparent* difference where relevant. The typology makes evident some of the common features which actors themselves discriminate, and which are used in the configuration of the loose and inconsistent layman terminology of humour and amusement. By applying these distinctions consistently, and in combination with each other, it becomes possible to establish unexpected relations between apparently diverse phenomena. For example, there is no essential difference between experiencing

what we take to be ‘untransformed reality’ and experiencing engrossment in ‘transformed realities.’ All experience is interpreted, and even brushing our teeth in the morning is seen through a severely limiting filter similar to that which blacks out the living room while we watch television. However, as people *do* differentiate between the real and the non-real, and between different types of reality. These distinctions also have important effects on subsequent thought, emotion, and action: interpreting a mentally disturbed individual as a character in a joke, for instance, may allow the interpreter to enjoy and exhibit amusement at the ‘madman’ in a way that might be impossible if the person was seen as ‘real.’ It is well worth structuring the discussion of funny events according to a systematic version of such distinctions. In this way, it is possible to observe that the differences we see in funny events are merely the application of these distinctions to claim-discredit situations.

I have attempted to present highly stereotypical illustrations where differences will be most obvious; not to reify these differences, but rather, to provide a few reference points of the type that participants, including humour researchers, habitually employ. I wish to present a way of talking about funny stimuli, a vocabulary that will reduce the level of imprecision of commonly available terms such as ‘irony,’ ‘jokes,’ ‘satire,’ or ‘wit.’

Not only am I aware that in-between cases exist for distinctions such as ‘accident-caused/agent-caused discredits’ or ‘claims of mind/skill/biography...’; demonstrating the continuous nature of such phenomena is the very point of the exercise. Thus, it is irrelevant whether a specific illustration could be classified elsewhere --or indeed whether alternative classificatory systems could be envisaged. The examples are not meant to ‘prove’ the solidity of the model, but to provide understanding of it. It will be sufficient, for the moment, if specific illustrations *could be interpreted* as belonging to the types and sub-types in question, or even if other perhaps more representative examples *could be imagined*. If such interpretations or imaginings are indeed possible, and the logic of the cross-cutting variables has been followed consistently, a unitary scheme for the interpretation of funny events will emerge. The extent to which this model accords with the observations and experiences of actors will determine its validity.



## 2. Funny Events in Untransformed Reality

The *location* of a funny self-claim's discredit may be either what is considered 'everyday reality' by the perceiver or else some type of transformation such as a book, film, or story. When we think of 'funny things,' it is usually jokes, funny anecdotes, stand-up performers, televised sit-coms, comedy films, animated cartoons, comic strips, and similar transformations of everyday events that come to mind. In Section 3, I will seek to show that the humorous elements in such productions consist of transformed claim-discredit events. However, many of the occurrences which stimulate our amusement take place at what we would consider to be the most basic level of reality, what is 'really going on' in a situation (Goffman, 1974): flesh-and-blood individuals have displayed self-claims which fail to be sustained before co-present observers. Everyday life is full of such moments, when we or others appear ridiculous in the eyes of someone, and amusement is evoked by events in the 'here and now.' These will be the focus of the present section.

As advanced in the introduction, four of the eight main types of funny events include events in untransformed reality: the accidental discredit of an other (Type I), the agent-caused discredit of an other (Type II), the accidental discredit of the self (Type III), and the agent-caused discredit of the self (Type IV).

Categories will be illustrated mainly with examples of true discrediting from real life. In most cases, these are taken from published sources which claim to recount true happenings and which treat the particular instances quoted as humorous. Some are entries from the 'humour diaries' of university students who participated in a study conducted by Polyxenie Kambouropoulou in 1930. A few will be taken from my own collection of real-life observations, taken from either my own experiences or those of trusted others, and in this case they will be selected either because I or someone else was amused in reaction to them. These anecdotes will be identified by the words 'personal observation' and will be recounted as factually as possible, apart from the substitution of names. Finally, a small remainder will be illustrated with hypothetical examples.

It should be pointed out that the examples provided do not necessarily represent actual instances of funny stimuli which were perceived in untransformed reality. They

constitute events which actually occurred and have been found funny by somebody, but not always somebody who was present at the time and place of the event itself. When no actual amused perceiver was present, he must be assumed or imagined. Furthermore, to the reader of this paper, inevitably, they represent transformations of the original event, descriptions within an academic text; and even to myself, the author, the large majority have been experienced only 'second hand.'

Nevertheless, they did occur (as far as we know), and they conceivably *could* have been experienced as funny by a 'live' observer. Interpreted in this light, they may serve their purpose, which is merely that of elucidating the structure of the classification proposed. Hopefully they will prompt the reader to recall additional examples which he or she *will* have experienced in real life.

2.1. *Type I*. The Accidental Discredit of an Other's Self-Claim (in Untransformed Reality)

Funny Events																					
Untransformed Reality								Transformed Reality													
Other				Perceiver				Other				Perceiver									
Accident			Agent	Accident			Agent	Accident			Agent	Accident			Agent						
I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	I	R	U	
I				II				III				IV				V			VI	VII	VIII

Table 2. *Type I* Funny Events. See Table 1 (p. 202) for full chart.

Type I represents the simplest case. The claimant discredited is some person or group other than the perceiver (i.e., student sees professor misspelling word on chalkboard), so that there is no question of him feeling embarrassment at the event. Secondly, the discredit is not intentionally caused by any agent, but rather occurs spontaneously (i.e., no one attempted to lure or trick the professor into making this error).

For this basic type, I will provide a detailed breakdown of sub-categories based on origin and content of the self-claim discredited, in order to illustrate the variety of possibilities within each of the eight main types. I will treat independent, role, and universal self-claims separately, giving examples of discredits of skill, mind, territory, appearance, and biography self-claims for each. The reader will then be able to apply these distinctions to the remaining situation types, for which only certain specific amendments will be made.

### 2.1.1. *Type I* - Independent Origin

As seen in Chapter Four self-claims of **independent origin** are those which a participant is not bound by rule or expectation to make. The self-attribution of such claims is assumed by the perceiver on the basis of an explicit statement seen to have been made by the claimant. When an independent self-claim of skill, mind, territory, appearance, or biography seen to have been made by a claimant is discredited publicly, bystanders may find the situation hilarious. Let us explore these possibilities in some empirical detail.

During a performance in 1977, Romarck the Hypnotist uttered the following words: "Ladies and gentlemen, I shall now drive this car blindfold through the centre of Ilford" (Nown, 1985: 10). This statement represented a bold self-claim of **skill**, committing Romarck to an unusual competence, successful driving despite wearing a blindfold over the eyes. Approximately two minutes later he collided with a parked police van (*ibid.*). Though Nown does not report if any bystanders laughed at the accident, or whether the crash was serious enough to have inhibited amusement (See Chapter Six, 3.2), he himself includes it in a book of humorous anecdotes.

Independent self-claims may also be non-verbal. One of the students taking part in Kambouropoulou's study (1930: 23) reported the following as a source of amusement: "A girl who plays bridge well and who often talks about the theory of the game and comments upon other people's poor plays, played a poor hand in which she did just about everything wrong." Here, theorizing about bridge and criticizing others' play seems to have been taken by the diarist (quite reasonably) as an implicit self-claim of skill along the following lines: "I am an excellent bridge player." An extreme episode of poor playing ("she did just about everything wrong") is then taken as a funny discredit of this claim.

Independent self-claims of the **mind** may also be made verbally ("I have an IQ of 149," "I'm an expert on basketball trivia,") or non-verbally. As an example of the latter case, making statements of fact ("Rome is in Italy," "It is impossible to build a perpetual motion machine") commits the speaker to a self-claim of knowledge about the topic. Discovering or knowing the falsehood of such statements may lead to amusement. With

hindsight it is funny to read that Professor Erasmus Wilson, on the first demonstrations of electric light in 1878, confidently sentenced its doom: "With regard to electric light, much has been said for and against it, but I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, that when the Paris exhibition closes, electric light will close with it, and very little more will be heard of it" (Nown, 1985: 75). A similar but more immediate discredit awaited sports commentator Harry Carpenter when, during a boxing match, he declared: "That's it. There's no way Ali can win this one now..." That very moment, Muhammed Ali knocked his opponent out for the count. (Complete, 1989: 100)

Self-claims of **territory**, it has been proposed, may relate to the claimed control of or the claimed respect for a certain territory. An example of an independent self-claim of *control* is provided by the case of Joshua Abraham Norton, a 40 year-old bankrupt man, who declared himself in 1859 his Imperial Highness Norton I, Emperor of the USA, and maintained a kind of court in his small town (Nicholas, 1990: 28-30). The evident falsity of Mr. Norton's claims to power over the United States of America may result in amusement. An independent self-claim of *respect* for the physical integrity of innocent people is implied in the following excerpt from a report by an assault victim delivered in April 1983: "Suddenly I was subjected to a particularly nasty, totally unexpected and unprovoked attack." The aggrieved tone of the speaker could be taken to suggest that violent surprise attacks, especially of an unprovoked nature are morally wrong, or in any case, that he would not engage in such actions. It is thus funny to discover the identity of the speaker --Peter Sutcliffe a British serial killer also known as the 'Yorkshire Ripper,' who spoke these words after being attacked by a fellow inmate (Jones, 1985:188).

When an individual sports a new hairstyle, garment, or 'look,' he thereby makes an independent self-claim of fashionable or stylish **appearance**. In the eyes of some observers, however, the style exhibited may fail to support the self-claim, and thus lead to amusement (personal observation). "I've never felt better" were the last words of Douglas Fairbanks (Nown, 1985: 63), his death immediately discrediting this independent self-claim to a healthy physical **condition**.

Discreditable self-claims of **biography** include those minor falsehoods which participants occasionally include in their reports of past or present events, often to prevent being discredited on other grounds: "That's funny. I posted it over a week ago",

"Yes, I *have* seen Citizen Kane. Rosebud was the sled! Brilliant!", "I've been meaning to phone you...", "I can't make it today; I've come down with the flu", "...but I didn't inhale." The following true story is a typical case.

A group of friends are cleaning up a kitchen after a meal. Linda 'advises' Frank to find a top for a bottle of olive oil "or it will go bad," implying that Frank is the kind of careless housekeeper who leaves bottles of olive oil untopped. Frank, however, finds that a makeshift paper towel 'stopper' has been inserted into the neck of the bottle. Believing it to have been work of his flat-mate Steve, and wishing to avoid Linda's derogatory implication, he bluffs: "I wasn't going to leave the bottle uncovered, you know. Look, we've corked it up with this paper towel until we find a proper top for it." Linda bursts into laughter: "I did that!!". The falsehood of Steve's biographical self-claim to have corked the bottle is the source of amusement here. (personal observation).

### 2.1.2. *Type I* - Role Origin

As seen in Chapter Four, role self-claims are those made by virtue of membership to a role held by the participant: policemen claim the ability to apprehend criminals, butchers to chop meat skilfully. The accidental discredits of such tacit claims in untransformed reality are no less funny (assuming the identity and involvement conditions hold --see Chapter Six, 2-3) than those which are made explicitly.

For example, a basic **skill** of aeroplane pilots is the ability to guide a plane to its destination by the use of cockpit instruments, flight charts, and an excellent sense of orientation. It must have therefore been quite funny for all those who followed the bizarre flight of an aeroplane pilot since known as "Wrong Way" Corrigan, who took off from a foggy NY airport headed for California, but ended up in Ireland (Complete, 1989: 18-19). A similar example is that of stage actor Robert Coates, who in the seventeenth century became well-known due to his appallingly bad acting. He would forget lines, invent scenes, and even repeat sections, causing "riots, uproars, threats of lynching --and gales of laughter." It is reported that on one occasion his acting was so poor that several people laughed themselves ill. (Nicholas, 1990:115-118)

Turning to role self-claims of the **mind**, certain pools of knowledge are often expected of particular role holders. Those responsible for a patent office, for instance, claim expert knowledge about the scope for technological advance, explaining the inclusion of this statement made in 1899 by the American Patent Office in a book of funny anecdotes: "Everything that can be invented has been invented" (Nown, 1985: 75). An American vice-president claims, among other things, an exceptional knowledge of history, politics, geography, and current events. Dan Quayle was a laughingstock and an embarrassment to President Bush for his whole term in office, seeming to lack very much indeed in terms of required mental contents. His foot-in-mouth quotes became so popular that there continues to exist a Dan Quayle homepage on the Internet, with hundreds of anecdotes and classic quips, such as the following:

"I love California; I practically grew up in Phoenix"

"Mars is essentially in the same orbit... Mars is somewhat the same distance from the sun, which is very important. We have seen pictures where there are canals, we believe, and water. If there is water, that means there is oxygen. If there oxygen, that means we can breathe"

(Walker, 1995)

The roles of criminal and police officer are both associated with important self-claims of **territory control**. In the former case, control is generally claimed over the booty, victims, and any obstacles to the completion of a crime. Mason and Burns recount numerous amusing discredits of such claims (1985: 18). In one story, a first-time bank robber was obviously nervous and could hardly see with three stocking masks and a scarf on his head. Pulling out his spectacle case instead of his gun, he provoked a general outburst of laughter by threatening to shoot. The police found him "cowering behind a parked car." In various complementary stories of law-enforcer discredit, Mason and Burns implicitly make reference to the territorial self-claims of police officers, namely of control over the perpetrators of crime (especially once identified and located). For example, a particular task force besieged a house for 2 hours, shooting tear gas into the windows and shouting at the gunman to turn himself in, until an observer pointed out that the gunman had escaped and was standing "just behind the police marksmen begging himself to come out and give himself up" (Complete, 1989: 13). An example of the discredit of a role self-claim of territorial *respect* might be the running over of a pedestrian by an ambulance (medical workers claiming extreme respect for people's bodily health).

Hockey players, due to the nature of their sport, claim a **physical appearance and condition** of physical strength and toughness. Perhaps for this reason, an entry in one of Kambouropoulou's humour diaries records amusement at an "abnormally thin player on Buccaneers [hockey] team" (1930: 30).

### 2.1.3. *Type I* - Universal Origin

Universal self-claims are those expected by a perceiver to be made by 'everyone,' by mere virtue of being a person. Failures to maintain such self-claims are a common cause of amusement in others. Specific 'universal' claims vary from one society to another (fishing and igloo-building proficiency are basic in Eskimo society, car-driving and home account-keeping in the urban West). However, certain general categories are likely to be found everywhere, such as the ability to walk, talk, control one's body, protect one's things, respect those of others, look 'decent,' and have 'common sense' and 'common knowledge. I will identify many of these categories in the following pages, under the usual content headings of skills, mind, territories, appearance, and biography.

Certain **skills** are taken to be claimed by members in all societies. Proficiency in *language production* is one such skill<sup>1</sup>. Numerous amusing examples may be given of faults at various levels of linguistic ability. Windsor (1979: 35) lists misspellings of English words found on foreign menus: "Wild duck in orang sorts...Biftek Gordon Blue...Chees and biskiss." Rees (1983: 14) quotes the following overheard redundancy from one woman to another: "'Well,' I says to him, I says to him, I says, says I, 'Well, I says,' I says." Hardy (1983: 120) provides this passage from the 1959 National Insurance Bill, an example of risible opacity: "For the purpose of this part of the schedule a person over pensionable age, not being an insured person, shall be treated as an employed person if he would be an insured person were he under pensionable age and would be an employed person were he an insured person." Lack of substance may be another cause for amusing linguistic failure, as in this quote from the Department of Technical Co-operation's "Departmental Fire Precautions and Instructions": "Most fires are caused by some igniting source coming into contact with combustible material." (Hardy, 1983: 127)

Another basic skill demanded in all societies of members can be called acceptable *sensory-motor coordination*, and involves the ability to perform basic bodily tasks of motion along typical terrains, handling of objects, balance, and the like. Awkward movements, falls, collisions, spills, and drops are among the most obvious causes of amusement. Nancy Reagan, during an American political convention, while walking

across the stage to take her place by her husband Ronald, tripped and fell, disappearing from the view of the television camera that picked up the stumble, and causing the amusement of many viewers (Staveacre, 1987: 9). Kambouropoulou's humour diaries include several cases: "Roommate sitting down hard on chair and hurting the end of her spine. I felt badly, but laughed loudly" (p. 27); "The awkward way B. stumbled over a rut in the road" (p. 29); "One member of the [hockey] team lived up to her reputation of taking innumerable falls" (p. 30).

A separate universal skill is *bodily control*, the ability to keep the body's 'automatic' activities --such as excretions, emotive outbursts, noisy processes, and nervous movements-- in check. Robert Morley has recounted the amusing failures of actor Lloyd Cole to maintain this universal self-claim (Morley, 1978: 47). He was told off by Alistair Sim, his director in a play, for not controlling his own strength. He "broke parts of the set,...broke props, and two of the girls in the play had bruises where [he] had taken them gently by the arm." While trying to defend himself, Cole, who was driving the car in which they were travelling, suddenly found himself with the gear stick in his hand, which came off with a "terrible noise." Another extreme case was Richard Whately, former Protestant archbishop of Dublin, who has been described as "one of the most restless men who ever lived." His limbs were in constant motion. At the home of a certain Lady Anglesey, he "dislocated half a dozen of her most elegant chairs by whizzing them round and round on one leg while he talked, and there were patches of bare carpet in front of the fireplace where he would shuffle to and fro while warming his bottom." (Nicholas, 1990: 167-71). In Hornsby (1989: 72), a more typical spontaneous discredit is reported: The TV presenter Sally Magnusson noticed, a few seconds before the start of a televised live report, that milk was leaking from her breasts and causing plainly visible stains on her dress. She gave the report in this condition.

Finally, there are numerous *culturally-specific skills* which are demanded of all members and may be found funny if discredited. The complex set of abilities (timetable-reading, ticket-buying, train-identifying, stop-checking, information-asking, language-speaking) necessary to travel successfully on a train is one example for Western society, relevant to the following story (in Hardy, 1983). Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Elham went on a

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the cross-cultural types of universal skill self-claims, see Chapter Four, 2.2.2.1.

day trip to Boulogne, but when they tried to get to Paris on the way to Dover they took the wrong train --to Luxembourg. Trying to return to Paris, they overslept, missed a connection, and arrived in Basel. They finally reached Paris but then mistakenly took a train to Bonn (pp. 12-13). In 16th century China, such a specific ‘universal’ skill would not have been applicable.

Universal self-claims of the **mind** can also be subdivided into numerous typical mental attributions, including ‘immediate’ perception, possession and correct application of natural and social frameworks of interpretation, language interpretation, and appropriate cognitive and emotional involvement<sup>2</sup>. *Immediate perception* refers to the sensory detection of salient events in the surrounding environment and within the body: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling<sup>3</sup>. To a group of students sharing a flat, the frequent complaints of a neighbour about imaginary noises coming from their apartment - ‘loud stomping,’ ‘moving of furniture,’ and even a ‘pendulum clock’-- were often reacted to with amusement (personal observation). A more extreme example appears in Hardy (1983: 34), a woman who did not notice her pregnancy until delivering a healthy 7-pound daughter.

Another universal mental expectation is the *ownership and application of* whatever is considered to be *the ‘correct’ natural frame of interpretation* --i.e., to interpret events according to prevailing ideas about the natural world and its laws of causality. Children often provoke the amusement of adults with their unscientific ideas. When a child was asked, during a handwriting lesson, "Where's the dot that should be over the 'i' ?", he answered, "Oh, that's still in the pencil" (Muir, 1984: 15). This reply is funny because to us the child misframes events by believing that written words pre-exist within the writing implement, rather than within the writer’s mind. A similar natural frame error is reported by Linkletter, occurring during an interview with a small boy:

"I'm going to be a doctor"

---

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the cross-cultural types of universal mental self-claims, see Chapter Four, 2.2.2.2.

<sup>3</sup> It is not being proposed that such perception is indeed ‘immediate’ or ‘direct,’ as I assume all perception is mediated by cognitive interpretation. Nevertheless, there is a common everyday distinction between ‘seeing’ and ‘interpreting,’ loosely based perhaps on more or less abstract/deep levels of cognitive processing, which may lead to apparent differences between amusing stimuli. It is these subjective differences which are being drawn in the discussion.

"What if I came to you with a broken arm, what would you do?"  
"Put it in a cast."  
"What if I had a stomach ache?"  
"I'd give you a pill."  
"And what if I had a hole in my head?"  
"I'd put a cork in it."

(1978: back cover)

Children are not the only targets of amusement of this type. Adults with different or erroneous ideas about the natural world also often provoke the hilarity of others. There exists a wide range of so-called 'crank' books which propose theories or ideas considered ludicrous by scientific standards. One popular science writer, for instance, has derided publications on "how to lose weight without cutting down on calories, on how to talk to plants, on how to cure your ailments by rubbing your feet, on how to apply horoscopes to your pets, on how to use ESP in making business decisions, on how to sharpen razor blades by putting them under little models of the Great Pyramid of Egypt" (Gardner, 1983: xiv). It is also well known that many theories about the natural world now accepted as sound contradicted 'common sense' when initially proposed by scientific pioneers, and were therefore "greeted with howls of laughter" (Koestler, 1964: 95).

Equally funny are the failures *to own and apply the correct social frames of interpretation* held by the perceiver, these relating to the social worlds --history, culture, and behaviour. Everyone is attributed the self-claim to know about basic historical events. For this reason, outrageous mistakes from history exams can be listed in books of humour: "The Great Fire of London was caused by someone dropping a match into a tin of petrol in a garage" (Muir, 1984: 37). Knowledge of important current events is also universally required. Hardy includes among his funny anecdotes a 1969 survey which showed that "over a fifth of the population of Morocco were unaware that man had set foot on the surface of the moon. Over 50% angrily accused their questioners of trying to hoax them" (Hardy, 1983: 100).

Knowledge must also be accompanied by appropriate application of relevant social frames. For example, if one knows a person, one must be able to also recognize them without fail on encountering the person face-to-face. Morley (1978: 67) recounts that Lord Portarlington uttered the following words to a woman he met at a social

occasion: "Damn it, Ma'am, I know your face, but I cannot put a name to it." The great fame of this particular individual --she was Queen Victoria-- makes such forgetfulness funny, as a serious violation of the self-claim to social frame application. A similar blunder was committed by pop singer Dana, during a tour of Europe, who couldn't understand why a hotel receptionist seemed so baffled when he asked about how to get to the gondolas or canals --it turned out he was in Vienna, not Venice (Snelson, 1990: 39).

Applying social frames includes also judging items from a frame according to relevant descriptive terms (i.e., a good-bad/funny-dramatic/cliched-original film). The following conversation was overheard on a bus: "And what are your neighbours like?" "Oh, quite normal. He's a French foot-juggler who's doing a summer season at Scarborough"(Rees, 1983: 94). This item is included in an anthology of funny remarks on the basis of the supposedly evident abnormality of what is described as a 'normal' neighbour. A similar error of judgement is imputed by Morgan and Langford (1981: 72) to Gene Simmons, of the rock group Kiss, regarding this critique of the English language's most renowned playwright:

I think Shakespeare is shit. Absolute shit! He may have been a genius for his time, but I just can't relate to that stuff. 'Thee' and 'thou' --the guy sounds like a faggot. Captain America is a classic because he's more entertaining. If you counted the number of people who read Shakespeare, you'd be very disappointed.

Mixing social frames incorrectly is another possible violation of this self-claim. Though it may be acceptable to drink tea while shaving, other intersections of these two spheres simply jar, such as the following comment overheard in a North London pub: "An' if there's one fing I can't stand, it's razor blades in me tea" (Rees, 1983: 94). In the same vein is the unusual medical case of a woman who ate a box of tissue paper and a cigarette pack every day for 12 years (Hardy, 1983: 35). Hardy also considers laughable that women's rights groups demonstrated against the road signs along Oxford's new environmentally-conscious cycle-ways because they showed only men's bikes (p.124). According to his interpretation, applying the frame governing sexual egalitarianism to bicycle icons on road signs is excessive and petty. Attila the Hun, Pope Leo VIII,

Cardinal Jean Danielou, Monsigneur Roger Tort, and Nelson Rockefeller all died while engaged in sex. (Jones, 1985: 108-11). If this be considered funny, as Jones does, the humour stems from the clash between the frames relating to death and sexual intercourse, which makes it something of an etiquette breach to die during sex, or to have sex on the deathbed.

*Language interpretation*, due to its importance in everyday interaction, can be considered a separate universal mental self-claim, though it is in a sense a subset of social frame interpretations. An example of a funny failure to maintain such a claim is this quote from the transcript of a court proceeding:

Q. And lastly, Gary, all your responses must be oral. OK?

A. Oral

Q. How old are you?

A. Oral

(Lederer,

1989: 26)

Here the witness (a child) has misinterpreted the phrase “all your responses must be oral” as “you must say ‘oral’ in response to every question,” an absurd demand.

Another basic mental self-claim required of all individuals is *an appropriate level of cognitive and emotional involvement* in the current situation as socially defined. Participants of interaction should seem to be sufficiently (but not excessively) engrossed in the activities they purport to undertake. An entry from one of Kambouropoulou’s humour diaries reports: “I laughed when I happened to see D.B.’s face in choir rehearsal. The altos were practicing a certain part to the words ‘And a fair old man’ and as she sang, she had a very sad and rather absent-minded expression as if she were thinking of something entirely different” (1930: 21).

Finally, all individuals claim the ability to *reason logically*, to combine the elements from various natural and social frames according to certain basic rules of coherent thought. This self-claim seems to have been violated by the inventor of US Patent 1,087,186 (1914), “a device, consisting of two intertwined helices or springs, which was supposed to demonstrate the existence of God” (Morgan and Langford, 1981: 112). Though the inventor’s reasoning is not provided, any conceivable argument seems

ludicrous. A more explicit error is quoted by Lederer (1989: 6) from part of a child's explanation of heredity on an exam read: "if your grandfather didn't have any children, then your father probably wouldn't have any, and neither would you, probably."

Universal self-claims of **territory** can be divided into claims of material, spatial/bodily, interactional, informational, and ego territories<sup>4</sup>. For each of these types of territory, self-claims may be made regarding control of or respect for these preserves. Often, as will be seen in some of the illustrations, incidents involving failures of respect also include complementary failures of control.

Universal self-claims of *material territories* include control over one's own personal possessions, one's 'things' which no one else should handle or take without appropriate permission; and respect for the things of others. Pulling out a wallet and calmly counting out large bills in the middle of an urban centre is a failure of control which visitors from safer quarters of humanity sometimes commit, and one which may inspire amusement as well as crime (personal observation). A funny anecdote illustrating a failure to respect others' material territories is reported in Complete (1989: 21). A woman bought a coffee and a Kit-kat at a cafe. She went off to get some sugar and on her return found an elderly couple had taken her Kit-kat and were eating it. Furious, she took the Kit-kat and snapped a wafer off for herself, called them thieves, and stormed off. Later, she found her own Kit-kat in her handbag (Complete, 1989: 21).

Universal *spatial/bodily territories* include the body of an individual, the space immediately surrounding it, and all spatial preserves which he considers his, such as his living quarters, his fields, and other buildings, vehicles, and spaces of his own. Funny control claim-discredits take place when spaces or bodily parts --especially sensitive ones-- are trespassed by persons or objects, sometimes to the point of damage. Jones recounts the story of how club singer Ian Whittaker, walking around naked in his dressing room, caught "his privates" as he closed the drawer of a sewing machine, looking for a screwdriver (Jones, 1985: 13). A less painful but no less embarrassing discredit befell astronomer Dr. Patrick Moore, who was speaking before the television cameras when a fly flew into his mouth and was swallowed whole (Hornsby, 1989: 73). In the same collection of anecdotes can be found an illustration of a funny bodily

territorial invasion (i.e., a failure to respect another's body). Alan Titchmaish, presenting a section on gardening within the *Breakfast Time* television program, was suddenly faced with the Princess of Wales, his hands covered in manure. They shook hands. (Hornsby, 1989: 98)

*Interactional territories* are the rights to engage in joint activity with other individuals, such as the right to speak during a conversation, to attend a funeral, or to participate in the cooking of a meal. Universal self-claims of control include claims over the rights to approach strangers for small requests (the time, cigarettes), to open and maintain more general and prolonged states of conversation with acquaintances and friends, and to be politely disattended (i.e., not stared at) by strangers. Self-claims of respect provide the complement of the former: respect for strangers' small requests, for the moves of acquaintances and friends to open conversation, and for the rights of others to be disattended. An entry in one of Kambouropoulou's (1930) humour diaries provides a twin example of both control and respect failures: "Yelled loudly at a girl out of the window only to find that she wasn't the right one" (p. 15). This event can be found funny both as the victim's failure to protect her right to be left alone by strangers, and as the shouter's failure to leave strangers alone<sup>5</sup>.

Universal *informational territories* include the facts, ideas, or feelings which an individual is expected to maintain private, or secret, concealed from others in public situations, such as potentially damaging information, the view of private bodily parts, sexual knowledge and experience, toilet activities, physical blemishes and deformity, immoral or criminal acts and attitudes, and other taboo subjects. A funny incident involving both loss of control and lack of respect for such territories is recounted by Jo Anne Williams Bennett, Canadian author. While spending a weekend in a mountain cabin with her friend Jackie, she began a conversation which treated topics such as pregnancy, periods, internal examinations, suppositories, douches and "other embarrassments of being female." "We started giggling," she writes, "because we had never talked about these things with each other." At one point, in a fit of laughter, Jo Anne shouted out that

---

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the cross-cultural types of universal territorial self-claims, see Chapter Four, 2.2.2.3.

<sup>5</sup> The latter case is actually an example of a self-discredit, rather than an other-discredit (See 2.2). Nevertheless, we can imagine that a friend of the diary writer (for whom this would be an other-discredit) could have also found amusement at the episode.

her worst experience was being told by a doctor that she had "warts on [her] cunt!". At that very moment, a young stranger who had been timidly knocking on the door walked into the kitchen. Jackie went into a hysterical fit, and Jo Anne, at first "dismayed," eventually joined in (Kurc, 1990: 14-18). Here both Jo Anne --by revealing such intimate information-- and the timid stranger --by trespassing on this private talk-- are discredited for their territorial violations and thus become targets of amusement.

Finally, there are universal self-claims to protect one's own and respect others' *ego territory*, the symbol or idea of the very self. Japanese Hitachi executives, when presented with a US flag by the Governor of Kentucky during a meeting "carelessly dragged it along the ground," unaware that this was interpretable as an act of intolerable disrespect by the Americans (Ricks, 1993: 3). This incident, though grave to the participants, can be found funny as a violation of Americans' ego territory (symbolized by their flag) --both as a failure to protect it, and as a failure to respect it.

Universal self-claims of **appearance and condition** include the claims to look 'presentable' in public, wearing attire, carrying belongings, and sporting a hairstyle and cleanliness suitable to the occasion. Failures in this regard can be quite humorous. The actress Maureen Lipman spent 45 minutes trying to get some help to jump start the car, unaware of the novelty reindeer antlers she was wearing on her head, which she had put on to amuse some friends (Snelson, 1990: 62). The amusement of observers can well be imagined. The actor and writer George Baker was forced to travel for 6 months with a toy panda put in his suitcase by his young daughter. Searching his luggage, customs officers found it "to [his] horror and their amusement." (Hornsby, 1989: 3) Attention to appearance can also become ludicrous if excessive. An outstanding case is that of George 'Beau' Brummell, the 'king of the dandies' in Regency Britain, who would daily spend three hours tying his cravatte. (Nicholas, 1990: 135)

#### 2.1.4. Summary of Type I Funny Events

In this section, I have set out and illustrated in detail the first and most simple type of self-claim discredit: the accidental discredit of an other's self-claim in untransformed reality. I have considered self claims of independent, role, and universal origin, and within each of these classes I have illustrated the funny discrediting of self-claims of skill, mind, territory, appearance, and biography. A deathbed claim to feel fine, a police team's inability to find its besieged prey, a pedestrian's clumsy step, the bizarre theories of cranks and crackpots --examples such as these have been integrated into the analysis as Type I claim-discredits of varying self-claim origin and content.

These differences can be transposed to the remaining seven types of claim-discredit situations. An awkward stumble may be accidental (Type I) or caused by an agent's trap, trip, or shove (Type II). Either of these possibilities may be found funny by other observers (Types I and II) or by the pedestrian as an observer of himself (Types III and IV). Finally, any of these four cases may be witnessed directly (Type I-IV) or else as retold stories, video-recorded images, staged fiction, or drawn comic strips (Type V-VIII). What works for awkward stumbles, can work also for universal frame-managements, independent skill claims, or role-related appearance.



will now be provided of amusing Type II discredits, in somewhat less detail than for accidental discredits of others.

### 2.2.1. *Type II* - Independent Origin

An agent can cause the discrediting of an independent self-claim in one of two ways. The first possibility is for the agent to somehow make a false self-claim for the claimant, or else to force him to make it. Hypnotists are able to make their subjects claim all manner of absurdities, such as speaking foreign tongues or being a four-legged animal, to the great hilarity of audiences (personal observation). Another curious possibility is recounted in Mayo (1993: 43-45). A Royal Marine officer, extremely keen about his job, was forced to leave the corps for medical reasons. On his last night, his fellow officers got him drunk and had his arm tattooed with the words "43rd Commando Royal Marines," finding this very funny. Here we are made aware that a false self-claim tattooed on the flesh is difficult to explain away as the work of unauthorized claim-makers.

A second and more common method of discrediting an independent self-claim is to question or debunk the fulfilment of the claim itself. For instance, James Randi and Martin Gardner are two magicians who have deflated many self-claims of supposed telepathic, telekinetic, and other 'supernatural' powers exhibited by various charlatans (Randi, 1987; Gardner 1983). These debunkings usually involve the provision of alternative 'rational' explanations for the performance, replication of the act by the magician, and the application, where possible, of controls on the faker which would prevent him from carrying out the feat if the magician's explanation were correct (and no supernatural powers were involved). Many readers, at least judging from the critical praise of the books cited on the back covers, have found the reports of such debunkings very funny to read.

For example, in the 1960's a young Russian girl called Rosa became widely famous for her apparent ability to 'read' with her fingers. In *Science, Good, Bad and Bogus*, Martin Gardner (1983: 63-73) describes her amazing feats performed even under strict scientific controls. Then he explains that magicians are familiar with the fact that however tightly one ties a blindfold, there always remain a couple of small holes down each side of the nose. Mentalists use what is called a 'sniff' position to obtain a better view, and various tricks to improve visibility even further. Finally, he describes the photo

shown in *Time* magazine of "Rosa wearing a conventional blindfold...seated, one hand on a newspaper page...comfortably within range of a simple nose peek." (Gardner, 1983: 65) At this point amusement is sought (and I would suppose often achieved) among readers.

### 2.2.2. *Type II* - Role Origin

Self-claims of role origin may be discredited by agents who put these claims to testing trials, perhaps with previous knowledge of their falsity. The world of hoaxes and forgery provides one domain for research of these kinds of discredit. For example, Hans van Meegeren in the 1930's fooled art experts with lost 'masterpieces' of some of the world's greatest artists (May, 1984: 26), thus discrediting the knowledge self-claims of these supposed experts. Similar must have been the embarrassment of physical anthropologists after Charles Dawson (1864-1916) found a skull of a supposed 'missing link' between man and ape near Piltdown Common in Sussex, leading to the naming of a new species of hominid, *Eoanthropus Dawsoni*. It turned out to be a hoax (May, 1984: 29). In these examples, Meegeren and Dawson can be considered agents who carry out their activities in full knowledge of their discrediting potential.

### 2.2.3. *Type II* - Universal Origin

All of us have more or less serious failings with regard to the universal requirements of our own society, which may be revealed by mere exposure to others or by unintended circumstances. It is also possible, however, that others may seek to expose deficiencies they are aware of, to test our capacities in search for failings, or to subject us to unfair conditions under which success will be practically impossible.

Practical jokes, wind-ups, hoaxes, and various other tricks provide examples of agent-caused discredits of this type, when observed by third parties. Tongue twisters ("She sells sea shells on the sea shore") cause the victim to mispronounce words, discrediting his self-claim of linguistic production skills. Numerous ploys may be used to

spoil a person's sensory-motor coordination: drugging or inebriating the victim, physically tripping or pushing his body, altering his environment (the schoolboy trick of pulling out the chair from behind a person), or merely distracting his attention (i.e., with a loud sound) at a crucial moment of activity requiring concentration.

Self-claims of the mind may also be discredited with more subtle tricks. Professional hypnotists may cause their subjects to see, hear, touch, smell, and even taste imaginary objects and substances, to the great amusement of audiences (personal observation). Charlatans may fool large populations with preposterous crank theories and claims of paranormal ability, discrediting their self-claims of applying the correct natural frameworks of interpretation (Gardner, 1983; Randi, 1987). Most familiar of all are wind-ups and practical jokes, ritualized in the institution of 'April Fool's Day', which cause the victim to believe an outrageous proposition.

In such jokes, the victim's holding of an evidently false frame and the resulting misadjusted words, actions, and emotional expressions are found hilarious by audiences. A laughable fabrication<sup>2</sup> is one which anyone with 'any common sense' should see through ---or at least this is how it should appear to observers. Some April Fools Day news stories should serve to illustrate: "Big Ben is Going Digital," BBC overseas radio claimed one year (Boston, 1982: 134). "Hovercraft services from Heathrow Cancelled Because of Low Tide", announced Capital Radio (ibid.). And then there is the infamous case of Richard Dimbleby's 'Italian spaghetti harvest,' with televised images of field labourers picking pasta directly off the 'spaghetti trees' (ibid.: 125-27). A person who is taken in by any one of these fabrications is exposed as lacking or mismanaging basic social frames. Heathrow has no seaport, pasta does not grow on trees, and the value of Big-Ben is symbolic, architectural, and historical --not related to the accuracy of its timekeeping.

---

<sup>2</sup> Goffman distinguishes between a "benign" and an "exploitive" fabrication<sup>2</sup>, but this distinction is not useful for discriminating between the types of fabrications which are amusing, and those which are not. There are "exploitive" fabrications which are nevertheless funny to many others (see the following example of Michel Chasles and the document forger). There are also unfunny benign fabrications. For example, a newspaper could run an April Fools Joke claiming that Queen Elizabeth II was to inaugurate and unveil a monument to world peace, or something of the sort. This lie might deceive many people, but it would hardly be found amusing, as it would be well within the realm of the plausible.

Hoaxes and confidence tricks resulting in similar frame mismanagements, though not intended specifically as jokes, may provoke amusement also. A book of funny anecdotes includes the story of Doctor James Barry (1795-1865), a skilled army surgeon who reached the rank of Inspector General. Upon his death, it was discovered that 'he' was a woman. Our amusement here is directed not only at the discredit of Doctor Barry's gender identity, but at the countless others who were taken in by this lifelong deceit (May, 1984: 24). Even more amusing is the case of French mathematician Michel Chasles (1793-1880), who bought thousands of forged manuscripts from a hoaxer, including writings supposedly penned by Isaac Newton, Pascal, Queen Cleopatra, Socrates, Galileo, Shakespeare, and Lazarus. The most astounding detail is that all of these were written in French.

There is a genre of puzzles and 'brain teasers' whose solution is obvious if the question or the elements involved are interpreted in the correct way. For those 'in the know,' the victim will seem lacking in reasoning techniques. For example, **figure 1** includes three cut-out figures<sup>3</sup>. The victim is asked to position them so that each jockey is sitting up on one horse. The solution, shown in **figure 2**, involves placing each rider on a horse formed by the front of one of the cut-out horses and the back of the other. This is an unexpected resolution, but obvious once seen (In fact, the cereal packet from which this example was taken [Kellogg's, 1996] includes the blurb "It's easy when you know how!"). In the meanwhile, a victim may spend many minutes shifting the three figures around in frustration, perhaps in vain, to the amusement of observers aware of the 'obvious' solution. (personal observation).

Territorial self-claims to protect a particular preserve are very often caused by intentional agents who trespass on a claimant's property. Some sleight-of-hand magicians perform acts in which a volunteer is asked to hold a coin, card, or other object, and yet somehow the illusionist is able to make it disappear or to exchange it for a different item. This often results in much laughter from the audience at the expense of the volunteer who has failed to keep control of his universal material territories. The series of tricks sometimes ends with the magician producing the volunteer's wallet or other personal possession from his own pocket, or 'from thin air', as if to demonstrate further the

volunteer's carelessness. Brandreth (1979: 86) describes such a magic trick as an amusing 'practical joke' to be played on friends.

The classic trick of placing a bucket of water or paint balanced on a semi-open door (Brandreth [1979: 11] suggests a less dangerous 'pillow' version) is aimed at ruining the victim's bodily territory. Spying through private windows or keyholes, reading private mail, intentionally walking into 'backstage' areas (bedrooms, toilets) or forcibly removing clothing from a victim would constitute agent-caused discrediting of informational territories. Malicious interruptions during conversation, and 'gate crashing' a party are examples of interactional territory violations. As for the agent-caused violation of ego territory, this category is perfectly synonymous with the intentional insult.

Agent-caused discredits of territorial self-claims of respect are also possible, though less common and rather more awkward. An agent, through misinformation, may cause his victim to take or damage a third party's material territories. He may cause a violation of spatial/bodily preserves by physically pushing his victim across a boundary. Nown (1989: 83) provides an amusing example relative to informational territories: A Scotsman on a Monarch Airlines flight, having drunk half a litre of scotch whisky, bared his private parts to the whole plane, thereby forcing passengers to intrude on universally forbidden informational territories. It is also possible to engineer situations by which a victim unintentionally insults a third party, causing a violation of his ego territory.

Finally, many practical jokes are designed to ruin the victim's physical appearance. For example, the joker tells the victim that he has a smudge on his nose, pretends to wipe it off, and in so doing puts one on. (Brandreth, 1979: 37).

---

<sup>3</sup> All figures in this chapter can be found on its last page (281).





their achievement of a distanced perspective from the event. The children quoted as believing that a hole in the head can be cured with a cork, that words flow out from pencils, or that the Great Fire of London began with a tin of petrol, as adults will be able to laugh with genuine amusement at their recorded errors, which do not discredit their present self-claims to knowledge. We know also from experience that victims of practical jokes and hoaxes, such as those listed for Type II, can also be amused at their own other-effected discredit. In fact, such victims are usually expected and even coaxed to 'take' events 'with a sense of humour' and share in the enjoyment at their own expense. In other cases, the discredited individual may perceive his own discredit but be unable to distance himself sufficiently from it to experience amusement, feeling only embarrassment. We might suppose such a reaction of the 'psychic' charlatans unmasked by Randi and Gardener (p. 231) or of the physical anthropologist who, taken in by Charles Dawson's hoax, excitedly announced and catalogued a new species of hominid (p. 232). In both these cases, discredit concerns a strong commitment made by a central part of the individual's self.

I will not give illustrations for all the categories of self-claim origin and content specified in the previous sections. It should be clear, upon reviewing these examples, that many of the discredited claimants could have found their own situation funny, either at the time or at some later period. This might be the case, for instance, of Maureen Lipman upon the discovery of the novelty reindeer antlers on her head (p. 227). In some of these cases, of course, the discredited claimant would never even have reached the stage of detecting the discrediting. Either he would not have noticed it, or he would not have agreed with the interpretation that casts it as an event which has indeed discredited the self. Professor Erasmus Wilson (p. 215) would have to come back from the grave to realize the extent of his folly when predicting that electric light would never catch on. On the other hand, Harry Carpenter (p. 215) would have 'swallowed his words' predicting Muhammed Ali's defeat almost instantaneously. The women's rights activists who protested about the men's bikes on cycle lane signs (p. 223) might continue to assert the importance of banning such chauvinistic iconography. On the other hand, the individual who once believed (as a child) that a cork could cure a hole in a patient's head (p. 222) would now probably be able to appreciate his error.

Instead of a full catalogue of funny accidental self-claim discredits of the self, I will draw attention to a number of possibilities which are specific to this type. An actor has a unique subjective perspective into his actions and states, specifically into their mental, perceptual, and emotional component. Thus, when the circumstances of a discrediting are discernible largely or entirely through this subjectivity, we encounter types of funny events not immediately available to outside observers. Examples include frame-mismanagement errors and bodily control failures which are perceived ‘from the inside,’ which will be said to include such amusing phenomena as jokes, irony, absurdity, puns, brain teasers, visual illusions, coincidences, astounding events, amusement rides, monster masks and films, ‘peek-a-boo,’ and tickling. For the rest of cases we can imagine discrediting identical or similar to those listed for Type I, viewed from the hypothetical perspective of the discredited individual.

2.3.1. Bodily Mismanagement: Fear games (i.e., ‘peek-a-boo’), horror and ‘sob’ films, amusement rides, tickling.

Here the self-claim discredited refers to a universally expected skill: appropriate bodily control (See 2.3). Being startled or even terrified by a loud sound, a prickly something that touches the body, or the unexpected sight of a person can result in self-amusement if the source is subsequently interpreted as harmless: the wind slamming a door shut, a brush, a pile of clothes. Amusement rides (i.e., rollercoasters), horror films and a few other devices and events have been designed to provoke strong emotional reactions in perceivers which do not correspond to a real and appropriate stimulus. For instance, a rollercoaster simulates a rapid fall that normally would mean probable death, triggering off intense fear in riders. At the same time, these riders know rationally that the ride is safe. As the cart speeds downhill, horrific screams are common. As it reaches the bottom and curves upwards, the screams fade and laughter takes over (personal observation). Such cultural productions may be considered to produce accidental discrediting. Those responsible for creating and giving access to the productions, however, could be identified as agents of discredit, as could the perceiver himself as a self-deceiving agent who collaborates in the process.

The game of ‘peek-a-boo,’ in which a parent ‘disappears’ from his baby’s view by covering his face, and similar infant fear-laughter games (“I’m gonna get you!”), produce victim reactions which belong more clearly to the category of agent-caused discredit of the self (Type IV). Related chasing and fighting games of slightly older children, with their continuous accompaniment of shrieking and laughter sounds, often seem to take up much of a playground’s physical and aural spaces. Adolescents and even adults may also engage in similar playful fear-provocation, such as stealthily approaching a friend from behind and hugging or shouting at him (personal experience).

These types of stimuli have often been interpreted as evidence for a tension-release mechanism of amusement. It should be noted, however, that it is *not only the subject* of inappropriate fear who experiences amusement. The event may also be found *funny by observers*: parents of the baby who find his innocent shock hilarious, experienced rollercoaster riders in the midst of shrieking companions, horror/‘sob’ film

audience members who turn around to watch the tears/grimaces in the cinema, with the distance of knowing 'it's just a movie.' In this model, such amusement would be classifiable as belonging to Type I or II: accidental or agent-caused discredits of *others*. Under the tension-release interpretation, the introduction of some notion of sympathy or identification with the aroused individual would need to be introduced --an unlikely description, as other-amusement seems as strong or even stronger in many cases.

In the examples which have been cited, amusement at the self is possible in the perceiver because he is able to attend to his error (as opposed to the fear-provoking elements of the scene, for instance). A novice rollercoaster rider who failed to trust the safety of the ride, or who was unable to overcome the sensation of extreme danger, would not be able to find the event funny --though *others* could laugh at him for this failure (Type I discredit). Moreover, amusement is possible because the error is seen as temporary or not affecting the 'real' self. A terrified rollercoaster rider might further experience embarrassment before his friends and bystanders for his more extended and genuine failure to control himself.

The laughter (exteriorized spontaneous amusement) brought on by the practice of 'tickling' can also be included within Type IV, though this concerns the failure to control gross bodily movement as opposed to mere emotional expression. Tickling-related amusement results from the perceiver noticing a loss of control over his own body when certain areas are physically touched or handled in certain ways, or when he perceives the threat of such contact. These areas of the body are precisely those where protective defense reflexes exist: "the soles of the feet, the arm pits, the ribs, and the solar plexus" (Black, 1984: 3000)<sup>1</sup>. The reflex behaviours, which consist in a forceful withdrawal of the bodily part in question from the offending contact, are only to a very limited extent subject to conscious control.

In many cases --such as when the agent stimulating the reflex is hostile, not completely trusted, or merely unseen-- no laughter follows whatsoever. The reflex performs its biologically foreseen function, and its subject experiences automatic withdrawal with no additional sensation than perhaps pain or fear. Thus, the mechanical

actions of 'tickling' are not in themselves a sufficient stimulus for amusement --'tickling' is not a physical production of the laughter reflex, as is often supposed.

When a trusted person threatens or carries out his threat to stimulate these reactions, however, the victim finds that he is helpless to stop his body from responding to an illusory threat. He draws back, writhes, jolts this way and that --even though the 'aggression' is only pretend. It is this loss of the universally attributed ability to control the body which results in amusement and its expression as laughter. Moreover, a vicious circle may be initiated, as the laughter itself may be perceived as a laughable loss of control.

Additional evidence confirming this interpretation can be observed. For example, congruently with the other agent-caused control failures cited above, it happens that the person tickled is not the only amused participant. Both those who carry out the tickling as well as other bystanders tend to display laughter, and to experience corresponding amusement. I would argue that all participants react to the same loss of control by the victim. Also, the subject of a tickling episode often feels embarrassment as well as amusement at his behaviour, a common feature of Type III and Type IV stimuli (See Chapter Six, I). Finally, frequent victims of tickling report that the experience consists of two contradictory sensations --on the one hand the amusement, but on the other a disagreeable and even quite painful physical sensation, which is capable of eliciting in them extreme and atypical aggressive behaviours. Moreover, very similar behaviours can be induced which affect different reflexes, suggesting the non-uniqueness of the tickling phenomenon. For instance, having a very cold but harmless object (such as an ice cube) placed in contact with cold-sensitive areas of the body (i.e., the spine) can provoke a similarly unwarranted or overstated withdrawal reflex and subsequent laughter or contemporaneous giggling.

It is worth noting that self-perceived bodily mismanagements (of both accidental and agent-caused varieties) constitute the very first stimuli of amusement which human neonates experience. Rothbart (1973), summarizing an extensive observational study,

---

<sup>1</sup> Koestler (1964: 79-81) has proposed a similar interpretation of tickling which, however, ignores the existence of independent defensive reflex mechanisms. On his account, the amusement emerges from the perception of an incongruity between two cognitive frames, that of an attack, and that of friendship or trust.

provides the following list (p. 247) regarding the first manifestations of amusement at the age of four months:

a baby laughs when he is tickled, during a mock attack from a parent, when thrown in the air or bounced on a bed, at the sight of a dog, or the sound of a sneeze or cough. As might be expected, these situations also sometimes lead to crying rather than laughter.

This fact is unsurprising if we consider that for a neonate (1) the neonate himself is his main social environment and (2) his most important behavioural manifestations are expressions of pleasure and displeasure (calmness/crying). A baby's own misinterpretations of a situation as safe/threatening are the first behavioural errors it may observe as such. Only from the fifth or sixth month do babies begin to display laughter also at the improprieties of parents, such as crawling on the floor or sucking on the baby's bottle (Sroufe and Wunsch, 1972: 1332). Even then however, this type of amusement continues to dominate the life of children throughout the pre-school years:

Laughter is a highly contagious reaction that may suddenly erupt in the midst of rough and tumble play, running, jumping, chasing, and so forth.... Children are especially likely to laugh following the successful completion of an activity viewed as dangerous, threatening, or 'scary.' For example, exaggerated laughter is likely after jumping off a high platform, going down a big slide, or climbing a 'difficult' tree.

(McGhee 126-27; see also Jones, 1967)

An intriguing link may also be made with animal studies, as an expression which looks very much like laughter has been observed in several species of monkey in response to both tickling and "the boisterous mock-fighting and chasing involved in social play" (Van Hooff, 1972), which Jones describes as "almost identical" to the rough-and-tumble play of human children. Bodily mismanagements of the self provide the only stimulus of amusement in the primate world, and the first of the human being.

### 2.3.2. Perceptual Mismanagement: Sensory Illusions

Sensory illusions are stimuli which, by exploiting certain vulnerabilities of human perceptual systems, lead to erroneous perception. Such illusions, sometimes designed intentionally for entertainment, educational, artistic, or research purposes, lead to discrediting of the universal self-claim to correct immediate perception (See Section 2.3):

Illusions are misperceptions. They are interpretations of stimuli that do not follow from the sensations received by the eye. When we witness an illusion, we perceive something that does not correspond to what is actually out there --what exists in the real world. Illusions fool us; they convince us of things that are not true. The interesting thing is we seem to enjoy being fooled in this way.

(Block and Yuker, 1991: 11-12)

Illusions are not normally cited in works of humour research (Paulos, 1980, is an exception). However, I have noticed in my own reactions and those of other persons who experience such illusions the appearance of amusement at the moment in which the illusion takes effect. For example, at the 1992 World Expo at Seville, the Fujitsu Pavilion included an innovative LCD three-dimensional projection system which produced a thoroughly convincing illusion of witnessing non-existent objects before the eyes. The cinema, throughout the showing and particularly in the first few minutes, was filled with amazed laughter (personal observation). These types of illusions lose their humour with habituation --the mind seems to learn to catalogue the illusion as an exception or trick. However, unfamiliar illusions continue to fool the mind. The cutting-edge of virtual reality research and of motion picture 'special effects' will continue to produce ever more realistic illusory worlds to deceive the senses. Drug-induced or other types of hallucinations and delusions, when noticed as illusory by the subject, can also be found funny.

The reader can test his own reaction with **figure 3** (Richard and Yuker, 1991: 63) which consists of eight black circles with missing areas. Do you see a cube? Or is it just a series of incomplete black disks? Is the cube in front of the disks or behind eight holes? Is the upper right face of the cube in front, or is it the lower left face? The configuration of the circles and the missing areas creates the illusion of a three dimensional cube floating over the circles (or sometimes behind them). The illusion is complicated by the fact that the three-dimensional figure is an 'unstable figure,' a 'Necker cube' whose 'front' side switches when looked at for a few seconds, flipping the cube inside-out. The failure to achieve a 'real' or 'stable' interpretation of the figure can result in amusement, and perhaps also bewilderment or surprise (See Chapter Six, 4). An example of a non-visual sensory illusion which may be familiar to the reader is nevertheless worth testing consciously: putting your hands in cold water with rubber gloves on makes your hands feel wet even though they are completely dry (Cobb, 1981).

Though the behavioural results of erroneous immediate perception (i.e., Don Quixote charging against a windmill seen as a giant) can sometimes be observed by others (i.e., Types I and II), the subject of the misperception, assuming he does notice his state of error, obtains a view on the event which is unique to himself: the world convincingly appears one way, yet is definitely another. In many cases, in fact, the error is visible exclusively to himself, apart from his own reports of it or his spontaneous reaction to its discovery. Moreover, the possible accompanying subjective experiences of interpretative shift, puzzlement, surprise, wonder, and the like may colour the amusement feeling with hues distinguishing this sort of event from other types of amusement (See Chapter Six, 4). It is for this reason, I would argue, that such amusement has often been seen in humour theory as deriving from incongruity, dissonance, surprise, or delight. It should be kept in mind, however, that to the extent that the cognitive error is observable by others (i.e., the words and actions springing from Don Quixote's hallucinations), they may result in amusement of Types I or II (depending on whether it is seen as accident or agent-caused). Amused delight at a sensory illusion is only different from hilarity at an other's perceptual mistake due to the difference of perspective towards essentially similar events.

It should also be noted that sensory illusions, as extremely unusual exceptions to the norm of perceivable objects, cause errors which normally do not lead to serious discredit or embarrassment of their perceiver. Anyone will recognize that failures to perceive these phenomena are equally exceptional, and not a reflection on a person's normal ability to see things as they are. Moreover, the fooled subject often actually plays a part in deceiving himself, or in any case anticipates the fooling, which he can classify as an unusual trick or exception. The discredit is thus very short lived, the self discredited easily cast off by the subject of misperception, and thus self-amusement easily possible (See Chapter Six, 2). Embarrassment is possible, however, when a person has committed himself more strongly to an evident misperception.

Visual and other sensory illusions may be seen as accidental (Type III) or as caused by some agent (Type IV), such as the originator or presenter of an ambiguous or deceptive sensory stimulus. A clear example of the latter might be the classic research experiment carried out by Nerhardt (1970) to support the 'incongruity' theory of humour. Three weights were presented to subjects for them to lift, each larger than the previous. When they tried to pull up on the largest, they found it was unexpectedly light. The wider the gap between expected and actual weight, the greater was the laughter recorded. The experimenter here could be regarded as an agent of discredit. Hypnotists who cause sensory illusions in their subjects through suggestion techniques provide a further example.

### 2.3.3. Natural Frame Mismanagement: Coincidences and 'Unnatural' Events

An event may be witnessed which so strongly calls upon our tendency to associate similar occurrences, or so strongly challenges interpretation by scientific schemes, that we come to conclusions that fly in the face of our rationalistic natural frameworks --magic or supernatural connections seem to be responsible for the anomaly. In other societies, and even by many individuals in Western society, these events would not be found funny, but rather confirmation of a 'magical' primary framework. To a disbeliever in the supernatural, however, they may provoke a risible acceptance of what

is deemed absurd. He witnesses his own self-claim to 'rational' explanation of events temporarily discredited, and experiences amusement at this part of himself.

Astounding coincidences are one example:

As a child in school, French poet Emile Deschamps shared a table with a Monsieur de Fortgibu. The man offered Emile his first taste of a novel dessert, plum pudding, which M. Fortgibu had acquired a taste for in England. 10 years later Deschamps passed a restaurant and saw a plum pudding being prepared inside. He entered and asked for a slice, but the pudding was being saved for someone --who turned out to be M. de Fortgibu. Many years later, at a dinner party where plum pudding was being served, Deschamps, about to have this dessert for the 3rd time, told his amusing story. And lo and behold, Fortgibu arrived at the door! He too had been invited to dinner, to another apartment in the same building, and had lost his way.

(Wallace & Wallechinsky, 1994:  
455)

Bizarre or 'unexplainable' happenings also challenge our natural frameworks: A dried fish found inside a tree when the trunk was split open, for instance; or a man who lost his eyesight and hearing after a severe head injury --then recovered it after being struck by lightning (ibid.: 448).

Again, the unique experience of observing one's own mental frame-struggle subjectively differentiates this kind of amusement from the essentially identical funniness of *others'* irrational beliefs (i.e., in the supernatural, in a flat earth, etc.). Amusement is possible here when the erroneous interpretation has not been committed to strongly, as in the case of these astounding phenomena which cause no more than a momentary lapse of reason (See Chapter Six, 2). Embarrassment would be the result of discovering that such an erroneous framework had been held strongly and publicly, as in the case of a believer in a psychic healer or mind-reader who is subsequently revealed as a hoax.

'Magic tricks' may produce agent-caused discredit of self-claims to proper natural frame application (Type IV). These illusions are designed to deceive an audience --by

such techniques as sleight-of-hand, mechanical devices, and misdirection of attention--into apparently witnessing events which defy the known natural laws: an assistant is sawn in half, rabbits appear out of empty hats, a wand is transmuted into a bunch of flowers. One of the emotional reactions experienced during such performances, triggered by awareness of the mind's acceptance of (or strong mental tendency to embrace) the impossible, is amusement at the self<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, humour is very often integrated into magic acts.

#### 2.3.4. Social Frame Mismanagement: Intentional and Unintentional Jokes, Puns, Absurdity, Irony, and 'Twist' Endings.

The funniness of verbal humour and the analysis of joke structure have been the focus of a large proportion of humour research, and have provided the starting point for the most popular theories in the field. I will treat such phenomena as elicitors of discredits of the self's universal mental claim to proper (normally social) frame management, either accidental (Type III, 'unintentional' jokes) or agent-caused (Type IV, 'intentional' jokes created or told by comedians, etc.). In other words, it is not a joke itself which is funny, but rather what a joke does to its listener when it 'works' and he 'gets' the joke.

As discussed in Chapter Two, many writers have characterized the source of amusement, or of some cases of amusement, as the mental juxtaposition or 'clash' of two incompatible frames of thought (schemas, scripts, universes, worlds, planes, systems...), or in some cases the mental 'resolution' of the incongruity. Though preceded by a long history, Arthur Koestler's eloquent exposition of this argument in *The Act of Creation* has been largely responsible for its current popularity:

It is the sudden clash between these two mutually exclusive codes of rules --or associative contexts-- that produces the comic effect. It compels the listener to perceive the situation in two self-consistent but incompatible frames of reference at the same time; his mind has to operate simultaneously on two different

---

<sup>2</sup> Magic tricks are not commonly discussed by humour researchers. Morreall (1982: 243) is one exception.

wavelengths. While this unusual condition lasts, the event is not only, as is normally the case, associated with a single frame of reference, but ‘bisociated’ with two. The term bisociation was coined by the present writer to make a distinction between the routines of disciplined thinking within a single universe of discourse --on a single plane as it were-- and the creative types of mental activity that always operate on more than one plane. In humor, both the creation of a subtle joke, and the re-creative act of perceiving the joke involve the delightful mental jolt of a sudden leap from one plane or associative context to another.

(1964: 5-6)

An unintentional joke which can be used to illustrate this process is the following real answer from a child's exam: "Philatelists were a race of people who lived in Biblical times" (Windsor, 1979: 13). The reader of this phrase receives inputs belonging to separate spheres of thought: stamp collecting on the one hand, biblical history on the other. There are some valid connections which could be made between these two frames, such as runs of postage stamps picturing nativity scenes during Christmas time. The proposed link between these frames, however, is obviously unacceptable. Stamps and mail systems are relatively recent cultural developments, and in any case stamp collectors are not a ‘race’ of people related by blood but a hobby group related by common interest. The similarity between the word “philatelist” and “philistine,” however, provides a link between the two frames, and facilitates the ‘clash’ of frames in the mind. If this connection is made, amusement may result.

Koestler’s explanation, however, overlooks or mischaracterizes a vital part of the joke-processing experience, which has been identified by numerous other authors. What happens in the mind of the amused individual can be described as a ‘clash’ or a ‘bisociation’, but also as a ‘union’ or an ‘integration.’ For at least a split second, the individual joins or makes an effort to join the two inconsistent frames, which only subsequently does he experience as inconsistent, as a jarring, clashing, incongruent pair. In other words, the joke ‘fools’ the listener or reader into making a logical error, like a visual illusion ‘fools’ the observer into making a perceptual error, or a rollercoaster

'fools' a rider into making an emotional error. According to this version of incongruity theory, the mind is actually *deceived into accepting the two incompatible frames as compatible*, the incongruous elements as congruous, the absurd or impossible as reasonable. It is the perception of this error by the self, this momentary lapse of reason, which leads to amusement.

Let us return to the child's exam answer and its unintentional joke. For the reader of this sentence, stamp collecting and the ancient Middle East are suddenly thrown into the same mental image by the purely visual and aural resemblance of the words 'Philistine' and 'Philatelist.' Following the workings of the automatic and unconscious language-processing faculties of the brain, a blatantly mistaken proposition for a moment seems to 'make sense': stamp collectors play a part in the stories of the Old Testament. When the mind catches itself for having accepted such an absurdity, however, amusement immediately results at the inappropriate mixture of social frameworks. Another example from Windsor (p. 16) is a real warning sign which read: "Beware! To touch these wires is instant death. Anyone found doing so will be prosecuted." Touching a high-voltage live wire might be both deadly and prosecutable, but this does not mean that the dead transgressor can be prosecuted. It is the momentary acceptance of this latter illogical supposition by the reader which causes him to find amusement at his own mental failure. Again, a certain trickery is involved, exploiting in this case the standard format of 'Beware' signs used ("Beware!"/Warning message against doing X/Punishment threat against doing X). A final example is the following newspaper headline: **HERSHEY BARS PROTEST** (Lederer, 1989). This headline leads the reader to imagine a group of 'Hershey Bars' (chocolate bars produced by an American sweets company) carrying out a political demonstration, an absurd notion. The idea, in fact, is extended and reinforced by a pictorial representation included in Lederer's book (See **Figure 4**). In this case, it is the ambiguity of the phrase (chocolate bars carry out a demonstration / a sweets company prohibits a demonstration) which provokes the error. The acceptable second meaning facilitates assent with the unacceptable former interpretation, which due to typical language-processing preferences is that intuitively favoured by most readers. There exists a whole genre of humour based on collecting these unintentional double-meanings, as

exemplified by such books as *Anguished English* (Lederer, 1989) or *Barbara Windsor's Book of Boobs* (Windsor, 1979).

Though commonly subjected to an incongruity-resolution type of analysis in humour research, jokes such as these have not been related to amusement stimuli less amenable to incongruity ideas. I would argue, however, that such a relationship exists, as perception of such jokes --which provoke social frame mismanagements of the self-- can be linked to the frame mismanagements of *others* (see 2.3), and subsequently to other kinds of self-claim discredits. A person who could actually believe that stamp collectors were an ancient Middle Eastern people, that chocolate bars can carry out a political demonstration, that the dead can be prosecuted in a criminal court, would be discredited as a rational or sane individual, and could well draw the derision of others. Such extremes of unorthodox belief are certainly not unknown in human society, among children and the mentally unhealthy, or in remote societies, rural areas, and pseudoscientific, religious, and supernatural cults and groups within our own. Spotting them in oneself, if only fleetingly, is enough to spark off an episode of amusement at the fool inside.

Canned jokes, puns, wit, plays-on-words, and other forms of intentional joking can be analysed in an identical manner, only the cause of discredit (agent rather than accident) varying. A joke creator or exhibitor can be considered an agent of his audience's discredit, who uses various tricks, lies, and ambiguities to deceive their interpretative mechanisms. A successful joker shows each audience member that a part of himself lacks the universally expected self-claim of appropriate frame management, while allowing him enough distance from this part to achieve amusement (See Chapter Six, 2). Unintentional jokes, such as the philatelist/philistine conjunction, can be considered to result in accidentally caused discredits of the self's mental claims (Type III). Intentional jokes --which may of course be based on unintentional ones-- lead to agent-caused discredit (Type IV).

This version of incongruity theory is hardly new. Aristotle and John Locke are only two of the major thinkers who stressed or implied the deceptive element of jokes, and the subsequent fooling of the listener:

Most smart sayings are derived from metaphor, and also from misleading the hearer beforehand.... The same effect is produced by jokes that turn on a change of letter; for they are deceptive.... For instance, when Theodorus said to Nicon, the player on the cithara, “you are troubled” (*θραττει*)<sup>3</sup>; for while pretending to say “something troubles you,” he deceives us; for he means something else.

(Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III.xi. 6-7)

For *wit* lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting these together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy; *judgement*, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating them carefully, one from another, ideas wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another.

(Locke, 1690: II.xi)

It is noteworthy that in all such cases the joke must contain some thing that can deceive us for a moment. That is why, when the illusion vanishes, [transformed] into nothing, 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

(Kant, 1790: I, 334)

Aristotle and Kant’s explicit references to deception and interpretative error are clear enough. Locke similarly suggests that wit causes the listener to be “misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another,” in other words, to make an intellectual mistake. More recent analyses have also framed the workings of joke material in this way. According to Marvin Minsky for instance, jokes lead to “logical mistakes,” “absurd

---

<sup>3</sup> A phrase which sounds like “you are no better than a Thracian slave girl” (p. 410, footnote).

reasoning,” “stupid thoughts,” “intellectual failures” for which, in his opinion, amusement and subsequent laughter act as “censors” (1985: 274-81).

No less interesting is the testimony of experienced joke writers and tellers. Stand-up comedians and other performers who employ humour are often well aware of the deceptive skills essential to their work, not to mention the role of the audience as a ‘mark’:

I call a joke a curve. See, a curve is a ball that starts out to the plate, and then it bends to fool the batter. That’s exactly what you do with a comedy line and the audience. You throw what seems to be a perfectly straight line and then curve it.

(Abe Burrows, in Wilde, 1976: 95)

Before you can expect to draw the audience in, you must believe your own joke -- you will sound much more convincing if you do. You want them to believe that your story actually happened to you. Share something truly personal with the audience and they’ll accept you more easily. *Then* you can pull the rug out from under them --and they’ll love it.

(Iapoce, 1988: 23)

This interpretation is also consistent with evidence regarding the variation in amusement which results from different levels of ‘comprehension difficulty’ of jokes (see Wyer and Collins, 1992: 673-676). It is well known from personal experience that these types of humour can be too ‘stupid’ or conversely ‘too obscure’ to be funny --ideally, they are ‘clever.’ Several studies have documented this fact empirically, showing that subjects tend to rate jokes lower if they require either too much or too little ‘cognitive processing.’ According to the proposed interpretation of jokes as deceptive, these ‘comprehension difficulty’ effects can be explained differently. In order for a joke to be found funny, it must be (1) elaborate enough for the victim to accept its premises and be deceived by the joke; (2) not so elaborate that the absurdity to be accepted is either not arrived at or not immediately evident to the victim.

The variety of genres and styles of intentional jokes (Type IV) is truly immense. An **intentional joke** can be defined as a verbal, pictorial, or other symbolic production by an agent which may cause an audience member to momentarily mismanage his social frameworks. A brief example and discussion will be provided for a number of common types: riddles, one-liners, puns, irony, absurd humour, jesting, and twist endings.

- Riddles: "What's orange and sounds like a parrot? A carrot."

A listener of the above riddle knows that a 'trick' ending will follow the initial question. Nevertheless, to properly enjoy the joke he must enter into the spirit of the game and try to imagine a reasonable answer: "Sounds like a parrot? Orange? Some kind of strange tropical bird or animal? Someone repetitive --but orange?...". He thus creates an expectation, an empty conceptual space for a 'something' which will fit both requirements.

The answer, 'carrot' indeed fits both requirements, but on a different reading of 'sounds like.' Once the new interpretation is understood, the solution provided is immediately accepted: 'a carrot' is indeed orange and 'sounds like' [is phonetically similar to] 'a parrot'. This slots 'a carrot' into the conceptual space opened up earlier --a space for 'something' which can make sounds similar to those of a certain species of bird. The perceiver, in this way, accepts the notion that a root vegetable may squawk and imitate sounds.

This mix-up of frames, however, is almost instantly recognized as being incorrect, indeed ludicrous --not merely because its absurdity is evident, but more importantly due to the perceiver's antecedent knowledge that the riddle would end with a 'joke.' In situations of announced humour, the audience collaborates with the performer first by allowing itself to be fooled and abused in various ways, and second by seeking and reflecting upon the resulting discredits.

- One-liners: "Seriously though, there are some great advantages in being sixty-five. One is that you are no longer bothered by insurance agents" (Bob Hope, quoted in Humes, 1975)

Here the perceiver is fooled into temporarily accepting the outrageous notion that the nearing of death, an almost unmentionable disadvantage of old-age, is actually a benefit. Amusement (plus, perhaps, a twinge of fear) follows from awareness of the mistake. Introductory words such as ‘really folks,’ ‘seriously,’ ‘no, but actually’ and the like are standard devices of such performances, serving to refresh the comedian’s image as sincere before each joke in order to deceive the audience once and again.

- **Puns:** "Eating bear meat is a grisly experience" (Crosbie, 1982)

Puns represent the minimal version of this genre. Here the joke hinges on the identical pronunciation of the words 'grisly' (frightful) and 'grizzly' (a kind of North American bear). In this case, once the secondary meaning of this phonetic string is detected, the mind of the perceiver is deceived into accepting the truth of the initial statement ("Eating bear meat is a frightful experience"), on false grounds --i.e., the fact that a 'grizzly experience' has something to do with bears. The automatic, unreflective nature of the human language-processing faculties can be easily exploited in such ways.

- **Irony:** “Well, that was entertaining!” (On exiting from a grim, tedious, and incomprehensible 3-hour film projection)

Ironic statements are propositions which are implicitly marked or intended as evidently false, improper, or in any case not to be understood as the real thoughts of the speaker. After watching what is known to have been a tedious film for all, a statement such as “that was entertaining” cannot be accepted as given. Furthermore, ironic words often refer to propositions which for some reason may have been expected in context (Mizzau, 1984). For example, a common view of motion pictures is that they are meant to entertain audiences, making “that was entertaining” an immediately recognizable reference to this expectation. Irony may be funny because participants of conversation, expecting co-participants to follow the rules of bona-fide communication, tend to accept that others will mean what they say, and may even accept as reasonable certain typical or expected phrases even when obviously inappropriate. In fact, irony is usually delivered in a mock honest tone or even with a ‘straight’ rendering of honest delivery, in order to better fool the listener and even the speaker himself. A pair of film-goers may develop an

extended ironic conversation on how ‘clever’ the film was, what bits were ‘particularly interesting,’ how much they appreciated the ‘subtle humorous undertones,’ and so on, following the well-known pattern and jargon of a favourable critical review. Amusement will depend on continuing serious delivery of such lines (which fool the minds of the two ironists into believing their own silliness), while this may become more and more difficult as amusement grows within.

- 'Absurd' comedy: The classic BBC television programme *Monty Python's Flying Circus* featured such bizarre conjunctions as a cycling race in which cyclists were modern art painters (Picasso, Ernst...) painting on large canvasses as they raced around English roads. The otherwise realistic simulation of the 'live' TV coverage of a sports event was able to deceive the minds of viewers into accepting the absurdity.
- Jesting: The conversational practice of 'kidding,' 'fooling,' 'joking,' or 'jesting' is an attempt to deceive the listener into believing an unreasonable proposition, which lasts only for the duration of the phrase or for a few conversational turns. These are common in conversations among friends, where absurdities are often bandied around and built upon for mere entertainment, as in this excerpt relating to a witnessed insect:

Ned: I keep hearing people call them things like hornets.  
 Frank: Let me tell you. That dude was big enough to take off with a payload of about twenty tons.  
 Ned: Well what do you call it?  
 Frank: I didn't know what to call it.  
           I had never seen [an insect] that big. Ever.  
 Ned: [He he.]  
 Frank: The only thing I could think to [call it-]  
 Ned: [He he] he he  
           Call it, “get thee hence”. Hehheh.  
 Brandon: Call it sir.  
 Ned: Heh heh *heh* heh hehhehheh.  
 Frank: Let me tell you what I call it. “My God look at that big bug.”  
           It had a fuselage *that* big. {holds up fingers}  
 Ned: Ehhehheh *ha* ha ha.  
 Frank: Yeah. Brandon, I'm not exaggerating, am I?  
 Brandon: Oh no. No. Easy.

Frank: It had a fuselage like *that*.  
 Ned: Eh huh huh huh.  
 Frank: And a wingspan like *that*. Oh man.  
       Never seen [one like that]  
 Ned: [So we're talking] primordial here.  
 Frank: It was just slightly smaller than a hummingbird.

(Norrick, 1994: 17-18)

It may be noted in this exchange that the two witnesses of the event, Frank and Brandon, tell their story in mock seriousness, while it is only their audience, Ned, who laughs out loud. The play earnestness of the storytellers, stressed by exclamations such as “oh man” and “I tell you” and by the appeal for and achievement of confirmation by each other (“I’m not exaggerating, am I?” “Oh no. No. Easy.”), is enough to allow for a listening friend who normally trusts the speakers to accept, if only partially or momentarily, the truth of what is spoken. This acceptance, however, contrasts with the simultaneous knowledge or belief that estimates of insect size and situational danger are being grossly exaggerated, and that the attitude (i.e., of Shakespearean defiance --“Call it ‘get thee hence’”-- or of humble submission “Call it ‘sir’”) offered as appropriate, is in fact grossly misplaced.

'Wind ups' (or 'put-ons') as discussed for Type II, are more extended versions of these foolings, in which the victim is actually led to accept blatant falsehoods for a more extended period of time. They often result in the amusement of the victim when he discovers the falsity of the frame he has accepted as real. Smith has conducted a study of the wind-ups carried out over the telephone by Steve Penk, the DJ of a local radio station (in cahoots with the friends of the victim). The following excerpt is from the transcript of such a conversation, in which Penk has made Joanne Crawley believe he is a travel agent demanding the return of a ninety-four-pound compensation she and her friends had obtained after a booking error. The exchange takes place at the end of the wind-up, when Penk reveals his true identity and blows open the deception.

SP: Anyway they've written to me and this isn't really ((pause)) Ian Cooper from the travel shop, this is Steve

/Penk from key one-oh-three.

JC: /Oohhhahahahahahahahaha you're joking, you are joking...

(in Smith, 1996: 281)

- 'Twist' endings: Short (and sometimes longer) stories may contain ironic 'twist' or 'trick' endings. The initial framings lead the reader to misinterpret events in a certain way, despite building evidence for the correct interpretation revealed in the final moments. The motion picture *Angelheart* (Parker, 1987) is an example: Harry Angel is a detective hired by Louis Cypher to find the once-famous singer Johnnie Favourite. It turns out, however, that Harry Angel *is* Johnny favourite (who suffers from amnesia), and that Louis Cypher is Lucifer, who at last has found the man who once sold his soul to him for musical fame. The film is riddled with clues that point to these facts --dreams, a recurring musical tune, Angel's emotional involvement, his phobia of chickens, his recurrent habit of looking into mirrors with a puzzled expression, the discovery that Angel and Favourite share a birthday, the words and demeanour of Louis Cypher (not to mention his give-away name). These hints, however, are usually only identified as such once the ending is revealed and the story is re-interpreted by the viewer. (personal observation)

- Play: Make-believe and play, even when involving incongruous or impossible events, can be taken very seriously by children or by adults engaged in their fantasy worlds. However, when the player's focus of attention turns to the impossibility of events itself, the previous acceptance of the absurd becomes funny. McGhee (1979: 63), in a discussion of humour in play, uses as an example the incredible feats performed by a toy car in the play world of a small child:

Such fantasy play would remain humorless play as long as the child's attention was directed toward what he could do with the car in his make-believe world. The play would not trigger humor *until attention was shifted towards the fact that the child is imagining the car to do something that he knows is nonsense, absurd, or impossible.*

All of these stimuli of amusement --intentional and unintentional jokes, puns, one-liners, riddles, twists, play-- as well as other related varieties, fool the mind and thereby provoke self-amusement. When they work, they cause the mind which interprets them to make a frame management error, discrediting the owner of this mind regarding his universal mental self-claims. Normally, these varieties of joke are evident enough to allow the person to immediately distance his 'real' self from the part of himself that is momentarily fooled. Thus, embarrassment is not often applicable (See Chapter Six, 2). Ironic statements, however, may sometimes be misinterpreted as honest proposals, and even agreed with in ways which might discredit mental self-claims more seriously. Victims of wind-ups and put-ons may also feel embarrassment if they committed strongly to an implausible fabricated scenario. Even being spied or 'caught' treating the absurd as serious during make-believe play can be found embarrassing by a child. These phenomena are not essentially different from events which result in the more evident self-claim discredits of Types I and II.





### 3.1. Funny Events Within Retellings

Retellings are probably the most obvious place to look for transformed funny stimuli, as they are often physically available in the form of texts or recordings.

It is worth making a couple of general points about retold elicitors of amusement. Firstly, it has been suggested that the purposes behind the production and exhibition of retellings may vary. Among these may be that of making the audience laugh and/or experience amusement, or of discrediting or mocking a particular character within the retelling. In some retellings (i.e., 'humour'), these may feature among the principal purposes. In others, they might be secondary side-effects. In some, however, they may not be expected at all, or even desired.

Secondly, it should be noted that different media of retellings lend themselves to representing different categories of error. Print lends itself more easily to language and framing errors, but not so easily to problems of physical appearance, emotional or bodily control, or motor skill failures. Silent film, on the other hand, handles the latter topics best, and the former worst<sup>1</sup>.

True or allegedly true stories of discrediting that occur in everyday life are commonly sold commercially as 'humour.' In fact, many of the examples cited in Section 2 were taken from written collections of this type. Some offer examples of mainly universal discrediting of well-known or anonymous individuals: "the most embarrassing moments of the famous...an hysterical collection of goofs and gaffs!" (Complete, 1989: back cover), "famous faux pas: embarrassing moments, gaffes, and clangers" (Snelson, 1990: title), "amazing blunders and bumbles...the most hilarious mistakes and miscalculations" (Elding, 1987: title;1), "self-inflicted disasters, blunders, and super goofs...actions which rebounded mightily, savagely --but always amusingly-- on their makers" (Jones, 1985: front cover; 11), "the greatest galaxy of mistakes, mishaps, and misfortunes ever assembled...simple, humorous cases of ordinary people whose errors of

---

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the fact that humour research is published in print form may be partly responsible for a bias towards data that is more easily reproducible in this format, and theories which are based on such data.

judgement would otherwise be forgotten," (Blundell, 1980: 7), "the world's greatest cranks and crackpots" (Nicholas, 1990: title).

Others present instances of independent claims that have been discredited: the "world's worst predictions" (Nown, 1985: title), "[colossally mistaken] predictions, generalizations, and categorical statements which people...love to make about past, present and future" (Morgan and Langford, 1981: 9) or "staggering display[s] of egotism from some of the world's most shameless self-proclaimed geniuses" (Cole, 1995: back cover).

Finally, we find books devoted to the discrediting of specific role holders: criminals, policemen, judges and lawyers in *Criminal Blunders* (Mason and Burns, 1985); aeroplane pilots, passengers, and air stewards in *A Wing and a Prayer* (Nown, 1989); film-makers in *The Fifty Worst Movies of All Time* (Dreyfuss, 1978); pop music artists and producers in *Slipped Discs: The Worst Rock 'n Roll Records of All Time*; stage actors, directors, and other artists in *No Turn Unstoned* (Rigg, 1983); scientists in *Science: Good, Bad, and Bogus* (Gardner, 1983); inventors in *Edwardian Inventions: An Extraordinary Extravaganza of Eccentric Ingenuity* (Dale and Gray, 1979); poets in *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse* (Wyndham Lewis and Lee, 1930).

In media other than the printed word we find similar humorous compilations of real events. Goffman illustrated his article "Radio Talk," which deals with the mistakes of radio announcers, with "eight of the LP records...produced by Kermit Schafer from his recording (Jubilee Records) of radio bloopers" (Goffman, 1981: 197). On television and on videocassette, I am aware of productions at least in the USA, the UK, Spain, and Japan which have exhibited videorecorded 'home movies' sent to the program's producers by viewers. They feature mainly examples of "accidents, mishaps, and misfortunes" (*You've Been Framed* video, back cover) which occurred unintentionally during the videotaping of everyday scenes. There have also been dozens of programs and video collections centred around filmed or taped errors committed by screen actors/presenters during the preparation of a film, newscast, or other television or film production. *Red Dwarf: The Smeg-Ups* (BBC Enterprises, 1994), for instance, contains the "fluffs, bloopers, hitches, and smeg-ups" from a popular British televised science fiction series: "the crew forget their lines and giggle uncontrollably, ...props fall apart and doors refuse

to open, ...model space ships self-destruct when strings break and chamaleonic mutants can't get anything right" (back cover). Failures by sportsmen is another popular genre: *Jimmy Tarbuck's Nightmare Holes of Golf* (Transworld, 1995) *Motor Sport Mayhem*, (Astrion, 1995) *Super Duper Baseball Bloopers* (Major League Baseball Properties, 1995), *Sports Funnies* (Wienerworld, 1993), *Danny Baker's Own Goals and [Football] Gaffes* (Vision Video 1992).

Many non-fiction books, articles, and documentaries which are not specifically intended as humour nevertheless include many amusing anecdotes of this type: biographies, ethnographic films, news reports. The book *Blunders in International Business* (Ricks, 1993), part of a series of texts on business management, uses a serious tone throughout, and emphasizes the "valuable lessons" that can be learned through its study (p. vii). However, the blunders recounted are indeed very funny ("wonderful" and "entertaining" are the euphemistic terms employed on the 'back cover' description). Critical review of any nature --sporting, artistic, academic-- will be found particularly promising as a hunting grounds for discredit accounts. A bad film can elicit amusement both in the cinema and in the homes of those who have not even seen it. The following concern *Che!*, (Fleischer, 1969) with Omar Sharif in the role of the South American revolutionary, and are taken from a humorous compilation of true celluloid atrocities, *The Fifty Worst Movies of All Time*:

"The consistency of strained spinach...actually seems to diminish the sum total of knowledge with which one enters the theater...a timeless, placeless jumble...." -- Vincent Canby, New York Times

"BOMB: Lowest rating....one of the biggest film jokes of 1960's. However, you haven't lived until you see Palance play Fidel Castro." --Leonard Maltin, TV Movies

"Frequently becomes ludicrous...laughable. Retakes should have been done on numerous scenes in which the lighting by photographer Charles Wheeler seems more appropriate to a comedy than a political drama...." --Variety

(Medved and Dreyfuss, 1978: 58)

The present paper, of course, and humour research in general, also present potentially funny material for purposes other than entertainment, in this case academic ones.

Much of everyday talk consists of the recounting of stories about the speaker himself, about people in the speaker's circle of family, friends, and acquaintances, and about others the speaker knows of. Many of these stories will contain events that make one or more of its characters appear as discredited. This is not always the intention of the raconteur, but it often is, as sharing amusement through laughter with other participants is an enjoyable and bond-forming activity, whether the claimant discredited be one of the participants present or an outsider (See Chapter Eight, 4.2.2):

Vera: Were you talking about you having a girl friend when you were little and writing her this letter.

Jim: Yeah. Yeah.

Vera: Well tell me about it.

Teddy: Uhhuh.

Jim: As I recall, she and I had matching Superman suits  
[and we'd-]

Vera: [Ahhahahahaha]

Teddy: [Hhuh huh huh]

Pamela: [Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh]

Jim: and we'd lie on the back lawn  
[and pretend to be flying and stuff.]

Vera: [The basis of true love. Yes.]

(Norrick, 1994: 424)

In this example, the storyteller and his girlfriend's wearing of "matching Superman suits" is interpreted as a discrediting fact regarding their self-claims of appearance. All share amusement at one of the participants, or rather, at who he was many years before.

When, on the other hand, a story concerns the discredit of someone not present, but who is known to participants, we have the ingredients of what is commonly known as 'gossip.' Jorg Bergman (1987) has argued that gossip is one of the most widespread of social phenomena, as common in remote Polynesian islands as in large industrial centres,

and just as universally condemned. According to Bergman, "the gossip information must concern something that does not agree with the subject of gossip's self-presentation and whose 'public disclosure' for the subject of gossip would probably evoke a feeling of embarrassment or shame." Very often, interaction during which gossip is shared is punctuated with smiles, giggles, and loud laughter<sup>2</sup>:

[11]

[High-Life: GR: 29]

[The transcript begins at the end of a gossiping session between Mrs. R. and Mrs. H. about Mrs. S.]

H: She's a little touched!

R: She's nuts

H: She's totally, completely crazy! <vehemently>

G: <faint laughter>

R: They imagine--

H: <grinning> Well...the dilemma was more or less (---) my fault. I brought it on, even though I didn't want to.

R: Yeah, yeah ( )=

H: yeah

G: =what then? What happened then?

R: the word got round, =got round---

H: I can't possibly repeat what part I played.

G: <laughing faintly>

R: The rumor went around that she---

G: This is getting exciting=

G: =hehehe

R: That she's always got some guy in the sack.

? hahahaha

(Bergman, 1987: 95-96)

It should be noted that 'telling a story' often involves more than mere speech. Many theatrical elements, including mime, imitation of tone, accent, and other speech particularities, and production of sound effects, may be employed:

<sup>2</sup> Another variety of gossip concerns moral sins, which are reacted to with indignation, anger, disapproval, pity, and/or moral outrage. The distinction is between 'substantive' and 'ceremonial' norms (Goffman, 1967: 47-55) or between self-claims the emptiness of which may have serious (ie, harmful, threatening) implications independent of the possible resulting social judgements and sanctions, and those the emptiness of which are merely informative.

We spend most of our time not giving information but giving shows.

(Goffman, 1974: 508)

A joke should be acted out. When telling a tale about something dreadful that happened to you or to a friend the impact is greatly heightened if the comic appears genuinely appalled or frightened or embarrassed as the case may be.

(Kilgarriff, 1975: 2)

The sharing of travel diaries, photo albums, slide shows, and 'home videos' with friends is another familiar everyday method of retelling past events.

Turning to fictional retellings, we find that many types of comedy consist of invented stories in which the characters' self-claims are continuously discredited by themselves or others, or are exposed to be less than what they claim by the teller.

Some verbal jokes are simply "the bare gag lines lifted from a real humorous situation" (Humes, 1975: 1), or at least of a potentially real one:

A man goes to the psychiatrist to ask for advice about his brother. 'He thinks he's a chicken,' he explains. 'Well, you'd better turn him in,' says the shrink. 'I can't,' says the man, 'I need the eggs.'

(Woody Allen, cited in Staveacre, 1987: 125)

By going to the psychiatrist for advice about his brother, the man in the story claims his own sanity, which both the psychiatrist and the hearer of the tale accept. The punchline discredits his self-claim.

As we have seen, raconteurs may act out the parts of the characters in their stories. Comedians often interpret the roles of individuals who manage to lose their dignity at every step, yet continue to reclaim it after every fall: the drunk, the clown, the Harlequin, the Pantaloon, the bungling criminal. Physical 'slapstick' comedy literally revolves around the slips, falls, drops, crashes, and territorial invasions of the actors in

the fictitious world created. Consider the following sequence from a 'Three Stooges' film as an illustration of the failure to protect bodily spaces:

*Larry, Curly, Moe are trying to get through a door, simultaneously. Larry gets cross. Larry slaps Moe (SPLAT!)*

*Curly: Here, don't do that! [Larry pokes Moe in the eye (BOING!). Larry turns to poke Curly, but Curly covers his eyes, so Larry slaps Curly's head (BAP!). Curly covers his head. uncovering his eyes, so Larry pokes Curly in the eye (BOING!). Curly covers his eyes, so Larry slaps Curly's head, again (BAP!)]*

*Moe: Here, don't do that! [Larry turns to poke Moe, but Moe covers his eyes, so Larry punches Moe in the belly (BOOF!) Moe clutches belly with both hands. Larry pokes Moe in the eye (BOING!). Moe covers belly with one hand, eyes with the other. Larry slaps Moe on the head (BAP!).]*

(Staveacre, 1987: 48)

Eccentric dress and appearance, extreme emotional expressions, unusual accents and speech faults, strange mannerisms and styles of walking, sexual innuendo, insults, illogical thought, awful singing voices, unintentional revelation of secrets, mistaken identities, misinterpretation of situations, and defeated pretensions generally have been the staple features of comedy since recorded times. In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BC) the claims of power and control of the warring Athenian men are defeated by their wives, who refuse to have sex with them. The sex-starved men spend a good part of the play in a state of continuous erection (discrediting bodily control claims) which is furthermore available to all observers due to the swollen size of the members (an informational territory slip). They are reduced to begging and pleading with the women for pity, and eventually give in to their demands (discrediting their role self-claims as dominant Ancient Greek husbands). In a climactic scene, Cinesias is seduced by his wife Myrrhine, who falsely leads him to believe she will break the 'strike' with him (showing him to be a gullible fool), and instead pours a cold jug of water over his genitals at the last moment (seriously violating his bodily territory).

The unsustainable pretensions of a self-deluded character fuel the humour in many comedies. Cervantes' *Don Quijote de La Mancha* rides across the Spanish plains in

a rusty suit of armour on a scrawny horse under the unshakeable delusion of being a paladin of legendary stature. The earthy common sense of his sidekick Sancho Panza and the disastrous consequences of his every action continually contradict his fantastical self-claims about himself and others, but the man adventures on unabated. In a similar way, Peter Seller's cinematographic 'Inspector Clouseau,' an unbelievably clumsy, inept, and clueless sleuth, nevertheless "thinks of himself as one of the world's greatest detectives" (Sellers, cited in Staveacre, 1987: 49). A recurrent theme in British comedy is the snob who claims a higher social class than actually appertains to him: the sitcom characters Mildred of *George and Mildred* (Thames, 1976) and Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced 'Bouquet,' as she insists) of *Keeping up Appearances* (BBC, 1990) are two examples (see Taylor 1994).

Misunderstandings (misapplications of the correct social frame) must also receive special treatment. In Shakespearean comedy, "spectacular misalignments to the world across the events of many scenes and several acts" take place (Goffman, 1974: 444), and similar misalignments commonly take place in Hollywood comedies. The evidence for the false frame is invariably thin, and fooled characters seem ever on the verge of discovering the truth. They appear as fools for failing to properly interpret a situation which to the audience seems obvious. Furthermore, if the false frame is being consciously sustained by some of the characters (i.e., as a fabrication), the latter will be projecting easily discreditable selves, and will need all their efforts to maintain control of their informational territories. In the classic film *Some Like it Hot* (Wilder, 1959), for instance, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon play two musicians who adopt disguises to join an all-female orchestra. The disguises are poor, and constantly falling apart, yet they somehow avoid discovery time after time. To complicate matters, Tony Curtis adopts a second false self, that of a millionaire on a holiday, to woo one of the female musicians. He must consequently carry out the well-known comedic shenanigans of changing from one disguise to the next, and appearing to be in two places at once, without his true identity being revealed.

Another common humorous technique is adopting the role of an incompetent producer of the type of retelling itself, bringing into relief the rules of the genre in question. Such is the case of *Rasputin Fish, the World's Worst Poet* (Lea, 1989), a book

throughout which the narrator, Rasputin Fish, claims to be "the world's greatest poet" (p. 9) while offering ample proof of the contrary:

Things in London are just fine,  
Except when they're just awful.  
While looking for a pen today,  
I found I'd got a drawerful.

(Excerpt from 'Dear Dacha', p. 64)

*It Was a Dark and Stormy Night* (Rice, 1986) is composed of entries from the annual Bulwer-Lytton Contest, in which participants attempt to pen the "the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels," (p. vii) with hilarious results:

The lovely woman-child Kaa was mercilessly chained to the cruel post of the warrior-chief Beast, with his barbarian tribe now stacking wood at her nubile feet, when the strong clear voice of the poetic and heroic Handsomas roared, "Flick your Bic, crisp that chick, and you'll feel my steel through your last meal."

(Steve Carman, winner of the 1984 contest; p. xiii)

Numerous live comedy acts have been based on the premise that the performer is in fact incapable of providing a proper performance:

The printed program announces [George] Carl as a genius of comedy, and the ring master introduces him without comment but in a tone of voice which indicates star status. By contrast, his entrance is undistinguished and unassertive. He wears a drab, not too well-fitted tuxedo and a black, floppy hat. He looks uninterested and slightly worried; he pays little attention to the audience, walking toward the right, then the left, aiming at the exit, coming back toward the centre where the microphone stands; he whistles as when one walks leisurely or is somewhat embarrassed, in order just to do something or break the silence.

He does a few dance steps, nods at the audience informally, walks a bit, nods again twice, comes to the microphone, steps on the tangled wire, pulls the wire, gets his feet caught in a mess of wires, says 'allo' in the microphone, as if he were testing the sound; he looks pleased, but glances toward the exit as if ready to leave the ring (...)

(Bouissac, 1990: 417-418)

I have referred in this section mainly to *Type V* funny events, transformed accidental discredits of an other, though some examples of agent-caused *discredits* (*Type VI*) have also been offered, such as the Three Stooges' slapstick battles or the sexual teasing and abusing of Athenian men by their wives in *Lysistrata*. *Types V* and *VI* are, in fact, the most common types of transformed funny events, as it is relatively rarer that a perceiver observes himself as the laughable character of a story told by others (*Types VII* and *VIII*), especially when considering such media as literature, film, and television.

A note might be added regarding *Type VI*, funny transformations involving an agent of an other's discredit. The prankster is a common figure in comedy, as the agent of many intentionally-caused self-claim discredits. Anthropologists have identified the 'trickster' in the oral literature of many simple societies, especially in North America and Africa (Apte, 1983: 192). Though they also often have their own self-claims discredited, tending to be ineffectual, boastful, and stupid, they are defined by their disposition to break taboos, violate and insult the persons and properties of others, and play cunning tricks, hoaxes, and pranks to achieve their goals (ibid.).

Tricksters can also be observed in our own culture. An example more familiar to Western readers might be the Marx Brothers, a "trinity to whom nothing is sacred" and in whose world "things and people exist solely in order to be subverted, overwhelmed, ridiculed" (Staveacre, 1987: 127). A collage of some classic scenes evokes a pattern which we recognize as widespread in our own experience of humorous retellings more generally:

The unwelcome interior decorators (Harpo and Chico), invading Groucho's midnight tryst with man-trap, Esther Muir, and wallpapering everything in sight,

including Miss Muir....A costume ball ('the beer is warm, the women are cold, and I'm hot under the collar'), where somebody is *inside* a detachable bustle, clamping himself to the rear of any passing lady....The captain's table, with three uninvited guests circling ravenously, filling their pockets with hors d'oeuvres....An operating theatre, where three mad surgeons, endlessly handwashing, rush around not examining Mrs. Upjohn.... A train, feeding on itself as the trio demolish the carriages to fuel the boiler.... An opera sabotaged by piratical invaders from the flies.... A horse-race that must be stopped....

(ibid.: 128)

### 3.2. Funny Events Within Play Acts

Funny events may occur within the unreal world created by the role-play of all participants in a situation. This is perhaps most common and most intentionally so in the case of 'games,' so I will use this case to illustrate.

The playing of games gives rise to many opportunities for amusement (Of course, it can also lead to anger, fear, dejection, joy, embarrassment, and other emotions). Players of competitive games often make specific claims of superiority ("I'm invincible! No one can defeat me now!") and predictions of future events ("You're dead in three moves...") which may be negated by actual outcomes. By virtue of their role as game players, they also claim a knowledge of at least basic rules and some skill in playing. Finally, games provide players with opportunities to demonstrate sufficiency in universal skills and characteristics: logical thought (strategy), correct interpretations of events (guessing the strategies and conditions of opponents), emotional control (bluffing, keeping poise), territorial protection (defending squares, tokens, cities, properties, men or other game materials). Some games test specific universal self-claims: possession of basic social frames ('question' games such as *Trivial Pursuit*), language production (*Scrabble*), acting ability (Charades), production and interpretation of visual representations (*Pictionary*). Some seem even specifically designed to provoke discrediting: 'truth' games (protection of informational territories), *Twister* (protection of bodily territories; appearance [bodily posture]).

### 3.3. Funny Events Within Imagined Sequences

There is little need to elaborate on the possibility of memories, fantasies, and speculations being found funny by the perceiver. To the extent that he becomes engrossed in them, they have some sort of 'real' status to him, and can trigger off any number of emotional reactions, including amusement. Joy Fielding, in writing about an embarrassing anecdote, makes reference to this fact: "Over twenty years later, I can't think of that time without laughing" (in Kurc, 1990: 44). One point that will be further developed in Chapter Six (2) is that past embarrassments may for the first time be experienced with amusement as memories.

A less obvious type of imagined sequence is the metaphorical or symbolic transformation of one strip of activity for another. A set of events normally interpretable only under a natural (i.e., deterministic) framework --a sunset, a pride of lions, a seismic movement in the earth's crust-- might be interpreted metaphorically in terms of a social framework: respectively, the quiet death of an old man, a royal court, an untimely bowel movement. Funny events may thus be perceived where they would not normally be found, by merely accepting a set of transformational rules. Children have difficulties in distinguishing between rational and non rational creatures, or even conscious and unconscious objects; often, adults behave towards non-human things in similar ways: pets, cars that won't start, computers, and television sets. Though we may have no rational reason for expecting a duck to walk in the 'elegant' manner we expect of social human beings, its 'waddle' may be found funny because we are able to imagine it as a waddling human.

Comics such as *Garfield*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, or *Peanuts*, animated 'cartoon' shorts such as *Bugs Bunny* or *Tom and Jerry*, and most Disney animated features present non-human characters --animals, dolls, clocks, candlesticks-- who within the frame of the exhibition behave in human-like ways, and are treated by the audience as social beings. Their discrediting (i.e., Jerry causes Tom to fall out of the window) inspire as much amusement as those of human characters in fictional accounts.

A social event may also be reinterpreted as another social event. An argument between two children might be re-imagined as a political debate in parliament, and the irrational stubbornness of the real children be transported to a forum where such absurd behaviour would be laughable. Similarities between the two situations can be focused on by the perceiver, and differences ignored, so that the politicians imagined appear discredited by the words and actions of these unintentional child 'mimics.' In the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson, such transpositions between the world of children and the adult one to which the reader belongs are often intended by the author, who comments on this aspect of his work in his *Tenth Anniversary Book* (1995): "Many of Calvin's struggles are metaphors for my own. I suspect that most of us get old without growing up, and that inside every adult (sometimes not very far inside) is a bratty kid who wants everything his own way. I use Calvin as an outlet for my immaturity, as a way to keep myself curious about the natural world, as a way to ridicule my own obsessions, and as a way to comment on human nature." In the strip pictured on page 281, **figure 5**, (ibid.: 103) many readers may recognize and find amusement in their own ridiculous self-claims to control over things and events. In the *Tenth Anniversary Book*, Watterson added to it the caption "The illusion of control."

Satirists and caricaturists, of course, specialize in making such comparisons. The Lilliput-Blefuscus war over "the Way of breaking Eggs" in *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift, 1726) continues to provoke amusement in the modern reader as a symbol for the absurd wars and other conflicts that various social groups engage in. Political cartoonists (and comic 'imitators' of politicians) similarly distort and exaggerate the physical shortcomings, behavioural inconsistencies, and other embarrassments of political figures and institutions to the delight of readers. Such jokes and their accompanying amusement and laughter are ambiguous, perhaps even deliberately so, as Mulkay (1988) has argued. They are directed in the first instance at a fictional character, as no one will seriously suggest that the presentation is objective and literal. However, the satirist claims a connection between the fictional version of the figure lampooned and the flesh-and-blood person. The strength of the connection may be weaker or stronger; and may be perceived

as weaker or stronger by different parties. But to the extent that the connection is accepted, the self of the real person alluded to is damaged<sup>3</sup>.

A similar analysis can be applied to the 'parody' of film genres, writing styles, art or musical movements. These forms of humour present a certain work as a supposedly genuine example of a particular creative style, and will indeed resemble it in many ways. However, certain conventions of the style will be exaggerated to such an extreme, or made so obvious, that they will constitute failures by the fictitious 'author' of the work to abide by the requirements of his role. Again the fiction will be close enough to real examples of the genre for some of the amusement to be directed at true representatives.

Humorous fictional retellings generally often contain some references to people and institutions which may be recognizable to perceivers, though generally less explicit than in the cases of caricature, satire, and parody. Individual perceivers may also make idiosyncratic connections between a certain character in fiction (or non-fiction) and one known in real life. Common examples of Types VII and VIII funny events (transformed claim-discredits of the self) are those where the audience member sees himself, or a part of himself, in the laughable character. In *The Best Excuse...And How to Make It*, Donald Carroll provides a supposedly serious 'how-to' guide to excuse-making, an essentially amusing topic, as the activity involves the making of false (usually biographical) claims about the self..

#### THE FAMILIAL EXCUSE

The familial is really an umbrella category, a sort of holding company for other excuses, which can always be depended on to furnish you with a silent partner whenever one is needed to shore up another excuse. For example:

*I can't understand why you haven't received it. I gave it to my son to post over a week ago.*

...

*Sounds like a super evening. You two always bring back such beautiful slides. Let me just check with John to see if he has anything planned.*

...

---

<sup>3</sup>To complicate matters further, the acceptance of the fictional character as the real target of satire will constitute a frame mismanagement by the perceiver, which could result in (simultaneous?) self-amusement (Type IV). Such 'complex' humour --integrating numerous potentially amusing stimuli-- will be treated further in Chapter Six (5).

*I've been dying to hear all about your operation. Wait, hang on a second. I think I just heard a scream from the kids' room. Let me ring you back.*

(Carroll, 1983: 4)

Here, the reader, as the student who must put the teachings of the book into practice, is placed in the position of imagining himself practicing such excuses, and may also be reminded of his own similar everyday falsehoods. Both of these imaginings contain an image of himself providing self-claims which are discredited from the start. In many cases, Carroll goes further and conjures up situations where bad excuses can lead to the reader's public discrediting:

Beware of killing [family members] off at a pace that exceeds their actual mortality rate.... At some future date you could find yourself in the embarrassing position of being challenged when you claim to have been in the company of a beloved aunt whose funeral you attended several years and many excuses ago.

(ibid.: 5-6)

#### 4. Conclusions

I have attempted to illustrate the apparent differences and underlying similarity of funny stimuli, on the basis of the proposed claim-discredit account of amusement. The method has consisted in (1) tracing out the possible categories of perceived discrediting events according to types of self-claim and discredit situation; and (2) providing instances of funny stimuli which exemplify the various categories. An extremely wide range of funny stimuli has been represented, from puns to banana-peel slips, from visual illusions to satire. All such stimuli can be described as perceived claim-discredits, whether accidental or agent-caused, affecting another person or the perceiver himself, seen in the 'real here and now' or in some transformed reality, affecting universal, role, or independent self-claims of skill, mind, territory, appearance, or biography.

The links between various examples of funny stimuli can be traced along the various axes of the classification, so that extremes of diversity can be found to share a common base. For example, the experiences of perceiving an astounding coincidence and of being tickled by a group of friends seem far removed. It could be said in both cases, however, that the subject is amused upon noticing the discredit of his own self-claim, moreover a claim he applies universally to all individuals. In the case of the coincidence, he fails to correctly interpret natural events, due to a fortuitous conduction of two percepts which his mind is deceived into linking. In the case of tickling, a group of others intentionally activate defensive bodily reflexes which he is helpless to stop, despite the inappropriateness of fearing such aggression from trusted friends. His self-claim to maintaining his own body under control is discredited, and while he laughs and writhes the discredit worsens, causing a growing spiral of amused laughter and control-loss.

Verbal jokes, like tickling, are the work of others who attempt to discredit the perceiver. In this case, however, the method consists of verbal 'tricks' which, as with coincidences, deceive the listener into mismanaging his interpretative frameworks.

The watching of a slapstick comedy film, again, seems distant from each of these three phenomena, and yet the genre is nothing more than the continuous fictional re-creation of clumsy movements, territorial invasions, illogical reasoning, and other actions which discredit the film characters' self-claims to be as normal, rational, and competent

individuals. Instead of being amused at his own failures, the perceiver reacts to those of others, in one 'gag' after another.

This classification allows for a unitary account of funny stimuli without sacrificing the empirical diversity of such phenomena. Unlike monolithic explanations such as 'incongruity,' 'superiority,' or 'play,' the claim-discredit account can accommodate differences as reflecting the natural diversity of self-claims, claim-discredit situations, and their perception by an observer.

This chapter has illustrated the necessary condition for amusement: the perception of a self-claim's discredit. It has been assumed that the perceiver was amused by this perception, and illustrations have been chosen which fit well with this assumption. However, not all discredits are amusing. Serious territorial violations can be imagined: robbery, knife-attacks, rape. Actions which discredit the actor may often be tragic, or lead to tragedy: poor judicial decisions, incompetent driving, physical deformity, or substance abuse. Embarrassment is often the main emotional reaction associated with discredit, for example as felt by the audience, let alone the speaker, at a conference where the latter stumbles and stutters at the podium. Such non-funny discredits must be accounted for.

Also, the experiential quality of some types of humour may well seem incomparable with that of others. Black humour, sexual innuendo, clever wit, crushing witty retorts, tickling --the appreciation of each seems subjectively unique.

In Chapter Six, I will address each of these questions, which will round out the proposed causal theory of amusement by providing the necessary conditions for this emotional mechanism. I will also consider the possibility of complex funny stimuli, which integrate numerous comic elements within a single given strip of activity.

(Figures 1-5)



