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Laughter Notebook

He sits at a table in a pub in Archway, Bob Marley on the stereo and a group of old timers sitting at the bar, crouched over pints and dusty newspapers. In the midst of the humdrum of conversation, a round of banter begins — light jokes told one after the other, tossed back and forth, resulting in flows of attentive listening and bursts of laughter. Jabs at stereotype, remarks suggesting gestation and urination, bits of callous good fun leading to pats on the back and words always readying to call forth the humorous, the comic, the witty, the lude.

Laughter among men —


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a shared language, a common lexicon, a social glue binding through temporal flows of power and vulnerability: each player shifting from telling to listening, taking control of the conversational rhythm through a masterful tongue and then allowing oneself to laugh at others, and further to become the subject of a joke.

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The laugh is both the product of a social dynamic, and a participant in its very formation: it signals a bond while charging that bond with complexity, placing the comic upon an array of contentious and volatile articulations. From the superiority of one to another (to laugh down at another), and the forced laugh that covers up and masks buried pain (to laugh in spite of oneself), to the shared recognition of unspoken yet agreed upon discriminations (to laugh collectively at the very tensions embedded within social norms), and the radicality heard within the corporeality of "busting a gut" (to laugh in the face of oppressive systems) – such a medley of scenarios underscores that laughter is rapturous precisely on the terrain where it should not be. To be out of place, to follow uncanny juxtapositions – the comedy derived from two dissimilar things coming into contact – to uproar in the face of another's tragedy, laughter is intrinsically and naturally disjunctive.

Comedy is built upon this understanding: the comedian knows how to be obscene – to introduce that which must remain off-stage, smuggling in the vulgar, placing the passions onto center-stage through a refined set of linguistic and gestural movements. The comedian is a magician of the abject, using it and being used by it, in a sorcery of the laugh: puncturing holes onto the codes of society, piercing the heart of the matter through a callisthenics of humor, the comedian knows how to be out of place with him or herself, to poke fun at the body, to perform one's own embarrassment. Such manoeuvres though in turn potently rely upon the social: for Freud, the mechanism of "joke-work" is bound to a reservoir and expenditure of psychic energy that balances itself through the telling, the sharing, and the ultimate production of laughter, which requires the other, the audience. The joke-teller seeks another to share his joke with, to display comic prowess while secretly experiencing a kind of cathartic release through the other's laugh, as psychic discharge. "In laughter… the determinants are given for an amount of psychical energy, used until then for charging, to be freely released."[1] Joke-work as a form of humor and comedy, winds its way in and among people, acting to charge and release, condense and punctuate, psychic energies and their related social behaviors. Such balancing performs against the notion of place, for the comic introduction of the obscene may charge and release the very bounded energies and languages that come to define place and its related etiquette.

Humor brings us to an unsteady geography: it both fictionalizes through antics of error while revealing all too plainly what is blatantly already apparent; it shuns convention through coy manoeuvres, trespassing while at the same time occupying an already familiar territory – the comic is a space defined by invasion, over-stepping bounds, smuggling in gestures, usurping control. What the laugh proposes, through a radical gregariousness or subtlety, is an affirmation of the power of the self, as embodied being, to enact attitudes of secret pleasure under full view of the social center. To my ear, the laugh is a form of public display that is both potently disruptive while being absolutely acceptable; it treads across the lines of social etiquette while formulating in its moment of quivering and trembling excess, routes towards mad expression. For every laugh plunges the self into the joys of itself precisely through being in and amongst others: as Freud's joke-work inaugurates and requires social situations, whether between friends or in front of a crowd, it thus underscores such sociality as a medium for individual transgression. Of course, social situations are precisely bounded by conventions of acceptable behavior, and this is exactly what humor and the comic thrive on; humorousness plays havoc with convention, social norms, the acceptable and the unacceptable, surfacing where it should not be, and in doing so, producing a form of renewed sociality – for the crowd takes pleasure in observing acts of transgression performed onto itself: the joker, the buffoon, the comedian, flirts with rudeness, allowing us to enjoy and partially accept the tragedy of our own seriousness.

The casual laugh the obscene laugh the sexy laugh the quiet laugh the flirtatious laugh the despondent laugh the nervous laugh the embarrassed laugh the unsure laugh the outrageous laugh the hidden laugh the hysterical laugh the joyous laugh the rebellious laugh the friendly laugh the professional laugh the guttural laugh the unstoppable laugh the illegal laugh the full-bodied laugh the terrible laugh the adorable laugh the beautiful laugh the possessed laugh

We all have our own laugh, as a potent syntax within the repertoire of behavior – we use our laugh, and at the same time we are used by it. We can't control it, it is the very promise of not being in control while remaining partially within bounds: the laugh is the force of a psychic energy that must spell out a forceful intent of the unconscious (to linger over the fine particles of the sonority of the laugh might reveal the phantasms of so many desires or memories…) while in the very same instant comfortably stitching us into a social mesh.

Historically, laughter's power and force was seen as degrading to individual purity, leading to early Christian decrees against its display: laughter in this regard polluted the body, signalling a slippage of personhood into a domain of folly. As Hélène Cixous states, "all laughter is allied with the monstrous."[2] The repressed laugh finds its way into medieval theater, defined by jesters whose follies

were given as entertainment, thereby allowing laughter to finds its place – a controlled presentation of comedy allowed a greater control of its potentiality to run amok, to catapult individuals into states of hysteria. The mad-cap, the zany, the foolish, the buffoon, leading to the "ship of fools" – madmen gathered on a raft and left to float out to sea, to be consumed by the greater forces of nature. Mikhail Bahktin identified the power of laughter and the comic by recognizing its political dimensions, most poignantly expressed in Carnival. "The inversions and suspensions permitted and legitimized by carnival represent substantive challenges to authority, therefore offering the possibility that comedy, invested with the spirit of festive and carnival traditions, may also be an expression of popular discontent."[3] The laugh, as an elemental force of comedy, is the primal expression of possible rebellion, a marker of the people in whose expressivity we might locate the future: as an excess, as expenditure, laughter promises change. Laughter in turn leads Georges Bataille into meditations on the religious and the sacred, and what he calls "nonknowledge" by supplying individual experience with the limits of understanding. "The strangest mystery to be found in laughter is attached to the fact that we rejoice in something that puts the equilibrium of life in danger."[4]

Henri Bergson's enlightening study of laughter further demarcates comedy as a social production aimed at balancing the rigidity and mechanization of life with its necessary fluidity and suppleness. Laughter for Bergson is a corrective targeting the gestures, movements, and formalities that capture social life in a net of repetition; what Bergson highlights is how the comic and laughter supply a vital elasticity to the formal expressions of bodies, bypassing the moral attributes in favor of surface effect, to shift the lines of the serious and the ridiculous.

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I would like to extend this understanding of the comic, the laugh, into a larger question of identity and social production and the forms they take. Such questioning of the comic finds curious articulation in much work related to sexual identity, from a particular feminist perspective. Feminism locates ways in which identity is constrained, locked into convention, and subject to power relations that often are without escape. This observation is often driven according to an examination of the dynamic of "the field of vision." As Jacqueline Rose proposes, in her *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, "we know that women are meant to look perfect, presenting a seamless image to the world so that the man, in that confrontation with difference, can avoid any apprehension of lack. The position of woman as fantasy therefore depends on a particular economy of vision."[5] Thus, sexuality in the field of vision is one determined, or over-determined, by fixed notions of how identity may perform or not: female sexuality occupies a space of the observed, while its male counterpart is constrained by its presupposed lack andhence desire for continual affirmation at the expense of the other. To look is a serious matter. The work of much feminist theory and writing could be understood to attempt not only to analyze existing relations and forces, but to also pry them open by identifying and charting instances or opportunities for play. The work of Judith Butler in particular, by focusing on such themes as "drag" reveals that the field of vision and the economy of identity has planted within it continual oscillations that make unsteady the lines that come to demarcate fantasies and expressions of selfhood.

In contrast to the examinations of the field of vision, Paul Carter concentrates on the auditive, stating that sound operates through an "erotic ambiguity," thereby suggesting that forms of representation, identity, and social relations gain in flexibility.[6] This is apparent when it comes to musical cultures. From punk to hip-hop, reggae to techno, musical genres are built through forms of cultural expressivity, partially through sound and partially through fashion, language, and class, to name a few. Music in this regard is bound up within a larger matrix that intensely activates forms of identification. Fashioning the self through this larger matrix seems to allow for a continual flirtation with change and the codifications appearing in relation to a given sound. Music reveals the radical degree to which sound is charged by "erotic ambiguity" that solidifies into coherent form only to mutate, evolve, and incorporate multiple features, continually modulating and transitioning into new genre and ultimately new matrices. Thus, musical identification is also a partial identification and ultimate participation in the built-in mutational and transitional materiality of sonic power while significantly enabling identity a form of adaptability and modification.

In relation to the visual-sexual thinking of Rose and others,[7] much post-feminist thought appropriates or finds a certain potentiality in the properties of sound or audition. For instance, Kristeva's formulations of the semiotic fasten onto corporeal attributes characterized by the rhythmic, the pulsional, and the fluid, which by nature lend identity routes towards flexibility and ambiguity – "musicalization pluralizes meanings" she writes, thereby transgressing language as a stabilizing "natural" order.[8] "Musicalization" equates with embodied drives and charges that equip the force of articulation with pulsional potential: bi-sexuality, polymorphous desire, carnivalesque masquerading hover on the threads of musicalization and imbue subjectivity with elements of freedom. Kristeva's formulations in turn are echoed in Luce Irigaray's search for an elemental transformation of sexual difference. Locating the feminine core according to a fluid mechanics in which flows, ruptures, immersions, and drifts disperse the arrested subject, Irigaray embraces the embodied peripheries in which identity may formulate a radical and productive ambiguity. Cultivating and sculpting such openings or fissures she relies upon a vocabulary infused with the temporal and the evanescent, the dynamic and the inchoate. Such working through of

language is echoed in Hélène Cixous' conception of "writing the body": "So for each text, another body. But in each the same vibration: the something in me that marks all my books is a reminder that my flesh signs the book, it is rhythm. Medium my body, rhythmic my writing."[9] To write the body is to conflate the conventional dichotomy of reason and feeling, rationality and the fevers of desire, through a primary vibration. Integrating the two supplies Cixous with potent flexibility in writing against the grain, literalizing on the page the promise of fluid identity.

The semiotic rushes, the embodied fluidities, the primary vibration, feminism's attempts to resituate and reposition the vocabulary and perception of identity, across gendered lines, play havoc with optical power. The production of identity and sexual being is thus in turn a drama of the sensory in which perception's immersion in games of reading, legibility, observation and apprehension turn into a politics of subjectivity. Henri Lefebvre in turn curiously parallels such thinking in his seminal *The Production of Space* when he makes claims against the perception of space as pure visibility.[10] For Lefebvre the production of space must be understood as integrating and involving the sheer tactility of embodied relations, which are most exemplified for Lefebvre in rhythm mapped out in his book *Rhythmanalysis*: "At no moment have the analysis of rhythms and the rhythmanalytical project lost sight of the body. Not the anatomical or functional body, but the body as polyrhythmic and eurhythmic… the living body has always been present."[11] In conjunction, we find alternative answers to the problematics of the optical in auditory space, characterised by Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter as boundless, without center, and determined by its own momentum.[12] The auditory intervenes onto the fixity of space, and its intrinsic politics as controlled and regulated by a transcendental optics, an ambiguous and temporal status. From sexual relations to identity, to spatial form and spatial politics, auditory thinking and materiality seems to supply the dynamic of relations and their play with elasticity.

The proposed liberation found in the auditory grants access to forms of identity and relations that may follow Rose's challenge to the "economy of vision." To take this into the sphere of orality, and the dynamics of speech, which can be underscored as the vital means through which individuals come to perform within a social space,[13] we might locate such freedom or elasticity in the laugh.

He stands in line at a cafeteria, in and amongst a crowd whose language he does not understand – there is no meaning to be found in the words overheard, it is all foreign to his ear. And yet, what he can follow, as a sort of overflow of audible gestures, are laughs: he focuses on their flow, their quality, their fleeting appearance. They are everywhere, appearing in between words, as intervals within the exchange of sentences, momentary hiccups on the surface of language, and yet they perform, as is most apparent within the foreign space of an unknown language, to contour conversation. From exchanges between friends to service persons to strangers, professionals and intimate neighbors, the laugh enables and is enabling of a certain mechanics of sociality that must be heard to labor against the stiffness of being with others. One laughs when there is nothing to say.

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I'd like to take up this material of feminism, echoing Paul Carter's "erotic ambiguity", as a way to hear the laugh as a potent slippage that escapes the body, via the mouth but also activating the entire body – from the diaphragm and the pit of the stomach through to slaps on the table and stomps of the feet, an entire embodied movement, which produces social connections while also alienating other bodies.

The laugh punctuates and extends the limits of the body through an audible semantics that must be heard as potently ambiguous. "In releasing laughter the joke liberates laughter's double purpose of threat and bond."[14] For the laugh also unsettles the territories of language, communicating and sharing through a surprising pleasure, or of countering structures as they bear down, seemingly without being spoken, onto individuality. The laugh enables the individual; it grants the body a potent means for transgressing the limits that are always surrounding, either in the form of social etiquette or something greater, as an unbearable circumstance against which the laugh may provide a sudden release or route.

The laugh is thus a project for the future, for it may be heard to disrupt the plane of both space and language, enthralling and annoying at one and the same time, those on the inside and those on the outside. It builds communities out of thin air, as a contagion spawning further laughter, like an infectious bug. It rivets the air with humor, pleasure, cruelty and potentiality, causes rifts that inevitably stage a play of desire and power.

For Cixous, the laugh is just such a potent proclamation on the field of desire and power. In her essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she traces the narratives leading to an understanding of hysteria, where the forces placed upon the female body by the examining male doctor leads to symptomatic spectacle: contorted expressions, locked limbs, gaping mouths, without speech, comes to be identified as expressions of repressed desire – woman is guilty of secret wishes. In this way, the body is called upon to perform for an audience of others, in this scene of hysteria, demarcated by a feminine body and a masculine gaze: to gaze upon the hysterical body, under medical scrutiny that performs its own unconscious wish of witnessing the feminine in all its power, in all its secret magic, in all its animality, as mythical force. Through psychoanalytic language, hysteria is secretly called upon to display feminine power cast as enthralling and threatening, supernatural and demonic.

Within such a scene, Cixous locates a potentiality, in which the performance the female body is called upon to

enact is in turn a stage of subversion, a stage of liberation: the hysteric above all disrupts the familial bonds, piercing the very relationships that keep woman in a proper place: the hysteric, within the scene of pathology, explodes the very language placed upon it under the momentum of science and desire. The hysteric plays havoc by being a spectacle – by displaying both that which is looked for and that which must as well remain out of view. Such havoc finds expression through words, but also through the body, in which an embodied articulation – of ticks and squirms, of hardened limbs and convulsed gyrations – prolongs the scene. As part of this vocabulary of uncertain passions, the laugh enters the scene, and must be heard, as Cixous hears it, as both an obstacle and an eruption. The laugh unsettles diagnosis, by turning back onto the psychoanalytic gaze an uncertain semantic – for the laugh performs a certain agency, giving voice to an element of madness that is in turn difficult to read, for it signals the potentiality of empowerment (that the scene is being directed not by the analyst, but by the other, the woman on the couch…); thus, the laugh gives the hysteric a weapon, a mask, a sound that can be heard to resist and transgress the arresting manoeuvres of language as it names.

I'd like to shift from Cixous' laugh, as a site of feminine resistance, and to place this "erotic ambiguity" onto the male body; to explore the comic and the resulting laugh as a masculine spectacle, to speculate on male identity as a social production. To do so, I take up the clown as a performer; as a kind of mythic player in a history of masculinity, and a relation to power. For the clown arises precisely in relation to the King's Court, as a form of spectacle that in turn is hard to fix.

From early jesters and harlequins, to jugglers, tumblers, and acrobats, pantomime to Auguste players and modern day tramps, hobos, and buffoons, the clown has featured throughout the ages, as a male figure poised between order and chaos. For the clown performs on this border, where "the inversion of the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, and the mad with the sane"[15] can coexist. It is this that I want to linger over, to locate a certain masculine instant of slippage, in which the patriarchal gaze is turned in on itself, and where the arresting power of language is silenced in favor of mimicry, miming, and the display of an errant malehood. For the clown by nature is made to appear as both an antithesis to the Master, while functioning as its alter-ego – part-idiot, part-jester, part-buffoon, the clown is an exaggerated figure, occupying a liminal zone, a kind of no-man's land where morality is allowed to entertain folly, power its own vanity, and mastery forms of disgrace.

With painted face, baggy or bright clothing, spiked hair or pointed cap, crumpled looks, unshaven or harlequin features, the clown takes on many forms: from early court jesters to the comic servants of the Commedia del Arte of the 16th century, to Kemp, Armin and the Shakespearian clowns to the Auguste clown of the early circus (which introduced the red nose), through to the circus tramps and hobos, finding expression in the likes of Chaplin, whose features give display to a masculinity trod upon by society, cast out, misshapen, and beat up. Tripped over, tripping over, unable to stand upright, disproportionate, outcast and whimsical, the clown makes us laugh. He is laughter incarnate, with either a permanently painted smile or a saddened expression, that extends and expands facial features, rising up into bright red hair spiked with hilarity, jumpsuits of polka-dots, oversized shoes, flowers pinned to lapels that squirt water, or dusty and broken, despair incarnate who gets tossed on the rhythms of society, a character that oscillates between idiocy and mischievousness, making fun or failing to act properly. He feigns stupidity while being stupid all the same.

The legacy of the clown may be seen as a history of a male hysteria, that is both enacted and scripted, contrived and exaggerated, while bordering on the criminal: that is, the clown may lend to witnessing in what way male identity locates routes toward managing and negotiating its own set of social and psychological structures, by demarcating an arena for a kind of panic – the clown signals both a space for other expressions, outside of mastery and on the side of error, while always already getting carried away with itself through zany acrobats, ludicrous comedy, satire and farce, and at times, absolute evil (as one example, we might think of the character of the Joker in the stories of Batman).[16] Does clowning embody a performance of male identity other to the proper? Does it give access to a masculinity in search of another economy of desire? To return to Rose, and her positioning the male in the role of lack, of being without, does the clown signal an attempt to make a route out of such a role, to make ambiguous a relation to power so as to undo the lines drawn around its body?

Roger Caillois likens the function of the clown to the "parody of the Gods" as found in indigenous cultures of North America, proposing that such performance grants reprieve (as in Carnival) to the strictures of conventional norms. Just by its mere presence, the clown releases, like Freud's joke-work, the psychic energies bound up within the proper – he is literally, totally hysterical. This relies upon for Caillois a relation to "mimicry" in which the "parody" is "not a springboard toward vertigo, but a precaution against it."[17] In contrast though, I'd propose that the parody enacted by the clown is not entirely one of the Gods, but also, and importantly, of the conventions of male identity (which in itself may take its cues from notions of Godhood). Like the female hysteric, under the spectacle of psychoanalysis, of medicine and science, the clown is a scapegoat – a vehicle for the movements of the unconscious, and an economy that requires its own unravelling within the space it occupies. It mimics malehood by explicitly giving embodied articulation to all that it attempts to repress, and turning this into public spectacle.[18]

While feminism locates women's laughter as a form

of agency, as the amplification of an interior slipping past the arresting force of patriarchy, clowning is a staged form of erred masculinity that comes to embody the laugh: the clown literally takes on the laugh through an entire arsenal of clothing, props, movements, gestures and antics that reveal, or show, masculinity as erring, blundering, slipping, unable to perform smoothly or masterfully.

To further my thinking on clowning, I'd like to end with some thoughts on the rodeo clown, whose antics are also a form of clowning that further attempt to divert a bounding bull from trampling a fallen rider. Developed through a combination of circus and Wild West shows between the late 1800s and World War I (the first recorded rodeo was in Prescott, Arizona on July 4th, 1864[19]), rodeos combine the skill of horse riding, cattle roping, bull riding, and entertainment, and evolved from early competitions between cowboys during round-ups of livestock. Early rodeo clowns (appearing widely by 1915) were skilled cowboys who either retired from competing or were more excited to do tricks with their skills, turning the heroics of competition into forms of clowning and entertainment. Yet clowning serves a dual role: to entertain the crowd during rodeo competition while also protecting bull riders. In this regard, the rodeo clown must be seen in contrast to the circus clown, for the rodeo clown puts his body in line with danger. The established circus routine known as Billy Buttons, created by Philip Astley in the first circuses in England in 1768, based on the figure of a tailor attempting to ride a horse but failing miserably to even sit astride, finds bolder display with the rodeo clown. His clowning runs the risk of injury and death, all of which greatly adds to the theatrical energies of his performance. "Clowning is based on violation of the logical and use of the extreme"[20] by not only teasing the borders of social convention, but in the case of the rodeo clown, by making fun of one's own confrontation with fear and danger:

Joe Orr came out on a bull named Destiny at Salt Lake City. Joe joined the birds on the third jump. Destiny whirled fast and hooked Joe before he could roll. Then the bull backed up for the BIG THING, but Jimmy Nesbitt came out of the dust and slapped that bull square in the face. Jimmy was clowning the show and while I've watched Jimmy fight bulls all over the country he outdid himself at Salt Lake. Jimmy never used a cape, but he saved the lives of seven boys with absolute disregard for his own life. Four times death missed Jimmy by an inch, and the crowds went crazy.[21]

The rodeo clown, as a performer within this arena of masculinity, of bulls and balls, competition and mastery, is a buffoon whose purpose is to divert and distract, to lead a bull into a dead end, whilst the rider finds safety. I am tempted to conceive of the bull itself not only as a pure energy of nature, but as the governing force through which the symbolic coding of the ring is enacted; the bull is a kind of absolute male force against which the cowboy and the clown both grapple, locating their masculinity through a codified and established hierarchy of varying skills enacted within the ring, setting the balls of the bull against the balls of the performers. In this sense, the bull is the source from which the language of the ring is made. All props, gestures, and movements come to circulate around his presence – the cowboy and the clown are both shaped by his raw presence; they are halves to a single entity we might identify as the masculine subject – a subject split according to notions of mastery and mishap, grace and buffoonery, a single performance by which masculinity demonstrates virility while showing another side, that of the trickster. On the one hand, the rider straddles the bull, harnesses it and attempts to wield it for itself, to show it who's boss, while on the other, the clown tricks it, distracts it, leading it away from its target until it finally gives up or loses interest. Within this arena, the spectacle may offer the crowd a chance to witness and come to know masculinity as both masterful and foolish, placing the male body on a spectrum of ongoing display: here, masculinity is the object of attention, yet an object in confrontation with a system of power, of dynamics, where laughter grants affirmation to the man in painted face:

When I was offered pay for clowning I was convinced that I could be funny, and with the help of a wig and makeup to hide behind, my career (as Wilbur the clown) was born. My first act included a pig and a bottle and was not too funny, but I discovered a brand new thing: there is a kind of magic that takes place between an audience and a performer. A relationship begins and you have but one desire – to please them and hear their response. Nothing else seems to be as important as the result of this communication. It's thrilling, rewarding, and very addictive. I've come to realize there is no point of saturation and a performer can never really get enough.[22]

Part of these reactions though must be appreciated in relation to the male body, for what the rider and the clown offer is a Jekyll and Hyde mythology enacted within an arena that may hark back to the Coliseum, where man's virility was placed on center stage, in and amongst beasts and slaves, gladiators and soldiers, as expressions of power. And through to bullfighting, where male bodies are made spectacle for pleasure and entertainment that come to express a deeper mythological narrative whereby good and evil, skill and buffoonery, come to wrestle, allowing society to witness the roles male identity is called upon to perform.

In the pub, the beaming of car lights and traffic signals ricocheting into the soft interior: beer on tap, thumping jazz in the background, the ebb and flow of social life setting pace to conversation and the tangents of perception. From single on-lookers occupying lonely seats to intimate couples and the team of gatherers beside him who orchestrate their drinks amid eruptions of laughter. Bois-

terousness reigns and he attempts to eavesdrop in, to gauge the source and trigger of such frenzied laughter, but is unable to locate it, to follow the drift of where things begin and where they end; it remains out of earshot. Such a spatial relation reveals the degree to which humor is generative of social cohesion. To share in the momentum of laughter is to participate in a live event, that of recognizing commonality: that we may share. From the semantic and connotative aspects of language, and the ever slippery field of the comic – pun, innuendo, suggestiveness, etc. – to the spatiality of the humorous, for to tell jokes, share in joyousness, and the nuance of story telling is to demarcate a space of sharing. Yet such sharing in turn defines limits, for the laughter bubbling up and filling the pub, with punctuated excess, leaves him without access: that is, it pulls him in and at the same time leaves him without.

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Laughter is unique to the forces of self-presence, ennobling individuality with degrees of rebelliousness, self-indulgence, joy and the raptures of letting oneself go. It conveys self-presence by being outlandish in the face of convention, withstanding the dynamics of staying in place, for the laugh is pure excess, unabashed. It is also a tiny rivet piecing together relations: from the smile to the giggle, the small laugh to the boisterous one, the casual guffaw to the uncontrollable chuckle, the laugh modulates, sculpts, and delicately choreographs relationships.

What I'm after is the laugh as it comes to embody or undo the demarcations of identity, and how it performs in and against the motions of gender. Inspired by feminist probings, which hears the laugh as a signal of change or freedom, a kind of reversal of the prescriptive and symptomatic as laid down by the master and the law of the land, my obsession is with the male laugh – to hear in it the movements of identity as it brushes against its own undoing, against its own prescribed set of proper attitudes: the male laugh must be heard as not so much the signal of change or freedom, but a last escape on the road to mastery. For it announces, through both a pleasure of embodied joy and the pain of self-loathing, a partial distrust or uncertainty as to the values of the proper. As Cixous and others demonstrate, the laugh is a serious matter, a trace of the social performance at work that binds individuals to certain roles. While laughter is also a performance of power – to demonstrate one's social superiority by laughing at another's ignorance... – it nonetheless, as Bataille suggests, leads us to an edge of knowledge: how often the laugh turns back on us, fraying, as Cixous' laugh does, the lines that keep power in place.

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1 Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 144.

2 Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 33.

3 Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 34.

4 Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 144.

5 Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 232.

6 Paul Carter, *Ambiguous Traces, Mishearing, and Auditory Space* in *Hearing Cultures*, ed. Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

7 As Griselda Pollock states in her seminal *Vision and Difference*, "Conventional feminist theorization has stressed the possessive look of the presumed masculine spectator *at* the objectified female form." (Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988, p. 134.) Pollock's use of the dynamic at work in what she refers to as "regimes of representation," from the paintings of Dante Rossetti to Hollywood cinema, historically signify various stages and levels of gender relations negotiating their own boundaries and social accept-ability. That vision and visuality has served to probe and question the degrees of these relations is revealing and curious. See also the work of Laura Mulvey, whom Pollock further quotes in the above article.

8 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 65.

9 Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 53.

10 Lefebvre states: "Wherever there is illusion, the optical and visual world plays an integral and integrative, active and passive, part in it. It fetishizes abstraction and imposes it as the norm." (Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 97.

11 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis* (London: Continuum,), p. 67.

12 Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, *Acoustic Space* in *Explorations in Communication*, ed. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).

13 This runs the risk of overlooking those who live with speech impediments, the deaf, the mute, etc., by forgetting that such individuals in turn equally perform in social arenas.

14 Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 281.

15 Andrew Stott, *Comedy*, p. 51

16 The clown is always bordering on criminality and demonic action, lending to the almost mythical status of the clown as sinister. The clown easily tips into the monstrous.

17 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 141.

18 As Cixous points out, the circus has its counterpart in cinema. With cinema the spectacle of clowning is given a new stage. Illuminated by the flickering of cinematic pleasures – which as Hugo Munsterberg pointed out early on is akin to the very dynamics of consciousness: cinema and consciousness mirror one another. In this sense, cinema is a psychic machinery lending significance to the power plays of social norms and their other. The clown finds a new place for itself in cinema. With the likes of Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy, and Jacques Tati, formulations of male clowning finds an increased elaboration.

19 Gail Hughbanks Woerner, *Fearless Funnymen: The History of The Rodeo Clown (Austin: Eakin Press, 1993)*, p. xi.

20 Jeanne Joy Hartnagle-Taylor, Greasepaint Matadors: *The Unsung Heroes of Rodeo* (Loveland, CO: Alpine Publications, 1993), p. 12.

21 Gail Hughbanks Woerner, *Fearless Funnymen*, p. 111.

22 Gail Hughbanks Woerner, *Fearless Funnymen*, p. 68.