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## HUMOUR, SUBLIMATION AND THE POLITICS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** This article approaches the existing relationships, in the works of Freud, between the metapsychology of humour and the sublimation process, understood not only as the creation of artistic or scientific works, but as the production of a singular style of existence. It demonstrates how the mechanism of de-idealization, condition of possibility of the humour speech, implies the necessary grief work for the transformation of narcissistic identifications with the first objects of satisfaction into sublimatory identifications. Therefore, the tyrannical superego is deposed, becoming a laughable caricature of the omnipotent longings of the narcissistic subject and revealing its aspect of a protector and facilitator of creativity. It thereby approaches the figure of the orphan to the figure of the humourist, paradigm of the creator and, supported by the Bakhtinian reading of ‘grotesque realism’ (an aesthetic category with which humour is associated), and points out that regarding the experience of helplessness of the modern man, humour is the highest expression of the joy of living.

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### *The work of de-idealization*

It is reasonable to be intrigued by the motivations that led a thinker of Freud’s stature to delve into a topic as unorthodox as humour. Moreover, Freud does not do so sporadically or intermittently. It could even be said that the subject of humour is pervasive throughout his body of work, from beginning to end. Examples range from his interest in the Jewish jokes he collected – and which he shared with Fliess – during the development period of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), to the huge effort he took to write the book *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious* (1905c), culminating in the publication of the short and unconventional essay ‘Humour’ (1927) already in his intellectual maturity – not to mention the

constant presence of humour in his life and in his writing style, examples of which are innumerable (cf. Gay, 1989, cf. Kupermann & Slavutsky, 2005).

The analysis of the context in which Freud returns to the theme, during the Tenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis in Innsbruck, is crucial for us to understand what is at stake in the importance given to the question of humour as well as its conceptual statute. The essay was originally written as the opening conference of the Congress, but since Freud could not present it due to health problems, his daughter Anna replaced him. Freud had been suffering for four years from palate cancer, which often prevented him from speaking and which fuelled his belief that he would soon die. It is not difficult to imagine the impact of this imminent loss on the psychoanalytic community.

One option of methodological interest to try to understand Freud's choice of humour as a subject matter at the time is the comparison with the ideas expressed in what could be considered his most influential essay, also published in 1927, 'The Future of an Illusion', which was just being completed. The argument developed here is based on the conceptual pair of helplessness-idealization: the religious illusion would be an attempt – through the childlike mechanism of narcissistic idealization – to escape the intensity of the anxieties that tend to afflict the human species based on its state of intrinsic helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*), phylogenetically inherited from the murder of the primal horde's father and reinterpreted throughout the life of each individual, which could be magnified in certain cultural contexts. The idealization would be responsible for creating the illusion of an omnipotent deity who could offer us protection, or a totalitarian *Weltanschauung* (worldview) that would give us an explanation of life's origin and its end, as well as to establish the moral criteria of good behaviour, comforting us and minimizing the impact of conflicts and of existential uncertainties (Freud, 1927d, 1933a [1932]).

The analogy with the framework of the psychoanalytic movement is abundantly clear: the death of the 'father' of psychoanalysis could lead, reactively, to the sacralization of the man and his words, which was wholly inconsistent with Freud's ethical principles or with his notion of psychoanalysis' rightful place in society. Suffice to remember that a year earlier Freud had published 'The Question of Lay Analysis' (1926e), trying to prevent psychoanalysis from being incorporated into the medical body of knowledge, and to preclude the psychoanalyst's training from being bureaucratically reduced to satisfying predetermined steps in order to obtain a title aimed at securing professional comfort (which obviously does not imply he was successful in his

endeavour). It was now a matter of discrediting the tendency of turning it into a religion. In this sense, humour and its *work of de-idealization* emerged as a most effective tool for this purpose. Its iconoclastic potential, in one fell swoop, strikes the over-technical arrogance – which intends to medicate the soul’s suffering – as well as the ban on free thinking imposed by religious idealization.

Following this hypothesis, Freud would now fully identify with the character chosen to illustrate the comic phenomenon, which surfaces first in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905c: 229), reappearing in the essay ‘Humour’ (1927d: 161): the criminal that is sentenced to death. In the joke, it is Monday, and upon the arrival of the executioners that will lead him to the gallows, the criminal remarks: ‘Well, the week’s beginning nicely.’ The act of telling a joke at the brink of the extinction of the self is paradigmatic and summarizes the main characteristics, as well as the paradoxes and even impasses that humour forces upon the psychoanalytic theory.

The joke also finds a correlation to a subsequent episode in Freud’s biography. In 1938, during the German occupation, just before heading out of Vienna to be exiled in London, Nazi authorities forced Freud to sign a statement declaring that he had not been subjected to mistreatment. He added, in his own handwriting: ‘I can most highly recommend the Gestapo to everyone’ (quoted by Gay, 1989: 567). Peter Gay, in analyzing the event in his renowned essay *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (1989) speculates, perplexed, on the risks Freud took in this situation, raising the possibility of an unconscious attempt to die on Austrian soil. Years later he revises this position, asking whether the act could have been an evidence of his persistent vitality, expressed by his irrepressible sense of humour, asserting the unsolvable *ambiguity* that exists behind every joke (Gay, 1990).

In fact, how is it conceivable to derive humour from the condition of greatest helplessness and distress one can endure, i.e., being confronted by death? Freud argues that, on the one hand, humour has the purpose of acting as an ‘illusion’ and is openly defensive. Simultaneously, it seems clear that it distances itself from psychopathological formations, such as perversion or psychosis (including therein any mania), since there isn’t, in fact, rejection or denial of the painful reality that is anticipated. Therefore, if humour is ‘the triumph of narcissism’, the ‘victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability’ (Freud, 1927d: 162), it is also the supreme embodiment of de-centralization and narcissistic detachment. A decisive concept

suggests a way to study the matter in depth: there is an ‘intention’ (*Absicht*) in the witticism to which it owes its ‘high and ennobling’ character, its ‘dignity’. After all, ‘humour is not resigned; it is rebellious (*trotzig*)’ (Freud, 1927d: 163, 1927/1972: 385). To explore what is expressed in this rebelliousness (or defiance, since the German term *trotzig* can be translated as ‘defiant’) will clarify the purpose of the humourist’s apparently solitary politics.

### *Humour’s ‘solitary’ politics*

The book on *Witz – Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905c) – sits at the head of Freud’s cultural writings and may be considered the first Freudian essay to deal in-depth with socio-cultural concepts. In chapter five, ‘The purpose of jokes - Jokes as a social process’ we find, by researching the role of the bystander in a joke’s degree of success, the development of veritable politics for humorous processes.

In it, Freud calls into question the apparently irresistible urge one has to tell a joke heard a moment earlier (or to make up a joke, in the case of a comedian). ‘No one can be content with having made a joke for himself alone’ he says. The comedic cycle is only complete when the joke is shared with another (Freud, 1905c: 143). For this reason, ‘three people’ are involved in the structure of the witticism: the ‘first person’, or the announcer of the joke; the ‘second person’, or the target at whom the sexual and/or aggressive drives that motivate the joke are aimed at – often the blonde woman, the politician, the homosexual, etc.; and finally, the ‘third person’, or the bystander, to whom the joke is told. In paraphrasing Bergson in his renowned essay *Laughter* (1899/1987), Lacan states that to be able to laugh at a joke, you must be part of the ‘flock’ (Lacan, 1957-58/1999: 124).

In an attempt to clarify the role of the bystander, or the ‘third person’, in the structure of the witticism, Freud raises a few hypotheses: for the bystander’s sake, we must relive the surprise we experienced when first hearing the joke, which allows us to enjoy it once again; the highly contagious nature of laughter - we laugh as a reflex of another person’s laughter, thus sustaining the joke’s effect; and finally, the bystander enables the transgression that is embedded in the temporary release of a repressed feeling, and this release is produced by the joke. Without this consent, the humorous effect would turn into an embarrassment caused by the manifestation of the comedian’s drive satisfaction, slipping into the offensive realm of obscenity.

But if witticism is indeed a social process, this does not imply that its role is restricted to reinforcing the identity ties established in a certain ‘flock’, using the ‘second person’ – the target – as a scapegoat for all aggression, according to the pattern found in ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’ (Freud, 1921c). In fact, the act of telling a joke often has the purpose of exposing current rigidities and hypocrisies, promoting a deterritorialization in the established styles of existence, clearing the way for fresh thinking and creating ways of sociability so far unheard of.

We do not lack examples of this, but just to illustrate, let us recall the epigram Freud found in a book of jokes (1905c: 110): ‘A wife is like an umbrella; sooner or later one takes a cab.’ One could think it makes the Victorian ‘double standards’ prevailing in the late nineteenth century more admissible – which, of course, was in the interest of men (cf. Freud, 1908d). At the same time, however, it recognizes the admission of a sexual malaise experienced by a whole generation, and the indications of the questioning (including psychoanalytical) that led to sexual behaviour changes established throughout the twentieth century.

As a result, we note that the discussion surrounding the role of the ‘third person’ in the structure of the joke implies, in effect, the recognition of the politics inherent to the *Witz*, not to be confused with the existence of jokes with a political content. It is to its political inclination that we owe the enthusiasm that drives us to disseminate the ‘good news’ – and the originality that goes with a funny joke is, as we saw, one of the essential elements of its power of affection. Accordingly, it is conceivable that the nonsense present in the witticism causes a short circuit in the thought process that prompts a creative gesture and the establishment of novel methods of social bonding, which, however, is even more evident in the humoristic phenomenon. Paradoxically, in his first approach to the problem, Freud (1905c) imagines that, unlike the comedian, the humourist could do without the audience to extract entertainment from his art, which signals a state of loneliness that seems to coexist, to a greater or lesser degree, with the capability for humour.

If we think of the initiation rite of a stand-up comedian, in which the candidate faces an initially hostile audience, taking on the arduous task of seducing it with the sole help of a microphone and the sharp-wittedness of his/her words, the image of an extreme and threatening solitude makes itself evident - which reminds us of the joke, appreciated by Freud, about a criminal on his way to execution. But wouldn’t this solitude be precisely the cause of the

disobedience and the ‘high and ennobling’ character typical of the humoristic phenomenon? And isn’t there a solitary dimension in the work advanced by any *Witz*?

In fact, considering the disturbing ability of the *status quo* that is inherent in the politics of witticism in general, and of humour in particular, we understand that, to apply this ability, one needs a certain amount of unfamiliarity in relation to his/her own environment, which would foster solitude. The ability to laugh at oneself, which defines humour, indicates not only a separation from the self but also from the regulating ideals of social life. Thus, if every creative act suggests solitude, in humour, this aspect is emphasized due to the de-idealization process that defines it. But where does the humourist find the strength to ‘rebel’, withstanding the pressure from culturally shared ideals and paying the price of solitude?

The rise of the theory of narcissism and the second topic in the works of Freud (1914c, 1923b) made it possible to have an alternative understanding of the concept of humour as an asocial process. If, in the context of the book’s investigations into jokes, there was already the hypothesis that, in humour, the individual deals with himself as an adult would deal with the seemingly hopeless suffering of a child, from the 1920s onward, one could offer a metapsychological outline for this process. The ego super-invests the superego, and ‘to the superego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial’ (Freud, 1927: 164). And based on this new frugal setting, the superego is successful in enunciating kind words of comfort to the intimidated ego, which can be translated as follows: ‘Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children - just worth making a jest about!’ (1927: 166). This is what allows Freud to assert that ‘*humour would be the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego*’ (1927: 165, author’s highlights), while the joke would be the contribution made to the comic through the unconscious (Freud, 1905c).

For ears familiar with the psychoanalytic phraseology, it is surprising to see the description of an aspect of the superego that, instead of being sadistic and tyrannical, shows itself as benevolent and reassuring. The comedic phenomenon thus raises one of the greatest enigmas of Freud’s late works, forcing him (1927: 166) to confess, ‘we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego’. In fact, if the melancholy process also includes the annulment of the ego in favour of the superego, what would allow that, in humour, the fate of the cathexis in the instance inherited from the father complex be so different from the mortification distinctive of melancholy?

The operation that admits this type of ego cathexis of the superego, dealing with itself and its bystander as a protective adult would deal with a child, is characterized by the fact that the individual ‘identifies him/herself *to some extent* with the father’ (*‘gewissermaßen in die Vateridentifizierung gebe’* in the original German version, our highlight. Freud, 1972: 386). ‘To some extent’ indicates an identifying mode in which one can expand on the mourning of an object that once was essential, acknowledging orphanhood by the same father, unlike the narcissistic identification that, through the perpetuation of the shadow of an idealized object, fosters the condition of melancholy (as well as masochism) characterized by the individual’s weakening.

### *Sublimation, humour and orphanhood*

It is through the contrast between humorous activity and melancholic mortification that it becomes possible to resume the argument that humour’s metapsychology is portrayed in Freud’s works as the paradigm of the creative process of sublimation (cf. Kupermann, 2003). We should, however, underline a curiosity, in methodological terms, before proceeding with the argument.

A coherent theory of sublimation seems to consist of a gap in the psychoanalytic theory. Joel Birman (1997) notes that the understanding of sublimation persisted for a long time, in a practical state, for demonstration or comparison with some other concept. Humour, in turn, deserved, throughout the history of psychoanalysis, a markedly marginal position. Ernest Jones (1989) dared to assert, in the 1950s, that Freud’s book on jokes was, up to that point, the least studied by psychoanalysts. This picture began to change with the resumption of the *Witz* theme taken up by Lacan in his seminar ‘The Formations of the Unconscious’, written in 1957-58, but only published in France in 1998 (cf. Lacan, 1957-58/1999). Thus, it was precisely the proximity between two categories that were influenced by psychoanalytic tradition – sublimation and humour – that magnified the importance of each other.

However, it is reasonable to suppose that the depreciation of the problems related to humour in psychoanalysis are a reflection of the theoretical weakness through which sublimation was addressed, and that the elucidation of enigmas suggested by humour’s metapsychology would tend to attract attention to the problem of sublimation and its paradoxes, especially those

involving a simultaneous occurrence, in the sublimation process, of a dimension that is illusionary and creative, aggressive and tender, painful and joyful.

There are indeed important convergence points between sublimation and humour: both involve processes that are at the borderline between the defence against anxiety resulting from the excesses of the drive and the creative movement; both originate from childhood play; both indicate the subject's assertiveness and experiences of pleasure and joy despite the recognition of limits imposed on any omnipotent triumph; and, finally, both produce a type of social bond based not on the repression of the drive, but on affective sharing.

An example of a humour formulation can be used to illustrate our argument. Brazilian cartoonist Aroeira drew a cartoon on the eve of Pope John Paul II's death in April 2005, following a long period of suffering due to a disease. A few days earlier, the Pope showcased a scene that earned the headlines of the main media outlets and is probably vivid in the reader's memory. While attempting to speak at the Vatican's balcony, the Pontiff was unable to pronounce any words, his face expressing the agony caused by the incident. The cartoon, inspired by the famous photo of the Pope's contorted face, suggested the wording of the undelivered speech, acquiring a prophetic aura: 'I will be brief.' It was obviously censored.

If we adopt, in a simplified manner, the structure of witticism outlined by Freud, we find the humourist as the 'first person' and the Pope as the 'second person', the target of a disrespectful hostility. Considering the absolute reverence that is due to the Pope's image (and not only among Christians), it is understandable that the general public, the 'third person', especially in the largest Catholic country in the world, would see the cartoon with indignation, interpreting its content as a lack of respect for its religious leader. However, a more careful reading would indicate another possibility.

In the cartoon there is a blend of the elements that make up the circuit of the *Witz*, which makes it resemble humour more closely than a simple 'cathartic' joke. Its aim is not only the Pope, as a first glance might suggest, but everyone who was tormented by his suffering and the prospect of his death. In this sense, the public is involved in the cartoon as a recipient, but also as a target, as the 'third person' and as the 'second person' in the joke. Finally, the humourist occupies the three positions simultaneously: as the creator of the witticism, he is the 'first person', and as someone who is troubled by the Pope's suffering, he is the target of his own cartoon, in the exact same way as his audience. The cartoonist would thus be laughing at himself,



a process that is typical of the most authentic form of humour. And what could produce laughter in this situation? The proof, brought about by the sharp and aggressive style of black humour, of the orphanhood that characterizes our modern condition.

It is clear, therefore, that the humourist is closer to an anti-hero than to an indestructible hero - his success isn't equivalent to the narcissistic triumph of beautiful women, renowned criminals, egocentric children or even of felines, mentioned by Freud (1914c), along with the humourist, as examples of unattainable entities; and the explanation of how one can laugh at his/her own orphanhood will demonstrate how humour is portrayed in metapsychology, as a paradigm of the creative process of sublimation.

There is a connection that is commonly established between sublimation and desexualization. In fact, in his first study of the issue, still in the context of the first topic and the pre-eminence of the repressive hypothesis, Freud (1908d) suggests that sublimation is a deviation of the drive's original target – sexual satisfaction – for socially accepted purposes, particularly scientific and artistic production. However, the characteristics involved in the artistic creative process rapidly imposed certain conundrums that forced him to revise this initial idea (cf. Freud, 1908e [1907]; 1910c), causing a weakening of the division established between sublimation and eroticism, which was only possible with the introduction of the narcissistic concepts and the death drive, and the second topic.

In his essay 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (Freud, 1914) there is a clue, in the distinction proposed between sublimation and idealization, to a more comprehensive understanding required by the sublimation concept in Freud's works. While idealization deals with the object, and maintains a relation with the repression process, sublimation would be free from repressive forces, understood thereby as a process that concerns the object-libido. However, in this moment of Freudian conceptualization, there is still the understanding that, in this process, the libido is desexualized.

Later, with the concepts in 'The Ego and the Id' (1923b), the enigmatic meaning of the desexualization involved in the sublimation process is clarified. Sublimation is described as a process in which, initially, the individual experiences a separation from objects, which so far earned the attention of the 'object-libido' (or sexual libido), and which therefore implies a *desexualization*, or the deactivated sexual libido centred on the ego and becoming the 'ego-libido' or 'narcissistic libido'. But this libido introversion – by means of an unclear mechanism

that can only be called the work of mourning – is also the condition for the individual to create new objects of his/her attention that will acquire social status, transforming the ego-libido once again into sexual libido, in other words, producing a *sexualization*. This is what we find in Freud's words:

The transformation of object-libido into narcissistic libido, which thus takes place, obviously implies an abandonment of sexual aims, a desexualization – a kind of sublimation, therefore. Indeed, the question arises, and deserves careful consideration, whether ... all sublimation does not take place through the mediation of the ego, which begins by changing sexual object-libido into narcissistic libido and then, perhaps, goes on to give it another aim (1923b: 30).

In this sense, sublimation, on the one hand, points to the possibility of the work of mourning, and on the other, to the metonymic movement of desire, constituting both a 'modification of the aim' as well as a 'change of the object' of the drive (cf. Freud, 1933a [1932]: 97).

However, it is understood that the sublimation process, once interrupted, may lead to other reversals. The desexualized libido undergoes a risky deactivation of drives, leading to the presence, in the ego, of the deactivated death drive, which will be used for the necessarily aggressive movement of creating new objects of sexual cathexis. However, if this creation proves unfeasible, due to the impossibility of carrying out the work of mourning – in light of the traumatized individual's option to idealize the lost object - the death drive, instead of contributing to the movement of deterritorialization necessary to the sublimation processes, reinforces the super-ego, increasing its sadistic and mortal rage. 'But since the ego's work of sublimation results in a defusion of the instincts and a liberation of the aggressive instincts in the super-ego, its struggle against the libido exposes it to the danger of maltreatment and death' (1923b: 56). It is only in this sense that the so-called desexualization characteristic of the sublimation process transforms into death narcissism, typical of melancholia.

The work of de-idealization in humour is, therefore, opposite to the increase in the superego's deadly potential resulting from the idealization of the object, offering itself effectively as a paradigm for the sublimation process. The shift promoted by the witticism from predictable paralyzing despair to creative development can be illustrated by the popular saying: *it*

would be tragic ... if it weren't funny. And humour seems to be, in fact, the quintessence of the tragicomic spirit that characterizes the modern condition. Orphans of the omnipotent father of the primal horde, of the King and, finally, of God – according to German romantic writer Jean-Paul Richter, later cited by Nietzsche –, we are left with the freedom to invest the ideals that we desire, sharing them among our 'fellow-unbelievers', leaving Heaven 'to the angels and the sparrows' (Heine quoted by Freud, 1927c: 50).

Therefore, as illustrated by the cartoon, the creative process of sublimation implies the possibility of accepting the orphanhood imposed by the loss of the protective father figure. The result of the work of mourning that takes place in sublimation is, therefore, the identification 'to some extent' with the father, in the sense that the creation of ideals to be shared among orphans includes the 'stimulation' of the instance of the 'ideal of the ego', resulting from the father complex. Where the mourning and the necessary distancing from the father imago are not possible, we find the inhibitions to the creative act – as in the example of Leonardo da Vinci, who was unable to complete his works (cf. Freud, 1910c) – and of moral and female masochism (Freud, 1924c).

In fact, according to several authors (cf. Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1992; cf. Lacan, 1938/1997) it is the ideal of the ego, and not the superego, which participates in the sublimation processes (and therefore, in humour), the confusion being credited to the fact that the two instances are undistinguishable in Freud's works. But the paradox remains: if the ideal of the ego stimulates, or even 'demands' sublimation, the creative processes seem to preserve their independence in relation to it (Freud, 1914c). There would therefore be one last ingredient that would operate as a driving force of the wit and the transgression characteristic of the creative process of sublimation.

### *Proof positive*

For the romantic ideals, the caricature had acquired a privileged status due to the fact that, by exploiting the exaggeration, the lack of proportion and the distorted stroke, it offered opposition to the idealization present in the Enlightenment arts, which had their source of inspiration in the perfection of shapes inherited from the Classical Era. Thus, the connection of the ugliness to the

humorous allowed a seductive release of the beauty imperatives that guided the aesthetic production and enjoyment.

Parallel to the iconographic appreciation of the stroke of a caricature, romantic literature also invested in the means of expression of the shrouded areas of existence. On the one hand, by the use of *Unheimliche* – the unsettling strangeness found in works such as ‘The Sandman’, a Hoffmann tale analyzed by Freud (1919h) – a symbol of the anguish that seizes the modern individual when he is subjected to experiences in which the ego’s sovereignty is put into checkmate, such as passion and death. On the other, through the *Witz*, which, in revealing the limits of Reason and the supposed control of consciousness over the soul, enables the individual to laugh at himself, stating the dimensions of desire and chance in his own existence. The cartoon sums up the appeal of the caricature to the impact of the humorous text, effectively transmitting the everyday tragicomedy always present in our lives, and gaining enormous power of affection over media consumers.

In his incomparable study of popular comic culture, the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) shows how the figures exploited by Romanticism find their origin in the grotesque realism. Bakhtin demonstrates that popular culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is essentially comical, given that the aim is to change all the oppressive and threatening elements disseminated through the official culture – monarchical and ecclesiastical – in jest. The Carnival feast is considered, in this sense, a popular event par excellence, and the privileged place for the expression of grotesque realism. In this expression, the perception of Carnival throughout the world and the principle of debasement prevail.

In the carnival perception, or ‘carnivalization’, we observe a subversion of boundaries traditionally assigned to the living creatures, especially those established between the human and the bestial, and the hierarchies that govern social life. Carnival is from everyone and for everyone. Among the main elements explored in the festival, we see laughter and an unabashed display of the body. Laughter is festive, i.e. non-individual, and universal, everyone laughs, at everything and everyone. But the carnivalesque laughter is primarily *ambivalent*: destroying and regenerating, it shrouds that which is old and simultaneously celebrates the arrival of the new. In this manner, the grotesque laughter praises the *joyful times* that pervade the festival’s spirit; a time of metamorphosis, sovereign and invincible, life’s fertilizer and the messenger of death. In the joyful period of Carnival, everything is transitory, in the sense that states and bodies are

constantly changing, unlike the static images worshiped by classical art. In this sense, one of the most famous images of popular comical culture is the pregnant old lady, who laughs and makes others laugh. For the grotesque realism, death is nothing but a pregnant woman. And just like death, the dangers and threats of the world are converted, through the carnivalesque perception, into 'comical scarecrows', worthy of a joke.

The principle of debasement, in turn, imposes itself as the other side of 'carnivalization'. Debasing has the sense of bringing something closer to the ground, which represents the absorption and the sowing, the purpose and the origin of all things. It also refers matters to their material and bodily sense, as opposed to the transcendent advancement that maintains the positions of power and hierarchy. Ambivalent laughter involves debasement, just as aggressiveness is part of the movement of regeneration, and it is not hard to see why authority figures, responsible for protecting and regulating social life, are its favoured targets.

It is understood, therefore, how it is possible, by the debasement contained in the cartoon anticipating the pope's death, to laugh at the condition of orphanhood that characterizes modern subjectivity. Also according to Bakhtin, black humour, a fairly valued currency in our times and a descendant of romanticism, proves the survival, in our lives, of the grotesque's vitality. However, our laughter is wet with tears due to the fact that we have lost the '(one might say bodily) experience of the one, inexhaustible being' (1984: 37) implemented up to the Middle Ages and Renaissance grotesque. The symbol of individualism has turned grotesque realism into a 'private 'chamber' character', weakened by narcissistic isolation.

However, the work of de-idealization, along with the possibility of establishing innovative methods of sociability created by humour allows us to think that we haven't completely forgotten how to laugh. The ability to make a caricature of our styles of existence and our desires for omnipotence and omniscience allows us to access the ingredient that is imposed as the driving force of our creative ability. As Oswald de Andrade contends (1928/1972: 18), 'joy is proof positive.'

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