

Humor in cinema: Slapstick

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Abstract

Aims-Since ancient times, sight, - in association with speech - has represented a medium for entertainment and socialization. It is enough to think of drama (comedy and tragedy), which has been present in the history of all peoples since early times, as masks, clowns and jesters are. The advent of cinema contributed to the grounding of such figures able to arouse laughter. Everyone is a competent judge in deciding what may be laughed at and when to laugh. Man's freedom consists not in giving in to pure spontaneity, but in inhibiting it. The main themes that trigger hilarity come from dichotomies like superiority/degradation and contrast/incongruity.

A psycho-sociological approach to humor-Tragic drama asserts the rules it is going to break, comic drama takes them for granted. The recognition of the rule broken by the comic actor is such that the rule itself does not need to be reasserted. Other people's flaws are ours as well, the others make us laugh because of their unsociability (they do not "lose face"). A film needs to contemplate the viewer offering a "pathway" made up of the four looks identified by Casetti: the objective (nobody's shot), the interpellation (voice-off), the subjective and the unreal objective shot. The point is to gain access to what Schütz called a "limited sphere" of meaning. Laughing at oneself and at others is a chance not to use civil disattention: society demands constant attention in order not to make mistakes between forestage and backstage. The function of the comic register is to correct one's inappropriate behavior: socialization becomes possible by "laughing at oneself" and "accepting a joke" on one's behalf. By laughing, viewers increase their self-esteem too. Fear of ridicule is a powerful means of conforming to the group's demands.

Conclusions -The "pie in the face" is not the only prototype of the slapstick-style gag; slapstick draws on numerous human features, against which the greatest comic actors have measured themselves. The characteristics of some great European and North American actors will be highlighted in this paper.

Key words: slapstick, inhibiting of freedom, comic register, laughin at oneself, accepting a joke.

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1. Introduction

If socialization is a training allowing one to become integrated in the society to which one belongs in order to attain normality, as indicated by many scholars, laughter and the reasons inducing laughter play a role in this development through sensory experiences of various kinds.

Visualization is a necessity of the human mind and the intellect's work is peripheral in comparison with the hand moving without the brain knowing about it: a film is able to show what is happening and anticipate what will come next. Cinema is derived from photography, which was regarded as a means of "showing the truth". Nevertheless, a photograph without a caption or an explanation says little or nothing of its context and its relevance. The first films were documentaries, and only later came up the idea of using a script, specially prepared for the purpose of shooting, with actors interpreting the scenes of a screenplay. Filmmaking has the ability to show what is happening, so much so that in the beginning it was considered an improvement of the theater. All this is to say that regardless whether the shooting is prepared or not, it shows what is or what may be real. In the period of silent movies fast scenes were much appreciated, and therefore also gags and comic scenes. In order to laugh, in fact, one needs to see what one could become (Langer 1953: 327), without personally engaging to prove it.

Ridicule actually springs from incompatibility. In daily life one can pretend to not see; fiction, but silence as well, allow incompatibility to be avoided (Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca 1966) and ridicule is what deserves to be sanctioned with a laughter of exclusion. This means that it is a sanction for those who infringe a rule, one that is regarded as not serious or dangerous enough to be restrained with more violent or more drastic means; a way of condemning eccentric behavior.

Fear of ridicule and the discredit entailed by ridicule are used as educational methods as well. Ridicule is often connected to the fact that a rule is infringed or challenged without awareness, out of ignorance of the rule itself or of the devastating consequences of a specific behavior. Ridicule may also be used by a speaker as a weapon against those who pose a threat to the speaker's argumentation; similarly, it is something to avoid in daily life. One can defy ridicule, but it takes audacity and the ability to overcome anxiety; it is also necessary to have acquired considerable prestige, something one is never sure of. Prestige is more easily found on stage, it is more easily earned by the actor playing a role¹.

As anticipated, socialization is a long training supposed to lead every individual to acquire a shared *habitus*, even if social background seems to give an advantage to personalities belonging to the ruling class, that is, the class making the rules. Acquiring an adequate social competence for each

¹In the case of a behavior that is out of the ordinary, it stops being ridicule as soon as it finds followers (Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca ([1958] 1966).

role leads one to avoid gaffes or failures due to insufficient attention: distractions bring to the forestage what was meant for the backstage (i.e. what was private)². What “saves” the social actor in case of a mistake that may trigger laughter is the distance from the role. If it is true that man constructs social reality, the latter in turn becomes objectified and institutionalized, thus acquiring a meaning of its own that is independent of the meaning attributed by actors with their particular interpretations (Giglioli 1971). The subject’s freedom may only be examined within the social constructions, since the concepts of “role taking” and “role distance” suppose the concept of role. The acquisition of social skills – and all that drives a person to act, and therefore also laugh, is part of it – involves man’s freedom not to give in to pure spontaneity, but to inhibit it, thus giving in to what is learned in the course of socialization and is shared with others. Therefore, everyone is a competent judge in deciding what may be laughed at and when to laugh.

This article focuses on slapstick³, which includes gags and eccentric characters as well. Based on body language and mainly appealing to sight, it has existed in cinema since the 1920’s. Here we will analyze why slapstick arouses laughter, usually in everybody, and what the rules are for this to take place (that is, the rules infringed by slapstick comedy).

When reality is conceived as a social construction, one result is that “linguistic messages can be translated, stored and held up as legal evidence; expressive messages tend to be ones for which the giver cannot be made legally responsible, it being usually possible for him to deny that he meant quite what others claim he meant” (Goffman 1963: 13). Such doubts, however, may not be referred to slapstick since it highlights, by itself, the “lack of attention” of which the person enacting it is “guilty”. Furthermore, not all linguistic messages are equal and a difference can be made between involuntary and premeditated ones. If we consider expressive messages, though, they “must often preserve the fiction that they are uncalculated, spontaneous, and involuntary, as in some cases they are” (Ibidem). Some expressive messages say something in the very moment in which they are acted: slipping on a banana peel, tripping and falling in a formal situation. These are embodied messages produced through a current bodily activity: the transmission of the message occurs only during the time that the body is present to sustain that activity. So, as an example, it may be a frowning of the eyebrows or winking of an eye, possibly meaning “be careful!” or “that’s understood”; but also slipping or an involuntary fall, meaning “I was not careful enough!”.

In face-to-face interaction, embodied communication is one of the crucial conditions of communication itself: “any message that an individual sends is likely to be qualified and modified

²It may also happen in private.

³Slapstick comedy is a comic film subgenre that began with silent movies. With its elementary simplicity, it is based on body language and gags. The name comes from a device used in the Italian *Commedia dell’arte*, the “slap stick”, with which a loud slapping sound was produced with little force (and no hurt).

by much additional information that others glean from him simultaneously, often unbeknownst to him”. Messages of this kind may also be very brief (Goffman 1963: 14). In face-to-face communication every receiver may also be a sender⁴ of naked communication, made with the senses or with one’s own bodily activity, therefore embodied. What interests us, however, is the fact that such embodied acts may be transferred from daily life to film, where the viewer (receiver) only participates as a spectator (audience) and not as an interlocutor or counterpart of the action taking place on the screen. Besides, the actor interpreting the movie follows a script, which may be anticipated and is included in the four gazes identified by Casetti (1999). In the interface between spectator and film there is not only a front stage and a backstage, but also the interpretation of life. The vision of a film aims to fill the spectator’s eyes, spur him through his senses. The film experience generates a perceptive intensity leading the viewer to “plunge” into what he is seeing, as if he was immersed in an environment – that is, nonetheless, an illusion.

A film needs in fact to contemplate the viewer, so much that it offers him a “pathway” (i.e. a frame, a setting) through the four views: the objective view (nobody’s shot), the interpellation (voice-off), the subjective view and the unreal objective shot. The point is to gain access to what Schütz (1962) called a limited “sphere of meaning”. Other people’s laughter and laughter in general are a chance not to use civil inattention. Lights – meaning attention – do not go down on gaffes, for example, but they are turned on and that is why people laugh⁵: society demands constant attention from its members, which in turn allows them to adjust to it. The use of the humor key is to avoid going unnoticed, in order to correct one’s inappropriate behavior. The function of laughing at oneself is that of an initiation, and when a beginner takes a joke it is as if he was saying, “I am one of you because I laugh with you” (Goffman 1969: 249). By laughing, viewers increase their self-esteem too. Fear of ridicule is a powerful means of conforming to the group’s demands.

This article starts from the analysis of laughing seen as a human characteristic since ancient times, one that has accompanied man’s steps and come as far as using the most modern technology. It continues with a brief digression on the “philosophy of laughter”. This is the part of laughing most examined and studied, but here we will dwell on the sociological aspect analyzed by a philosopher, Susanne K. Langer, who offers a beautiful and useful perspective on what comic drama is, from which every human population was able to draw its own way of laughing. Finally, a short review of a small number of comic actors is presented: Antonio de Curtis, known as Totò, Paolo Villaggio,

⁴The opposite is also true, that the receiver then takes the role of giver: receiver and giver are in fact interlocutors (Tessarolo 2007).

⁵In Goffman’s view, civil inattention is the ritual performed when encountering other people, also by chance. People approach, look at each other and use gestures or looks to establish how they will behave; then they turn their look down when crossing and walk on. It is almost a downing of the lights. With this behavior, they implicitly affirm that they have nothing to fear from one another.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, and finally Jerry Lewis. The choice of actors is arbitrary, but all these personalities share something besides their ability to generate laughter – and this “something” may be precisely what generates laughter.

2. Laughter as distinctive to human beings

In society, the individual has a more or less public existence in which all his acts are anticipated, monitored, inhibited or modified by gestures and interactions of others. In cinema, everything is presented as a story, even if it is a very short one. In a film we laugh at gags, mistakes due to distraction or foolishness: the cinema is constantly teaching what one must not do, how one must behave. Bergson ([1899] 1991), then, is right when he states that laughing is the social punishment of behavior mistakes that may be made if we change or invert the places where we act. The categories used by Goffman to analyze the social space of daily life, be it public or private, are the front stage and backstage. The front stage is where the subject is accessible or exposed to others, where he has to adjust his behavior in order to be able to fulfill the expectations constructed around his personal presentation in public locations of various kinds. The backstage is the place where the public mask may be discarded, but only to put on a private mask allowing the subject to stop being on the alert (Giglioli 1971).

The attention to episodic and fleeting manifestations of sociability dwells upon the deeper meaning of social life. Such deeper meaning may be grasped precisely in those aspects, more ephemeral and apparently irrelevant, because they provide the individual with his “reality kit”, i.e. the material with which to construct the meaning of everyday life. Laughing serves to comprehend the world such as it appears to be to the deviating subject. However, this does not equal an indiscriminate acceptance of the deviating version. Goffman’s dramaturgical model is useful for studying false representations and learning something about true ones; this does not mean that a distinction between the two cannot be made (Goffman 1969: 80)⁶. Goffman’s definition of “merchants of morality” is interesting: it refers to the decision making of social actors concerning what must or must not be done.

The basis for the action of the self is the ideal performance, rather than the actual conduct of the actors. Every actor or communicating subject resorts to the concept of distance from the role, which refers precisely to the kind of expressive behavior used by the subject to let the persons assisting know that he does not wish to be identified with the role he is taking on – even though another role must be taken on in order to show one’s distance from the first role. There are moments when some

⁶On the contrary, the awareness of the fact that subjects wear a mask, that they tend to represent an idealized self, leads to assume a demystifying attitude (Giglioli 1971).

social actors find themselves at the edge of the social context, where tiny and elusive expressive acts are enacted that seem a direct manifestation of the individual personality, tiny acts that lead one to rediscover the weight of what is normative. What is felt is the “fingertips of society”, reaching bluntly into every relationship. The subject’s freedom in relation to his role is that of a juggler, one who is able to adjust and reconcile, who performs a function while apparently engaged in another one (Giglioli, 1971). This is also the role of the comedian who, as such, distances himself from his a-social role. The priority is not to know who the subjects are, but to know what the situation is, because meaning is in fact attributed to the situation.

The *Commedia dell’arte* is rooted in the tradition of medieval jesters and tumblers who, on festive occasions or during carnival, used to enliven courts and *piazze* with farces, *mariazzi* (grotesque scenes of marriage), *barcellette* (the origin of the modern word for joke in Italian, “barzelletta”), told and mimed by solo actors, with their ridiculous way of speaking, moving and dressing. Masks are typified characters as well, even when the plot they are to perform is not yet known. On the other hand, the comic subjects in their early stage come from street life and daily life: the so-called comic duets of Magnifico and Zanni⁷. These subjects were taken from the great popular production, namely the Sicilian school of the 13th century. The tradition of jesters spread itself in squares, noble palaces and courts starting from the 15th century and continued for some centuries.

The Italian poet Aldo Palazzeschi⁸, in his futurist manifesto titled “Controdolore”, notes that laughing is often interpreted as a sign of superficiality, but it is in fact an indication of a great soul: everybody can cry, while in order to allow oneself a hearty laugh, one needs to “mature”. Pain is temporary and can be refuted with farce, mockery and laughter. This specific characteristic allows us to remember Dario Fo, who was awarded the Nobel prize in literature in 1997 because he “emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden”. Fo (1962), in fact, believed that fun comes from the discovery that “the opposite stands up better than the commonplace” and that it is even more real and more believable.

⁷Precisely through such exchanges, actors came to assimilate the peculiar synthesis of their appreciation of diversity into one single repertoire. Since the beginning, for example, the duet between Zanni and Magnifico represents the mid-1700 contrast between rich Venetians (Magnifico) and the dispossessed coming from the Lombardy countryside (Zanni), who were employed as servants. In the *Commedia dell’arte* Zanni was treated the same way as an immigrant is treated today. In the name *Commedia dell’arte*, “art” means “trade, profession”. The genre was identified by other names as well: it was called “Italian comedy” abroad, and “Commedia all’improvviso” (“through the art of improvisation”) or “Commedia degli Zanni” (“of the Zannis”) in Italy (names that are certainly meaningful!).

⁸The Manifests of Futurism were launched by Marinetti, Boccioni, Garba Bussolo, Balla, Severini, Pratella, M.me de Saint Point, Apollinaire and Palazzeschi in Florence in 1914 (published by Lacerba).

3. The philosophy of laughter

Laughter, in Bergson's view ([1899] 1991), is a human and social manifestation generated in the contact with other intelligences. One can even smile by oneself at something beautiful. A classical example of comicity is that of a man tripping and falling; the passers-by who witness the scene laugh. The misadventure happens to the unfortunate subject against his will, which shows that he did not use enough attention, enough socialization skills. The lack of adaptation and the inability to adjust to the forms of becoming commonly encountered and managed can make us laugh (Rozzoni 2011). Laughter is actually a genuine means of social correction; it includes the reporting of vices and the stiffness of body and soul. Comic impersonality may be grasped by considering the character of Don Quixote, intended as a feature of comicity drawn from as near as possible to its source (Bergson [1899] 1991). The Don Quixote created by Cervantes is the realization of the peculiar "distraction" generating impersonality. Society condemns impersonal conducts with laughter, meaning conducts that do not make differentiations, because they are perceived as characters to be excluded and avoided (Girard [1961] 2002). Since these characters are not socialized, they do not belong to the order of daily life. If the aim of laughing is to avoid (restrain, exclude) unsociable behaviors, he who laughs finds himself in a position of privilege, since he is acting as a judge of the (ridiculed) one who is not aligned to social objectives.

According to Berger ([1997] 1999), madness, which characterizes comicity, is conceived first of all as an inversion of the consolidated system of categories and hierarchies of reality. Dionysian rituals, seen in a comic dimension, are a controlled and limited destruction of social order. Every feast and every comedy includes those characteristics, suffice it to think of the essence of carnival where the game of indifferenciation becomes so relevant, the game of assuming any identity that may also be found in comicity. Carnival has an important ritual ancestor: the Bacchanal, the source of origin of the comic. The comic is a trace of the sacred and of ritual, because it is a "child" of the expiatory victim and it inherits its ambivalence: the experience of the comic, as that of the sacred, triggers an ambiguous fascination when it manifests itself in all its power; seductive, yet generating anxiety due to its action that poses a threat to reality and its order. A brutal attack against institutions is always expected from it. In Western culture, the figure of the fool is rooted in classical antiquity, especially in the cult of Dionysus and its later Roman version, the Saturnalia. Closer references may be found in the Middle Ages in the various types of wanderers (*vagantes*). These characters were marked by a bizarre mixture of wandering spirit, criminality, learning and theatricality; they lived off their wit, at the edge of society, constantly on the move.

4. The comic in comedy and in cinema

The issue of how a person behaves within a certain role is never decisive; for this reason, it is very difficult to attain absolute conformity because an actor constructs his role in the course of interaction, by constant modifications, according to his own inferences about the roles of others. In trying to make the various aspects of the role explicit, the individual creates and modifies the role in the act itself with which he brings it to light. The process is not only that of role taking, but also that of role making (Giglioli 1971).

What we may observe in role distance is not a mere reduction of formality, but rather the identification with a structure at the expense of another structure (Goffman 1961; Giglioli, 1971).

Tragedy and comedy share the same fundamental form, but they differ in point of view; this is a product of the attitude the author and his interpreters take, and the viewers are invited to take, toward the action. The difference between tragedy and comedy, though, is the same as that between levity and *pathos*, so they are very different. If tragedy “abstracts from reality the fundamental forms of consciousness”, the underlying feeling of comedy is “the pure sense of life”, developed in countless different ways (Langer 1953: 331). The sense of life is always new, infinitely complex, therefore infinitely variable in its possible expressions. This sense, or “enjoyment”, is the realization in direct feeling of what sets organic nature apart from inorganic: self-preservation, self-restoration, functional tendency, purpose. It is important to preserve the pattern of vitality: keep the equilibrium of the organism, regain it when it has been disturbed, pursue a sequence of actions dictated by the need of keeping all its interdependent parts constantly renewed, their structure intact.

There is a deep connection between the pattern of the vital feeling and the emotional reaction, that is, between the symbolic structures that determine reality and instinctual life. This human life-feeling is the essence of comedy as well. “It is at once religious and ribald, knowing and defiant, social and freakishly individual”(Langer 1953: 338). The illusion of life which the comic poet creates is the oncoming future fraught with dangers and opportunities, occurring by chance and building up the coincidences with which individuals cope according to their lights. Fortune is that “ineluctable future”. The fabric of comedy is developed by comic action, the upset and recovery of the protagonist’s equilibrium, his contest with the world and his triumph by wit, luck, personal power, or even humorous, or ironical, or philosophical acceptance of misfortune. “Comedy is an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life” (ibidem). The basic structure of tragedy and comedy is different. Comedy is contingent, episodic and limited; it expresses the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society and is exemplified briefly in each individual; tragedy is a fulfillment, and its form therefore is closed, final and passional. Tragedy has not arisen in all great civilizations, but comedy is present in all peoples.

The natural vein of comedy is humorous, so much so that “comic” has become synonymous with “funny”⁹. There are all degrees of humor in comedy, from the quick repartee that elicits a smile because of its wit (without being intrinsically funny), to the ridicule that sets all spectators “shouting with merriment”. “In comic drama [humor] has its home”. Laughter is triggered by a peculiar way of not remaining within the rules, of being full of vitality either as a “villain” or as a “fool”: comedy may be frivolous, farcical or incongruent, because its very structure makes comicity hilarious.

Humor is only one of the causes of laughter, and the causes are sought in funny things or situations whereas they really lie in the subject who laughs (Langer 1953: 342). Laughter always betokens a sudden sense of superiority¹⁰. The situations that are dealt with, however, are ludicrous, “so it may be said that the source of the comical is in the laugher”. We feel our own superiority in detecting the irrational element: we feel superior to those who perform mechanical actions, accept absurdities, or make confusions. Nonetheless, Langer notes, “what is laughable does not explain the nature of laughter, any more than what is rational explains the nature of reason. The ultimate source of laughter is physiological¹¹, and the various situations in which it arises are simply its normal or abnormal stimuli” (Langer 1953: 343). Laughter seems to arise from a surge of vital feeling. It is the spectacular end of a complex process. As speech is the culmination of a mental activity, laughter is a culmination of feeling, “the crest of a wave of felt vitality” (Ibidem).

“Laughter is, indeed, a more elementary thing than humor.” There are many causes of laughter or its reduced form, smiling, which operate directly on us and belong to actual life. In comedy the spectator’s laugh has only one legitimate source: his appreciation of the humor of the piece. However, we need to consider the psychical distance between spectator and actor: in a good play, the laughs are poetic elements. Its humor as well as its *pathos* belongs to the virtual life, and the delight we take in it is delight in something “created for our perception”, not a direct stimulus to our own feelings.

⁹Susanne Langer notes that in English it may be well to say “comical” instead of “comic” (1953).

¹⁰Marcel Pagnol (1947) divides laughter into “positive” and “negative” kinds, according to its social or antisocial inspiration.

¹¹Two muscles are engaged in smiling: the zygomaticus major, on the sides of the face, drawing up the corners of the mouth; and the orbicularis oculi, closing the eyelids. The first one draws the corners of the mouth back, exposing the teeth and increasing the volume of the cheek; the second closes the eyes and forms the so-called crow’s feet. The zygomatic muscle is voluntary, it is controlled by the conscious part of the brain and may be activated to pull a fake smile and pretend enjoyment, with the intention to show friendliness and submission. The orbicularis muscle is involuntary and reveals the true feelings that make one smile (Pease, Pease, 2005). Smiling is a sign of submission, it communicates that one is not a threat; there are different kinds of smiles. Finally, laughing stimulates endorphins, contributing to relieving from stress and healing the body.

Comical figures are often represented by buffoons, simpletons, clowns; they are almost always sympathetic, and indestructible even though knocked around and abused. The buffoon is, in fact, an important comic personage, especially in folk theater. He is essentially a folk character, that has persisted through the more sophisticated and literary stages of comedy, as the Italian Harlequin, the French Pierrot, the Persian Karaguez, the Elizabethan jester or fool, the Vidusaka of Sanskrit drama. These are all ancient figures present in the humbler theatrical forms that entertained the poor, and especially the peasantry, and have survived since the advent of the cinema. The buffoon had a more vigorous existence as Hans Wurst, as Punch of the puppet show, the clown of pantomime, the Turkish Karagöz who belongs only to the shadow play. These figures have or rather express the vital force¹². The buffoon is the personified *élan vital*. He is neither a good man nor a bad one, “but [he] is genuinely amoral—now triumphant, now wretched”, he comes out of every situation with a new fantastic move. Besides, these characters are envisaged in great comedy as well¹³. The English Punch is not a real buffoon because he is too successful; his appeal is probably a subjective one, to people’s repressed desires for general vengeance and revolt. He is really a degenerated and stereotyped figure, diverging from the Punchinello of the Italian theater of marionettes; he has become the pure comic protagonist¹⁴.

Humor is the brilliance of comedy, a sudden heightening of the vital rhythm. The laughs are likely to be of a peculiar sameness, almost dutiful, the formal recognition of a timely gag. The phenomenon of performed laughter (in the theater or cinema) brings into sharp focus the whole question of the distinction between emotion symbolically presented, and emotion directly stimulated; this distinction is radical, because it presents us with what is probably the most difficult example¹⁵. The audience’s laugh at a good play is self-expressive, and responds to a “lift” of vital feeling in each laughing person. Laughs of daily life are direct responses to separate stimuli; they may be sporadic and connected to events that are expected, even though unforeseen, and seem funny only if one is in the mood for them. Sometimes we reject witticisms and are bored with tricks and clowning. Spectators laugh at the play, at what is present in the play. This device of playing with things from actual life is sure to bring laughs: it presents the very image of “livingness” that belongs to the life we see, and that expresses itself in laughter, it is universally human and

¹²*Élan vital* is a term coined by Bergson in his 1907 book “Creative evolution”, in which he addresses the question of self-organization and spontaneous morphogenesis of things in an increasingly complex manner. *Élan vital* was translated in the English edition as “vital impetus”, but is usually translated as “vital force”.

¹³Think of Verdi’s Falstaff and its libretto, adapted by Arrigo Boito from Shakespeare’s “Merry Wives of Windsor”: at the end of the play Falstaff sings in a baritone voice: “*Tutto nel mondo è burla. L’uomo è nato burlone*” (all the world is a joke, man is born clown).

¹⁴The older Punchinello (i.e. Pulcinella from Naples) was far less restricted in his actions and circumstances than his modern successor (Langer 1953).

¹⁵Langer calls such difficulty “*pons asinorum*”. The wording comes from Euclid’s Proposition 5 of Book 1, a statement considered very hard to understand for students.

impersonal. It is not the meaning of the joke to us that measures our laughter, but what the joke does in the play or the film we are seeing.

5. A few examples of comic actors

Comic actors are scene stealers. After following Langer's thinking on comedy, we will look at the characteristics of a few comic actors. The characteristics are definitely personal and connected both to the look (personal features and expression) and personality and culture. The comic actors who used slapstick undoubtedly present a marked characterization; here we will try to make this point more explicit.

5.1 Totò (Antonio De Curtis, 1898-1967)

From Naples, Totò absorbed the culture of the *pazzariello* and that of Pulcinella, the art of trick and the taste for sophism, the technique of mockery and the tactics of sarcasm, in addition to an extraordinary mix of comic and tragic, to a sense of love for life; his character is thus unrepeatable, one-and-only and of universal value. Totò had a stage costume of his own, almost a uniform for him: shorter-than-normal and turned-up trousers, a long and baggy tailcoat, a shoe lace tied around the shirt's neck in place of a tie, a worn bowler hat, black shoes and colorful socks. This way of dressing conveys an idea that is very typical of Naples, that of the little man, poor yet decorous, who is integrated in the system – but who could also completely disrupt it with his logic of nonsense and ridicule. As a cinema comic actor, Totò brought the *Commedia dell'arte* to the set in its historically most genuine sense. In all of his films, in fact, he improvised in every succeeding sequence, perhaps even in every succeeding shot.

An asymmetrical and surreal face, like a Pulcinella drawn by Picasso, and an incredible ability to transform the ridicule in art. It was as if an avant-garde artist, in the mood for mocking and clownery, enjoyed himself in transforming a normal face in the most extraordinary mask of 1900's Italian culture. The asymmetry of Totò's face assembles a plurality of masks and traditions before him, that are represented by the present aesthetic of the comedian, with his irregular rhythms and his complete freedom of ways and attitudes. His use of muscular movements, extension and contraction of the neck, snapping movements of the limbs like a marionette, disarticulation of the body in all its possible forms are characteristic. He used his whole body to produce sense and nonsense. Thanks to a personal trait of unpredictability, he could transform himself: from small-town man to man of the world, from swindler to judge, to serial seducer or other. He respected nobody and nothing. Escobar (1998: 75) provides an appropriate description: Totò is a hyperbolic explosion of desire, a revenge of what lies underneath on what is usually above, a triumph of

appetite and body and love over any pretence of order and stability. Hierarchies, honor, common sense: while his antagonists are thrown into panic, Totò overturns and overwhelms it all in a flow of words and gestures gone mad, disguising reason as folly and folly as reason.

5.2 Paolo Villaggio (1932-2017)

He trembles in a situation of danger, but turns out to be more intelligent than the silly hero who is not afraid of dying; he is servile with those who are more powerful than him because he bows to necessity. The character created by Villaggio and named Fantozzi is certainly the leader of this type of comic figure. Always unlucky, he needs to exorcise the fear he shares with all those who are not competitive. When someone powerful falls while stepping down a stairway, all his subjects are merry: “See, it can happen to them too!” (Villaggio 2010).

For the cinema and television, Villaggio created and performed characters relating to a paradoxical and grotesque comicity such as professor Kranz, the extremely shy Giandomenico Fracchia, the accountant Ugo Fantozzi. His activity as a comedian was followed by his work as a writer, beginning in fact with a book on Fantozzi. Fantozzi is a character that reflects while showing: some aspects of Italian reality are presented in a deformed way, sketched with surrealist genius, so much so that when they are given back to the audience they are useless; at the same time, though, they are extremely precious, like a vision. Villaggio achieves all that with a technique that appears trivial because it has become part of the Italian sense of humor. The comedian is able to exalt it even though he uses poor syntax and concise phrases. His starting point is one of absolute simplicity. The structure itself is poor, yet he can make it explode with a rapid succession of terrible bursts, thus transforming the whole thing into hyperbole and vision. It is a continuous, lightning-swift, jubilatory revenge against reality. Villaggio, with his Fantozzi, has the merit of making people “cry with laughter”; he has been called the greatest comical mask after Totò. His first performances were as the sadistic and aggressive professor Kranz and the humiliated and submissive Giandomenico Fracchia, the latter a role featuring an unparalleled gummy mime.

As a comic actor, Villaggio performs his gags in the middle of the audience, often by improvisation and following what is happening, with no plot whatsoever. Furthermore, the fact of constantly involving and “attacking” the viewer has the purpose of making the viewer become a protagonist of the performance in every respect. The Italian actor’s fame and appreciation by the audience are also visible in the deonomastics¹⁶ of the adjective “fantozziano”, meaning “typical of a loser” and indicating stupidity, ignorance and a servile attitude.

¹⁶Deonomastics is the study of words formed on the basis of proper names, for example Machiavellian, Fellinian, Elizabethan and “fantozziano” in Italian.

5.3 Laurel and Hardy (1890-1965; 1892-1957)

The double act composed of Stan Laurel (called Stanlio in Italian) and Oliver Hardy (Ollio in Italian) was very famous in the history of cinema and stands among great performers of the slapstick genre. As for Villaggio, we may say that the world is full of persons like Laurel and Hardy. One has but to look around: there is always someone stupid to whom nothing bad ever happens, and someone clever who is actually stupid – only he does not know.

Laurel is the main character of the comic pair. Looking small and slender next to his partner, he is constantly smiling and has characteristic protruding ears. Also characteristic is his ruffled red hair, standing up at the top of his head, that he scratches especially in times of doubt, or when he does not understand what is happening, or what Hardy is saying. He sometimes pulls up his hair while he cries and complains for being mistreated. Hardy is a know-it-all guy who thinks he is more clever than his fellow. Bigger than Laurel, he has dark, shiny hair pasted onto his forehead with grease; characteristic of his look are his short moustache and remarkable double chin. Hardy wears a bowler hat like Laurel, but bigger, and a jacket that is noticeably too small for him.

In the theatrical relationship between the two, Hardy has the role of the “serious” guy engaged in some kind of activity (work or business), only to see his efforts and ideas disrupted by Laurel’s absent-mindedness. Following a commonplace construction based on contrast and starting from a seeming circumstance of stupidity and naivety, Laurel is the one who benefits from the situation in the end. His typical gesture is ruffling his hair, while Hardy has a characteristic way of greeting and twiddling his short tie to show sympathy. Physical fights between them mean they beat each other with their hats; the fights, which are started by the usually meek Laurel, sometimes spread and become generalized, even involving passers-by.

When in 1929 their first sound comedy film “Unaccustomed as we are” was released, the process of dubbing films in foreign languages was not yet standard. The director Hal Roach¹⁷, in order for the film not to lose its appeal on foreign markets, resorted to an ingenious and complicated procedure. Each scene was shot five times, in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian, with a change of cast every time. Secondary characters were replaced with actors speaking the different languages, while Laurel and Hardy necessarily performed their scenes in a language they did not speak, with the aid of a blackboard hidden off camera where they could read the lines. This may be the reason why they both spoke in a funny way in the Italian version¹⁸.

¹⁷The American film director and producer who produced the duo comic series that made their success.

¹⁸The funny way of speaking was kept by Alberto Sordi, Hardy’s Italian voice, even though he made a significant change by transforming Hardy’s original tenor voice into a baritone voice. Laurel’s Italian voice, Mauro Zambuto, gave the character a higher tone: when Laurel cries his whining voice almost turns to

5.4 Jerry Lewis (1926-2017)

The meeting between Jerry Lewis and a singer with Italian origins, Dino Crocetti, known as Dean Martin, was a fortunate artistic circumstance indeed. Their success as a comedy duo was immediate and they became the most popular comic pairing of the time. The collaboration lasted about ten years and extended to the theater, cinema and television. The two artists formed a well-balanced comedy duo, with Martin's confidence and good looks in stark contrast with Lewis' twitches and goofy way. It was time for a more modern comicity and their duo stood out thanks to the fact that their comicity was based on the interaction between the two characters, rather than on scripts and pre-planned scenes. Lewis and Martin quickly gained national popularity. They started performing their shows in night clubs; they continued with a radio program of their own and numerous television appearances, and were finally the stars of a series of Paramount films.

It was almost by chance that Lewis became the director of his films. He continued his acting career and brilliantly paired it with film direction, enjoying great acclaim in Europe: French critics called him "a total film-maker", praising him as a director capable of making a perfect comic film.

"Which way to the Front?", released in 1970, gathered enormous success in France but was snubbed in the U.S. Working on a tight budget, with a limited time available and no structured script, Lewis made the film with a day-to-day approach. Bill Richmond collaborated on the creation of scenes and gags by drawing inspiration from comic sketches in silent movies. During production, Lewis developed a system of monitoring that was the precursor of the modern "video assist", now a standard in the industry for directors: he arranged a number of screens so that he could monitor his performance while he was giving it.

Jerry Lewis was one of the most brilliant comic actors of the 1900's. Thanks to an extraordinary skill at facial expressions and a stunning genius for entertaining, he left an indelible mark on his time. Ambitious, hilarious, explosive, exaggerated: a kaleidoscopic vortex of adjectives would not be sufficient to outline the profile of a great and versatile artist. He was an actor, musician, scene-stealer, film-maker, he revolutionized the world of film-making by conceiving the prototype of the video camera we now call "video-assist".

The film that is still considered his masterpiece is "The Nutty Professor", dated 1963. Lewis wrote and interpreted the role of the shy and awkward chemistry professor, Julius Kelp, who invents a serum that transforms him into the charming and cheeky Buddy Love. Lewis resorted to the classics in order to make people laugh at the cinema and said that "Modern Times" had made him discover

false, an exaggeration of the original. The Italian voice artists who represented Laurel and Hardy after Sordi and Zambuto followed on the same track, even when many dialogues in the original language were replaced during dubbing in the 1980's.

comicity. If Chaplin could make people laugh and cry, Lewis as well, like other comic actors, was a scene-stealer with his comic acts, but he was also a good actor in intense dramatic roles.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion to this short article, we think Heers' appreciation is appropriate ([1983] 1990): what is ridicule will not bend to be constrained into one of the various definitions, because the feeling that is peculiar to it may take as many forms as there are deformities; among feelings, only one has inexhaustible matter, the number of its curves. The "feasts of fools" were numerous and surprising expressions of social life. Their importance was in the fact that they could have a public feature, thus exalting power, and a private one as well, for the strengthening of social relations with audiences and clients. They were not just simple games or shows.

Why have comic characters always made us laugh? Because at unconscious level they constantly remind the viewer of his childhood, the merriest, most playful and carefree time in one's life. The audience is expected to laugh, and the willingness to laugh determines the function of comicity. The comic actor plays the role of the "Authority"¹⁹, especially if he is known to the wide audience. One must not forget that humor, like authentic poetry, is capable of taking viewers to a child-like condition, letting them become children.

The primary rule for comicity is the childish behavior of the comic actor, and this is always present as a constant in the greatest protagonists: Laurel and Hardy, Jerry Lewis, Paolo Villaggio and Totò, who are very good performers of the goofiness, naivety and simplicity of children.

The accord between a comic actor and his audience is not something the brain knows, but something made in collaboration with others: it is not a static state of consciousness, but an interactive process extending itself as far as to comprising the peculiarities of the actors, in a field of action distributed between the artist and the audience (Goodwin 2003). A great comedian enacts what Dewey theorized ([1954] 1977), i.e., great openness of mind, in addition to personal skills, technical skills and power of observation, imagination and judgment. A great comedian, therefore, does not rely on a single model. Instead, he is open to creativity and is only aware of what he wants to do, and of what he does, when his work is finished; in this sense, he is an artist – just as a painter is! The gags he improvises while performing are the result of a maturation of his experience through practice (Tassarolo, 2015). It is precisely the execution process that brings to the artist's mind the most important suggestions, absorbed when experience was being acquired, thus making the artist more likely to be able to perform an effective and articulated interpretation. One could state that

¹⁹An unknown comedian has a harder time than the one who stands in front of an audience with an eager expectation of seeing something that will make them laugh.

comicity is something “bodymental”²⁰ because “an object in itself can never be experimented; its properties will be expressed only through a ‘bodymental’ interaction with it” (Tessarolo 2015: 145). In comicity as well, “one starts from the fact that each feature of the object derives from a subjectively experienced interaction. On the other hand, given that, thanks to the common genetic heritage and the common evolutionary history, every human being is equipped with more or less the same bodymental characteristics (sense, memory, associative ability etc.), the experienced properties have actually an intersubjective nature” (Tessarolo 2015: 143).

This is one more reason why great comedy actors pay much care to their “stage costume”, meaning not just clothes, but gestural expressiveness and facial expressiveness as well. Real success means delivering a quality performance that is approved by the public. So the actor needs to be believable, and therefore “sincere”: if it is allowed for the man in the street not to be sincere, sincerity represents a constraint for the comic actor. Here lies the paradox of the actor highlighted by Stanislavski: for an actor playing a role, the starting point is not imitation nor fiction, but an inner truth that goes beyond daily truth and transforms truth into fiction. It does not matter whether the actor acts well or badly: what matters is that he acts what is true (Guerrieri, 1985).

A film²¹ allows us to laugh by means of a comparison of features: the text that is read is put in contrast with the text that is seen, thus making the second “friendlier” than the first, meaning more respectful of the difficulties encountered by the recipient in decoding it. Interestingly, we may note that a more easily enjoyable text – such as the visual one – is also the one that activates an intelligence of a simultaneous type, that is, an intelligence combining several levels at the same time. The better accessibility of the visual text in comparison with the written and spoken text has turned it into the one that best represents globalised civilization, also called the civilization of the image (Rossi, 2003).

Furthermore, the comic actor’s work may be compared with that of the craftsman Sennett writes about (2008): the artisan-craftsman works with mastery and “the term mastery indicates a lively human impulse, the wish to do a job well. Mastery improves a person’s overall way of being. Every good craftsman establishes a dialog between real practices and the thought, and such a dialog concretizes in the acquisition of support that triggers a rhythmic movement between the identification and the solution of problems” (Tessarolo, 2015, p. 145). The comic actor, therefore, pays obsessive care to every gesture, every movement, every word, so as to give the right rhythm to

²⁰In Italian “corpomentale” is a neologism created by G.O. Longo (2001) which expresses well the union between the body and the mind.

²¹And all other new technologies allowing us to receive images as well, because films may be seen everywhere, not just in the cinema.

the whole performance: in every craftsman there is an absolutist for whom any imperfection is a failure, and the comic actor is often a perfect craftsman²².

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²²In the stories of the comic actors selected for the present article we have in fact found a constant desire for greater perfection.

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