

## On Resemblance

Ayelet Lilti\*

**Abstract:** Resemblance is inherent to thinking insofar as the latter manifests the act of reflection. In other words, if representation is always the object of thinking, resemblance can be considered as the mind's ability to discover relations between representations, that is, to assemble images.

But what if resemblance were as constitutive of the comic as it is of thinking? In a letter to his critics, Henri Bergson explained that his essay, *Le Rire, Essai sur la signification du comique* (1900), was initially a study of association of images, that is, of the way comical appearance spreads from one image to another.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Bergson considered the relation of resemblance to comical situations an additional aspect to his analysis of the comical.

In this article, I first introduce various aspects of the notion of resemblance. Then, I use philosophical and literary texts to examine different manners of relating resemblance to the comical. Finally, I argue that the relation between resemblance and the comical is a vital and constitutive element of our cognition.<sup>2</sup>

**Key Words:** Resemblance, comical, thinking, images, philosophy

*Deux visages semblables, dont aucun ne fait rire en particulier, font rire ensemble par leur ressemblance.* (Pascal)

### Introduction

“Two faces that are alike, although neither of them excites laughter by itself, make us laugh when together, on account of their likeness.”<sup>3</sup> The motto quoted above is from French philosopher Blaise Pascal. It can be read as an assertion but also as a question about the relation of resemblance with the comical which Pascal addresses to us. I encountered it for the

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\* **Ayelet Lilti**, Institut Universitaire Elie Wiesel, Paris, France, [ayelet.lilti@gmail.com](mailto:ayelet.lilti@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le Rire, Essai sur la signification du comique*, Paris, Éditions PUF, 2007 [1900], p. 315.

<sup>2</sup> A former version of this article has been read at the 1st International Conference of the International Association for the Philosophy of Humor, held at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, in July 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Henri Bergson, *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, translation Fred Rothwell & Cloudesley Brereton, Centaur Edition, 2013, p. 21.

first time in Henri Bergson's *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (1900)<sup>4</sup>, and it became very significant for my study of resemblance's possible relation to the comical, along with Bergson's book. It enabled my understanding of the role of resemblance in our thinking and our perception of the world around us.

The first thing I understood was that an entity isolated by itself can always be conditioned by another isolated entity, whether or not it makes us laugh. By "conditioned" I mean that this element can change its essential position, in the same way the number 1 multiplied by 2 can also be considered a half of the resulting answer.

Secondly, the degree of similarity that we grasp in what we see is a tool our cognition uses to discover, identify, and apprehend new relations and associations between phenomena or appearances.

Thirdly, according to Pascal, if we laugh when we see two faces, it is because we find them amusing. But why do we find them amusing? What is it that makes us laugh or smile? Moreover, to see two similar faces can make us feel perplexed or uneasy, not only amused. Incidentally, when I looked for pictures on the Internet which displayed a resemblance between two faces, the majority of the images were horror pictures: freaks, tragic accidents of nature, a man resembling his dog, a woman trying to resemble her dog by wearing a mask, etc. So why does it make us smile? And why does it worry us?

Bergson explained that it is the mechanical aspect of the human body that emerges in such circumstances, and that the mechanic rigidity makes us laugh. According to Pascal's assertion, it is the agreeable surprise to find another of a kind, such as bringing together two lost twins. On the other hand, we could be facing the industrial series symptom of what could be duplicated, like the reproductive cloning that we encounter in science today.

I believe we become anxious because we are firmly attached to a view of the human being as a unique being, a vivid form, a vital organism. Any other view of the human being is considered as a threat to its nature, because of the fear of being a number, an object, a thing. This danger emerges when we discover that two faces are identical. Resemblance is an interesting and fruitful notion when it indicates a degree of affinity to the other, that is, when it is an indicator of reference, and not the identical duplicate of the other.

Aristotle's view of metaphor may also enlighten resemblance. Aristotle considered metaphor to be the gift of the genius, and as such, something that cannot be taught or learned:

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<sup>4</sup> Bergson, *op. cit.*

“The right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances.”<sup>10</sup> According to Aristotle, the ability to detect identity in difference, to find similarities between distant things, is characteristic of the philosopher and scientist.<sup>11</sup>

Although the claims of Aristotle and Pascal are different, both refer to the ability of resemblance to bring independent entities together.

In *The Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant is referring indirectly to Aristotle’s notion of the metaphor. Kant asserts that “intuition” (The aesthetic Idea) is a representation of the imagination for which no concept is adequate. According to him, intuition is the gift of the artistic genius, which can broaden the horizons of thought.<sup>12</sup> In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant considers the “Schema” or the reproductive imagination (the capacity of the imagination to associate an image to a concept) as a secret of nature that hides deep within the human soul, a secret that the philosopher will have great trouble bringing into light.<sup>13</sup>

In *La Métaphore vive* Paul Ricœur associates Aristotle’s notion of metaphor and Kant’s concepts of “intuition” and reproductive imagination. He argues that resemblance, as a feature of metaphor, enabled the vivid and poetic principle of thinking and of philosophy in general to emerge. The work of resemblance, as conceived by Ricœur, is based on the concept of the Same or the identical, but only in order to create the Other, variance, and difference. “It is the Same that generates the Similar/Congruous) and not the opposite”, writes Ricœur.<sup>14</sup> And as such, as an indication of reference and variance, resemblance is inherent to thinking insofar as the latter manifests the act of reflection. In other words, if representation is always the object of thinking, resemblance could be considered the capacity of the mind to discover relations between representations, to assemble images, as well as an active principle that enables us to perceive, create, and bring different concepts into being.

In a letter addressed to his critics, Henri Bergson explains that his book, *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (1900), was initially intended as a study of the association of images and of the way comical appearance spreads from one image to another.<sup>15</sup> In other

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by W. H. Fyfe, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1932, 1459a. Quoted in Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, coll. “Points/Essais”, 1975, p. 244.

<sup>11</sup> See there.

<sup>12</sup> See Emmanuel Kant, *Critique de la Faculté de Juger*, traduit en français et introduit par Alexis Philonenko, Paris, Éditions Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1993, Section 49, p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> See Emmanuel Kant, *Critique de la Raison pure, Analytique transcendantale*, Chapitre Premier: “Du schématisme des concepts purs de l’entendement”, traduit par Alexandre J.-L. Delamarre et François Marty, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, coll. “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”, 1980, pp. 885-887.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive*, op. cit., p. 381; my translation.

<sup>15</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le Rire*, op. cit., p. 315.

words, Bergson studied the role of resemblance in comical situations whilst thinking about the comic.

If we consider the comic as a way of observing reality, resemblance can be related to the comic effect as a contemplating eye enabling a study of mental objects through their degrees of similarity. Likewise, resemblance as a contemplating eye implies that we take some distance vis-à-vis these objects in order to examine them from a critical perspective. This is important because these entities of contemplation are clearly images that can be altered. For this reason, resemblance is an aesthetic dimension within thinking. The comic effect results from new and surprising relations revealed by an association of images.

But what if the relations are inappropriate or incongruous? Does it mean that the moment of what we call a significant reflection, a serious one, becomes insignificant, that is, comical? Does this bear on the similarity and difference between philosophy and the comical?

Moreover, what could define the critical distinction between philosophy, as Ricœur conceived it, and humor? Could it be resemblance as a principal drive for our imagination?

### **Resemblance: A Drive of Imagination**

I do now wish to answer this question directly, for to answer it is to determine beforehand what philosophy is and what humor is—an ambitious task which lies beyond the scope of this article. I seek to answer these questions from a different angle, namely by emphasizing the role of resemblance as a common element of both humor and philosophy.

I argue that resemblance is significant both for philosophy and for humor, as long as we embrace Ricœur's view of philosophy. Philosophy has long ceased to concern itself purely with thinking. It gave birth to numerous fields of study, such as philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, aesthetic philosophy, analytical philosophy, and so on. The classical disciplines of knowledge, such as history, anthropology, psychoanalysis and sociology can be considered as deriving from traditional philosophy. Although these disciplines expanded our understanding of humor in a meaningful way, philosophers still think, speak, and write about humor. Why do they find it important? I would answer that humor is important to philosophy, because resemblance relates humor, as a human phenomenon within communication and language, to philosophy, as the traditional domain of reasoning and understanding. I suggest, furthermore, that resemblance is significant as the aesthetic dimension within thinking, due to two main dimensions, namely, proportion and vision.

Let me first explain the emphasis on “resemblance” rather than “difference,” however. In order to associate images, we must first perceive the ways in which they resemble each

other. But to see resemblances or similarities between images is to involve the concept of identity. In order to see differences between entities, we need, beforehand, to acknowledge their resemblances, and consequently, their identity. Therefore, resemblance should be the first element to be considered in productive and coherent thought whether aimed at a concept or at a philosophical assertion.

The following amusing examples of the two aspects of resemblance mentioned above explain the significance of proportion and vision. Proportion indicates the measure between related objects; and, since resemblance is to be considered as the faculty of sight that assembles images within our cognition, vision is important as well.

### An Incongruous Resemblance

In *Le Rire*, Henri Bergson analyses Jean Paul Richter's joke, "The sky was beginning to change from black to red, like a lobster being boiled".<sup>16</sup> He argues that, "once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor, the idea expressed becomes comic,"<sup>17</sup> so as "to take literally an expression which was used figuratively".<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Bergson claims that neither degradation nor exaggeration is the essence of the comic effect, but rather transposition.

Jean Paul Richter called this form of *Witz* "a partial resemblance" which produces the incongruous effect. For Richter, that which is incongruous is the condensation of an ideal and a limited body, of infinity and finitude, namely, a lack of proportions between body and mind.<sup>19</sup> In other words, according to the two thinkers, the incongruous effect which results from resemblance is a matter of proportion and vision.

Let me add that what makes us laugh in the joke is not only the transposition or the partial resemblance indicated by Richter and Bergson. The colors of a romantic sunset can also be those of the killing of an animal. It seems to me that what makes us laugh or gives us pleasure is the association of images alongside their dissociation. One aspect of the image of the sunset—the changing colors—can be easily associated to another scene, far less romantic, which has nothing to do with the first one. In this sense, jokes reveal the eccentric appeal of

<sup>16</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, op.cit., p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Jean Paul Richter, *Cours préparatoire d'Esthétique*, traduction et annotation d'Anne-Marie Lang et Jean-Luc Nancy, Lausanne, Éditions l'Âge d'Homme, 1979.

arbitrariness. As Mary Douglas put it, “A joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity.”<sup>20</sup>

### Edgar Allan Poe: The Narcissistic Desire for One’s Origins

Let us now consider Edgar Allan Poe’s humorous short story “The Spectacles”, published in 1844. This story reveals a perversion within the family on account of impaired vision.

A young man of twenty-two is very proud of his fearless temperament but is constantly preoccupied with his appearance. He suffers from shortsightedness but refuses to wear spectacles out of concern for his outward appearance. Before telling his story, the young man describes at length his French ancestors’ family lineage in order to defend his theory that “the brightest and most enduring of the psychal fetters are those which are riveted by a glance.”<sup>21</sup> His name is Napoléon Bonaparte Simpson, but his real name is Froissart, something he is proud of as it associates him to the French writer of *Chroniques*, Jean Froissart. According to the narrator, the names of his predecessors have a “singular coincidence of sound”<sup>22</sup>: all their names are linked by the suffix “-sart” up to his great grandmother, Mademoiselle Moissart.

One night at the Opera, the young man falls in love with a woman. He is enchanted by her remarkable beauty and marries her at once. Unfortunately, the whirlwind romance is doomed to end ludicrously. Once in the company of his beloved, he discovers to his amazement that he has married a very old woman. His wife is none other than the mother of Madame Moissart, the wife of Monsieur Voissart, his great-great-grandmother!

This is why the glances of these two distant relatives came upon each other, attracted by a family resemblance. The young man, suffering from a narcissistic disorder and enamored with his own image, built an alliance with an ancestor of his “Moi” (self).<sup>23</sup> The dazzled glance, at first sight—of a young man with bad eyesight—can bring back a narcissistic lover to his origins and attach him to his ancestry. Here, the glance itself displaces the coveted object—the name Froissart—in the hope of associating the narrator with an imaginary lineage of writers. The story ends on a ludicrous note: ultimately, young Simpson is excluded from the prestigious lineage of the French chivalric storytellers.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Simon Critchley, *On Humor*, London & New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Spectacles” [1844], *Bookclassic*, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> I suggest that the author, Edgar Allan Poe, used specifically the word in french, « Moi », in order to relate the narcissist lover to his French ancestors’ name.

Resemblance, then, plays a key role in Poe's short story. As in a poetic transposition, by a lineage of assonances, resemblance can generate an ancestral desire if it is considered a desire for one's origins. More precisely, resemblance is the gaze of desire that drives us to observe and interrogate phenomena both internal and external to us. Whether resemblance is the search for the One, the whole, the Self, or the ego, it should not be considered as a quest for identical, tautological truth.

Let me generalize these findings. Regardless of the comical, when thinkers associate representations, they do so in order to develop concepts and elaborate a theory whose aim is to broaden the horizons of thinking and change our view of reality. As thinkers, we are eternally seeking for truth and searching for the origin of the phenomena surrounding us. If we err in our observations and produce inappropriate relations between representations, however, it is because we were distracted by the images that captivated our attention and engaged our process of reasoning. Consequently, we risk becoming comical ourselves as the origin of some incongruous situations. But in such a case, it is resemblance as a comical way of thinking that extricates us from a much heavier distraction, such as madness.

### **Conclusion: The Aesthetic and Changing Nature of Resemblance**

Based on these considerations, I would like to conclude by repeating my initial question, is resemblance common to philosophy and humor?

The two examples above illustrate both a lack of proportion and proper vision in incongruous situations. Richter's joke and Allan Edgar Poe's short story are humorous due to the appearance of things, a certain "family resemblance". If we are to relate humor to philosophy through resemblance, we should consider it an aesthetic dimension within reason, insofar as resemblance, as a principal drive of our imagination, should not assemble representations only out of consideration for the harmonious and well-proportioned thinking. If we consider resemblance comical, that is, as a reference of inappropriate relations, it ought to expand our horizons in a dynamic way that shakes and disturbs the philosophical enterprise.

Perhaps the comic dimension of thinking marks the *relief-limit*, enabling us to acknowledge a space of liberty within the bounds of reason.

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