

## Abandoning Our Selves to Laughter: Time and the Question of Self-Loss in Laughter

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### Abstract

Vlieghe et al. (2010) argue that through uninhibited, spontaneous laughter one may experience a momentary loss of one's self. The present article begins by examining whether that assumed experience of self-loss, difficult to determine empirically, is credible, by tracing and critically examining literary sources referred to by the authors and elsewhere. Finding that there is at least some support in the fact that the phenomenon is remarked across various texts and even across certain diverse cultures, an attempt is made to identify how that perceived effect may come about. It is suggested that a subversion of the subjective experience of time in laughter may be generated by a sudden confrontation with incongruity (under a complex of conducive conditions) and that insofar as the self is formed through subjective temporality this momentary collapse of time could lead to a perception of self-loss. The article then addresses the issue of why the laughter-time-self nexus has not been granted greater attention in humor theory, and concludes with a discussion of some reservations that need to be addressed concerning claims of radical potentialities in laughter while nevertheless pointing towards significant existential and social implications.

**Keywords:** laughter, time, timelessness, self, absence, incongruity

In an article in the journal *Educational Theory* Joris Vlieghe, Maarten Simmons and Jan Masschelein (hereafter referred to as Vlieghe et al.) note that beyond the occasionally cited benefits of humorous play such as fostering creativity and challenging conventional wisdom, the laughter response itself deserves more attention for its capacity to suddenly and momentarily undermine the identities of those who laugh and thereby to broach radical new potentialities. While careful to concede that much laughter may be

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socially “forced” and that mocking and otherwise aggressive acts of laughter do exist, the authors’ thesis is certainly at odds with those theoretical approaches, from Hobbes’s famous superiority theory right up to Michael Billig’s attempt to once again place ridicule at the core of laughter, which view laughter as essentially indicative of power relations. What Vlieghe et al. are concerned with is not at all laughter as a form of self-assertion, but on the contrary, the experience of being overcome by the sudden and intense corporeal response, and even of having one’s identity momentarily erased as we laugh together—“a shared experience of self loss” (p. 728). It is the sudden collapse of the existing self, they claim, that challenges the continuity of the dominant social order through which such selves are constructed and thereby expands the horizon of social and individual potentiality towards what they believe could be a “radical democratic community” (p. 730).

The ideological implications the authors vaguely point toward are questionable and they admit that there is only potentially, not necessarily, such an expanded futural horizon coming out of laughter: it is “but a *possibility* that might vanish as rapidly as it came into existence” (p. 730). But these implications are not my primary concern here, the education context even less so; my main interest is the basic premise: that the self may somehow be dissolved or collapsed as we laugh. Is this actually credible? I will argue here that at the very least the *perception* of a momentary dislocation of selfhood in certain intense experiences of laughter does find support in some significant literature, so that in this sense it is not entirely a flight of fantasy when we say that we “abandon ourselves to laughter.” I will examine critically the modern philosophical stream upon which Vlieghe et al. draw, and I will also show how the experience they describe finds a fascinating, and until now (at least as far as I’ve been able to ascertain) unremarked, convergence with scholarly conceptions of laughter emerging from South and East Asia in recent years. This is not to say that they are the same, but amid significant differences there is a point where they clearly coincide, and I think this may be an important issue for cross-cultural dialogue, as well as contemporary discussions of the plasticity, multiplicity and expanded potentialities of selves. Yet identifying references to the phenomenon across disparate cultures, though significant and useful, still leaves the crucial question of how that perception of self-erasure may come about. In order to provide a tentative hypothetical model for addressing this question I will proceed to an analysis of how the operations of selfhood and the event of laughter may collide in the realm of subjective temporality.

## 1. Unbridled Laughter and the Perception of Self-Abandonment

The Vlieghe article bases its foundational notion of self-loss in laughter less on classroom observation—the self is a very difficult thing to see after all—than on literature about laughter, the first and most theoretical being Helmuth Plessner’s *Laughing and Crying: The Limits of Human Behavior*. Sourced in phenomenology, Plessner’s work is able to conceive of laughter beyond subordination to a humorous text or incident and not essentially or even primarily as a form of communication. Plessner also observes that care should be taken not to misconstrue an emotional state attending a humorous situation, which may actually be punctuated by laughter or may emerge following the initial eruption into laughter, as the psychological core and source of laughter itself; in other words, though it is profound in its effects, it is viewed not as an emotion or expression of emotion as such but a mechanism and an event. Vlieghe et al. quote the following passage: “In laughter man gives up a certain position. He answers directly and impersonally. He is delivered to an anonymous automatism. It’s not really he who laughs, but something laughs in him and he is, so to speak, only the theater and the frame of this event” (quoted on p.727 [p.86 in the original text]). It is from this, and specifically the observation that the laughter may be regarded as “anonymous,” not the product of a self insofar as the self is conceived in terms of will and/or identity, that the event of laughter is seen by the authors to mark a sudden and temporary subversion of selfhood. Indeed, Plessner writes early in the book, “Laughter is pleasurable and ‘healthy’ as a reaction of letting oneself go” (p. 4), and it is because the conscious self is apparently absented in the initial burst of laughter that he describes it as being an existentially liminal event.

Though this conceptualization of the event of laughter opens up exceedingly complex philosophical and psychological issues regarding how we define “the self,” the experience as it is described by Plessner is perhaps familiar and at least makes a certain intuitive sense to many of us. It finds an echo in an important essay by the psychoanalytic literary critic Samuel Weber (not referred to by Vlieghe et al.) critiquing Freud’s treatment of the laughter response, which refers to “the peculiar relation of laughter to the ‘subject’: one does not laugh the way one walks or speaks; it is not an act that the subject performs (or avoids) at will. Rather than deciding or choosing to laugh, ‘one abandons oneself’ to it...” (p. 693). More than other automatic physiological responses like sneezing or yawning, laughter seems to have this capacity to momentarily override the consciousness of the self, so that its more intense instances approach a punctuation of our very being. Weber later describes the sense of returning to ourselves after the initial eruption: “we ‘come to’ and find ourselves engulfed by laughter. Impossible to say just where

and how that laughter ‘began’: no sooner do we begin to think back... than we discover that it is already ‘over,’ indeed all over a body that no longer does our bidding” (p. 703). Described in these terms, we can see how spontaneous laughter, relatively commonplace though it may be, can be experienced, if one is so inclined, as a dramatic, if ephemeral, existential event—and in a sense it *is* so. It represents an overturning, for an instant, of a certain mind-body hierarchy.

From the foundation in Plessner’s work, Vlieghe et al. proceed to the work of the philosopher/writer Georges Bataille, who in *Inner Experience*, originally published as *L’expérience intérieure* in 1943, provides an earlier articulation of this perception of a disappearing self. In fact, the authors approach Bataille not so much directly as through an essay referring to Bataille’s conception of laughter in Adolpho Lingis’s book *Body Transformations* (2005). The reference to Bataille is securely founded, however; Bataille’s *Inner Experience*, though conspicuously lacking in humor, refers to laughter throughout and ends with a poetic encomium to its existential significance. A pivotal personal experience is recounted by Bataille early in the book. Remarking that “I was extremely young then, chaotic and full of empty intoxications,” Bataille describes how walking alone one night, riddled with anxieties, he suddenly breaks into laughter: “A space constellated with laughter opened its dark abyss before me. At the crossing of the rue du Four, I became in this “Nothingness” unknown—suddenly.... laid bare, as if I were dead” (*Inner Experience*, 34). Bataille’s experience of self-disintegration has been taken up recently by Anca Parvulescu: “The ‘I’ that tells the story was not quite there when his laughter burst (Bataille later refers to this ‘I’ in the third person: ‘the man with the umbrella’ [p. 36]). In the same way one cannot say ‘I am dead’ in the present tense, one cannot say ‘I laugh’ in the present tense” (p. 85). As Weber had earlier noted, one can only reflect back on laughter because the discursively articulating self is absented in the eruptive moment, which, again, is what distinguishes it, locates it at the boundary of being.

Some context should be given, however, before assuming that the psychoanalyst and the phenomenologist are on the same page as the surrealist. Bataille’s work draws directly and heavily from Nietzsche on whom he wrote an entire book and at times seemed to base his life, not least of all in the valorization of the transformative potential of laughter. Bataille’s contention that “I laughed as perhaps one had never laughed” is, ironically, secondhand, echoing Nietzsche’s own experience of a joyfully catastrophic laughter as he conceived the notion of eternal recurrence and as it is expressed in the laughter of the eponymous protagonist of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “No longer shepherd, no longer

human—one changed, radiant, *laughing*. Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter” (p. 272). Given that both Nietzsche and Bataille reveal a propensity for elevating the extreme experience, and given that in both cases the laughter is experienced in conspicuous solitude, we should ask whether such depictions of laughter are relevant to the study of laughter among what Nietzsche called us, the “common herd,” and suitable for application to the classroom for example. While Bataille does envisage a radical communion through laughter, neither Bataille nor Nietzsche are commonly cited by theorists of humor and laughter precisely because their relating of the ideal experience, though insightful, is esoteric, eschews analysis and is intimately bound up with an ecstatic mythologizing that elevates a very specific and seemingly unique species of laughter; thus it is in a “*certain* laughter,” not laughter in general, that Derrida finds affirmation in Nietzsche (Derrida, p. 27). In fact, Zarathustra’s journey begins with the inciting event of his being the dismal object of common laughter in the town square—“there they laugh. They do not understand me” (p. 128)—and the laughter he eventually discovers for himself in the mountains and celebrates in the epiphanic moment of “eternal recurrence” is in that sense not only an overcoming of the human but also an (arguably vengeful) overcoming of human laughter, a supersession, the birth of “super-laughter.”

Parvelescu’s cultural philosophical work *Laughter: Notes on a Passion*, taking much from the Nietzsche-Bakhtin legacy—and claiming that “Bataille’s laughing specter haunts the twentieth century”—is more strident than Vlieghe et al. in promoting what is perceived as laughter’s revolutionary potential as a “communal passion” (p. 12). Here too a distinction is drawn to separate the ideal from a degraded initial moment of comically induced “reactive” laughter as commonly experienced: “For there is laughter and laughter” (p. 83). In fact, the definition of the ideal laughter is gradually so refined—it is not the initial burst, not reactive but active (p. 90), it is wildly kinetic, perhaps the domain of only women (or the woman in man) (92)—that the “community” of laughers becomes a rather exclusive one. This is in part achieved by divorcing the ideal type from the theoretical heritage pertaining to everyday humor and laughter. Following Bataille’s mystical observation that “What is hidden in laughter must remain so” (p. 155), and referring to Cixous’s influential “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Parvulescu asserts that “This book leaves the old question of what makes us laugh behind” (p. 3): “The point will not be to forensically learn how laughter works” (p. 113). Despite that, a rationale is given for this resistance to theory: “What we call ‘theories of laughter’ share a focus on the object of laughter. Laughter is laughter *at...*” (p. 4), which is to say either the laughter of laughter theories is of a degraded type, or the theories

themselves falsely project a comic butt. Actually, this is a patently inaccurate claim since incongruity theory, the broadest and most persistent theoretical line (reduced to a dismissive footnote in the book (p. 85, fn42)), is less likely to describe laughter as directed *at* an object, a comic butt (the early Zarathustra, for instance) than as a *response to* conceptual dissonance. By attempting to push ecstatically, which is to say immediately, away from theoretical discourse and out from laughter's little death to a universe of resplendent possibilities—"The future must no longer be determined by the past.... Anticipation is imperative," Cixous wrote (p. 875)—such writing consciously, joyfully divorces itself from the theoretical heritage, as it believes it must do in order to preserve the ultimate potential of what Bataille called "non-knowledge" and the "hope" (Parvulescu, p. 155) of a certain laughter. I'm not sure that this is what Vlieghe et al. have in mind in their vision of corporeal democratic potentiality, yet they draw on the same modern-postmodern tradition and it is an aspect that needs to be considered.

Still, even if the celebrants of an ecstatic laughing revolution want nothing to do with those who theorize, we might nevertheless borrow their insights and connect them, with some care and qualifications, to our own mundane universe. It is difficult to regard the ecstatic self-annihilation Bataille describes as of an entirely different species to the more quotidian experience of self-absence that Plessner and Weber observe in spontaneous laughter and recognize as a liminal event for the self, even if the Bataillians would place greater stress on a radical rebirth coming out of this. So, while granting that there are innumerable types of laughter, the perceived loss of self is probably not restricted to the revolutionaries; my own informal discussions with a broad range of people about what they experience in unrestrained laughter, though not at all conclusive, lends some support to this. The key difference is perhaps an issue of emphasis, perceived intensity and the motivation at work when laughter is (after the fact) interpreted—or not being interpreted in accordance with a lack of incentive to do so, as with most of us when we laugh most of the time. It might be going too far at this point to say that everyone has this experience of self-loss to some degree in spontaneous laughter, that those who claim not to are simply guilty of a failure of recognition, self-reflection or articulation. We can say at the very least, though, that there is acknowledgment from various sources of this apparent self erasure, this little death, in laughter, even if there is an unfortunate dearth of thoroughgoing elaborations on the subject.

It is a pity that Western theories and theorists of humor, including those that have focused on the laughter response rather than analysis or exegesis of humorous texts, have paid so little attention to discourses on laughter from other cultures. An obvious argument might be made, for instance, that the

sparseness of literature on the apparently common phenomenon of self-loss—which would seem to be a significant issue where human experience and identity is concerned—is due to the centrality accorded the unitary individual subject in the Western tradition. Perhaps. I cannot myself claim to have stepped so far from that tradition except where it is critiqued from within by poststructuralism, but I have been struck recently by the work of scholars within East and South Asia on this matter of laughter and the self.

In a book published in 2003 on the extraordinary conspicuousness of humor and laughter in the everyday life of people in the Kansai region of Japan, one of the foremost scholars of humor and laughter in Japan, Hiroshi Inoue, writes, virtually in passing, “With a hearty laugh, the self disappears” (*Osaka*, p. 76 [my translation]). In a more recent work in which he begins to address the issue of what happens in the mind in the transition into, through and out of laughter (the past, present and future of the event), Inoue repeats the claim: “Laughing, the mind is emptied, disappears in a sense” (*Power of Laughter*, p. 212 [my translation]). When I showed this to an eminent Bhutanese scholar, Karma Ura, he directed me to a paper by the Thai scholar Soraj Hongladarom titled “Language, Reality, Emptiness and Laughs” delivered in Europe in 2008 which draws a connection between laughter, incongruity and the experience of mental evacuation: “One laughs... as an integral part of, an expression of, Emptiness itself” (p. 19). Hongladarom relates this experience to a certain Buddhist heritage, and it makes sense given the centrality of notions of emptiness, absence, evacuation within the philosophy. In that regard it should be noted that while laughter may be frowned upon within the context of much Buddhist religious practice, it is sanctified in the figure of Hotei or Putai, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist monk commonly identified as the “laughing Buddha” in the West. When I asked the Japanese scholar Inoue to what extent he felt he was drawing on Buddhism (of course, of a different kind to that generally followed in Thailand) he cited the Zen scholar Kitaro Nishida as a philosophical source.

In a series of lectures interpreting the Buddhist Dhammapada, the eclectic Indian religious scholar/philosopher (and guru) Osho remarks: “when you laugh, suddenly laughter is there, you are not. You come back when the laughter is gone. When the laughter is disappearing far away, when it is subsiding, you come back, the ego comes back. But in the very moment of laughter you have a glimpse of egolessness.” The similarity between this statement, originally made in 1980, and the descriptions of the scholars Inoue and Hongladarom naturally suggest the influence of Buddhist culture, but each of these also approximate the observations made by Plessner and Weber, as well as the Bataillan vision

taken up by the Vlieghe group. One could note then that Bataille was able to immerse himself (dissolve his self) in a Buddhist vocabulary: “As a subject I am NOTHING within the immensity that is NOTHING” (*Accursed Share*, p. 378). So there are interesting trails of influence and convergence inviting exploration, but there are of course very considerable differences in the interpretations and implications that each of the above writers draw. Bataille detects a liberation of transpersonal and revolutionary passion in self-abandonment which is not at all implied by the self-erasure or self-evacuation delineated by Inoue and Hongladarom, for instance. In relation to Buddhism itself there is also that issue of whether the mind is absented or merely emptied, although both can be seen to connect with the notion of comic detachment, comic indifference. My aim here is not to conflate or synthesize the variety of perspectives, only to identify the apparently common perception of a disappearing self in the laughter response. For now, we can say that a kind of self disappearance or evacuation in laughter is remarked in some Asian texts and that a somewhat similar sense of self-loss is observed in the West, both in analysis of the quotidian experience and in the realm of a certain ecstatic post-humanist literature. The next challenge, as Inoue points out, is to determine how exactly that effect comes about... and where it goes (*Power of Laughter*: 234). Certainly, if the notion of self loss in laughter is to be applied, as Vlieghe et al. propose, then some explanation will be required somewhere along the line. To this end the concept of incongruity will be useful, but on its own insufficient. In order to get into the embodied mind of the laughing subject, the subject that can apparently be laughed away, we clearly need to better understand what makes the human, the human experience of laughter, and the comic itself, tick—by which I mean time.

## 2. Laughter and the Temporality of the Self

The Zen master Dogen remarked in the thirteenth century that being does not exist in time, but *is* time: “Time is existence, existence is time” (quoted in Loy, p. 19). In the middle of the twentieth century, Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a chapter of his *Phenomenology of Perception* titled “Temporality,” writes this: “We are not saying that time is *for* someone.... We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time” (p. 490). Coming from such very disparate cultural historical backgrounds, both suggest that it is being which creates time, while what we experience as the self is constituted by temporal consciousness. The increasing currency of the notion of being as becoming in Western philosophy, especially since Nietzsche, reflects a gradual cultural digestion of this insight. Let me foreshadow the

connection I want to draw here between the laughter response, time and the perception of self loss by way of another description of the experience of spontaneous laughter by Osho, enigmatic but readily comprehensible intuitively, which brings those terms together: “For the moment the past disappears, the future disappears, the ego disappears, everything disappears—there is only laughter.” Again, the observation appears to be describing the same experience of momentary subjective dissolution alluded to by the various authors cited in the previous section, but here in direct association with subjective temporality, the experience of the past, present and future.

I have discussed at length in various other articles the perception of a temporal disjunction in the experience of laughter resulting from a particular type of “cognitive catastrophe” (Paulos) induced by comic incongruity. Although it is not mentioned by Vlieghe et al., and is rarely pursued in depth, this is not a particularly new issue. At the risk of plagiarizing myself, let me briefly review, as well as extend, the history. Billig observes, “There is a constant but barely discussed element in previous laughter theories: the assumption of a sudden break in time” (p. 116). In particular, much of the discourse on humor and the laughter response basing itself in incongruity refers to or implies a subjective temporal disjunction. Immanuel Kant, often cited as an early incongruity theorist, provided a concise formula when he wrote that “Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing” (p. 199). The first point to note in this line is that word “nothing” (*in nicht*), which recalls the experience of absence identified as self-loss, but here it is not the self explicitly which is absented so much as a certain subjective temporality. There are actually two respects in which time is implicated in this single sentence. Most obviously, there is the stipulation that the perception of incongruity must generate a change *suddenly*; this was present even in Hobbes—“*Sudden glory*, is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER” (p. 46)—and seems to concur with the models of many incongruity theorists. John Morreall, in his attempt to advance a model drawing on incongruity, discusses the importance of suddenness in producing a pleasurable “psychological shift,” for instance (p. 48-51). The other temporal element in Kant’s formula is the initial condition of “strained expectation,” and this receives less attention, perhaps because it appears to overly refine the model: we may not actually be “expecting” something specific to happen in all cases of comic laughter. It is not wholly misguided, though, if we interpret expectation in a broad sense as generalized anticipation and part of our common subjective temporal operations in which the mind is “tensed,” constantly gathering up the past and pushing itself through a present into the future—whether actively or passively, as Deleuze makes the distinction.

In *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer advances the idea a little further, again in the course of elaborating a theory of laughter from a base in incongruity. Schopenhauer refers to two modes of being distinguished by their temporal characteristics: on the one hand, there is “conception,” which is the mind operating across time, projecting into the future and reflecting on the past; on the other there is “perception,” which is described as discursively unmediated, temporally immediate. According to Schopenhauer, the collision of concepts under specific supporting conditions leads to a collapse of conception that is marked in laughter and a pleasurable momentary release into the atemporality of perception.

For perception is the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything that gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself. It is the medium of the present, of enjoyment and gaiety; moreover it is attended with no exertion.... [Conversely] it is the conceptions of thought that often oppose the gratification of our immediate desires, for, as the medium of the past, the future, and of seriousness, they are the vehicle of our fears, our repentance, and all our cares. (p. 280)

Schopenhauer’s model, however crude it might seem, does at the very least make a certain amount of sense intuitively. Yet in the same way that Kant’s description is apparently overly refined, so too is Schopenhauer’s, since laughter’s pleasure is clearly not always associated with an escape from worldly worries related to the past and future: we can laugh, we may even laugh more freely, when we don’t have a care in the world. It would appear that it is not specific negative aspects of our being in time that we escape in the eruption of laughter, but subjective time itself. In short, the pleasurable lightness we identify with laughter may be in considerable part the weight of time, arguably the heaviest and most relentless burden that humans carry since it confronts us with decay and death, being suddenly removed.

This temporal effect is what Simon Critchley has in mind, perhaps, when in remarking “the peculiar temporal dimension of jokes” he claims that “Humorous pleasure would seem to be produced by the disjunction between duration and the instant” (p. 7). It is important to note that as Critchley describes it, following Schopenhauer and arguably even Kant to some extent, the temporal effect is not a mere enhancement, the pleasure is not supplemental to that which might be attained from some semantic or semiotic content contained in the preceding humor—quite the reverse; the *primary* pleasure is that attained from moving suddenly out of durational consciousness and into immediacy. Laughter is not

simply a response to something happening or expressed suddenly, but is itself a pleasurable release into suddenness. It is not inconceivable that the relief often identified with laughter is above all that release from time; we experience the collapse of the tenses (past and future) as a dramatic drop in tension. Laughter was referred to as a *détente*, in the sense of de-tension, by Dugas (cited by Freud, p. 147), and is alluded to as such by Bergson, who I will return to shortly. The primacy of the temporal effect over humorous content in this respect helps explain why even semantically vacuous nonsense can be funny, a point that Freud wrestled with unsuccessfully, and many scholars of humor have struggled with before and since. It might also begin to explain why “comic timing,” recently taken up by scholars such Attardo and Pickering, is considered so integral to comic performance, since the performer’s primary task might in a sense be to engineer that subjective temporal dislocation marked by the explosion of laughter.

The title of Weber’s essay on Freud, “Laughing in the Meanwhile,” suggests the centrality of the temporal cause and (non-temporal) effect in laughter. The “meanwhile” is taken from Freud’s description of the punch line of a joke, in which laughter seems to erupt as our mind is away, which “raises the question of the temporality of the joke process” (p.702) leading to “a sudden let-up [*Ausslassen*] in intellectual tension” (p. 703). Weber emphasizes the significance of the experience of de-tension, both in the one who laughs and the one who suddenly conceives the joke, and argues that Freud’s idea of a “discharge” or “release” in laughter, often assumed in so-called “relief theories” of humor, is misleading, since the sudden arrival of laughter “entails not a ‘letting out’ but rather a sudden ‘let up,’ the way a motor can die during a change of gears” (p. 703). According to this view, although the preceding humor may allow liberation of normally inhibited ideas and emotions, laughter itself is not, or not primarily, an embodied kinesis reflecting such liberation. Although Weber does not describe it explicitly as such, this letting up, this sudden de-tension is a collapse of the tenses maintained in durational consciousness.

In another underutilized work on the subject, “Philosophy, Literature, and Laughter: Notes on an Ontology of the Moment” published in the phenomenology journal *Analecta Husserliana* in 1998, Lawrence Kimmel states it directly, “Laughter is a release, however brief, from time” (p. 176), a point echoed, without reference to Kimmel, by Lingis—“A moment liberated from the future and from the enchainment of moments in time, recognizes itself in laughter (p. 91)—and then by Parvulescu: “What the burst of laughter bursts is time itself” (p. 14). In a description which recalls Osho’s pronouncement, Kimmel writes: “Beings-in-time we are loosed from the fetters of time. In the instant and instance of

laughter, past and future vanishes, and nothing leads up to or away from this moment. You did not plan it, you cannot preserve it” (p. 181). Moreover, the instant and eternity can be seen to coincide in this timeless moment (p. 183). Again, each of these scholars alludes to the difficulty of articulating this effect, since as a subversion of subjective temporality it also undermines the temporality, the grammar, of discourse with which the subject is almost inextricably connected: the laughing body “is far more difficult to assimilate to an economy and to a temporality of representation,” Weber writes (p. 706). Yet all of these writers broaches the issue of the relationship between laughter and subjective time, which cannot but have dramatic, even “fatal,” implications for the self. If what we experience as the self is a product of temporality in the sense that it is formed, or rather is constantly forming (becoming) through the operations of our gathering the past through the present in projecting the future (which is what Critchley refers to, following Bergson, as duration), then it is not surprising that the sudden subversion of subjective time in laughter has the effect of momentarily dislocating subjectivity, perceived on reflection as that self-loss, little death or evacuation that Vlieghe et al. and various other writers have referred to.

Although this temporal-existential effect may be an important, even central, element of comic laughter, this is not to say that all people across all cultures and times will perceive a time-slip and/or momentary self disappearance every time they have laughed. As mentioned earlier, most people will not recognize the event as such, nor even identify a temporal collapse after the event, since this is not how laughter has generally been conceived and there is little reason for us to undertake such reflection, having enjoyed the moment—and being (or non-being) in the moment—for its own sake. For those of us interested in humor theory, and in having time more deeply considered in the field, however, this is only a starting point towards overcoming a certain resistance or inertia in humor theory regarding the temporal dimension.

Apart from the problem of bringing laughter’s temporal disjunctive effect into discourse, a factor retarding discussion of the interactions between laughter, time and the self is the legacy of Henri Bergson, which is not to blame the French thinker once known as “the philosopher of time” and author of one of the most influential, oft-cited texts on comedy, *Le rire (Laughter)*; the problem is that in Bergson’s writing laughter and the issue of the temporality of being are not explicitly connected, perhaps because his book on laughter was conceived, though not published, before the elaborate philosophy of subjective time (*durée*) that would influence Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze. In fact,

Bergson's book on the comic (which despite its title is only partly about comedy and very little about the laughter response) does conclude with rather negative comments about the laughter experience and the one who laughs that implicate subjective time. His denigration of the individual laugher in whom "there is not so much a want of attention as a lack of tension" (p. 196) and "the beginning of a curious pessimism" (p. 199) in *Le rire* suggests a negative relation to his model of an evolving subjectivity launching itself into the future through the willed "tension" of *élan vital*: "the whole of humanity in space and time is one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming charge able to beat down every resistance, and clear the most formidable obstacles, even death" (*Creative Evolution*, p. 286). In that grand(iose) narrative, laughter's subversion of subjective time (duration) and subjective projective tension would be nothing but a liability if it were not redeemed by Bergson as a signifier chastising insufficiency in comic others and thereby serving social progress. Yet if Bergson had happened to integrate those temporal aspects of his conception of the laugher's experience more thoroughly, even if negatively, with his influential theory of subjective time then humor theory today, lacking as it does a thorough engagement with subjective temporal aspects, might look very different. To pursue that point through its Bergsonian base is beyond the scope of the present article but I have dealt with it to some extent in an essay on Nietzsche and will pursue it further in a later work on Bergson, Deleuze and laughter.

Another problem in pursuing the laughter-time-self nexus is the way the self is regarded, or else disregarded, in humor studies. There is on the one hand a tendency to assume a unitary self as a starting point and agent of laughter, along the line of Hobbes but evident even in the more liberal pragmatic approaches of theorists like Morreall. The "I" is treated as given, almost transcendental, which immediately closes off from analysis the possibility of its disappearance. On the other hand, the self who laughs (or who is laughed away) may be utterly or largely absented from the beginning in discourse-based studies of humor, as in much linguistics, in formalism and structuralism, even some poststructuralism, for instance. Along with these scholarly impediments, there are considerable psychological and social resistances to the notion of a disappearing self. It is possible, only possible, that certain cultures where the individual self is less emphasized are more amenable to the notion of self-loss or self-evacuation at the core of laughter; in Western cultures—particularly before deconstructions of the self in postmodern philosophy and literature, and before the growth of interest in meditation and yoga—the very idea has tended to be associated with reckless self-abandon, removing the superego's lid from a Pandora's box of barely repressed drives. This is evident to some degree in Bataille's ecstatic

vision of laughter under the influence of Nietzsche and a little Freud, but the assumption has been in the culture for a long time and is possibly at work in the fear and censorship of laughter which according to Vlieghe et al. is fostered in the classroom and carried into adulthood.

Despite this, with the gradual relaxation of the assumption of a unitary imperial self, along with the increased attention given to time and time consciousness across academic disciplines these days, it is now easier to consider the idea of self-loss taken up by Vlieghe and colleagues. In fact it may be more accurate to say that their conception of laughter is an outgrowth of those social and intellectual changes. The notion of self disappearance in the burst of laughter makes a certain sense insofar as the self is viewed as a construction of and through time, and insofar as it is accepted that laughter is a sudden and radical subjective temporal disjunction. It is not a supernatural event, then—even if it is a wonderful one. We can begin to form an outline of the process, with some reference to incongruity theory, so long as the issue of the temporal effect of the cognitive catastrophe effected by incongruity, remarked as early as Kant and then Schopenhauer, is given due consideration, which it hasn't been to this point.

### **3. Doubts and Possibilities**

The question may be not so much whether the little death can occur but rather what is being done with it, and what could or should be done with it, if anything at all. As already suggested, that is a matter of cultural and social contexts, of ideology, and of personal inclinations within these. That laughter has this apparent capacity to quickly, pleasurably change our sense of being in time is no small matter; there is much at stake in the way it is perceived and utilized, even where there is an impulse not to send it to work at all but to allow it to be enjoyed for its own sake. Clearly, despite the continuous and growing refrain of “laughter is the best medicine,” it is a realm of underexplored effects and potentials. Which is not to say exactly that it can be whatever we want it to be. In response to an earlier article by Vlieghe et al, Barbara Houston writes, “Any analysis that is isolated from social context, content, and meaning of laughter keeps this phenomenon more innocent and less problematic than if it were contextualized” (p. 214). This is unquestionably true and it is a practical reality that in order for laughter to be recognized as such institutionally, as Vlieghe et al. propose, the phenomenon would first need to be conceptualized in more depth and detail, including that momentary impact on subjective temporality and its longer term effects.

There are related points, connected to Vlieghe et al.'s referencing of Bataille, that warrant a healthy skepticism. As mentioned earlier, Bataille's and Nietzsche's experience of a "super-laughter" is conspicuously and perhaps essentially discovered in isolation, where the self, released from its social context, may be more easily collapsed and reborn as something other—in the *mind* no less than in the body: it is inevitably to some extent an *imagined* community that is born of this even if it is an embodied imagination. Frankly, that is a suspicion, just a suspicion, I have whenever I read about radical communities of a superior, embodied "passional laughter" advanced by scholars immersed in reading, whether following Bataille or Bakhtin. That is to say, there is a certain literary distance in this imagining which allows the laughter, far from being embodied in a real world as it claims, to be fetishized and, despite all the references to materiality, to be raised to the level of a transcendental signifier. Cixous sought to overcome this through another type of communication, but before that, Sartre, in response to Bataille's claims for laughter as the wellspring of a radical new being, noted that Bataille and his work were conspicuously lacking in laughter and its attendant lightness.

Sartre also notes in addressing Bataille that in social reality laughter is hardly the domain of radicals: "Conservatives excel in it," he observes (p. 70), which brings the issue of the temporal mechanisms of laughter back to the fore. While a case can be made for the potentially extraordinary effect of laughter upon our self—momentarily annihilating it and allowing it to be reborn in a way—the temporal mechanisms beneath laughter should be kept in mind when considering ideological implications. Kant's description of a strained expectation being reduced to nothing long ago suggested that laughter does not just say goodbye to the past; it also, perhaps principally, subverts the future tense, the tensing of the self towards the future. That is, the subversion of time in laughter may just as easily be a way of resisting changes to the status quo, or at least moderating the pace of transformation (and thereby rendering it palatable, perhaps functional). The Nietzscheans right up to Parvulescu, as well as Vlieghe et al., are at pains to insist on the little death and immediacy ("nowness") of a type of laughter as the beginning of something new; yet the laughter generated at some kind of punch line is firstly an end, generally regarded as a pleasurable end in itself, and may readily serve a cyclical return. In fact, in that way the timelessness of the comic, as Lydia Amir notes, drawing on Langer, may be related to the ancient fertility rite of *Comus*. This is not to say that laughter cannot be enjoyed by social revolutionaries, that a super-laughter cannot exist and could not be used for socially radical purposes, only that laughter is not per se socially radical.

These are doubts, not dismissals. For me intriguing challenges and the prospect of adventures come from studying the nexus of laughter, time and the self, which I believe is in its infancy. It is an adventure into being human that does perhaps offer a window into new ways of being in time, being as time. To further this exploration of a phenomenon on the edge of phenomenality we need to find a more complex and systematic vocabulary for the description of subjective temporal experience so that we might better discuss and understand what is going on “before, during and after laughter,” as Inoue puts it. This is taking me (on the recommendation of humor scholar Thiago Leite) into Deleuze’s work on the subject of time, as well as that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, but even these, I’m sure, will be insufficient and I feel the need or desire to move outward. We need to address more attention to the way cultures outside the European-American context both laugh and conceptualize laughter for themselves. It is not enough, in fact it is surely detrimental, to merely place our preconceptions about what laughter is and must do onto other cultures, not only because it is culturally insensitive but because we surely have much to learn, even about ourselves, by broadening our gaze and listening to other voices on the subject. My small and tentative exploration of work on laughter by some Asian scholars has been very rewarding in expanding my horizons on the issues of laughter, time and the self, for instance. It has also, in conjunction with the idealism of Vlieghe et al.’s work, got me thinking further about the role laughter *might* play, *may* already be playing, as a globally shared nothingness, time-out, *détente*—a subversive interruption of the economically driven compression of time—in which beneath our differences and tensions we are able, perhaps without even being conscious of the fact, to commune.

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