

Laughter as Immanent Life-affirmation

Reconsidering the Educational value of Laughter through a Bakhtinian lense

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Introduction: Out of Place Laughter

This essay focuses on the phenomenon of laughter and more precisely laughter taking place in the context of formal schooling. My main objective is to show that a particular (and not often discussed) form of laughter is in itself educationally significant. This concerns the kind of contagious laughter we undergo in spite of our own intentions and which sometimes makes us lose our grip on ourselves, in the sense that we are entirely delivered to spasmodic body-reactions. As I will argue, this specific phenomenon is not to be confused with other things such as humor and amusement, which can and should be dealt with separately. Although a detailed analysis of humor and amusement falls outside the scope of this essay, I argue that, when no such distinction is being made, we run the risk of taking no notice of the significance that laughter, taken as a strong corporeal event, might possibly have. Moreover, I argue that a lack of clarity on this point might be explained by the inconvenient nature of this phenomenon: whereas humor and amusement are phenomena that are sometimes highly esteemed, it is not easy to deal in a positive way with a physical behavior in which we no longer relate to the world and one another as we intend, but in which we are subject to a set of involuntary muscular convulsions. And this is especially not easy in the world of education, where laughter is often disqualified as something annoying or even inappropriate.

It might be said that, in educational contexts, the particular kind of laughter I want to discuss is ‘out of place,’ similar to the way in which corporal waste products are sensed as unsuitable in many, if not all, human societies. I refer here to Mary Douglas’s magnum opus *Purity and Danger* (2008), in which she argues that social order and cohesion depend upon the observance of strict regulations regarding the clean and the dirty, because these are strongly embodied symbols of integrity and disintegration. They represent in a direct and almost literal way what is under and what is beyond intentional control. From a very early age, we are trained to feel disgust for litter and dust, but also for clipped toe nails or feces. Therefore, the way in which we relate to these realities becomes subject to prescriptions that range from soft pressure (e.g. rules of etiquette that prevent us to pick our nose) to harsh legal repression (e.g. laws that forbid public urination). Although these taboos and legal regulations are often claimed to be legitimate because they reduce the impact of unhealthy circumstances or the contact with pathogenic organisms, they prevent us from seeing the *real* danger that ‘matter out of place’ brings into presence (pp. 29-31). The truth, so Douglas claims, is that dirt, waste and exocrine secreta are dimensions of human existence that escape the willful and conscious imposition of meaning and that therefore disturb the clear ordering of social life we normally desire. This explains why we require keeping certain aspects of our physical existence hidden to the public eye, or why we want to remove them as quickly as possible (Fusco, 2004). So, it is not so much out of a concern for hygiene and health that we dread soiled toilet seats or find hairballs clogging the shower drain so inconvenient, but because the presence of these corporal waste products contradicts, in a very immediate and material way, the order of things we long for.

Analogously, the kind of laughter I focus on in this essay is generally regarded in a denigrating manner. While roaring with laughter, we give in to rhythmical contractions of the diaphragm and start uttering all kinds of weird and meaningless sounds: our bodies generate

spasms and bizarre sounds that might contaminate and distort the integrity of societal order. This might explain why there are many (social) situations in which laughing is regarded as inappropriate and as a way of behaving that we should (try to) suppress and overcome. Now, schools are, together with other institutions such as churches or court rooms, places where laughter is regarded as extremely ‘out of place’ (Goldstein, 2003). This restriction placed on laughter in the world of education will often be explained away, with a claim that laughter doesn’t go together with the intellectual orientation, seriousness and discipline that are required, or that it soaks away attention. However, another and perhaps more adequate explanation is that laughter constitutes a direct and physical threat to the authority of parents and teachers, and is actually so annoying because it totally subverts the pedagogical order¹. In other words: because laughter is a direct manifestation of the physical side of existence that is beyond intentional control, it possesses a strong insurrectionary force and should therefore be dealt with the greatest caution inside schools.

In this essay, I want to take Douglas’s analysis a step further and argue that laughter only possesses this insurrectionary potential vis-à-vis the societal and pedagogical regime *because* it grants the possibility of experiencing in a different way what it means ‘to live together’. In that sense, laughter might bring about a transformation of individual and collective existence. I am not interested merely in finding an explanation for the odious quality that is often related to laughter, but, above all, in the positive and intrinsically educative value that a certain form of physical laughter might have. First, I define the precise form of laughter I am interested in and contrast it with other phenomena that are usually considered in one and the same breath, such as pleasure, amusement and humor (Morreal, 2009). Next, I briefly discuss more customary accounts of laughter and education while offering an alternative perspective on this issue. In the third and fourth sections, I try to substantiate my view by revisiting and elaborating further a classical analysis of the

phenomenon, namely, Mikhail Bakhtin's famous study regarding the degeneration the Medieval folk culture, in which laughter went together with a strictly positive affirmation of embodied life (Bakhtin, 1984).

Laughter versus Humor, Amusement and Expressive Behavior

The background of the analysis I pursue in this first section is Helmuth Plessner's work on laughter (Plessner, 1961). As a phenomenologist he was interested in a rich description of what we might experience when taken by a fit of laughter. Most interestingly, he treated this phenomenon as a strongly *corporeal experience*: laughter is a bodily reaction in which we are, often against our will and sometimes without reason (as it is a very contagious phenomenon), *overtaken by* repetitive contractions of facial musculature, vocal chords and diaphragm. Plessner argues that when we laugh, we answer to a disorienting situation we find ourselves in. However, it is no longer we, as self-possessed persons who respond, but rather embodied life itself answers in our place. In laughter, he believes, we give up a certain position. We answer directly and impersonally; we are delivered to an anonymous automatism. It is not really we who laugh, but something laughs in us and we are, so to speak, only the theatre and the frame of this event. Fully absorbed by the spasmodic reactions that just took place, we are completely 'out of position.' So a most important characteristic of laughter is that we involuntarily *lose ourselves* due to spasmodic reactions with which we tend to *coincide*. While laughing, *we are our bodies*. By this, Plessner doesn't mean an ontological position (that we are in the end nothing more than material reality), but to the experience in which we no longer have our bodies at our disposal. We aren't able and perhaps also don't desire to detach from what we experienced in the flesh.

It might be objected that Plessner only offers a very narrow definition of the phenomenon at hand and that he passes over many important things we might experience

when laughing, ranging from sheer joy to the revelation of certain truths. For instance, when we laugh with a character from a play by Molière, we might be confronted with all too human traits such as hypochondria or greediness and be taught a lesson about ourselves or human existence). Nevertheless, I will try to show that there are good reasons for distinguishing between a ‘pure’ form of laughter, which essentially entails a bodily experience, and other things that often go together with laughter. To begin with, introducing this distinction makes sense on a purely conceptual level. This is of course not to deny that pleasure and amusement are emotions that frequently accompany laughter, nor to deny that humor is a quality that defines silly and incongruous situations or actions that typically produce laughter. Still, there are many cases in which laughing may not be sensed at all as pleasant or gratifying (for instance when we cannot help or stop laughing)². Furthermore, the funny character of a situation or action is not a sufficient nor a necessary condition for people to be overcome by a fit of laughter (funerals, tickling, nitrous oxide or the sheer fact that someone else laughs, even for a reason we don’t know, might do the job). So, on mere conceptual grounds, laughter is not necessarily connected to amusement and humor, and therefore a ‘pure’, bodily form of laughter might be singled out as an object for further investigation. This is, however, not the only reason why I focus on laughter as a bodily experience. I will argue that this corporeal experience has a significant educational relevance which tends to escape from the attention of the researcher when she immediately reduces it to pleasure or humor. To be perfectly clear, I’m not saying that I am *against* humor or amusement or that I am planning to question the educational potential these phenomena possess. Neither am I suggesting that ‘pure’ laughter is better than other types of humor (‘pure’ is solely meant as a descriptive category). My intention is simply to point out that when we discuss humor in this way, we risk leaving out an important dimension of laughter³.

Moreover, 'pure' laughter might be opposed to an *expressive* range of behavior that only superficially resembles it and that perhaps should be called 'laughter' only in a figurative sense. Expressive forms of laughter refer to gestures that are used to convey or amplify an opinion or an attitude regarding a person or a situation; for instance, when we catch someone in a delicate situation, and *laugh at* her, in order to manifest our own superiority or to put her in her place, or *smile at* her in order to show that we fully understand her or feel sympathy. In these cases laughter has the same function as body-language. In opposition to forms of tender, understanding or sardonic laughter that goes together with willed action, there is also a kind of laughter *that overcomes us* – sometimes completely against our own wills. This is to say that smiling, grinning or jeering at someone should be seen as an intentional usage of gestures, implying that we are in control of the meaning of what we do. Something quite different takes place when we are taken by laughter and are left utterly dispossessed. In that case it is no longer possible to confer a precise meaning to what (just) happens. *Pure laughter is beyond meaning*. What is more, whereas smiling or jeering can easily be individual and private matters, the laughter in which we are carried away in spite of ourselves is essentially a *social* event. Even if we might laugh against our will without others being present, for instance when watching a comic film on our own, this has a different phenomenological quality. It seems that the experience of self-loss during laughter also has to do with our exposure to one another *as corporeal beings* (Nancy, 1992). Perhaps this is why Plato claimed, going against the Homeric tradition, that the immortal (and therefore disembodied) gods cannot laugh, or why it seems difficult to laugh together during an online chat conversation.

Of course, the unexpressive kind of laughter I am interested in often takes place in humorous situations and is often accompanied by feelings of pleasure, merriment and joy. These conditions, however, are not essential to fathom what we experience at the level of the

corporeal. Defending the idea that we should fully concentrate on the ‘merely physical’ aspect of laughter, and claiming that, seen as such, laughter is ‘beyond meaning’, I might create the false impression that I am also defending a dualist account of human beings (the independence of the mind and body). On the contrary, the very phenomenon of laughter clearly shows, in my opinion, that it is impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between two substances, the mental and the corporeal. Nevertheless, I believe that it is possible and desirable to make a distinction between two modalities of bodily self-experience—*having our body* versus *being our body* (Plessner, 1961). In the latter, we don’t find ourselves ‘at a distance’ from our body, which might for instance happen when suffering severe pain. Being in pain, we have an *experience of the body*, an experience of something that haunts us or forces itself upon us and with which we cannot coincide. Contrary, when roaring with laughter, something different takes place, namely, a bodily experience. In this case, there is no distance experienced between ourselves as subjects and something that remains outside ourselves, as we completely coincide with the muscular reactions that completely take possession of us.

Existing Approaches Concerning Education and Laughter

In the following sections I would like to go deeper into the intrinsic significance of laughter seen from a wholly body-centered perspective, and to explain why educational theory should be concerned with this. However, I should first clarify that the perspective I want to elaborate here differs in important ways from another approach that has recently become popular in educational theory and research, which is interested in the benefits laughter may bring for education (e.g. Gruntz-Stoll & Rissland, 2002; Gordon, 2010; Roth *et al.* 2011). Although this school of thought might at first sight defend the same things I want to bring forward, this approach reduces laughter to something that has scarcely anything to do with

bodily experience. On the contrary, this view deals with laughter on the condition that it is *not solely* a corporeal affair, and, thus, on the condition that it is not threatening to the pedagogical order. This precisely will warrant my plea to go deeper into the bodily side of laughter. And, paradoxical as it might sound, I will argue that it is precisely because of its dangerous and insurrectionary nature that laughter is to be valued as educationally relevant.

The approach that might resemble mine, is the following one: due to the way in which actual school life is organized and ordered laughter is usually dismissed, but this powerful resource urgently needs to be given back its full due and put at use as a pedagogical tool. In this view, laughter is not antithetical to the goals of schooling and edification, but rather a way of realizing (more efficiently) what education aims at. That is, as long as it is used moderately and confined within certain borders, humor can stimulate a more relaxed class atmosphere and solidify social bonds. It also offers the possibility to make learning an enjoyable activity, thereby stimulating intrinsic motivation. Likewise, laughter has an impact on creativity and problem-solving capacities, it stimulates both sides of the brain and it prevents or at least reduces the incidence of certain emotional problems such as depression.

Furthermore, this approach emphasizes that the seriousness that teachers require in daily class-room practice prevents students from reflecting upon habits, convictions or existential issues. Therefore, teachers are advised to laugh from to time at themselves and at their subject matter, demonstrating that they are also vulnerable beings who are not omniscient and that the things that are written in textbooks are not the only important matters in life. All this will stimulate in students an open and reflective attitude which allows for a more complete, emotionally richer and more virtuous existence. Moreover, when teachers become sensitive to the topics about which their students laugh, they might come to understand them better and to create the possibility for an honest discussion about the young's world. Perhaps we should even allow laughter for the sake of pleasure in schools and

classrooms since the tendency to burst out in laughter is a spontaneous and natural tendency and should not be repressed. Sensual gratification should not be feared, but allowed and even encouraged so that we don't undermine something essential to human existence.

These arguments in favor of the educational worth of laughter have, however, *nothing to do with laughter as such*. What is at stake in these arguments is not really laughter. First, most of these arguments in favor of laughter deal with the surplus value of humor, amusement and pleasure, but don't address laughter in the sense of a powerful physical mode of behavior. On the contrary, laughter is only tolerated as long as it accompanies and promotes the formation of intellectual insights, personal growth, increased motivation, or moral development. Second, when laughter is praised, this is not because it has an inherent educational value. In other words, this approach regards laughter as something valuable *as long as* it may serve established educational aims. This means that laughter appears as a tool that serves goals that remain in the end external to what actually might be lived 'in the flesh' during a fit of laughter—that we completely are 'out of place' and coincide with our bodies. Hence, this more common approach to laughter in education is not interested in the bodily experience of laughter.

To be clear, I am not saying that the common approach on the educational relevance of laughter is incorrect or unimportant. It is not my intention to call into question that laughter might stimulate motivation or contribute to more humane and authentic ways of learning and teaching. I am also not disputing the significance of the effects that are praised by this school of thought, and I am certainly not claiming that pure laughter is preferable to self-depreciating humor. Instead, I would like to emphasize that this particular way of looking at laughter narrows it down to humor or merriment and reduces it to a purely pedagogical instrument. As a result, we lose sight of the possibility that 'pure' laughter might have an inherent educational significance. Furthermore, a one-dimensional concentration on pleasure and

humor, as well as a functionalization of laughter in view of existing educational objectives, might be argued to constitute a (conscious or unconscious) attempt to neutralize the insurrectionary potential of laughter and to give it a more safe destination. Laughter is endured insofar as we are not confronted with its annoying and uncomfortable effects. In contrast, I want to stay true to what might be actually lived when laughter occurs and to elaborate the educational meaning of this entirely physical mode of behavior.

Humor versus Carnavalesque Laughter: The Direct Affirmation of Embodied Life

In order to elaborate such a positive account, I turn to Bakhtin's famous study of the work and the world of the French humanist writer François Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1984). I should however immediately add that I will not deal with this book as an analysis of how 'carnavalesque' practices such as parody or exuberant laughter, which were typical of Late Medieval and Renaissance popular culture, posed a constant threat to the social order of those days. Repeating all this would add nothing to the argument I have developed so far. For me there is a more compelling reason to revisit this oeuvre. Besides contrasting folk and official (Church and State) culture (in Rabelais' days), Bakhtin also opposes Medieval culture to the Modern, enlightened way of living. More precisely, with the advent of Modernity we have, so he claims, witnessed a radical shift regarding the way we look at issues such as personal identity, community and the corporeal dimensions of human existence. The historical evolution laughter has undergone during the last five centuries is a telling illustration of this transformation.

Whereas laughter used to be a spontaneous and ebullient, physical event that possessed a potential for suspending clear distinctions between individuals, only a 'civilized' and decayed form survived in Modern times—"a laughter that does not laugh" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 45). This is to say that laughter is narrowed down to a disembodied and individual

activity, instead of being *a collective and bodily lived-through experience*. Late Medieval culture, so Bakhtin claims, knew a material body principle (Bakhtin, p. 18). This term refers not to “the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because [the carnivalesque body] is not individualized,” but to “the collective ancestral body of all the people” (Ibid.). So, with the rise of Modernity a ban was placed on the possibility of the collectivizing corporeal experience that exuberant laughter essentially is. Furthermore laughter became more and more a matter of insight— the focus shifted to *understanding*, as a private individual, wit and sarcasm. In this way, laughing was reduced to laughing *with* sophisticated jokes, elaborated plotlines and moralizing stories. It was principally concerned with the inappropriate and the anomalous, such as incongruous situations (ranging from slips of the tongue to surrealist concoctions). But, most importantly, impudent and disproportional manifestations of corporeality (like Homer Simpson’s insatiable appetite) become the object of laughter. For Bakhtin, this amounts to a degenerated form of laughter since in Medieval times laughter consisted in an insouciant acceptance and affirmation of bodily existence and was therefore itself impudent and beyond proportion. For the Medievals, laughter had nothing to do with deriding and with mocking the insolent things we sense not to be fitting inside a dominant regime of meaning. The exaggeration that is linked to embodied life has “a positive, assertive character,” meaning that abundance does “not reflect the drabness of everyday existence. The material body principle is a triumphant, festive principle, it is a banquet for all the world.” (Ibid., p. 19)

To fully appreciate this claim one should without any reservation examine Rabelais’ writings themselves⁴. I guess that for many people today reading *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* is not a pleasurable or amusing thing to do and it is certainly not the kind of book that makes one laugh one’s head off. It’s more probable that the contemporary reader takes offence at the bawdy and even extremely savage things that are portrayed here: discussions regarding the

best instrument for wiping one's ass, which results in the conclusion that one should use a small bird covered with a downy coat, or a rejected lover who covers his ex-Mistress's coat with chopped pieces of a bitch's genitalia, upon which the lady becomes the prey of a bunch of lecherous hounds. This might, of course, just indicate that our sense of humor has changed since then and that we have become more polite persons. Another explanation is that Rabelais' work just isn't a sequence of jests and pranks (some of which could perhaps still today be displayed in a Monty Python-film), but that it belongs to *a completely different culture*, a culture in which laughter was not yet narrowed down to mere humor, but a direct affirmation of the materiality of life and a form-of-life itself.

In contradistinction to this entirely positive laughter as a form-of-life, the Modern, degenerated form of laughter has an *exceptional* character: mostly, it constitutes a 'time of release' that stands out in stark contrast to the bleak reality of every day. So, modern laughter functions as a safety valve, which allows for a moment of liberation from the structural wrongs inherent to the world we live in, the monotonous bourgeois life we are expected to lead or the repression of unproductive tendencies and desires, while not changing the way things are. In that sense, laughter is made *instrumental* to the continuation of the manner in which society is actually organized—it allows for a moment of total license that is always limited in time. When we laugh with inappropriate contents, such as unfamiliar sexual behavior, we might be granted for a very brief time freedom from the imposition of oppressive norms. But in the end, the social regime that was temporarily destabilized is reinforced; the whore-hopper we joke with is put in its proper place again⁵.

It has to be admitted that the base and the inappropriate, and especially the sexual, are major themes in Rabelais's work. But, this testifies more to a positive experience of embodied life that is all-pervading, rather than to a mere reversal of the established order and its official culture: "We must stress... that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody

of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture” (Ibid., p. 11). This means that the insurrectionary force that carnivalesque laughter possesses follows from this fully positive life-experience, rather than that this inversion of social and cultural codes constitutes the meaning of the carnivalesque. However, the opposite thesis is often claimed by authors who are inspired by Bakhtin’s ideas. This is for instance the case when Lauren Langman argues that the carnivalesque contains an insurgent power, *because* it addresses the primitive, the animal within us (Langman, 2008). In order to substantiate her view, Langman brings forward illustrations of what are in her eyes contemporary forms of carnivalesque life-style, such as the practice of body-piercing or the pornification of dress and life-style⁶. These examples concern an ‘imagined premodern primitive’ and imply a return to ‘something more basic and fundamental in human nature’ (Ibid., p.665). Therefore they have the potential to defy bourgeois customs. What is at stake is thus a negation of imposed cultural norms through the appropriation of a pre-civilized and more authentic way of life. This seems to me a wrong interpretation, as the force of the carnivalesque is here only approached negatively (i.e. as a departing from something else). Again, the most interesting insight Bakhtin has to offer for me is not so much that the carnivalesque, and thus laughter, is a brutal or bestial behavioral residue that undermines the existence of civilized culture, but that with the introduction of civilized culture the existence of a plainly positive laughter has become more and more problematic. Since Modernity, laughter is narrowed down to humor and sarcasm, and has therefore lost its entirely corporeal and life-affirming character.

Bodily Experience and Equality

Taking carnivalesque laughter seriously moreover implies that the recurrence of extreme verbal violence in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* should be dealt with in a proper way – and not

from a present-day point of view. Although excess and exaggeration might be interpreted as linguistic tropes, implying that one might express or paraphrase the same message by using other words (just in the way that one might explain a joke in a more exhaustive and less ambiguous way), this violence might also be seen as a language that has become excessive or that is ‘drunk with hyperbole’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 307; Simons, 1990). Carnavalesque language is then a form of speech that consists in a tendency typical for the physical body to cross thresholds. Language in Rabelais’ insolent stories is not something that stands outside the corporeal (and that allows to represent the body in metaphoric ways), but is something that is itself corporeal, “the positive hyperbolism of the material bodily principle” (Ibid., p. 45). Exaggeration is language ‘made flesh’, so to speak, an immediate manifestation of the exuberant and unbridled forces proper to the body. What is at stake is thus *language-as-body*—language experienced as a corporeal excess itself, rather than *body-as-language*—the body seen as an intentional communication medium.

Together with the transition from the carnivalesque world to a more enlightened and civilized one, our relationship to human embodiment changed. The ‘grotesque’ body was substituted by a self-contained body that is clearly separated from that of others:

That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface and the body’s ‘valleys’ acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 320).

The grotesque body, on the contrary, is not something private, but a never-finished physical reality that, referring once more to Douglas (2008), not only constantly produces, but actually *is* ‘matter out of place’. “[T]he grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 317). When we are taken by laughter we go through an unwilling bodily

experience that is so strong that we entirely coincide with grotesque corporeality. This precludes the possibility to affirm ourselves as atomized and self-identical entities. We only relate to one another as far as we are grotesque bodies. A more accurate way to put this is perhaps that we relate to each other as far as we are ‘flesh’.

The experience of communal laughter implies an unrelenting “suspension of all hierarchy, rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (Bakhtin p. 10). In this experience, any regulation of our ‘being together’ according to well-defined identities and clearly distinguished roles is canceled out. Normally, similarities and differences regarding identity and social position define the scope, inherent possibilities and depth of the relationship we have with others. We usually only feel members of a community if we share something with the other members, we only obey those who we find rightfully occupying a higher social position (parents and teachers), and we are only on an intimate basis with particular categories of people (lovers, friends, psychiatrists). When we meet as grotesque bodies, which typically happens when we are taken by a fit of laughter, communal existence is no longer mediated through these conditions of (similar or different) identities and positions. Coinciding entirely with the flesh that we are, we immediately find ourselves together and it doesn’t matter with whom we form this particular form of community⁷. Carnavalesque laughter “is not an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people... [I]t is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone” (Bakhtin, p. 11).

All this might help to understand better why laughter possesses an insurrectionary quality vis-à-vis any social ordering. This is *not*, as Simon Dentith wrongly claims, because carnivalesque laughter symbolizes social struggle or canalizes popular resentment against a prevailing social structure. Laughter is neither a form of social glue that gathers the outcasts in their resistance against the ruling class nor a weapon we can intentionally put to use (Dentith, 1995, pp. 72-73)⁸. Bakhtin very emphatically claims that carnivalesque laughter

does not build stakes. Although it might be tempting to interpret this kind of laughter as expressive of a successfully realized alliance between the castaways, the experience of true carnivalesque laughter can never be appropriated and so it can never become the property of one of two parties that are involved in a (social) struggle (Simons, 1990, p. 133). While laughing, each and every one is completely *dispossessed* and so any possibility of identification with a social or political faction is precluded. Laughter is in a deep sense disarming and makes the very idea of opposition or struggle meaningless.

Thus, the insurrectionary force of laughter resides in its potential to put an end to *all* attempts to order or regulate our 'being together' on the basis of positions and identities. In this laughter, neither conditions of similarity nor conditions of difference play a role. A more positive way to rephrase this idea is that when we are taken by this strongly physical experience an *immediate form of equality* is achieved. The equality experienced during grotesque laughter is not mediated and is not the result of acknowledging that we share a condition of belonging (Agamben, 2005). When laughing we are not equals *because* it allows us to see that we are ultimately the same and that we are therefore forced to give up normative patterns of identification or hierarchical differences in positions that society imposes upon us. On the contrary, the kind of equality Bakhtin points to is the corollary of what I called a *bodily experience*—an experience during which we are collectively taken by rhythmical and anonymous spasms and therefore relate to one another only insofar as *we are flesh*, and more precisely *fully flesh*. At such a moment of immanent life-affirmation, it makes no sense to understand communal life in terms of either differences or similarities in position or identity.

The Educational Meaning of Laughter

It is not my intention to discuss the historical accuracy of Bakhtin's account of laughter and of the evolution regarding the way in which we relate to our bodies. I am not inclined to follow

his arguments all the way through, but rather read his analysis in a more ‘synchronic’ way, meaning that the opposition of carnivalesque and civilized forms of laughter can be taken as an idea that matters today (Sidorkin, 1997; Michelson, 1999). In this view, we are still able to experience carnivalesque laughter, but in certain contexts, and especially inside pedagogical institutions, this pure form of laughter is usually fended off, or only tolerated if it gets a clear function and a safe destination. If this is the case, the equalizing potential that is linked to the grotesque body gets tamed, and laughter is rendered useful to the continuation of an established societal regime.

This regime determines in a dual manner the world of formal education, as traditionally conceived (Rancière, 1991). First, schools and other pedagogical institutions depend as a rule on clear hierarchical barriers between a small group of people who, due to their age, moral maturity and professional knowledge, are rightfully in charge and the flock of ignorant and incapable newcomers that is in need of their guidance. Second, and more importantly, these institutions see the preparation of newcomers for a future social life often as their utmost calling and reason of existence. Schools and other pedagogical institutions select and rank students on the basis of their own possibilities (and on the basis of the efforts they have put on display) in order to get the right person in the right place in the adult world. Formal education is structured according to a pedagogical order that mirrors *and* supports societal order. Although, this kind of preparation might stimulate students to discover and develop capabilities of which they were not aware, pedagogical institutions envisage in the end the continuation of an existing society and the distribution of roles within it. This objective furthermore demands that we relate to ourselves as subjects that are fundamentally interested in finding and appropriating a clear and fixed identity. It appeals to our desire to have a distinct position vis-à-vis the others with whom we share the world.

This ordering of individual and collective lives might be suspended at any time, because there is always the possibility that students and/or teachers burst out laughing together and thus undergo a bodily experience that is profoundly equalizing. At such a moment, the whole idea of order becomes irrelevant, which explains why laughter is mostly felt as problematic. However, it is also possible to take a completely different and positive attitude towards this laughter. In this case, bodily laughter would no longer be viewed as a threat or as a useful resource, but we would accept to *undergo* it and to live a moment of radical self-dispossession. In other words, we would experience a moment during which we entirely affirm our corporeal existence without any concern whatsoever for an established distribution of identities and social roles.

Such corporeal laughter might create a fundamental transformation of individual and collective life, and thus the possibility of something new and unforeseeable is opened. This may lead to something completely different from the kind of ‘change’ that pedagogical institutions normally allow for, and which always consist in what Derrida (1999) has described as “just making possible what is already possible.” Granted that the traditional school structure offers opportunities for discovering and exploring hidden talents in pupils and to achieve the unexpected, in the end the existing ordering of individual and collective life is always reproduced. This is because, in spite of these changes, the idea that we should be interested in achieving a substantive identity and a clear position in life, and that our social existence should be mediated according to these identities and positions is still fully accepted. When giving ourselves over to laughter we experience, on the contrary, a way of relating to one another in which the only thing that matters is that we are ‘flesh’. In this way, *an unconditional and immediate equality is achieved*. This is something completely out of the ordinary and should be called, referring once more to Derrida, ‘making possible the impossible’. Individual and collective existence is transformed in a way that radically

disrupts *any* imposition of a societal order. When laughing together in classroom, it doesn't really matter that we are together with others we didn't choose to be with, with persons that have completely different ambitions, opinions or social and cultural backgrounds, or with teachers that are always at a distance because of their professional status. We find ourselves as equals, and this might profoundly alter the quality of the relations students not only with each other but also with teachers. In that sense the possibility of a truly *new* future is created.

For this reason, laughter is *educationally relevant in and of itself*. This is not to say that we should trigger laughter in classrooms, if it is not already taking place, or that we should laugh more often or more intensely (replacing the existing pedagogical regime with a regime of laughter). Neither am I contending that we should embrace laughter as a pedagogical tool for realizing a more egalitarian society or a more authentic form of community. If I were claiming all this, laughter would become functionalized again. My whole point is that there is plenty of opportunity for laughter to just happen everywhere (including within pedagogical contexts), and that parents, teachers, professors or whoever is 'in charge' should allow this event to take place. Of course, for all sorts of reasons, discipline will have to be restored, but that doesn't mean that the moment of laughter, as long as it takes, might be accepted as something that is inherently significant (Sidorkin, 1997). All this of course implies that we are willing to rethink the vision of education we usually endorse and consider that the most important 'educational' moments might be those in which the whole project of developing and strengthening ourselves is interrupted (Thompson, 2006) and in which an unconditional form of equality is installed. This means that the neutralization of our desire to become someone with a clear and fixed identity and position is a precondition for the coming into being of something new and unexpected. And this precisely might happen when, during laughter, we experience what it means to 'live' together at an entirely corporeal level.

Notes

¹ With this phraseology I refer to the most basic power structure that organizes the meeting of the elderly and the younger generation. This order is not only threatened by devious forms of laughter that directly attack hierarchy and authority, but by laughter *as such* (Baas, 2003, p. 100).

² For a discussion about the non-necessary interrelation between laughter and pleasure, illustrated with many counter-examples, see Pfeifer, 1994.

³ This is typically the case in philosophical explanations of laughter that mainly concentrate on the things we laugh about, such as the superiority-theory, which states that when we laugh, we consciously or unconsciously mock and denigrate others in order to prove our own superior position, or the famous theory defended by Henri Bergson, who explains that we laugh with human behavior that becomes inert and machine-like (e.g. when we stick to much to habits or make a slip of the tongue) (Bergson, 1981).

⁴ A main part of Bakhtin's study precisely tries to show that the existing Rabelais-scholarship is on the wrong track, because it fails to read his work as a direct affirmation of physical life and tends to interpret this oeuvre through a contemporary lens: 'Current literature concerning this subject presents merely gross modernizations. The present day analysis of laughter explains it either as purely negative satire (and Rabelais is described as a pure satirist), or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12).

⁵ The 'classic' theories on laughter I discussed in footnote 3 do exactly the same: the model case of laughter they advance always concerns deriding something that is inappropriate or reprehensible in view of a desired form of behavior which, at the very moment a joke is told, is affirmed to be the right way of how to live our lives.

⁶ It should be admitted however that Langman, next to the obvious dangers related to these practices (that they might surreptitiously subject us to consumerist exploitation), also stresses the 'utopian' qualities of 'carnavalesque' lifestyles - in the same way that Giorgio Agamben argues that (some) pornographic imagery has the force to suspend all social hierarchy: it debases, but because of its obviously exaggerated character, it might also embody an otherwise almost impossibly imaginable 'idea of communism' (Agamben, 1995)

⁷ This doesn't of course preclude that we actually can laugh together with people that are close and very similar to us. The whole point is that this closeness or similarity don't constitute *necessary conditions* for the communizing effect laughter might generate. To be clear, I am not denying that we use to laugh with friends and significant others, that this kind of laughter might strengthen and deepen our friendships, and that anonymous laughter occurs less frequently.

⁸ Dentith draws here from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of the Carnival at Romans (1979), which he considers to be an archetypical form of the carnivalesque. Looking at the popular-festive culture of the Late Middle Ages through a contemporary lens, the carnivalesque is reduced here, once more, to a form of satire that symbolizes the antagonism between the poor and the rich.

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