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Laughing at Ugly People. On Humour as the Antitheses of Human Beauty

Matilde Carrasco Barranco[1]

University of Murcia

ABSTRACT: Since antiquity, while beautiful people are loved and admired, the ugly are often subjected to mockery, usually because their defective appearance is often taken to be a sign of a faulty moral character. *Human* beauty, integrating body and character, becomes a norm which deviation from can lead to humor that, in this respect, is in the family of antitheses to beauty. Nowadays none of the major current general theories of humor (incongruity, superiority, and the relief) focus on the, once constant, contrast with beauty, nonetheless still very present in our culture and comic forms. By exploring the reasons why people may laugh at human ugliness, my aim is to relocate the question in the current scenario in order to show how, in these cases, the antitheses to human beauty still operates, finding room within the terms of the explanations offered by contemporary theories. I will also defend the complementarity of such explanations against their pretended rivalry, yet I will address possible counterexamples that help to refine the debate between theories that try to explain the nature of such a complex thing as humor.

1. Introduction: Humor, Beauty, and Theory

Human ugliness sometimes makes people laugh. Since antiquity, ugly people are considered appropriate objects for comedy and mockery, while

[1] Email: matildec@um.es

beautiful people are loved and admired. Generally speaking, the contrast with beauty, and human beauty in particular, has played in Western philosophical reflections on humour, from Plato to Rosenkranz at least, an important part in order to explain the roots of humor. For example, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle (1987, 1449a V) defined the ludicrous as "some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive". [2] And so, historians of art and aesthetics have recalled how the beautiful and the comic traditionally belong to two radically different orders.[3] On the side of beauty, we encounter what is noble, adequate, and proportioned while, on the side of ugliness, what is low, inappropriate, deformed, and excessive.

Nowadays, however, recent Anglo-American philosophical aesthetics analyses humor mostly in terms of three major general accounts in seeming competition (the incongruity theory, the superiority theory, and the relief from tension theory), which do not focus on the contrast with beauty in order to explain the phenomenon of why sometimes people laugh at ugly fellow human. While this absence could be explained by the decreasing relevance of the category of beauty in aesthetics in general since the nineteenth century, and the interest in explaining humor beyond the scope of ugliness, the issue is nonetheless still very present in our culture and comic

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[2] This quote, as well as all others that come from texts that are referenced in Spanish editions, has been translated by myself.

[3] See the history of the aesthetic category of "the comic" that Valeriano Bozal traces at Bozal, 1997, pp.103-106.

forms, and so still deserves philosophical attention. In this essay, my aim is then to retrieve this old question in the current scenario in order to show how, when laughing at ugly people, the antitheses to human beauty still operates, yet can find room within the varied explanations offered by contemporary theories.

Furthermore, I will also defend the complementarity of such explanations against their pretended rivalry. Since the analysis developed by D. H. Monro (1988) stated this standard classification, the three theories have been thought to be rivals, though recent research contests this common view by arguing that they address different aspects of humor trying to answer different questions, and therefore they are not incompatible but consistent with each other (Linttot 2017; Zamir 2014; Shaw 2010; Smuts 2006). My account will argue then also for the complementarity, particularly, of incongruity and superiority theory in the explanation of why human ugliness makes people laugh sometimes, without excluding the concurrence also of some tension release in the amusement caused by these cases. However, the theories also face counterexamples that I explore in the two final sections in order to suggest a more complex view of the phenomenon.

In this way, I would also like to show that bringing our attention back to this age-old aesthetic question not only benefits the understanding of it but it also may help to refine the current debate between theories that try to

explain the nature of such a complex thing as humor. Being so, before I proceed with my argument, I should make a couple of important remarks on the goals that both this essay and the theories seek.

I do not pretend here to explain once and for all why we find human ugliness comically amusing. This would be a formidable topic too complex and too large to engage in any sort of academic study, much less in a paper of this length; even more so if the very explanatory potential of the theories that I use has been questioned too. For it is true that, as Ted Cohen argues, it should be agreed that none of them can succeed as a *general theory* of *all* humor. Indeed, given the enormous range of potentially humorous things (in life and art), of the context and circumstances that determine whether someone finds them actually funny, and so that virtually no one's sense of humor reaches every humorous thing, the possibilities of any view, and of those in particular, of succeeding as an overarching theory that explains, much less predict, *all* humor are rather hopeless (Cohen 2001, pp. 376-377). And yet I think that it is still worthwhile paying attention to what these accounts on humor have to say about our case and the part played by human beauty since, by capturing what was essential in the views on humor sustained by different philosophers through history,[4] they seem committed

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[4] Although the adscriptions of some philosophers to the different theories is also often controversial, it is affirmed that Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Hazlitt and Kant would have subscribed the idea that humorous things are incongruous, while Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes and Bergson will be representatives of the superiority theory, and H. Spencer and

to offer properties that, necessary or sufficiently, every humorous thing share. Or at least, as Cohen also concludes, "the theories are still worth considering, however, if only as partial descriptions of some humor, especially if it is possible to regard them as three parts of a single theme (2001, p. 379).

2. Human Beauty as a Norm and the Incongruity Theory

Keeping in mind the reservations just expressed, I will start, and deal mostly, with the incongruity theory, since it is widely believed to be the best candidate for a general theory of humor. For one of its most prominent defenders, Noël Carroll, the theory certainly provides useful heuristic for when we try to understand humor.

Carroll summarizes the theory's hallmark by saying that "what is key to comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm – that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the way in which we think the world is or should be" (Carroll 2014, p. 17). Thus, the incongruity theory can explain the cases when we laugh at ugly people as here humour exploits deviations of human beauty, which can be certainly understood as a norm**.** With Kant (1990, § 16), we can think about

Freud will be those of the relief of tension theory. For a general account, and now a classic on the issue, see Morreall 1987.

human beauty as a mode of dependent or adherent beauty, that presupposes a concept, and the perfection of the object in accordance with it, for which one must see it as a thing of a certain kind; human beauty is then dependent on a concept of the human being.[5] As the norm is set by the sort of object in question, we can call ugliness some departure that transgresses or deviates from that norm by way of exaggeration, extravagance, or any other way of "denormalization" that shows inappropriate or incongruous.[6]

And this normative character of human beauty is not significantly diminished by the notable degree of social construction, and cultural and contextual variability, that shapes any actual pattern of beauty. Great Italian philosopher, essayist and writer, Umberto Eco affirmed this point when, at the beginning of his *Storia de la bruttezza,* said that beauty and ugliness are always defined in relation to a "specific model" that beauty represents and ugliness departs from, and that can be historically tracked through diverse artistic and cultural representations (2007, p. 15).

Since we are dealing with people's appearance, human beauty and ugliness are considered here specific visual qualities bound up with the pleasure or displeasure that their contemplation provokes.[7] However, as

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[5] For a sample of authors that have recently defended human beauty as a dependent one, see Carroll (2001, p.37); Zangwill (2003, p.336); Levinson (2011, p.195).

[6] See Paris, 2017, pp. 142-143.

[7] Their use here must be thus separated from the wider notions that make beauty and ugliness equivalent to aesthetic value, or disvalue.

Kathleen M. Higgins observes, human beauty "is not only skin deep…carries with it an impression that the person is more than an enjoyable image...emerges from a condition of integration that encompasses body and soul, however the latter term is understood" (2001, pp. 104, 105). This does not mean that when judging people's appearance, we cannot separate their physical aspects from their personality or character, but it is difficult to do so. Moreover, we tend to correlate the physical and the moral as if a beautiful exterior was a sign of virtue or moral goodness, and the opposite, as if ugliness was the face of vice and evil. Thus, it can be said, that "our tendency as human beings" is to consider and, consequently, to represent vicious and bad people, our enemies, and "those we must hate" as ugly, deformed or formless, beings, more or less monstrous, demons at a last resort (Eco 2007, 201).[8]

Noël Carroll points out that the corollary of the Kantian view of human beauty is that insofar as we call someone beautiful, we judge them as

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[8] The fact that this tendency is a pervasive one and, as we shall see, very important for explaining why we laugh at ugly people, does not exclude other actual trends. As Alexander Nehamas (2007, pp. 9-10) remarks, physical beauty has often been also considered the deceptively seductive face of evil. Nonetheless, both cultural embedded directions, in principle opposite to each other, can be traced back to classical views, where human beauty was understood as having an attractive physical side but, more importantly, as being a quality of the soul, and so as being superior to the former one. Nehamas recalls as well how in order to escape from the dangers of a delightful appearance that could hide an evil soul, the tradition that comes from Plato and develops into the Christian thought tried to ensure that beauty, when properly pursued, provided a path to moral perfection, aligned with goodness and virtue.

a perfect example of the category of human being. But the opposite goes as well, implying that nonbeauty or ugliness is the imperfect or defective realization of that category; thereby, to represent a person or a group as ugly portrays them as in some way or ways imperfect instances of the concept of the human. Thus, Carroll also notes the association of the ugly, or the monsters, with moral vice and evil, hence ugly people could be seen as "other-than-normal-people", somehow non-human or sub-human in the more extreme cases. These characters are commonly found in the popular genres of horror and humour, whose natural terrain lies therefore within the ugly (Carroll 2001, 37-39).

Designed to be ugly, animalized figures such as people with donkey' ears or rabbit's teeth, as well as the physical deformity of comic types such as clowns make people laugh, as does any other sort of folk who have a naturally odd appearance (for instance, because their heads or noses are too big or too small, or due to other inadequacies we could find in their bodies), since frequently too people take their ugliness to be sign of some intellectual or moral fault. All of them belong to the unfortunate troop of ugly persons, who can be comic-looking because they violate the cannons of human perfection, epitomized by beauty. Taken as weird, anomalous, worse than the average, they can be seen as forms of incongruity in relation to the norm, and so, traditionally suitable for comedy.

3. Conditions for Comic Incongruities

However, as has often been warned, incongruities *per se* are generally neither enjoyable nor comically amusing; ugliness, in particular, is unpleasant[9] and, like other anomalies, can make us curious, or lead frequently to confusion, perplexity, and even fear. For these reasons advocates of the incongruity theory, at least in its most recent and sophisticated versions, appeal to certain conditions under which we can find all sorts of deviations comically funny.

Carroll considers that the situation should not be threatening, or otherwise anxiety producing, as a basic condition for certain perceived incongruity to become comically enjoyed (2014, p. 50). On these conditions rests also, for example, the difference between horror and humour. Both are in the family of the antithesis of beauty, but presented in a context of fear, the monster produces horror and repulsion, while in a context bereft of threat, the result is comic amusement (Carroll 2001, p. 41). Nonetheless, these requirements should extend to cover the absence of any negative emotion or discomfort in the perceiver. This means, as Carroll notes too, that the joke can never be "annoying" but, furthermore, one should not enlist "a genuine problem-solving attitude", in order to enjoy the pertinent

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[9] Panos Paris (2017) has recently defended that deformity does not suffice for ugliness but requires also displeasure.

incongruity for its own sake, as part of an experience of "levity" (2014, p. 50). In this manner, Carroll wants to emphasize that not only must the audience not feel threatened but also that they should adopt enough "comic distance" in relation to the characters involved in the jokes or any other comic forms. By not feeling any empathy or moral concern for those, imaginary or real, characters, we can be retrieved of any worries and anxieties about what happens in the world of the joke (2014, p. 31). More recently, Tom Cochrane has insisted that being cognitively and practically unburdened are the two necessary conditions for the experience of finding something funny; conditions built into the incongruity theory (2017, pp. 51-52).

Like Carroll, Cochrane underlines the cognitive and emotional conditions that mark our attitude when we find something funny. One just needs to be capable of acknowledging which norm is being violated and how, but one should not feel obliged either to change our views or do something about it. Only this attitude can allow us to enjoy the incongruity as an incongruity, simply amusing, just joking.

4. Some Moral Issues

By setting up these conditions, incongruity theory underlines that, as we all know, comic amusement is very sensitive to the identity of the perceiver and

their current mood, the context in which it takes place, and the intention of the jokes or comic forms in general. As a clearly response-dependent phenomenon, humor must thus find the appropriate audience in the proper mood. And if comic amusement relies on the transgression of a certain norm, that audience must know which norm is being transgressed. So, jokes are social: a particular joke only makes sense for those who belong to a group of people who share certain rules, beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, etc.; people who get the joke are part of a sort of more or less lasting community within which it is possible to identify the violated norm, but what we have identified as "comic" conditions would preclude taking that violation seriously.

In our case though the norm transgressed is human beauty and so, insofar as it depends on the category of human being, laughing at ugly people necessarily involves moral issues if to the extent they are ugly, are considered in some way imperfect instances of the concept of the human, other-than-normal-people, worse than the average, even sometimes non-human or sub-human. Therefore, in order to enjoy the joke, particularly the condition of comic distance becomes crucial here, albeit sometimes difficult to adopt.

Traditional comic genres such as satire and caricature offer parodies of human perfection to denounce or ridicule a moral defect through a physical aspect. Typically, in satire the lack of empathy or compassion for

the persons mocked is justified by appealing to a moral function: the denunciation of vice, of reprehensible conducts and other challenges to social order with corrective and repressive purposes. Thereby, satire is meant to portray life's mistakes with the intention of teaching us what is deformed, what is ugly, what we should not do.[10] Satire then confronts individuals with some pattern of behavior, some "moral code" without which it becomes "mere abuse".[11] Given the cultural correlation between ugliness and vice, in satirical works, ugly people illustrate faults like selfishness, greed, hypocrisy, vanity, and so on, with the ultimate goal of preventing them. And because these faults deserve to be amended, even some temperance is to be expected from those whose weaknesses have been exposed. To sum up, as Carroll puts it quoting Molière, "the duty of comedy is to correct men by amusement" (Carroll, 2014, p. 79).

Caricature also deforms human appearance and invents "recognizable types", exaggerating body features aiming to mock or decry a moral fault through a physical characteristic (Eco, 2007, p. 152). Celebrated art historian Ernest Gombrich analyzed how the portrait caricature makes us shrewdly perceive certain features of someone's physical appearance or character by unifying them in a sort of exercise of comparison, condensation, and simplification, which results in the reduction of a

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[10] See d'Angelli and Paduano 2001, pp. 11, 27, and Bozal 1997, p. 104.
[11] See Gaut 2009, p. 247.

person's physiognomy to a formula that cleverly fuses "symbol and likeness in a dreamlike fantasy" making "the identity visible" (1985, pp. 136, 137). Thus, such visible or exposed "identity" conveys the case against someone.

Nevertheless, caricatures are many times expression of the least honorable intentions of comic forms, particularly those based on human ugliness. I mean cases where the deformed figure represents the vicious or evil side of people but also manifests offensive, aggressive, and cruel attitudes against these individuals or, significantly, against certain (national, social, cultural, ethnic, sexual, etc.) groups who are ridiculed through various representations of physical deformation, often animalized, in order to express their pretended moral depravation or infra-human condition. De-humanized in this way, these people are finally excluded from our moral community and have no rights (Carroll 2001, p. 42). The potential list of those derided for the sake of comedy in past and present times would be very long indeed and, at least in Western culture, would include collectives like black people, Muslims, gypsies, homosexuals, women, the disabled, immigrants.... and so many others among which social minorities, the weak, the vulnerable and the marginalized stand out. It is usually claimed that humor is one of the best sources of information about people's actual beliefs and this kind of "immoral" humor not only reveals the perversity of many views, attitudes and prejudices that are in fact more or less explicitly working in society but, by reproducing them, it would also help to reinforce

these norms.

Now, according to the theory, if we laugh at immoral jokes because we find them funny, we are the *appropriate* audience. In our comic case, when ugliness is the correlation of vice or non-humanity, laughing means that we are enjoying their so-represented incongruity by adopting the necessary comic distance which prevents compassion or similar moral concerns. And of course, it is easier to adopt comic distance when, as in the case of corrective humor, one thinks that those persons are actually vicious or evil, that is to say, if one is committed to the beliefs and prejudices that somehow make those people "deserve" to be abused like that. But even if we notice the wicked intention behind such evil jokes and reject those views as immoral, comic conditions could afford that we can still laugh without our amusement being necessary proof of our defective moral character. Against the thesis that defends that being comically amused by immoral humor shows that one endorses classist, racist, homophobic, etc. attitudes, Carroll defends that in fact we can simply *imaginatively* enjoy the wit of the humorist at formally devising the incongruity in question (Carroll 2014, pp. 98-99). From this perspective, being capable of identifying and understanding the relevant background beliefs mobilized in each case, and the way in which they have been manipulated, shows more relevance for comic success than being actually already biased by them.[12] Furthermore,

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[12] See Bergmann 1986.

what is key in order for the pertinent incongruity to be enjoyed is for it to be in the right context and mood, where one can enter the world of the joke and endorse its assumptions somehow *fictionally,* without being disturbed by one's own moral concerns, *as if* no real harm is threatened to those mocked by the joke. This is not to deny that actual harm may very well be inflicted in these cases and, again, that some people could find them funny even so (as one can laugh at the person that falls slipping on a banana peel), being proof of their endorsement of immoral views. The point is though that, given the conditions built in to the incongruity theory, immoral jokes are either funny, because we are capable of adopting comic distance as part of our experience of levity, or are less or not funny at all when we are not.[13] Therefore, immoral jokes could put comic conditions in danger, but the theory sustains that there is no funniness without fulfilling them. Thereby, also when laughing at ugly people, if we cannot overcome our moral concerns, we take the case seriously, and so the joke ends.

5. Other Theories of Humor: Superiority

However, managing to adopt such comic distance and levity does not overshadow the fact that, when we laugh at ugly people, we laugh *at their*

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[13] Along these lines, "amoralist", "moralists" and "immoralists" discuss how ethical flaws may affect comic amusement and interact with its value. See Carroll 2014, Ch. 3.

expense, we make fun *of them* since, to see them as ugly, means to judge them incongruous with the norm, namely human beauty, in the sense that they are imperfect, thereby inferior by this standard that, as insofar as it is dependent on the concept of the human being, carries moral implications. But this is the hallmark of the so-called "superiority theory" which construes "humor as rooted in the subject's awareness of superiority" (Levinson 2006, p. 392). Therefore, superiority theory seems also to provides an important aspect of why we often laugh at human ugliness in which the deviation from the idea of beauty, as dependent on the category of humanity is also key.

Along with the incongruity theory, superiority theory is one of the most extended accounts of humor and one of the oldest too, since it goes back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle. Both theories have been long analyzed as rivals, as they would both try to stand alone when offering a single general explanation of comic amusement. However, as stated at the beginning, fresher research seeks to dismantle the idea that they are competing views by seeing them rather as approaches that aim to explain different things. And so, the theory of incongruity aspires to define the formal object of humor, while the theory of superiority is interested in the affective response that accompanies humor. But it would still not apply to all sorts of humor, since Sheila Linttot (2016) speaks in particular, of the "myth of the superiority theory" to refer to the presentation of the theory as

an essentialist theory of humor. As she states, given that not every kind of humor is the expression of superiority feelings, it is simply impossible to think about it as a theory of all humor. Moreover, it is hard to believe that philosophers of the stature of Plato or Aristotle did not warn that we do not actually always laugh only at the defects and weaknesses of others, although they reflected on the fact that on many occasions this is indeed the case. Lintott concludes that the theory of superiority should then be studied not as seeking to establish necessary and sufficient conditions for all kinds of humor but focused on a humor of a certain kind which ethical considerations normally accompany.

Consequently, both incongruity and superiority theories are not only compatible but can even be complementary if we find some comic amusement that enjoys "a certain kind of perceived incongruity that gives one a feeling of superiority" (Lintott 2017, p. 356), which after all seems to fit the cases when we laugh at ugly people.

Besides, Lintott adds that a reduction of psychic and/or bodily energy via expression in laughter can join the perception of incongruity and the feeling of superiority. This is to say that the "relief theory", a third thesis which has generally been regarded as a genuine rival of those other two, is also compatible with them. This last view was formulated by Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer, fathers of the theory, and it locates the essence of the humorous "in the relief from psychic constraint or release of

accumulated mental energy" that the pertinent item occasions (Levinson 2006, p. 393). In order not to stumble upon the possible objections arising from aligning with these authors' particular views of the human mind, a "weak version" of the proposal appeals to the basic claim that humorous laughter involves a release of tension or energy (Smuts 2006), along the lines expressed by Linttot. There are even those who, like Carroll, speculate that the fundamental intuition of this approach is aimed at highlighting the mental experience of releasing cognitive pressures that accompany comic laughter that in the end would be nothing more than a condition of the experience and not so much a definition of the traits of objects that are comical (Carroll 2014, p. 41). In any case, this third account that rather than defining humor, discusses the psychological processes that produce laughter (Smuts 2006) would not be incompatible with the other two theories, just as these would not be incompatible with each other, and the three of them being possibly complementary in accounting for, at least, some comic phenomena.

At this point, without excluding then the concurrence of the release of psychic tension or energy, it seems that the complementarity of incongruity and superiority theories provides important features that, as antitheses to beauty, help to understand what it is in some people's ugliness that we find amusing and why, at least in many occasions.

6. Some (Revisited) Objections

Because, however strong the partnership of incongruity-superiority may appear, it is opportune to discuss some possible objections. These objections have been directed separately at both theories, as they are standardly studied, seeking to demonstrate their respective limits as general theories of humor that supposedly try to explain every example of comic amusement. However, my interest is in revisiting them as they may apply specifically to their explanation of what can make human ugliness funny and so can help to challenge their respective justification of the phenomenon.

We have just seen that the explanatory capacity of the superiority theory has often been noted as being very limited. But even restricted to cases like the one before us, the objection arises that the theory cannot justify instances of self-deprecating humor. Let me consider, first, the work of those comedians who specialize in self-deprecation as would many (ugly) clowns who want people to laugh at their expense and are happily willing to do so. Carroll (2014, p. 64) refers to these kinds of comedians to illustrate that they would be denying the idea that no one likes to be laughed at, which would be the proof of superiority theory, as Roger Scruton has defended. Scruton is a contemporary proponent of the theory of superiority who analyses amusement as an "attentive demolition" of a person or something connected with a person. "If people dislike being laughed at," Scruton says,

"it is surely because laughter devalues its object in the subject's eyes".[14] However, this would not be a counterexample to the superiority theory because it is not just that, as Carroll admits, when Scruton says that no one wants to be laughed at, he means "being devalued in a way no one wishes to be" (Carroll 2014, 64) but also because these comedians offer their imperfections (here, their ugliness) precisely to ridicule, to excite the feelings of superiority in the audience, which assures their shows' success. Thereby, humor remains derisive, as the superiority theory claims.

Self-deprecation humor offers though a harder objection if you are the audience yourself. One can laugh at oneself and it is not impossible that, for example in front of a mirror, one can laugh at one's own ugliness. Lintott says that authors like Morreall would admit that the approach can account also for self-deprecating humor considering that on these occasions we express feelings of superiority "over a former state of ourselves" (Lintott 2017, 348). But Morreall (2013) also considers that at least some people laugh at themselves yet not a former state of themselves, but "what is happening now". This would make the superiority theory unable to explain my laughter at myself, due to my own ugliness, for instance. Insofar as we perceive ourselves as ugly, we perceive our anomaly in relation to a norm of beauty which is not at question, and so we perceive ourselves as inferior to

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[14] See Scruton 1987, p. 168. I take this description of Scruton's proposal as well as his words' quotation from Morreall 2013.

other people, but we are not being devalued in a way we do not wish to be; as a result, this does not give us a feeling of superiority. As unpleasant as it may be to recognize our own ugliness, being able to laugh indicates that we manage to take the same necessary distance from ourselves that we are supposed to be able to adopt from other unfortunate fellows who we might not feel superior to but that, due to their real or pretended "fictionality", do not make us feel pity or compassion.

Finally, another objection to superiority theory could come from caricature that is not mocking and ridiculing but kind and laudatory. Following Gombrich, I said earlier that portrait caricature wittily plays with the deformity of human appearance aiming to show certain features of someone's physical appearance or character; making "the identity visible". And, just as for Gombrich, the success of graphic caricature depends therefore on the mastery of the cartoonist in achieving what he called the "physiognomic expression" through which people's faults but also virtues are exposed (Gombrich 1985, p. 137). Thus, both depend on the ingenious distortion of human appearance but, in amiable caricature, deformity of appearance is not belittling, instead aims at offering deeper insights into the person's character to increase our sympathy (Eco 2007, p. 152). Thereby, no superiority feeling seems to color our comic amusement when laughing at human ugliness in an amiable caricature. However, while derisive caricatures do represent people as ugly, I believe that this is not the case of

kind portrait caricatures. For they will not represent someone as ugly since deformity does not suffice for ugliness but requires also displeasure.[15]

The example though could work as an objection against the incongruity theory. In general, caricature was used by Scruton to deny that perceived incongruities are the condition for comic amusement. Scruton sets the example of a caricature of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that "amuses, not because it does not fit Mrs. Thatcher, but because it does fit her, all too well" (Scruton 1983, p. 157). Then, when it comes to *comic* caricatures, we will be laughing then at their congruities, rather than incongruities. In Gombrich's terms, their success depends on their capacity for "making visible" the identity or truth about the person portrayed.

Despite this being so, it remains also true that, as Carroll says in response to Scruton, in the graphic caricature "congruity-as-correspondence-to-the-nature-of-its-subject" is compatible with "incongruity-as-lack-of-correspondence-to-the-appearance-of-its-subject", without which there will be no comic amusement (Carroll 2014, pp. 51, 63). Unlike other sorts of portraits that also capture the truth of the character, Carroll concludes, the discrepancy in the appearance makes the difference here, that is to say, the visual incongruity turns the representation into caricature, on this occasion a funny one.

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[15] See again Paris 2017.

To sum up, the antitheses to human beauty still operates in the terms of the explanations given by both the incongruity and superiority theories of the comic laughter sometimes caused by human ugliness, whose complementarity is useful to explain why. The variety of the occasions when we may laugh at ugly people though allows some exceptions to the superiority theory, which is nonetheless admittedly an account that cannot, and probably never pretended to, work as a general theory of humour. Nevertheless, being more ambitious in this respect, it seems that the incongruity theory could still do the job, as long as its premises were of course correct.

7. The Comic and the Rule

In the terms of the incongruity theory, human ugliness, as the deviation from a norm of human beauty, can provoke comic laughter when perceived by the appropriate audience, in the right mood and fulfilling the comic conditions. Let us recall that, in order to be found funny, the ugly, the deformed, the monster, must be perceived in specific states of mind free of negative emotions or discomfort, unburdened by any possible moral constraints in an experience of levity where no genuine problem-solving attitudes are required and no practical consequences are expected because we are just joking. However, some implications of these conditions can be contested

since they seem to deny humor much actual cognitive and practical impact, at least insofar as it means to change our minds.

For instance, going back to the last example, by telling the "truth", caricatures try to be enlightening (as was also the assumption in moralising satire), yet, no matter how compatible with the visual deformity of the appearance that truth might be, not much efficacy should be expected since under comic conditions things are not taken seriously. Nonetheless, Gombrich pointed out that the truth or "identity" that becomes visible in caricature has an actual impact given how "convincing" it is for our "emotional mind" (1963, p. 139). He also stated that, once exposed, such truth somehow stays with us, in our collective imaginary making caricature very useful for propaganda as well as for criticism and denunciation.[16] But the proponent of the incongruity theory could reply that, however illuminating, laughter in any case will respond to the pleasure of who reaffirms what somehow, they already think. Otherwise it will cause disturbance, and incongruities "designed to disturb" or "intended to be unsettling" come out of the boundaries of comic amusement (Carroll 2014, p. 52).

So, it is not that humor cannot be effective at all, but only in reinforcing the social rules that implicitly reproduces, which thereby remain

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[16] Even if such a truth was not real since "who could disentangle truth from falsehood in such a ludicrous mock portrait?". Gombrich (1985, 135).

unchallenged, while it just allows us to *play at violating* the norms. I warned before that it is admitted that humor accurately reflects what people think or believe, including immoral views. Indeed, Carroll emphasizes that the rhetoric of human ugliness can be "frighteningly effective" in spreading and consolidating prejudices and stereotypes that affect weak and marginalized collectives (Carroll 2000, p. 53), while he also thinks that it can be innocuous for whom is capable of entertaining such immoral jokes in a merely imaginative way (Carroll 2014, p. 116).

In consequence, Tom Cochrane has also defended that probably comedy is the artistic genre that can least influence our attitudes, in spite of the common opinion that often sees it transgressive. As he argues, we can only find something funny if we regard it as norm-violating in a way that doesn't make certain cognitive or pragmatic demands upon us (to defend the norm, or to abandon our norm-commitment); which means that it is not compatible with the conditions for comic amusement that, on the basis of finding something funny, we come to reject some existing attitude despite the fact that "it is compatible with these conditions that humor reinforces our attitude that something is norm-violating" (Cochrane 2017, p. 51). His conclusion simply follows then from the way comic conditions constrain the relationship between humor and the rules. Like at a carnival, humor affords us the enjoyment of rule transgressions but afterwards, everything stays the same.

And Umberto Eco also describes along these lines the relationship between the comic and the rule:

> The comic (where the opposite to the rule is perceived) seems popular, liberating, subversive, because it grants a license to violate the rule. But it grants it precisely to those who have internalized this rule to the point of considering it as inviolable…. Precisely because the rules, even unconsciously, are accepted, violating them for no reason becomes comical. (Eco, 1980a, pp. 282, 283).

But Eco wonders whether among the diverse subspecies of comic amusement some that would sustain a different relationship with the rules could be found, and finds such a way in what another illustrious Italian, Luigi Pirandello (1908), called "humourism". In order to distinguish it from "the comic", which is "the *perception* of the opposite" that presupposes and in fact affirms the rule, Pirandello describes "humourism" as "the *feeling* of the opposite" that goes beyond that first perception, moving us from a plain comic laugh to a perplex, almost bitter, smile that exposes and questions the rule. Pirandello traces the origins of this tradition back to Cervantes' Don Quixote,[17] but also gives examples of an ugly and extravagant appearance.

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[17] "We'd like to laugh at all that is comic in the representation of this poor madman who disguises himself, others, and everything, with his madness, but laughter doesn't come to our lips pure and easy; we feel that there is something that troubles us and hinders us; it is a sense of grief, of commiseration, and even admiration; yes, because while the heroic

He spoke of an old lady "with dyed hair, smeared with who knows what horrible fat, and then crudely made up and dressed in youthful clothes" that makes him laugh because he "*warns"* that she "is *the opposite* of what an old, respectable lady would have to be", until reflection on why she might have wanted to have that look makes him penetrate his first observation and happen to *feel the opposite* which, while still laughing, prevents him from doing so in the same way (1908, 162). The point is, that only on the condition of laughing at her, and making people laugh at her, we can sympathize and feel pity for her, even admiration (Pirandello 1908, p. 186). This is why, as Eco concludes too, in the case of humourism, the ugly person is not, as in the comic, "victim of the rule that presupposes, but represents its conscious and explicit criticism" (Eco 1980a, p. 285). And for this reason, this kind of case constitutes a counterexample to the relationship with the rule that derives from some of the conditions that the incongruity theory builds as necessary to engender comic amusement.[18]

Concerned with our study case, humourism results from the tension between two contrary feelings where the anthesis to a particular norm of

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adventures of that pure hidalgo are ludicrous, there is no doubt however that he, in his ridiculousness, is truly heroic". Pirandello, 1908, p. 165.

[18] These cases also challenge the pleasurable feeling of superiority that we may experience at first over these ugly people. Recalling Pirandello's distinction, Eco further describes how, in this movement that takes us from the comic to the humoristic, "I don't feel superior to and distanced from the animal-like character that acts against the good rules, but I start to identify with him, I suffer his drama and my loud laugh transforms into a smile". Eco 1980a, p. 284.

beauty that defines the comic is not sanctioned but contested and undermined by *feeling the opposite.* In certain representations as in life, the humanity and dignity that the person displays claim for a different concretion of the transcendental category of human being which human beauty depends on. We may say that we still laugh at an incongruity yet somehow, we feel disturbed; disturbed enough to challenge our own views.

Humourism produces a restless laugh because it hovers over the distinction between what is taken as adequate and what is not, with the effect of eroding and so perhaps widening the limits of correctness. Probably, the theories of incongruity and of superiority in particular have underestimated or have not paid enough attention to this sort of effect. Albeit, Carroll concedes that "much humor is transgressive" since "forbidden ideas and emotions are aired" (2014, p. 101). As a matter of fact, humor can be transgressive because, admittedly, there are no limits, and we can laugh at almost everything. But that is not enough to guarantee the relevant cognitive and practical effects unless we see it as an act of empowering people.

Ted Cohen relates anomalous things that are irregular, unusual, unexpected but also often unsettling, yet still funny to the idea of power over something or someone. Firstly, power in the sense of freedom from the linguistic, social, cultural and natural constraints that are the inhibitions of our normal lives, and that is enjoyed at least in imagination. Secondly, and

less commonly noted he says, sometimes humor "bespeaks not power but powerlessness". It happens when "the anomaly has the form of extreme incongruity… truly absurd, genuinely incomprehensible". In such case, Cohen concludes, "one does not imagine oneself with power over anything, and yet one may find humor" (2001, p. 380). For him, we would be in "a mood of acceptance, of willing acknowledgment of those aspects of life that can be neither subdued nor fully comprehended". Although according to Cohen, this is not resignation, I believe that the case of Pirandello's humourism bespeaks of powerlessness yet in a mood of protest and challenge in which we find satisfaction. Thus, this "intertwined feeling of laughter and tears", as Pirandello (1908, p. 186) describes humourism is well located within the limits of comic amusement rather than outside them. Also because maybe the common belief in the transgressive power of humor, confirmed by a long history of censorship, is strong as it responds to the experience that humor very often does not leave things exactly as they are. When certain things are aired, or exposed as Gombrich suggested, even only in imagination, laughter kills fear and foments doubt.[19]

Seen this way, humourism conducts differently the anthesis of beauty played in the cases when we laugh at ugly people, stretching the scope of comic amusement beyond the limits of the standard justification

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[19] In these terms, Eco made the monk Jorge of Burgos condemn the subversive character of comedy in his famous novel, *The name of the Rose*: laughter "distracts from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God". Eco, pp. 474-475.

that the complementarity between the incongruity and the superiority theories gives, helping to manifest the complex nature of humor, and of its relationship with the rules, including human beauty, and to refine the philosophical accounts that try to understand all this.[20]

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