

# Dialectic's Laughing Matter

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*Cartoon by Izar Lunaček*

Before I begin, I want to begin with an epigraph. Conferences are as much about listening as they are about speaking—ideally speaking, at least. And listening has its obvious advantages. For one, to reference Deleuze and Guattari, one can make other, perhaps more sensible uses of one's mouth once it is no longer de-territorialized by language. And if to speak is to hunger (Deleuze and Guattari 1975, p. 35), if the forced choice is that between “bits of food” and “bits of Shakespeare” (Deleuze 1990, p. 23), when listening we can have both. We can have our cake and eat it too. The epigraph I am about to quote is taken from Philip Roth, his novel *I Married a Communist*, and the quote has to do with listening, but, more importantly, it has to do with storytelling, with conveying one's experience to others. Broadly and perhaps inaccurately speaking, the topic is Benjaminian, and it is primarily bits of Benjamin that my talk is concerned with. The quote has to do with listening—so listen up:

When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: “Listening.” Can that have been the unseen drama? Was all the rest a masquerade disguising the real no good that I was obstinately up to? Listening to them. Listening to them talk. The utterly wild phenomenon that is. Everyone perceiving experience as something not to have but to have so as to talk about it. Why is that? Why do they want me to hear them and their arias? Where was it decided that this was my use? Or was I from the beginning, by inclination as much as by choice, merely an ear in search of a word? (Roth 1998, p. 226)

Hopefully, that epigraph will make better sense once we get started.

Benjamin's position within the Frankfurt School is by no means unambiguous. Though deemed its fellow traveler, the relationship is a difficult one, permeated with tensions. And to begin somewhat arbitrarily, said difficulties and tensions are sufficiently exemplified by the circumstances surrounding the publication of his infamous essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (Benjamin 2008a, pp. 19-55). The French original, published in 1936 in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the official journal of the Frankfurt School, is missing the entire first section. Benjamin's letters from the time immediately prior to this first publication testify to an uneasiness and anger over the editorial process. The publication was overseen by Hans Klaus Brill, the secretary of the Parisian section of the Institute for Social Research. Brill refused to listen, turning a deaf ear to the author's pleas, which prompted Benjamin — on 29 February 1936 — to write a letter to Horkheimer, the Institute's director at the time, a letter full of harsh words regarding Brill, who supposedly cut sections of the text "*behind my back*" (Benjamin 2015a, p. 63). Surprisingly, in his response, Horkheimer took Brill's side:

As regards your complaint about mister Brill, I of course understand where you're coming from; on the other hand, however, as you yourself indicate, you are also familiar with our own situation. We must do everything in our power to protect the journal as the scientific body [*Organ*] from being dragged into political discussions in the press. This would seriously jeopardize our work in this and in other directions. (Benjamin 2015b, pp. 70-71)

The serious threat and the object of self-censorship, which ought to spare the scientific body from a likely lynching by the media, was Marx, mentioned at the very beginning of Benjamin's essay. The 1930s were a time of violent opposition to communism, one symptomatically embodied by an otherwise internally

divided, yet externally unified, coalition of fascists, conservatives, liberals, and social democrats. 1936 is also the year of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan, joined a year later by Mussolini's Italy. Historical circumstances just mentioned effectively favor caution. However, from our remote historical perspective, the erasure of the first section of the essay can be persuasively defended despite and beyond these historical circumstances. The section's contribution to the whole is modest. Instead of substantially serving the essay itself, it serves the self-identification of its author, his inscription into the tradition of historical materialism. The contribution's modesty is further matched by the ultimately problematic references to Marx, convincingly critiqued by later Marxologists. These references include a historicist reading of Marx's *Capital* in the tradition of Kautski, Luxemburg, and Lenin. These readings suggest that Marx paints a picture of capitalism in its infancy, a picture that must be updated and reformulated in accordance with capitalism's subsequent developments.<sup>1</sup> The same goes for Benjamin's uncritical adoption of the base–superstructure divide promoted by Marxism-Leninism (see Benjamin 2008a, pp. 19-20).

Since the inner, conceptual gain of the introductory reference to Marx is negligible at best and untenable at worst, both the editorial intervention and the allusion to historical circumstances appear spot on. However, when it comes to the remaining two editorial changes, things are less self-evident and much more complicated. Though themselves minimal, they maximally alter the essay's political scope. Moreover, they alter it in ways that, in turn, elucidate in an unflattering way the political ideology of the Frankfurt School. Brill erases the words "fascism" and "communism," which, considering historical circumstances,

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<sup>1</sup> Here are the opening lines of Benjamin's essay: "When Marx undertook his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, that mode was in its infancy." (Benjamin 2008a, p. 19)

does not strike us as particularly odd. What *is* odd, however, are the two substitutes: “fascism” becomes the “totalitarian state” (*L'état totalitaire*), while instead of the word “communism” we get “the constructive forces of humanity” (*les forces constructives de l'humanité*). The initial terms, carrying certain political and conceptual weight, are substituted for the abstract discourse of conventional social sciences. Except this time the political price that critical theory must pay for this reactive sublimation is much higher: we are prompted to question the critical character of critical theory itself, while catching a glimpse of its reactionary-liberal ideological core. The liberal vocabulary replaces communism with forces of humanity whose constructive character appears—in retrospect—as a double apology of fascism and capitalism.

The differences between Benjamin and the Frankfurt School are best exemplified by the disparities between Benjamin and Adorno as the key figure of the school, and they surely exceed my concrete examples, in turn concerning broader views on technology and mass culture. Thus, it is no wonder that the gap between the two is most palpable when it comes to their respective treatments of cinema, this paradigmatic bundling together of both, of art and technology. More precisely: ultimately, the dispute concerns the valuation of comedy, mainly Chaplin—a valuation whose entire drama revolves around the problem of laughter. Is laughter a reactionary or a revolutionary affect? Or does it embody both, and thus the very split of social totality? Moreover, what is the connection between laughter and Marx's critique of capitalism?

As a worthy heir to the philosophical tradition going back to Plato, Adorno was notoriously suspicious of laughter, especially of laughter generated by the products of the culture industry. In laughter, servitude finds a space of false freedom that is nothing but a mask of conformism:

There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about. ... Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases

to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness. ... In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality. Laughter about something is always laughter at it, and the vital force which, according to Bergson, bursts through rigidity in laughter is, in truth, the irruption of barbarity ... The collective of those who laugh parodies humanity. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 112)

In sharp contrast to Adorno's conception of laughter as the vehicle of mass dumbification, laughter as false happiness, and laughter as indistinguishable from sadistic ridicule, for Benjamin "there is no better trigger for thinking than laughter" (which, of course, does not mean that every laugh is the beginning of thought): "In particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul" (Benjamin 2008b, p. 91).

We cannot overlook the curious fact that, according to the famous anecdote, philosophy effectively begins with laughter. In this anecdote, as retold by Diogenes Laertius, we encounter Thales, the first philosopher, out on a night-time walk, looking at the stars and overlooking the ditch in front of him, falling right into it. The scene is observed by an old Thracian woman, who responds to it with an explosive laugh. Should her laughter be read in Adornian fashion, that is, as a ridiculing of philosophy? Or should we read Thales's fall in a Benjaminian way, that is, not as the fall *of* philosophy, but rather as a falling *into* philosophy, born of a "convulsion of the diaphragm"?<sup>2</sup>

If we briefly consider the topic of "Marxism and laughter," then Benjamin's defense of laughter is an exception rather than the rule. But if we nevertheless look for an influential figure, situated at the juncture of both, that is, of Marxism and laughter, then Brecht comes to mind. And the line from Benjamin I just

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<sup>2</sup> See Laertius 2018, p. 18. The anecdote is the subject of Blumenberg's famous study *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* (Blumenberg 2015).

quoted refers to Brecht's Epic Theater, "lavish only in occasions for laughter" (Benjamin, 2008b, p. 91). It comes as no surprise then that Adorno's criticism of Benjamin often concerns the insufficient "liquidation of Brechtian motifs" (Benjamin 2015c, p. 78), further split into the two interrelated topics of Marxism and laughter. It is well known that Brecht was precisely the Marxist who, with the seriousness of a humorist, spelled out the link between thinking and "convulsions of the diaphragm" by insightfully recognizing the comedy of dialectical thought, calling Hegel the ultimate humorist.

In this article, I propose to focus on laughter and dialectic. However, what concerns me here is not the dialectic of laughter, but rather the laughter of dialectic. Laughter as the laughter of dialectic is essentially speculative, pertaining to Reason, *Vernunft*, and hence is situated beyond the reflexive logic of the Understanding, *Verstand*. To quote Kant's *Critique of Judgement*: "Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh" (Kant 2007, p. 161). Not the dialectic of laughter, but rather the laughter of dialectic, its laughing matter. I am not concerned here with how to think laughter dialectically, but rather am interested in ways in which laughter already thinks dialectically, always already structuring dialectics at its most fundamental.

Brecht's Ziffel, the character from his *Refugee Conversations*, notoriously says with regard to Hegel's *Science of Logic* that he's "never met a humourless person who understood Hegel's dialectic" (Brecht 2020 [e-book]). What is dialectic, then? Here is one of its all-time best definitions: dialectic is merely *der Witz einer Sache*, "the punchline of a thing." Brecht is not merely suggesting that grasping dialectics requires a sense of humor, rather he is telling us that one can only think dialectically if one has—not a sense *of* humor, but—a sense *for* the humor of things, which is not the same thing. If in its minimal philosophical designation, a

thing is defined as that which persists (for some time) in its self-identity, then dialectic is its inherent self-splitting, getting right at the butt of a thing. Furthermore: many readings of this passage from Brecht overlook the telling connection between the topic of laughter and Hegelian dialectic, on the one hand, and Marx's critique of political economy, on the other. A page earlier, Ziffel draws attention to the "third-rate Marxism without Hegel," namely precisely without the humorist Hegel of *The Science of Logic*: "A half-decent understanding of Marxism will set you back between 20,000 and 25,000 gold marks these days, according to a colleague of mine, and that's without the trimmings. You don't get any of the proper stuff—you get a third-rate Marxism without any Hegel" (ibid.).

But before we continue along these lines, I must mention another of Benjamin's references, one that appears as far removed as possible from the one just mentioned: according to Benjamin, Baudelaire's *Essence of Laughter* "contains nothing other than the theory of satanic laughter. In this essay, Baudelaire goes so far as to view even smiling from the standpoint of such laughter. Contemporaries often testified to something frightful in his own manner of laughing" (Benjamin 2004, p. 182). With this reference, laughter acquires an unsuspected tonality. Its affective value enters the domain of a new hedonic paradigm. Instead of laughter as cheerful humor, we witness here demonic and destructive laughter as central to Benjamin. What is satanic laughter? What is its nature? What does its demonic essence consist in? Before we are led astray by free associations, Benjamin provides us with the key. In "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism," he writes: "*Satan is dialectical*" (Benjamin 1991, p. 838). Laughter owes its satanic character to the feature mentioned by Brecht, namely to the very nature of dialectical thinking, marking self-identity with irreducible alterity.

Let us take a step back. According to Brecht, Hegel

contested the idea that one equals one, not only because everything that exists changes inexorably and relentlessly into something else—namely its opposite—but because *nothing is identical with itself*. (Brecht 2002 [e-book]; my emphasis)

Brecht's point is a very precise one. Dialectical thinking refers not merely to the passage of every entity into its external opposite, but rather to the inner alterity of each entity, that is, to the entity's negativity in relation to itself as an entity. Hegel writes in *The Science of Logic*: "Such *identical* talk therefore *contradicts itself*. Identity, instead of being in its own self truth and absolute truth, is consequently the very opposite; instead of being the unmoved simple, it is the passage beyond itself into the dissolution of itself [*ist sie das Hinausgehen über sich in die Auflösung ihrer selbst*]" (Hegel 1969, p. 415).

Here is how Benjamin continues his remarks on satanic laughter:

The dialectic of commodity production: the product's novelty (as a stimulant to demand) takes on a significance hitherto unknown; in mass production the ever-selfsame [*das Immerwiedergleiche*] manifests itself overtly for the first time. (Benjamin 2004, p. 182)

From laughter, through dialectics, to commodity production. The dialectical nature of laughter holds the key to the commodity form. I have dealt with this elsewhere (see Hajdini 2016 and 2021), so let me be very brief here. Brecht's insight into the comic nature of dialectical thinking ultimately relates to a very precise property of the relation of identity, namely to its reflexivity, without which identity would have dissolved into nothing ("nothing is identical with itself," Brecht writes). Reflexive oppositiveness (as opposed to reflexive identity) lies at the conceptual core of Marx's analysis of the commodity form. On the one hand, a commodity is a relational entity, whose (exchange) value is entirely dependent on its relation to other commodities. However, this universal



translatability presupposes a point of impossibility, without which it would not have been possible. In other words: commodity exchange is made possible by an impossibility. This point concerns the impossibility of a particular commodity to express its own value. This means that the commodity-relation of equivalence is not reflexive and that the values of commodities can only be equated on the condition that commodities *are not equatable with themselves*. It is precisely this reflexive oppositiveness that fuels the dialectic of commodity production.

The satanic laughter provides a key to the dialectics of commodities but can be further linked to the demonic image of the commodity, proposed by Marx: the commodity is a sensuous-supersensuous thing, entertaining “grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (Marx 1990, p. 163). The commodity-relation (of equivalence) rests on a (reflexive) non-relation, and perhaps the image of a dancing commodity is but an approximation of the image of a laughing commodity, subjected to the vibrations of the diaphragm. Laughter is the affect of non-relation; the self-splitting of the commodity, its inability to express its own value, could be put forth as follows: *commodities can't tickle themselves*—they can only be tickled by other commodities.

Let us briefly return to dance, as mentioned by Marx. Laughter and dance are situated at the intersection of body and spirit, populating their split: dance is the laughter of the body, laughter is the dancing of the spirit. It was Nietzsche who first noticed their intimate relationship. In *Zarathustra*, he writes: “And we should consider any day lost, on which we have not danced once! And we should call any truth false, that has not been accompanied by one burst of laughter!” (Nietzsche 2005, p. 183) In his reading of Nietzsche, Deleuze mistakenly interprets dance and laughter as elements of anti-dialectics. By his lights (and this is taken from his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, a chapter tentatively titled “Against Hegelianism”), dialectic

proceeds by opposition, development of the opposition or contradiction and solution of the contradiction. It is unaware of the real element from which forces, their qualities and their relations derive; it only knows the inverted image of this element which is reflected in abstractly considered symptoms. ... Dialectic thrives on oppositions because it is unaware of far more subtle and subterranean differential mechanisms ..." (Deleuze 2006, p. 157)

That is why, according to Deleuze, dialectic is foreign to laughter and hence "the natural ideology of *ressentiment* and bad conscience." (Ibid., p. 159) Deleuze paints a thwarted image of dialectic as premised on external opposition, thus overlooking "the real element" of reflexive oppositivity at the very heart of dialectical movement—the element not of bad conscience, the "spirit of gravity," but of satanic, Dionysian laughter.

In discussing the economy and laughter, we cannot fail to mention Bakhtin, Benjamin's famous contemporary. Bakhtin understood carnival culture as an offspring of the general culture of laughter. Laughter is conceived of as an instrument of the ruled in their struggle against the ruling class. Laughter dethrones by symbolically perverting the existing relations of power and authority. By redressing, in a gesture of travesty, beggars as rulers and slaves as masters, laughter profanes power and ridicules the false transcendency of the ruling order. Laughter is a means of leveling that reduces the tricky spirituality of the ruling class to its profane material principle. We immediately see that such leveling is not dialectical in the aforementioned sense. Though relying on the mechanism of reversal into opposites, though being the vehicle of destabilizing social differences, the carnival is ultimately the great leveler, relying entirely on the principle of an external "identity of opposites." Consequently, Bakhtin's theory of laughter lacks a truly dialectical character. Instead of recognizing external oppositions as mirroring reflexive oppositivity, Bakhtin drowns self-difference in the regime of universal equivalences. Ultimately, the carnivalesque redressing is the

commodity market in miniature, such that *the carnivalization of culture finds its model in market profanation*. That which appears as a revolutionary attack on class society effectively amounts to its reconfiguration in accordance with the commodity market and its principle of equivalent exchange.

This aspect of Bakhtin's conception of carnival culture is often overlooked, even though, for Bakhtin, the market of early-modern European cities is the carnival's primordial breeding ground. The beginnings of carnival culture coincide historically with the onset of capitalist development in Europe, first emerging in the High Middle Ages but beginning to flourish in the 16th and 17th centuries. Structured like the early-stage capitalist free market of equivalent exchange, premised on the identity of opposites, the carnival owed its transgressive character to the conditions of precapitalist domination in which it existed. Its provisional overturning of social hierarchies and privileges could only have thrived in conditions of precapitalist exploitation, which rested upon a relationship of personal domination and dependency. Thus, the carnival enacted within culture the same process that the expansion of commodity markets enacted in the economy. With the triumph of capitalism, the carnival lost its subversive potential because *the economy of the carnival coincided with the carnival of the economy*. In developed capitalist societies — which is to say, under the new conditions of capitalist exploitation — the carnival retained its ritual cultural-transgressive function, while losing its critical edge.

From here, let me return to the discussion between Adorno and Benjamin. In this discussion, laughter plays the role of a differentiator of the difference between what is politically revolutionary and what is politically reactionary, and its fate is ultimately decided with reference to Chaplin's films. It is worth mentioning, against the backdrop of discussing carnival culture, that Adorno sees in film as the primary consumable of mass culture the paradigm of "cheating happiness," by means of which the exploited class is

deprived of an insight into the exploitative nature of industrial capitalism. This thesis aligns well with a central circumstance from film history. Setting aside the obvious reason, we should ask whether it is coincidental that the first film ever made (though that is not entirely accurate) was the Lumière brothers' 1895 *Workers Leaving the Factory*. In the eponymous documentary, Harun Farocki, the recently deceased German experimental film essayist, gathers an astonishing number of scenes from film history that rely on the same motif. Historically, the art of film showed little interest in what was going on inside the factory as the modern scene of exploitation, rather focusing on spaces outside of it. This circumstance supports Adorno's point. However, contrary to the entire history of film, there is at least one movie that I can think of, namely Chaplin's *Modern Times*, that begins precisely with *workers entering the factory*. Though using scenes from Chaplin's film, Farocki surprisingly takes no note of this. Chaplin's film is the ultimate comedy of capitalist exploitation, which sets it apart from other comedies from the era of the great depression, which portrayed the high society of "individual entrepreneurship" (outside of factories) while purposefully disavowing the misery as the truth of its "humanity" (see Hajdini 2015). Incidentally, 1936 is the release year of both Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Benjamin's artwork essay.

This singular status of *Modern Times* speaks in favor of Benjamin's interpretation of Chaplin as someone who, in his films, "appeals both to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter" (Benjamin 2008c, p. 337). I must provisionally note that, in the German original, Benjamin does not say "their" laughter, but merely laughter. I will show why that is important in a bit. But to continue: Adorno rejects such a view as mere romanticizing, basically reducing Chaplin's films to reactionary mass products (Benjamin 2015c, p. 77). However, Benjamin's defense of laughter is found also in other, less-expected places. The crown example of this is the closing lines of his 1933

essay “Experience and Poverty,” which together with other texts, for instance the artwork essay and the storyteller essay, relies on the diagnosis of the incommunicability, impoverishment, and the collapse of experience at the height of modernity, reducing the subject (to quote Roth again) to “an ear in search of the word.” The dissolution of experience pushes civilization, caught up in wars and economic crises, over the edge, while calling for its re-configuration along the lines of a messianic *Barbarentum*. And *Barbarentum* is no *Barbarei*, no barbarity or barbarism, otherwise addressed in Benjamin’s famous thesis on the philosophy of history. The latter states that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism [*Barbarei*]” (Benjamin 2015d, p. 248). *Barbarentum*, “barbarianhood,” interrupts the reciprocal conditionality of barbarism and culture. In her book *Barbarism and Its Discontents*, Maria Boletsi writes that “*Barbarentum* is not civilization’s loyal opposite but a rupture in the edifice sustained by *Kultur* and *Barbarei*” (Boletsi 2013, p. 130). As such, barbarianhood aims at a new collectivity, a community of creatures who have shed all similarities with man: “In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good” (Benjamin 1999, p. 735). The quote echoes the Marxian topic of the revolutionary overturning of existing power-relations, an overturning accompanied by laughter as a revolutionary affect, while the barbarically sounding laughter further echoes Baudelaire’s notion of satanic laughter. But the key point I want to highlight once more is the simultaneous linguistic kinship and tension between Benjamin’s project and Adorno’s already quoted reply that rejects the “irruption of barbarity,” while declaring the laughing collective a parody of humanity.

The difference between Adorno and Benjamin as it relates to two disparate conceptions of laughter as either a reactionary or a revolutionary affect of the masses is perhaps best illustrated by

their irreconcilable interpretations of cartoons. Whereas Adorno sees in the violence of Disney films the cryptogram of bourgeois violence, Benjamin sees in these same films a critique of these bourgeois relations and the possibility of a breakthrough.

To quote Adorno:

[C]artoons ... hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 238)

And here is a quote from Benjamin:

In these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization. / Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind. (Benjamin 2008d, p. 338)<sup>3</sup>

Is it not highly indicative that, out of all the possible Disney characters Adorno chooses Donald Duck, known for his Adornian pompousness, bitterness, and quick-temperedness, while Benjamin's beloved cartoon character is the happy, mischievous, and heroic Mickey Mouse? The formula would hence read *Adorno : Benjamin :: Donald Duck : Mickey Mouse*.

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<sup>3</sup> In her Benjaminian reading of Adorno, Lidija Šumah gives this creaturely dimension a sinister spin by relating Fascist dehumanization to a cartoonization of the Other, which, however, does not amount to its reduction to bare life, but rather to bare afterlife: "Fascist de-humanization of the Other coincided with its *cartoonization*. But what is its function? Is the Other thereby reduced not to *bare life* (which can be legally extinguished), but rather to *bare afterlife*, i.e., to a non-human, creaturely substance situated beyond life and structurally akin to a cartoon character perpetually surviving its own death?" (Šumah 2022, p. 80)



Cartoon by Izar Lunaček

The best example embodying these two competing theories of laughter, an example of the drama entailed in the encounter of the masses with the art of animated films, is provided by Preston Sturges's 1941 comedy *Sullivan's Travels*. In it, we encounter another Disney character, namely Pluto. Unlike Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse, Pluto is not entirely anthropomorphized and thus is perhaps even better suited to embody the Benjaminian creature. Within the Disney universe, Pluto is Mickey's pet, so it shouldn't surprise us if he were to prove philosophically closer to Benjamin than to Adorno. A scene from *Sullivan's Travels* takes place in a southern church, where we witness a group of prisoners, including Sullivan, joining a congregation of impoverished blacks to watch Disney's animated short *Playful Pluto* (1934). (*Playful Pluto* was not Sturges's first choice; initially, he wanted to use clips from Chaplin's films, but couldn't get the rights for it.) On the one hand, the scene brilliantly illustrates Adorno's point. If the prisoners (and the segregated black paupers) are laughing at the "continuous attrition" on the screen, their laughter serves the forgetting of and reconciliation with the beatings they suffer in real life, with the *punchline* merely standing in for the *punch*. The carceral and racial cage is momentarily substituted for the cage of laughter. But is the punch effectively all that is on the line in the punchline? And does the punchline necessarily bring the subject in line with the demands of social authority?

Such an Adornian reading does not exhaust the full complexity of the scene. The laughter of social rejects has an unmistakably ominous, demonic, satanic character, such that the scene does not strike *us*—the viewers—as the least bit comical. Here is Alenka Zupančič's insightful comment on this scene:

The prisoners laugh from their hearts, as we say, but at the same time there is something sinister (menacing, ominous) in this laughter and in the way it is filmed: something excessive, something disturbing the homely comfort of the (supposedly natural) social differences that frame the film at the level of its narrative. We get



something like a time outside of time, a hint at the emergence of masses as collective subject, or at least at the possibility of such an emergence. The poor and underprivileged are certainly not shot here “as we like to see our poor”: as weak, grateful, and lovable; no, they are presented as a subject emerging out of, and with this excessive laughter... (Zupančič 2020, p. 278)

The scene situates laughter beyond the comedic. The laughter of the social outcasts, though appearing in a comedy film, fails to befit the genre of comedy. Though this last thesis is highly counterintuitive, I nevertheless claim that the scene brings to light laughter not as an element of comedy, but rather the paradoxical part-of-no-part of comedy. Here, we should be reminded of Hegel's notion of dialectic as the “universal irony of the world” (Hegel 1892, p. 40). In Hegel's singular sense of the term, irony does not pertain to language and discourse, but rather to the world itself. In terms of our discussion, we could say: dialectic relates not to the *word* of comedy, its punchline, but rather to the punchline of the *world*. It pertains not to the oppositional, contradictory, antagonistic, etc. character of comedic *discourse*, but rather to the reflexive splitting of reality itself, that is, to its irreducible and unsymbolizable *laughing matter*.

However, can the scene nevertheless be salvaged? Can the outcasts' laughter enact their vindication? In the scene from Sturges's film, the faces of the outclassed and/or of criminals “throw off all resemblance to a human being,” assuming a figuration of inhuman creatures, or of the barbarianhood of a new collectivity. Their satanic laughter is dialectical in the precise sense of emerging at the point of dissolution of self-identity: at first, Sullivan is perplexed and somewhat amazed at the demonic roaring laughter of those around him but is very quickly overtaken by the same affect of the masses. His initial outburst of laughter is automatic and mechanical, as if he were seized by some inhuman force. Sullivan's laughter is something that essentially happens to him, something escaping his free will. However, immediately after this momentary

outburst, Sullivan calms down, re-collects himself, turns to the fellow prisoner seated next to him, visibly perplexed, and asks: “Hey, am *I* laughing?” Am *I* the one, who is laughing here? Therein resides the essence of dialectical laughter undermining the subject’s reflexive identity, that is, the subject’s identity with itself. In laughter, Sullivan ceases to be who he is; his is precisely a laughter of an inhuman creature “preparing to outlive culture.”

Another very quick aside: Benjamin’s double thesis on laughter as the best occasion for thought, and laughter as a creaturely affect accompanying the dissolution of humanity, is reflected in Foucault’s book *The Order of Things*, first published in 1966. In the Preface, Foucault famously writes that “[t]his book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought” (Foucault 2003, p. xvi). Near the end of the book, after having “shattered the familiar landmarks of thought,” laughter is mentioned again, this time the “philosophical laughter,” as a kind of an immediate response to the Benjaminian topic of outliving humanity. Here is this powerful passage:

To all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth, to all those who, on the other hand, refer all knowledge back to the truths of man himself, to all those who refuse to formalize without anthropologizing, who refuse to mythologize without demystifying, who refuse to think without immediately thinking that it is man who is thinking, to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh—which means, to a certain extent, a silent one. (Foucault 2003, p. 373)

Benjamin sees cartoon characters as creatures of satanic laughter that have “thrown off all resemblance to a human being,” while Adorno reduces these same characters to symptoms of traumatized bourgeois subjectivity; their resilience and literal

“destructive plasticity” (Malabou 2012), their immeasurable capacity for enduring violence places them beyond the concept of trauma. The new subjectivity emerging from the burning ground of experience therefore disrupts “the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind,” that is, in man as a reservoir of tradition and “inner life.” This new subject is emphatically *a subject without a biography*: its life cannot be written because it is situated beyond life. Slavoj Žižek takes note of the connection between post-traumatic subjectivity and the death drive (which, according to Freud, is silent, just like Foucault’s philosophical laughter):

The properly philosophical dimension of the study of post-traumatic subject resides in this recognition that what appears as the brutal destruction of the subject’s very (narrative) substantial identity is the moment of its birth. The post-traumatic autistic subject is the “living proof” that subject cannot be identified (does not fully overlap) with “stories it is telling itself about itself,” with the narrative symbolic texture of its life: when we take all this away, something (or, rather, *nothing*, but a *form* of nothing) remains, and this something is the pure subject of death drive. (Žižek 2009, p. 143)

In his “Storyteller” essay, Benjamin provides a succinct description of what post-traumatic reality might look like:

Beginning with the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day. Wasn’t it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin 2002, pp. 143-144)

Are the new creatures of satanic laughter, emerging against the background of culture outlived, not precisely subjective forms of the self-destruction of the Self? Their laughter does not spring from a Bakhtinian “culture of laughter”; rather, it emerges at the point where culture outlives itself. As such, the laughter signals the dialectical nature of these new subjective forms emerging from the dissolution of experience—it is dialectical insofar as it remains irreducible to an “identity of the opposites” (which exhausts itself in the logic of market equivalences), in turn standing for the reflexive opposition as the dialectical core of subjectivity (and as the point of subjectivization of dialectic).

Before concluding, a key question must be asked: so, what of all this? I will highlight, very briefly and provisionally, some of the possible uses of these conceptions for understanding contemporary power structures, especially as they relate to technology. My conclusion is open-ended and serves to indicate my plans and directions for future research.

The new subject as embodied in autistic laughter is a subject without a biographical identity. It is not the post-traumatic subject emerging from the “field of destructive torrents and explosions,” but rather the subject of trauma, namely the trauma of dialectical self-splitting. Does our contemporary historical moment not incite us to undertake a double revision of this Benjaminian subject-matter? The first of these two revisions concerns the status of information as a means of communication. The old, orally transmitted story that Benjamin talks about is characterized by an openness distinguishing it from information. Information is verifiable; it demands referentiality, which attests to its semantic conclusiveness. “[N]owadays,” Benjamin writes in “The Storyteller,” “no event comes to us without already being shot through with explanations. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information” (Benjamin 2002, pp. 147-148). The story, on the other hand, gives an account of an event without cementing its meaning, such

that its meaning can resonate and is carried on by continuous storytelling: “The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connections among the events are not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (ibid., p. 148). In our age when new media have taken over the function of informing the public, Benjamin’s (but also Adorno’s and Agamben’s) criticism of information is brought to its limit. Today, we appear to be witnessing a return to the story and of the story as the means of misinforming the public. It is left up to us “to interpret things the way we understand them.” Information thus loses what is integral to it, namely verifiability, that is, a reference to truth. My second revision concerns the return of biography—a return that places the story and storytelling at the very center of the modern *digital dystopia*.<sup>4</sup> The managing of the informational flow is left up to algorithms which generate, via our participation in digital systems and through tracking mechanisms, our “unauthorized biographies.” These are no longer stories “we tell ourselves about ourselves,” but essentially stories that are told about us by the big Other in the form of predictive algorithms, risk modeling, biometric systems, etc. Hence, today the dead biography is experiencing a massive dystopian comeback.

But wherein exactly lies the difference between Benjamin’s concept of biography and the new reality of unauthorized digital

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<sup>4</sup> I am borrowing the term digital dystopia from Jean Tirole, who deploys it within the following analytical framework: “Autocratic regimes, democratic majorities, private platforms, and religious or professional organizations can achieve social control by managing the flow of information about individuals’ behavior. Bundling the agents’ political, organizational, or religious attitudes with information about their prosocial conduct makes them care about behaviors that they otherwise would not. The incorporation of the individuals’ social graph in their social score further promotes soft control but destroys the social fabric. Both bundling and guilt by association are most effective in a society that has weak ties and is politically docile.” (Tirole 2021, p. 2007)

historiography? What sets apart the dystopian scenario of digital alienation from traditional biography, which consists, as Benjamin notes, of “unfolding the views of himself in which he [the subject] has encountered himself without being aware of it” (Benjamin 2002, p. 151)? In this traditional sense, biography confronts the subject with the intimate core of its identity, standing opposite of it as an alien exteriority, in which the subject is unable to recognize itself. And this point of misrecognition is the extimate core of subjectivity. The biography enacts a dissolution of the self-identical biographic subject, laying bare its effective splitting. Digital biography, on the other hand, confronts the subject with the flat, and to use Hegel’s term, “the unmoved simple” of identity (Hegel 1969, p. 415), unable to reach beyond itself and to self-dissipate. The identity of the subject as constituted through the erasure of its own identity is hence confronted with unerasable evidence, with an “In-Itself” of the permanent record of a-subjective individuality, stored in digital “clouds,” where (or rather no-where) our unauthorized biographies dwell and underneath which there dwells “the tiny, fragile human body.”

The big Other of biography is a compliment of sorts to post-traumatic subjectivity, as understood by Malabou. Is it coincidental that the concept of autistic subjectivity as alien to memory and remembrance should emerge at the precise time when unauthorized biographies are being tamed and regulated by “the right to be forgotten”? The autistic, post-traumatic subjectivity is radically foreign to biography as such. The autistic subject is understood as the effect of an external trauma that remains uninterpretable and irreducible to personal history. As such, it presents the point of impossibility, or of suspension, of hermeneutics. The unauthorized biography as the product of digital domination presents us with the flip side of this impossibility. In it, the subject faces not a traumatic *impossibility* of hermeneutics, but rather its equally traumatic *inescapability*.

One final word on the politics of digitization. From a liberal perspective, the issues involved in digitization primarily have to

do with privacy protection. However, in my mind, the main issues lie elsewhere. Many AI scholars have pointed out how the use of AI is intended to root out the biases of human decision-making, while entailing its own algorithmic biases. If Benjamin called for a politicization of art that would counter the fascist aestheticization of politics, should we today opt for a politicization of digital systems countering the digitization of politics? Or are these systems already politicized in a very fundamental sense? Looking at the State's digitization of social protections, some have pointed out how these systems penalize the poor. Virginia Eubanks, for instance, speaks of the creation of a digital poorhouse. It is clear to me that algorithmic biases perpetuate, if not create, class divisions. We could use a provisional pun-cept and say that digitization is inherently *classified*, reproducing and further accentuating class divides. I will conclude with an open question: how do we get out of this? Or, in Benjamin's terms, how do we bring about collective laughter in the LOL world?

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