

Bakhtin, carnival and comic theory

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Abstract

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In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin presents us both with a theory of carnival, and with an account of the historical decline of the carnivalesque since the Renaissance. This thesis uses Bakhtin's work as a point of departure for an analysis of particular moments in the history of post-Renaissance comic theory. It is argued both Bakhtin's account of carnivalesque decline provides us with a potent framework within which to perform such an analysis, and that this in turn facilitates a thorough interrogation of, and engagement with, Bakhtin's theory of carnival.

Chapter One outlines Bakhtin's theory, identifying its historical and utopian dimensions, and exploring some of the problems which it generates. Chapter Two addresses some of the methodological issues relating to a historical analysis of comic theory, and situates Bakhtin's theory of carnival in relation to recent work in the area of comic theory. The remaining chapters focus on particular comic theory texts in the light of Bakhtin's thesis. Chapter Three contrasts Kant's analysis of humour with Schopenhauer's theory, relating the former to its Enlightenment context and the latter to its Romantic context. Chapter Four explores Bergson's discussion of laughter, situating it in relation to modernism, while Chapter Five reviews Freud's theory of jokes, examining the proximity between the structures of carnival and the structures of the Freudian joke. Chapter Six focuses on a Brechtian theory of comedy, assessing its relationship with the carnivalesque tradition, while Chapter Seven attempts to update Bakhtin's thesis in relation to contemporary configurations by exploring recent arguments concerning the comic credentials of postmodern culture. It is argued in conclusion that, if post-Renaissance culture has witnessed a decline in the significance of the carnivalesque, then the trajectory of that decline has undergone a complex series of historical shifts and reversals.

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I would like to thank my parents for their encouragement and support over so many years. This thesis is dedicated to them.

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Introduction

It would be extremely interesting to write the history of laughter.

(A. I. Herzen; quoted in Bakhtin, 1984: 59)

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin attempts to account for the ways in which the meaning of laughter, and the culture with which it is associated, have been transformed since the Renaissance (Bakhtin, 1984). He argues that in the work of Rabelais, and in the popular carnival forms which informed it, laughter enjoyed a positive corporeal and collective significance. Since that time, however, carnivalesque forms have been increasingly marginalised within the social formation. As feudalism was replaced by new social structures, so there was a reorganisation of cultural practices. The new bourgeois order placed a greater emphasis on the private sphere, and as a result the practices associated with carnival, enacted as they were within the public sphere, were either eliminated, downgraded or assimilated by the private sphere. In the process, laughter lost its carnivalesque connotations, and acquired instead a more negative and restricted significance. If Bakhtin is correct, then the sort of transformations that he identifies should be reflected in some form or other in philosophical and theoretical explorations of comic phenomena. This thesis will seek to elaborate on Bakhtin's

argument through a detailed analysis of certain moments in the trajectory of post-Renaissance comic theory. It will be argued both that Bakhtin's thesis provides us with a potent framework within which to perform an analysis of comic theory, and that such an analysis simultaneously facilitates a thorough interrogation of Bakhtin's theory of carnival¹.

Chapter One will undertake a detailed examination of Bakhtin's analysis of carnival. Bakhtin argues that the culture of the Middle Ages consisted of an official, serious side, related to the power and the imagery of the church, and an unofficial under-belly, linked to the practices of carnival and its popular festive imagery. Laughter was of central importance to this popular festive imagery, linking together the marketplace, the banquet, the lower stratum of the body and the grotesque. This topography of carnival has been criticised for projecting an idealised conception of folk culture. I will argue, however, that while Bakhtin's theory is certainly problematic, it can nevertheless be defended both on the grounds that it provides us with a historicised account of carnival, and on the grounds that its utopian dimension enjoys a critical potential.

Chapter Two addresses some of the methodological problems and issues surrounding a historical analysis of theoretical texts. It will be argued that a Bakhtinian emphasis on the dialogic nature of signification complements recent perspectives developed in the field of intellectual history. Further, it will be argued that recent work within the field of comic theory allows us to elaborate on Bakhtin's account of the cultural processes underpinning the development of post-Renaissance comic theory.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Rabelais' work is identified as 'the summit in the history of laughter' (1984: 101). Bakhtin's mapping of the historical descent from this summit will be used to structure the remaining chapters of the thesis. According to Bakhtin, while the Enlightenment valorisation of reason underscored a negative evaluation of laughter, the Romantics' reaction against the Enlightenment allowed for a reappraisal of the sort of grotesque imagery derived from carnival practices (1984: 116-28). This disparity between Enlightenment and Romantic views of laughter will be used as a starting point for Chapter Three, which will focus on the analyses of humour advanced by Kant and Schopenhauer. Chapter Four will focus on Henri Bergson's essay on laughter, singled out by Bakhtin as representative of the negative streak within the philosophy of laughter (1984: 71). It will be argued that, while Bakhtin's assessment is undoubtedly correct, Bergson's theory needs to be situated in relation to the current of modernism in order to develop a comprehensive critique of it.

Bergson's contemporary, Freud, is disregarded in Bakhtin's survey. This omission is curious, for Bakhtin² had earlier published a critique of Freud in which he recast Freud's distinction between the conscious and unconscious realms of mental life in terms of a distinction between two ideologically different forms of consciousness, an 'official conscious' and an 'unofficial conscious' (Voloshinov, 1976: 85). This classification would seem to anticipate Bakhtin's analysis of medieval carnival, and Chapter Five will address the relationship between the carnivalesque and Freud's theory of jokes in the light of this distinction.

Chapter Six will focus on the possibility of deriving a theory of comedy from the work of Bertolt Brecht, identified by Bakhtin as a representative of one of the routes down which the grotesque has developed in the twentieth century (Bakhtin, 1984: 46). It will be argued that although there are some crucial differences between the dynamics of theatrical performance and the dynamics of carnivalesque participation, there are nevertheless some important affinities between Brecht's appraisal of comic practices and Bakhtin's analysis of the critical function of carnival.

Chapter Seven will reflect on the extent to which Bakhtin's thesis needs to be updated in relation to contemporary cultural formations. One of the key areas of debate here concerns the extent to which the development of postmodern culture has either debilitated or revitalised comic practices. It will be argued that, in charting the post-Renaissance marginalisation of comic practices, while at the same time identifying points at which such practices flourished, Bakhtin's thesis allows us to negotiate such issues.

Since my thesis is concerned with an analysis of comic theory, before embarking on this analysis it is worth considering in more detail the relationship between comedy and theory, between comic phenomena and theoretical discourse. At the 1987 Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Jonathan Miller opened a session devoted to the study of humour. In it he complained that humour typically 'fails to gain admission for serious consideration by scientists', and that 'it is also regarded by those laymen who take great pleasure in the experience of laughter as being too frivolous and enjoyable to be treated by science at all' (Miller, 1988: 6). If Miller is correct, then the

relationship between comedy and theory would appear to be particularly precarious.

This problem can be brought into sharper focus by recounting a personal anecdote. In February 1990, I was about to begin teaching an adult education class looking at humour and comedy. A reporter from the local newspaper, the *Nottingham Evening Post*, had seen my entry for the course in an adult education prospectus and, sensing material for an article, had contacted me to discuss it. Naïvely thinking that I might be able to help popularise a small corner of academia, I agreed to meet him and, when I told him about my research project, which was funded by the British Academy for two years, the story apparently became even more newsworthy.

Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge have tried to list the criteria that a particular event needs to fulfil in order for it to be deemed newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge, 1973). The criteria are that the event falls within the temporal or geographical scope of a particular news production; that it can be given a clear meaning; that it is either consonant with or, alternatively, at odds with our expectation; that it has already been treated as news in one form or other; that it differs significantly from other coverage; that it is connected with élite nations or people; and that it is negative or can be personified. The more of these criteria a particular event can fulfil, the more likely it is that it will be selected as newsworthy.

On February 6, 1990, the story appeared on the front page of the *Evening Post* with the following headline: 'Ben gets £6,000... as

a chuckle checker'. This was accompanied by a large photograph of me, clipboard in hand, 'checking the chuckles' of two laughing police constables. Using Galtung and Ruge's criteria, we can analyse the apparent newsworthiness of the story. Since I was based in Nottingham, the story obviously fell within the geographical scope of the local paper and, since the other lead story announced the setting of the city's poll tax at £390, the apparent frivolity of my activities differed significantly enough from the severity of an iniquitous tax for it to attract a relatively high news value on that particular day. However, perhaps the key criterion in clinching the newsworthiness of the story was its unexpectedness: here was someone receiving funds from the state for research into humour. As a more detailed analysis of the coverage will reveal, this apparent unexpectedness derived from a contradiction between the assumed earnestness of academic research and the perceived frivolity in studying humour, between a utilitarian view of government funding and the consequent worthlessness of a project like mine. The story's newsworthiness was guaranteed, in other words, because it infringed an expectation that serious discourse and comic discourse should occupy mutually exclusive territory.

The *Evening Post* locates a contradiction in the amusing incongruity between the object of research and 'the less than side-splitting title' of the thesis, for example. Indeed, this basic contradiction not only structures the entire article, but is portrayed throughout as humorous in form. Punctuated with numerous puns, the article starts in the form of a joke - 'Did you hear the one

about...' - and ends with a request for readers to send in their own favourite jokes - '(clean ones, of course)' - to the newspaper.

Meanwhile, the national press were picking up on the story, some of whom dealt with it slightly differently, as the *Sunday Mirror's* reaction, printed under the caption 'Laugh... I nearly cried!', makes clear:

A Nottingham University academic is being given a £6,000 government grant to find out exactly what makes people laugh. I can tell him for nothing one thing that DOESN'T make me laugh - the thought of taxpayers' money being squandered on such arrant nonsense.

(*Sunday Mirror*, 11 February 1990)

In spite of such contrary interpretations, the overriding newsworthiness of the story is still ensured by the apparent contradiction between earnestness and worthless frivolity. For the *Evening Post* this is a source of amusement, for the *Sunday Mirror* a source of outrage.

Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the longest, coverage appeared in a page-long article by Iain Murray in *Marketing Week*, a trade magazine for the advertising and marketing industry. For Murray, the inherent contradiction in my situation is that to 'find out what makes people laugh' is actually an 'impossible' task. This makes the fact that my attempt is being funded by a British Academy grant all the more amusing:

With £6,0000 jingling in his pocket, a postgraduate student of even the meanest imagination and the slightest curiosity ought to be able to observe a laugh or two and perhaps speculate upon their cause.

(Murray, 1990)

At this point Murray reintroduces the opposition between earnestness and frivolity, placing himself on the side of frivolity

and me on the side of the earnest. Had he received such a grant he would have devoted it 'to the pursuit of fast women and slow hangovers, leaving the laughter to take care of itself'. I, on the other hand, am

a serious young man on whom an abundance of loose women and matching change would be wasted... because any one who believes that the nature of laughter may be analysed has probably been dealt a poor hand in the sense of humour department.

(1990)

Murray spends the rest of his article (ironically?) analysing the nature of laughter, ranking wit, particularly that of P.G.Wodehouse, above various forms of vulgar humour, and finally urges me either to abandon the project, or to split the money with him.

We can identify a number of reasons for the form that these reactions took. They certainly share a mistrust of academic discourse and a commitment to crass, utilitarian values. They perhaps also represent a desire to safeguard the pleasure of humour from theoretical scrutiny, a point raised earlier by Miller. The key opposition on which the articles rely, however, is the distinction between serious and humorous discourse. What I will suggest in the course of my thesis is that, far from being 'natural', this distinction is historically constructed, and its evolution is closely related to a more general process of cultural stratification. Where Bakhtin's theory of carnival is of assistance is in beginning to explain this process. By conducting an analysis of particular comic theories in relation to this Bakhtinian perspective, I hope to cast further light on such developments.

In the light of the media coverage that my initial research received, Miller's reference to the precarious relationship between comedy and theory would appear to be borne out. What my thesis attempts to do is to explore the historical development of this relationship. What I will not try to do is to efface the boundary between comedy and theory by attempting a comic style of writing. The deployment of theoretical discourse - the writing of a PhD thesis, for example, - is, after all, bound by certain institutional factors, just as the deployment of comic discourse - a stand-up performance, for instance, - is equally bound by such factors. As Ken Dodd eloquently summed it up, 'the difference between Freud and me is that he never had to play the first house to the highly critical audience at the Glasgow Empire on a wet Monday night' (quoted in Cook, 1982: 2). As with Freud, Bakhtin explores comic phenomena within the constraints of theoretical discourse, and it is to his theory of carnival that we turn first.

Notes

- 1 Since Bakhtin's theory of carnival arises out of a study of Rabelais, he tends to concentrate on European culture. My thesis shares this European focus. It should be pointed out, however, that there is a literature on the patterns and functions of humour in cultures beyond Europe (e.g. Christensen, 1963; Hammond, 1964; Kennedy, 1970; Marc, 1989; Miller, 1967; Sharman, 1969; Ziv, 1987)
- 2 The precise authorship of the work in question, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, is problematic: the book was actually published under the name of V. N. Voloshinov. At the beginning of Chapter One, I will explain the manner in which I will negotiate such problems.

Chapter One

Bakhtin and carnival

One of the first problems to confront when reading Bakhtin is the controversy surrounding the authorship of certain texts. There has been an intense debate amongst commentators about the extent to which the authorship of texts published under the names of V. N. Voloshinov, P. N. Medvedev and I. Kanaëv might actually be attributable to Bakhtin himself (see Clark and Holquist, 1984: 146-67; Todorov, 1984: 3-13), and the most recent interventions suggest that the dispute is far from settled (see Rzhevsky, 1994; Morson, 1991: 1072). As a result we are left with the problem of how to refer to the disputed texts, and throughout the rest of this thesis I have adopted the strategy of using the name under which a text was published when referring to it *specifically*. When talking more *generally* about Bakhtin and his possible collaborators, however, I will adopt Robert Stam's strategy and use the name 'Bakhtin' 'stenographically... to refer to Bakhtin himself together with his close collaborators' (Stam, 1989: 3). As Stam argues, such an approach would seem to be in keeping with Bakhtin's insistence on the dialogic nature of signification.

In this chapter I will explore Bakhtin's theory of carnival. The most important text here is *Rabelais and His World* (Bakhtin,

1984), but in the course of the exegesis I will also refer to other works by Bakhtin. I will then investigate some of the problems relating to his theory of carnival, where I will argue that Bakhtin presents carnival not only as a historically variable phenomenon, but also as a utopian category. In the final section, I will explore the extent to which this utopian dimension might yield a certain critical potential.

Rabelais and His World

Bakhtin describes his approach to Rabelais' work as a form of 'historic poetics' (1984: 120), whereby Rabelais' texts are analysed both in terms of their historical context, and in terms of the historical influences which are manifest in them. The influences which interest Bakhtin are not simply literary ones, but any aspect of cultural and social practice which somehow finds its way into Rabelais' work. In doing this, Bakhtin echoes his earlier recommendation in 'Discourse in the Novel', that literary study should not ignore 'the social life of discourse outside the artist's study,' but should explore the relationship between a literary text and 'discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages, of social groups, generations and epochs' (Bakhtin, 1981: 259). According to Bakhtin, the key to understanding Rabelais' work is to analyse the practices of carnival on which they draw. I want to begin this section by describing the cultural periodisation within which Bakhtin situates Rabelais' work. I will then turn to Bakhtin's account of carnival, before looking at his analysis of its import within the work of Rabelais.

a) Bakhtin's cultural periodisation

The cultural periodisation that Bakhtin employs in *Rabelais and His World* is based around his account both of historical transitions in the significance of laughter, and of the relationship between official and unofficial culture. Bakhtin argues that, since the Renaissance, the significance of laughter has been systematically downgraded, and the cultural forms which it accompanies have been increasingly marginalised. We can divide his analysis into four historical stages.

The first stage is that of preclass and prepolitical society where, according to Bakhtin, 'the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally "official"' (Bakhtin, 1984: 6). There was at this time, then, a synergy between the comic and the serious, and this relationship could be perceived in certain rituals even through to early Roman society. As class-structured societies developed, however, this equivalence could no longer be tolerated. In order to consolidate their position, the Church and the feudal class sought to surround themselves with a sense of awe and fear, and comic phenomena were not the most appropriate forms with which to achieve this aim. In the second stage of Bakhtin's schema, then, we find a separation between serious and comic discourse, between the official culture of the ruling class and an unofficial folk culture. As a result, the official culture of the Middle Ages exorcised the trappings of comic imagery from their discourse:

The very contents of medieval ideology - asceticism, sombre providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering, as well

as the character of the feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation - all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness. It was supposedly the only tone to express the true, the good, and all that was essential and meaningful.

(1984: 73)

As the comic aspects of preclass society were relegated to the realm of the unofficial, they took on a new significance, acquiring a critical and celebratory potential that they had perhaps lacked in an earlier period. Above all, they offered an alternative to the seriousness of official culture, 'a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations' (1984: 6). It is within this realm that Bakhtin locates the practices of carnival.

The third stage in Bakhtin's account is the Renaissance, the period in which he situates Rabelais. The Renaissance is marked by the collapse of feudal and Church authority, and the emergence of a new ruling class, the bourgeoisie. In order that this new class might supersede the old regime, a new form of discourse was required in which the orthodoxies of medieval ideology could be challenged. Bakhtin argues that the discursive forms of carnivalesque practices offered just such an opportunity: in contrast to the realm of official culture, unofficial culture celebrated 'the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities' (1984: 11). This relativity was constructed through the ambivalence of carnivalesque imagery. The grotesque body which dominated such imagery simultaneously represented birth and death, feasting and defecation. In addition, the 'world inside out' (1984: 11) that existed during the period of carnival offered an

alternative construction of social relations, suggesting that the feudal and theocratic order was not necessarily a given.

The relativising potential of carnival practices thus offered an occasion for the skids to be put under the prevalent truths of the medieval order, and it is because of this, argues Bakhtin, that they were able to penetrate the realm of serious culture so effectively during the social upheaval of the Renaissance. This process was aided by the decline of Latin in relation to the vernacular language within which carnivalesque discourse was conducted (1984: 99-100; 465). Consequently, a new conception of comic discourse arose during the Renaissance in which

[laughter] has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness.

(1984: 66)

During the Renaissance, then, comic discourse acquired a new epistemological status alongside serious discourse, and this parity can be seen in the work of Rabelais, Boccaccio, Shakespeare and Cervantes (1984: 72). Grotesque imagery, for example, with its emphasis on corporeality, complemented the new humanist perspective on the world, and with their shared privileging of the human rather than the divine, they helped to call into question medieval ideology (1984: 362-63).

The fourth stage in Bakhtin's schema takes us from the Renaissance through to the twentieth century. Just as feudal and theocratic power had consolidated itself through the creation of a

serious, official cultural realm, so the bourgeoisie has sought to consolidate its position through the reorganisation of cultural forms. After the relativising tendencies of Renaissance culture, there was a need for the bourgeoisie to present their new set of values as 'eternal truths', to construct a stable code of propriety (1984: 101). If this was to be achieved, then 'the ambivalence of the grotesque [could] no longer be admitted' (1984: 101), and this brought about a new breach in the relationship between serious and comic discourse. Henceforth, carnivalesque forms were relegated to a position low down on the cultural hierarchy. Comic forms were no longer considered appropriate for articulating serious ideas, and Bakhtin traces the effect that this process has had on Rabelaisian scholarship. 'At the end of the sixteenth century,' he argues, 'Rabelais descended lower and lower, to the very confines of great literature and was finally driven out of bounds' (1984: 65). And although there have been some fluctuations in the relationship between serious and comic discourse since this time, and some reappraisals of the value of humour, there has, according to Bakhtin, been no significant reversal of the hierarchy that was constructed between the comic and the serious. Consequently, he concludes, '[the] grotesque tradition peculiar to the marketplace and the academic literary tradition have parted ways and can no longer be brought back together' (1984: 109). Bakhtin's periodisation thus provides us with an account of the way in which the relationship between comic and theoretical discourse, addressed in the introduction, has developed historically.

It is worth raising two points in relation to Bakhtin's periodisation here. Firstly, it is a schema which also pervades much of his work on the novel, although here the progression is usually described in relation to the development of language. In 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', for example, Bakhtin identifies a cultural progression from monoglottic culture, to polyglottic cultures, and, finally, to heteroglottic cultures (Bakhtin, 1981: 41-83). In historical terms, there is a rough equivalence between Bakhtin's key example of monoglottic culture - ancient Greece - and the first stage of Bakhtin's Rabelaisian periodisation. According to Bakhtin, the monoglottic conditions of ancient Greece gave rise to what he calls 'the major straightforward genres' of the epic, tragic and lyric (1981: 64). For Bakhtin, these genres are predicated on the idea that language is both univalent and fully capable of representing reality. As such, they embody a 'centralizing (unifying) tendency', signifying social and ideological cohesion (1981: 67).

The second stage of Bakhtin's periodisation is equivalent to the polyglottic epoch. Polyglottic cultures include two or more different languages side by side, and Bakhtin's key examples are of Hellenistic, Roman and medieval culture¹. The Hellenistic world, for example, consisted of a melting pot of different languages and cultures, and this heterogeneity facilitated the development of satirical and parodic genres: under such conditions, one language could be used to parody another. As Bakhtin points out, this form of parodic quotation raises a problem: 'is the author quoting with reverence or on the contrary with irony, with a smirk?' (1981: 69). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he cites Menippean satire as

an example of this irreverent form. Developed between the third and first centuries BC., Menippean satire consisted of a mixture of fantastical narrative, topical discourse and strong comic elements (Bakhtin, 1973: 92-7). Rather than displaying the centralising tendency of monoglottic genres, genres like Menippean satire were able to relativise the supposed authority of particular discourses by sending them up. As such, polyglottic genres reflected a 'decentralizing tendency (that is, one that stratifies languages)' (Bakhtin, 1981: 67). This combination of styles and voices created a situation where the ideological cohesion of monoglottic culture was called into question.

Renaissance culture, the third stage of Bakhtin's periodisation, represents the decline of polyglossia and its replacement with heteroglottic conditions; the development, that is, of a unified language embodying a 'social diversity of speech types' (1981: 263). Here, the 'parodic-travestying word' of polyglottic genres begins to penetrate all genres, and the novel develops as the ultimate representation of heteroglossia (1981: 79).

The fourth and final stage of Bakhtin's periodisation consists of a process of ongoing struggle between centralising and decentralising tendencies (1981: 270-5). Certain genres assist centripetal forces, perpetuating the myth of a unitary language, and thus contributing to the process of social and ideological cohesion. However, such genres struggle against the reality of heteroglossia, against the ability of other genres - particularly those fertilised by popular discourses - to perform a centrifugal function by laying bare the full range and diversity of speech types. We can see, then, how Bakhtin's periodisation of Rabelais overlaps

with his historical analysis of the novel. In both cases he is concerned with the way in which the cultural practices of the past prepared the way for the development of the novel, and in both cases he takes the cultural configuration of the Renaissance as crucial to this development.

The second point that I want to raise in relation to Bakhtin's cultural periodisation concerns its accuracy. To what extent do his periodising categories provide a legitimate guide to the development of cultural practices? Ken Hirschkop has noted of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, for example, that '[e]ven today, it doesn't square with many societies; and the notion that the major social forms of discourse have not changed since the Renaissance seems, to say the least, a little suspect' (Hirschkop, 1989: 18). While Hirschkop's point is certainly valid insofar as it applies to Bakhtin's cultural periodisation, Bakhtin's discussion of post-Renaissance comic theory actually veers away from a portrayal of post-Renaissance culture as a monolithic entity, identifying discontinuities between the Enlightenment, the Romantic period and modern cultural forms. While such labels similarly beg the question of accuracy, chapters three to six will explore each of these moments in more detail, providing a more thorough assessment of Bakhtin's periodisation in relation to particular comic theories.

Hirschkop makes one point in defence of Bakhtin's periodisation; namely, that concepts such as heteroglossia are, like most of his concepts, 'balanced somewhere between evaluation and empirical description' (1989: 18). Bakhtin forsakes a certain accuracy, in other words, in order to develop a critical analysis of

the development of the novel in relation to social and linguistic transformations. I will argue that a similar sort of ambivalence - 'between evaluation and empirical description' - surrounds Bakhtin's concept of carnival, but that it is precisely this ambivalence that provides it with its force. It is to the category of carnival that we now turn.

b) Carnival

Bakhtin's thesis is grounded on the premise that Rabelais' texts are indebted to the 'culture of folk carnival humor' (Bakhtin, 1984: 4), and he uses the term 'carnivalesque' to refer not only to carnival in its narrow sense, - the specific festivals and feast days celebrated over the course of the year - but also to the whole range of popular, festive practices that developed during the Middle Ages (1984: 217-8). In this wider sense, the term includes the following forms:

1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and the vernacular.
3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons.

(1984: 5)

Although Bakhtin identifies carnival in the narrow sense as the 'maternal womb' of these various forms (1984: 17), it is clearly the case that comic verbal compositions and billingsgate genres had the potential to extend beyond the bounds of the carnival feast. As we have seen, Bakhtin locates these practices within the binary culture of the Middle Ages, organised as it was around a serious, official stratum, and a laughing, unofficial stratum. Although

carnavalesque practices had been banished from the official stratum, they were nevertheless licensed beyond the realm of officialdom. Here they acquired a particular significance. Not only did carnivalesque imagery offer an alternative to official imagery, but by suspending and/or inverting social hierarchies carnival provided an alternative construction of social relations. In what follows, I will look at three aspects of carnivalesque practices: grotesque imagery, laughter, and the marketplace.

i. grotesque imagery

Carnavalesque practices were imbued with images of the grotesque body, images of '[e]xaggeration, hyperbolism... [and] excessiveness' (1984: 303). In contrast with the classic conception of the body as a complete, individual entity, the grotesque conception of the body was of an incomplete, amorphous entity. As a result, grotesque imagery is preoccupied with the body's orifices, those points at which an individual body begins to merge with the world around it. Not only do mouths, noses, buttocks and genitals frequent the imagery of carnival, but so too do the physical functions that mediate the relationship between the body and the world: eating, drinking, digestion, defecation, copulation, childbirth and death. On one level, the reliance upon such imagery is obvious. Mardi Gras, for example, was a feast day, where food and drink would be in abundance, and this contrasted starkly with the Lenten diet that would follow. At the same time, as E. P. Thompson has argued, 'for the young, the sexual cycle of the year turned on these festivals' (Thompson, 1974: 392). In this sense, grotesque imagery can be seen as nothing more than a celebration

of the freedoms permitted during the period of festivities. At another level, however, grotesque imagery contributed to the alternative construction of reality provided by carnival as a whole. Firstly, the material imagery of the grotesque provided an alternative to the spiritual imagery of the Church (1984: 401). Secondly, the dynamism of the grotesque body represented an alternative to the stasis of the official order. This is because it 'is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body' (1984: 317). The physical functions with which grotesque imagery is preoccupied are all dynamic processes of interaction between the body and the world, between the old and the new. While official culture strove to portray social relations as natural and unchanging, grotesque imagery contrastingly represented the extent to which human existence was bound up with processes of transition. Finally, grotesque imagery signified an alternative to the fear inspired by official imagery. Life in the Middle Ages was lived within the shadow of potential catastrophe, of famine, drought, floods, disease. According to Bakhtin, official imagery traded on these cosmic threats in order to inculcate a sublime sense of fear (1984: 335). Grotesque imagery overcame this sense of fear by assimilating humans with the cosmic elements. For example, rather than submitting to the threat of disaster, grotesque images of eating and drinking were able to represent the way in which a person 'triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured' themselves (1984: 281). In a number of ways, therefore, grotesque imagery represents an alternative to the symbolism and ideology of officialdom.

ii. laughter

Grotesque imagery also had an important connection with laughter, the second aspect of carnival to which I will turn. Bakhtin ascribes to carnivalesque laughter a number of qualities. Firstly, laughter contributed to the overcoming of fear mentioned above. Carnivalesque imagery displaced the potential disasters which threatened the community into the persona of comic monsters. In this way, participants could assert their superiority over, and their imperviousness to, various threats, in the form of laughter (1984: 91). Secondly, such forms of laughter had a universal quality. They did not represent the triumph of the individual but the victory 'of the great generic body of the people' (1984: 88). Laughter was a loud, collective, communal phenomenon: Bakhtin does not have in mind a concealed titter but an unrestrained belly-laugh. Thirdly, carnivalesque laughter embodied the freedom facilitated by the licence of feast days. Laughter, in this sense, was a celebration of permissiveness, whose significance, as Bakhtin points out, was necessarily relative to the strictures that governed the norms of everyday life (1984: 89). Finally, laughter enjoyed an epistemological status. Carnival imagery held up emblems of power and authority as objects of derision. The chorus of laughter that responded to such images 'permitted the expression of an antifeudal, popular truth,' exposing the supposed naturalness of the social order as artificial (1984: 94). In his essay 'Epic and Novel', Bakhtin identifies a similar epistemological propensity in laughter, where he accredits it with

the capacity to undertake a thorough scrutinisation of objects that fall within its scope:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.

(Bakhtin, 1981: 23)

In spite of the demystifying potential that Bakhtin affords laughter here, however, he nevertheless argues that such potential was constrained by the sense of fear instilled in people by the power of official culture. We need to remember, in other words, that the '[f]reedom granted by laughter often enough was mere festive luxury' (1984: 95). For all that it operated within certain constraints, however, laughter played a central role in the carnivalesque cultural practices of the Middle Ages.

iii. the marketplace

The third aspect of carnival to which I will turn is its typical location: the marketplace. Carnival took place in the street, and its grotesquery and laughter were shared in the market square. Bakhtin envisages the marketplace as an unofficial site controlled by the people (1984: 154), a place where people could experience their own collectivity:

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.

(1984: 255)

Under such conditions, the marketplace was a site of free and frank communication. Indeed, the street hawkers' cries, - the speech genres typically employed in the discourse of the marketplace - combined '[a]buses, curses, profanities, and improprieties' (1984: 187). In addition to this, the marketplace provided a situation where the sense of dynamism and change embodied in the forms of grotesque imagery could be experienced by the people as a whole. 'The body of the people on carnival square is first of all aware of its unity in time,' argues Bakhtin, 'it is conscious of its uninterrupted continuity within time, of its relative historic immortality' (1984: 255). We might argue, therefore, that while the laughter and grotesque imagery of carnival had the potential to cultivate a rebellious critique of the ruling ideology, it was only on the street that this potential could be fulfilled, for it was here that the people gained a sense of their own collectivity.

Grotesque imagery, laughter and the marketplace location were thus three of the key elements of carnival. We are now in a position to see the way in which these elements penetrated Rabelais' work.

c) *Gargantua and Pantagruel*²

In his comprehensive study of Rabelais, published in 1979, M.A. Screech could only offer Bakhtin a single footnote, explaining that *Rabelais and His World* was 'useful if treated with caution' (Screech, 1979: 479). Today, however, Bakhtin's study occupies an important place within Rabelaisian scholarship. Carol Clark

has argued, for example, that while Screech's studies of Rabelais tended to situate him in relation to learned culture, Bakhtin's work has provided the impetus for a younger generation of scholars to try and recuperate something of the 'vulgar' Rabelais (Clark, 1983: 1). What I want to do in this section is to explain Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, and the importance that he ascribes to this vulgarity.

We can begin by looking at the way in which Bakhtin situates *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* in relation to his cultural periodisation. As we have seen, the Renaissance is of crucial importance to Bakhtin's schema, both in terms of the particular configuration that developed between serious and comic discourse, and in terms of the overall development of the novel. For Bakhtin, the Renaissance is marked both by social transformation, and by the increasing inability of the official ideology of the Middle Ages to secure a hegemonic position in making sense of the world; 'a world,' as Bakhtin explains in his essay 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', 'in which simultaneously America was being discovered, a sea route to India was being opened up, [and] new fields in natural science and mathematics were being established' (1981: 166)³. Given these conditions, the Renaissance witnessed attempts to construct a new world view:

Thought and word were searching for a new reality beyond the visible horizon of official philosophy. Often words and thoughts were turned around in order to discover what they were actually hiding, what was that other side. The aim was to find a position permitting a look at the other side of established values, so that new bearings could be taken.

(1984: 272)

This process of taking new bearings was assisted by the fact that polyglottic cultures gave way to heteroglottic culture during the Renaissance. On one level, the triumph of vernacular languages over Latin represented a victory against the entrenched position of medieval officialdom. However, this victory had only been achieved after a lengthy process of interanimation between Latin and the vernacular languages during the polyglottic epoch. As a result of this process, the heteroglottic conditions of the vernacular allowed for a diversity of voices and inflections to be represented within the one language (1984: 465-73). By allowing for the juxtapositioning and relativising of different 'dialects, idioms, and jargons' (1984: 470-1), these conditions facilitated the exploratory process of taking new bearings. However, according to Bakhtin, they were not alone sufficient. It was only by drawing on the popular forms of carnival that the process could be completed. During the Renaissance, then, the divide between official and unofficial culture gradually disappeared as carnival forms penetrated high culture. It was this process, together with the attendant social and linguistic transformations, that enabled a new world view to emerge. Bakhtin takes Rabelais' work as the key example of the way in which the carnivalesque fertilised literary culture. What I want to do is to look at this process in relation to the three aspects of carnival explored in the previous section: the grotesque, laughter and the marketplace.

Rabelais' work is brimming with grotesque imagery. The tales of Gargantua and Pantagruel, both of them giants, are a chronicle of fantastical exploits littered with moments of drinking, feasting, urination, defecation, copulation and giving birth. *Gargantua*

begins, for example, with a description of Gargantua's birth. This takes place on Shrove Tuesday, as his mother and father, Gargamelle and Grandgousier, are celebrating at a Mardi Gras feast. Gargamelle had just eaten 'sixteen quarters, two bushels, and six pecks' of tripe (Rabelais, 1955: 48), when she went into labour. Initially her 'bum-gut' exploded as a result of her over-indulgence, so one of the midwives had to operate to restrict Gargamelle's sphincter muscles (1955: 52). The result of this operation was to force the foetal Gargantua up through Gargamelle's body, so that he was eventually delivered via her left ear. His first words, 'Drink! Drink! Drink!' prove to be an accurate indication of his future behaviour, while his father's first words on seeing him, "Que grand tu as." - What a big one you've got! - (the gullet being understood), provided him with a very apt name. As Bakhtin says of this passage, '[w]e thus obtain a truly grotesque image of one single, superindividual bodily life, of the great bowels that devour and are devoured, generate and are generated' (Bakhtin, 1984: 226).

Similarly, laughter is central to Rabelais' work. As Bakhtin notes in 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', Rabelaisian laughter typically acquires a grotesque inflection, insofar as it is frequently conjoined with images of birth and death. This can be seen in the example of Pantagruel's birth, cited by Bakhtin (1981: 198), a baby who 'was so amazingly large and so heavy that he could not come into the world without suffocating his mother' (Rabelais, 1955: 174). The birth was further complicated by the fact that Pantagruel's emergence from his mother's womb was preceded by the emergence of

sixty-eight muleteers, each pulling by the collar a mule heavily laden with salt; after which came out nine dromedaries loaded with hams and smoked ox-tongues, seven camels loaded with salted eels; and then twenty-four cartloads of leeks, garlicks, and onions: all of which greatly alarmed the... midwives.

(1955: 176)

The initial response of Gargantua, Pantagruel's father, is to weep at the death of his wife, but as soon as he thinks of his newly-born son, he 'began laughing like a calf' (1955: 177). Bakhtin is clearly correct in identifying the grotesque significance of this laughter: it is a positive form of laughter, registering the grotesque conception of the human condition as a state of regenerative transition (Bakhtin, 1981: 198).

However, there are two further points that Bakhtin raises in relation to Rabelaisian laughter. Firstly, Rabelais' work is so imbued with the comic imagery of carnival that even the ostensibly 'serious' passages 'acquire in their context an overtone of laughter' (Bakhtin, 1984: 135). The narrative, for example, is shot through both with a series of curses to the reader ('you dunderheads - God rot you!' (Rabelais, 1955: 39)), and with the assurances of the narrator that the narrated events are to be believed ('and if you don't believe it, may your fundament fall out!' (1955: 47)). This framing device calls into question the very ability of the narrator to communicate in serious discourse.

The second point raised by Bakhtin in relation to Rabelaisian laughter concerns the epistemological status of carnivalesque laughter. As we have seen, carnivalesque laughter had the potential to demystify reality insofar as it provided the means for probing the objects around it. Crucially, in Rabelais this potential

was fused with the progressive humanism that was emerging during the Renaissance. Renaissance humanism supplanted the dominant religious world view of the Middle Ages with a new world view centred on the human being, and laughter contributed significantly to this process. In his essay 'Epic and Novel', for example, Bakhtin assesses the historical development of character within literature, and he argues that the comic forms of carnival played a key role in this development insofar as they provided a 'comic familiarization of the image of man': '[l]aughter destroyed epic distance; it began to investigate man freely and familiarly, to turn him inside out' (Bakhtin, 1981: 35). We can see this sort of process at work in the two childbirth passages referred to so far. However fantastical each birth might be, the physiological detail of each passage literally lays bare the body⁴. In this way, Bakhtin argues, the 'thousand-year-old laughter [of folk humour] not only fertilized literature but was itself fertilized by humanist knowledge and advanced literary techniques' (Bakhtin, 1984: 72). In this way, then, carnivalesque laughter and the grotesque contributed to the construction of a new world view.

In order to understand this process in greater detail, however, I want to turn to the third aspect of carnival that we have looked at, the marketplace. Bakhtin identifies two important relationships between Rabelais' work and the carnivalesque marketplace. Firstly, he notes the way in which Rabelais' language echoes the language of the street, deploying as it does the range of '[a]buses, curses, profanities, and improprieties' found in the marketplace (1984: 187; quoted above). We have already seen some examples of these idioms in the passages referred to earlier.

The second relationship identified by Bakhtin concerns the need to establish a new set of bearings to replace the world view of the Middle Ages. For Bakhtin, this is 'the problem that all Renaissance literature was trying to solve,' and it could only solve it by finding 'forms that would make possible and would justify the most extreme freedom and frankness of thought and speech' (1984: 271). What Bakhtin has in mind here is 'a completely loud, marketplace frankness that concerned everyone' (1984: 271), for as we have already seen, the marketplace facilitated this open and free form of communication. We can draw on Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope at this point in order to determine further the relationship between Rabelais and the marketplace. In his essay 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', Bakhtin explains the concept of the chronotope in terms of 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships' that obtain within each genre (1981: 84). Each genre can be characterised, in other words, in terms of the co-ordinates of space and time typically embodied within it. The precise nature of these co-ordinates is going to impose certain requirements and constraints on the narrative of a text belonging to that genre. Bakhtin devotes a significant part of his discussion of chronotopes to the Rabelaisian chronotope (1981: 167-206), and he also provides an analysis of its folkloric precedents. He identifies these precedents in the 'pre-class, agricultural stage in the development of human society' (1981: 206). Here, life was organised around the requirements of productive agricultural labour. Spatially, this culture was oriented collectively towards the earth, because it was the earth that provided people very directly with sustenance. Temporally, the culture was oriented towards the future, because

people's labour was geared to producing food for the future: 'men sow for the future, gather in the harvest for the future, mate and copulate for the sake of future' (1981: 207). Bakhtin argues that a similar sort of chronotope organises Rabelais' narrative. The Rabelaisian chronotope is, as we have seen in the two childbirth examples, geared to a temporal dynamic of regenerative transition. At the same time, its spatial perspective is organised around the various points of interaction between humans and the world around them; the passage where Gargantua is born, for example, constructs a relationship between eating, drinking, reproducing, defecating and raising oxen for tripe. Although Bakhtin's discussion of the folkloric chronotope does not specifically refer to carnival, I would argue that carnival in fact shares a similar chronotope⁵. Spatially, carnival is located in the marketplace, a site which constructs for the people a sense of their own collectivity. At the same time, the grotesque imagery that inhabits the marketplace is preoccupied with the relationship between humans and the world around them. Temporally, the marketplace is governed by the 'gay time' of carnival (1984: 219), representing the historic progression of humans in the form of images of birth and death, decay and renewal. There would thus seem to be a strong affinity between the Rabelaisian and carnivalesque chronotopes.

According to Bakhtin, we can only understand the significance of these chronotopes if we compare them to the dominant chronotope within the official culture of the Middle Ages. Spatially, the medieval chronotope⁶ was organised around an opposition between high and low, from the celestial bodies at the top, to the

earthly elements down below (1984: 363). On this vertical axis, the high is valorised over the low. Temporally, this chronotope was organised around the idea of stasis, the 'belief... in a static unchanging world order and in the eternal nature of all existence' (1984: 275), and as such it denied the possibility of transition along a horizontal axis. The contrasts between this chronotope and the Rabelaisian/carnavalesque version are striking. The latter supplants the hierarchy of high and low with a typology of interactions between humans and the world around them, while it supplants the stasis of the medieval picture with a radical sense of historical progression. In the work of Rabelais, this chronotope lent itself to the development of a humanist world view:

This transfer of the world from the vertical to the horizontal was realized in the human body, which became the relative center of the cosmos. And this cosmos was no longer moving from the bottom to the top but along the horizontal line of time, from the past to the future. In bodily man the hierarchy of the cosmos was reversed and canceled; he asserted himself outside it.

(1984: 363-4)

The inadequate world view of the Middle Ages was thus replaced in the Renaissance by a new, progressive world view predicated on notions of historical transition and humanism, and centred on the human body. For Bakhtin, this world view was articulated most forcefully in the Rabelaisian chronotope, which was itself indebted to the popular festive forms of carnival.

We have seen in this section, then, how Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais situates him both in relation to the carnivalesque tradition, and in relation to the transformation that took place in the Renaissance. What is important to Bakhtin's argument is not simply that Rabelais draws on carnivalesque imagery, but that

carnavalesque imagery is renewed and rearticulated in his work in relation to the particular problems faced during the Renaissance period.

In my discussion of *Rabelais and His World* I have looked at Bakhtin's periodising schema, at his analysis of carnival, and at his reading of Rabelais. We are now in a position to explore in more detail some of the problems and issues confronting his theory of carnival.

Problems with the theory of carnival

Bakhtin provides a very positive account both of the carnivalesque practices of the Middle Ages, and of the impact that they had on the work of Rabelais. In both cases he attributes to carnival a progressive and/or rebellious political significance. In the former case, this derives from the way in which the imagery of carnival offered an alternative to the official organisation of social relations. In the latter, it derives from the cross-fertilisation between the carnivalesque and Renaissance humanism, enabling the construction of a new world view. In this section I will examine some of the problems connected with Bakhtin's account. These problems can be divided into three groups: a) the popular; b) gender; and c) politics.

a) The popular

As Graeme Turner has noted, Bakhtin's theory of carnival has provided an analytical framework that has frequently been put to use in recent studies of popular culture, even if the theory has, at times, been 'carelessly adapted' (Turner, 1990: 219)⁷. The category of the carnivalesque would seem to offer a model with which to explore the interface between pleasure, ideology and the oppositional potential of popular culture. In this section, however, I want to examine some of the problems involved with Bakhtin's conception of the popular.

We can identify three aspects to Bakhtin's conception of the popular in *Rabelais and His World*. Firstly, the 'people' are envisaged as a unified, subordinate entity, whose homogeneity is in fact reinforced through the imagery of carnival. For all that the grotesque imagery of carnival represents the people in a 'universal' sense, society itself was divided into two opposing blocs: the people and the ruling class. Bakhtin's binary model of the culture of the Middle Ages erects a distinction between the official and the unofficial as separate realms, and he locates the people and the popular (or 'popular-festive forms') within this unofficial realm. As a result, carnival is represented as an autonomous set of practices: the people organise it '*in their own way*' (1984: 255). Secondly, popular-festive forms are attributed with an ability to convey a historical awareness that is absent from the official world view. While the dominant chronotope of the Middle Ages projected a sense of stasis, popular forms challenged this impression through their preoccupation with images of transition, inversion and

incompleteness. Indeed, it was this aspect of popular culture which, as we have seen, facilitated the development in the Renaissance of 'a new free and critical *historical* consciousness' (1984: 73). The third feature of Bakhtin's portrayal of the popular is very much related to the previous two features: it is oppositional. Laughter, grotesque imagery, images of inversion, images of transition: each of these phenomena contributes to the construction of an alternative to official imagery. In this way, popular culture is envisaged as an arsenal of oppositional practices.

We can raise a number of problems in relation to this conception of popular culture, the first of which would be that Bakhtin's account of carnival is overly positive, that he tends to overlook its negative aspects. Peter Burke's analysis of carnival in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, for example, identifies 'three major themes': 'food, sex and violence' (Burke, 1978: 186). Bakhtin's analysis has much to say about food (he devotes a whole chapter to the imagery of the banquet), and sex (which is subsumed within the category of the grotesque body), but he has very little to say about violence. He certainly registers the extent to which carnival practices often resorted to activities of debasement and abuse: the 'slinging of excrement' (1984: 148), for example, and the insults traded in the atmosphere of the marketplace (1984: 187). However, he interprets these gestures within the context of the grotesque; that is, the act of debasement or abuse is seen to confer on the object a connection with the lower stratum of the grotesque body, with the genitals or anus. As such, Bakhtin argues, these gestures enjoy a positive pole deriving from the

regenerative connotations of the grotesque. I do not want to argue that gestures of this sort necessarily lack the ambivalence identified by Bakhtin. However, I would argue that debasement and abuse might equally enjoy a more negative, and more literal, signification. Further, I would argue that Bakhtin concentrates on symbolic violence at the expense of physical violence. As Burke points out, for example, while carnival violence 'was often ritualised' - in the manner suggested by Bakhtin, - it was also often 'displaced on to objects which could not easily defend themselves, such as cocks, dogs, cats, and Jews, who were pelted with mud and stones on their annual race through Rome' (Burke, 1978: 187). Bakhtin tends to ignore the possibility of such incidents, and as a result his conception of the popular runs the risk of being overly optimistic.

The second problem would be that Bakhtin's theory is based on an idealisation of the 'people', a point raised by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, who argue that Bakhtin sees the 'people' as necessarily 'anti-absolutist, pro-universalist and anti-war' (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 310-11). We might respond to this criticism by arguing that it is not so much the people themselves to whom Bakhtin attributes this oppositional potential, but rather the imagery and practices deployed by the people during the carnival. However, this revision also faces problems. As Hirschkop has noted, in contrasting the 'naturalizing tactics of the ruling class' with the 'historicizing tactics' of the people, Bakhtin reifies the concept of carnival as a social force in itself (Hirschkop, 1986: 104). What Bakhtin's theory of carnival lacks, argues Hirschkop, is a model of socio-economic power, and it is only with the use of

such a model that we could properly understand the propensity either of the ruling class to maintain the social order, or of the subordinate class to resist it. As Michael Gardiner has argued, Bakhtin's analysis of carnival 'neglects to take into account the institutional context of feudalism and the hegemonic role played by the Catholic Church, at least in any great depth' (Gardiner, 1992: 177).

I want to explore this problem a little further by turning to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of the carnival that took place at Romans in 1580 (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979). The carnival festivities lasted over a period of weeks, and took place within an atmosphere of brewing unrest. Not only was France experiencing a period of religious wars between Protestants and Catholics, but the Dauphiné region, where Romans is to be found, was in the throes of a series of tax revolts. In addition to this, 1579 had seen a number of 'antiseignorial struggles' developing in the region, with peasants destroying country manors (1979: xix). As the carnival festivities approached, two clear social groupings were apparent within the community: the craftsmen and peasants, led by Paumier, who generally supported the recent regional revolts; and the nobles and patricians, represented by Guérin, who favoured the maintenance of the status quo. The carnival festivities themselves were organised around these two groupings, and the various rituals and parades acted out by each of the groupings were designed to antagonise the opposing faction. Eventually, this antagonism could no longer be contained within the symbolism of carnival, and fighting broke out. The patricians' faction undertook a slaughter of the peasant forces, and the ensuing struggle

engulfed the Dauphiné region for a number of months. Le Roy Ladurie's study presents a very detailed analysis of the relationship between carnivalesque practices and the various forms of political struggle enacted in and around them.

We can use Le Roy Ladurie's analysis to highlight some of the weaknesses in Bakhtin's conception of the popular⁸. As we have seen, Bakhtin insists on the autonomy of the people within the carnival square. Le Roy Ladurie's analysis suggests that the situation is more complex than this. The Romans carnival consisted of a symbolic struggle between two opposing factions. In fact, Le Roy Ladurie argues, 'there were in effect *two Carnivals, that of the plebeians and that of the notables*' (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979: 207). While each of the rival factions maintained a degree of control over the precise form that their particular festivities took, the duality of the Romans carnival suggests that it would not fall that neatly within the bounds of Bakhtin's conception of popular autonomy. While this duality is not necessarily the dominant pattern that carnivals followed, Le Roy Ladurie suggests that it was nevertheless often the case that carnival would be structured around some sort of ritualised battle between two parties (1979: 207, 313-14). Further, although Bakhtin credits carnival with a political significance, he nevertheless argues that it is 'extrapolitical' (1984: 5) insofar as it lies beyond the political, social and economic structures of everyday life (1984: 255). Again, Le Roy Ladurie's analysis calls into question this conclusion. Rather than representing a world divorced from everyday political, social and economic processes, Le Roy Ladurie shows how such processes were manifested in the very fabric of carnival. For

example, the animal imagery favoured by each of the factions very much reinforced their social position. The patricians' faction employed images of the rooster, the eagle and the partridge, whose airborne abilities represented their superiority (1979: 216). The popular faction, on the other hand, employed images of the bear, the sheep, the hare, the capon and the donkey, each representing a 'wild and earthy orientation' (1979: 215). We might argue that such imagery simply reinforces Bakhtin's emphasis on the grotesque nature of carnivalesque imagery, that in asserting their connections with the low and the downward, the commoners were opposing the official imagery that always placed value on the high and the upward (Bakhtin, 1984: 401). However, the animal imagery was also overlaid with connotations directly related to the political struggle that was developing in Romans. The hare had come to represent the Huguenots, and the capon to represent the group supporting the tax revolt, while the partridge represented the Catholics (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979: 203). In addition, the eagle and the partridge represented those who had changed sides, and had come over from supporting the popular group to supporting the patricians' case (1979: 215-16). While the commoners' imagery certainly drew on the tradition of the grotesque, then, like the patrician's imagery it was simultaneously imbued with elements of the ensuing political struggle. In this sense, carnival can be seen as a continuation or intensification of political struggle, rather than a phenomenon where such processes are suspended.

The marketplace, where Bakhtin locates the autonomy of the people, emerged during the carnival at Romans as one of the key sites of political struggle. In the weeks leading up to Mardi Gras,

traders flocked to the town to buy and sell. 'Even during the holidays,' Le Roy Ladurie says, 'it was business as usual' (1979: 216). However, in the heated political context of the day, the marketplace became a source of antagonism. The plebeians resented the sight of 'Romans's supply of wheat leaving town', while the patricians were anxious about the influx of people ostensibly sympathetic to the plebeians' cause: 'might they not be attacked by all these peasants coming to town to buy grain?' (1979: 217). At the same time, one of the patricians' carnival activities was to decree a new price list for the market, inverting all of the regular prices of foodstuffs: 'the highest prices would be for hay, straw, oats, all animal feed, as well as for bad or wormy wine, slated eel, rotten herring, and fatback' (1979: 190), while the lowest prices were to be paid for

turkey studded with cinnamon and cloves, pheasant or ruffed grouse, partridge, hen, hare, roast snipe, ringdove à l'orange, fatted veal, mutton, trout, carp, pike, wine from Cornas or Tournon, hypocras, strawberries with rosewater and sugar...

(1979: 190)

Executed as it was by the patricians, the purpose of this inverted price list was not to make luxuries available to the poor, but to mock their poverty, to use 'absurdity to illustrate "an *order* in which Nature and society are soundly unchangeable..."' (1979: 192). In Romans at least, the marketplace was not the carnivalesque preserve of the people, but one of the key sites in the political struggle surrounding the carnival. Le Roy Ladurie's analysis thus raises a number of questions in relation to Bakhtin's conception of the popular.

While *Rabelais and His World* provides us with a ground-breaking analysis of the relationship between popular culture and literary forms, Bakhtin's conception of the popular faces a number of problems.

b) Gender

Just as the concept of carnival has been put to use in recent discussions of popular culture, there have also been some recent attempts to draw on the notion of carnival in developing feminist readings of certain textual practices (e.g. Russo, 1988; Stam, 1989: 157-86; Wills, 1989). However, as several commentators have argued, the construction of gender in Bakhtin's theory of carnival is itself problematic (e.g. Booth, 1986; Ginsburg, 1993; Russo, 1988). Before considering some of these problems, I want to look at some of Bakhtin's remarks concerning the relationship between carnival and gender.

The most appropriate point at which to start is Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais' representation of women. Bakhtin situates Rabelais' portrayal of women in relation to the '*querelle des femmes*', a dispute concerning 'the nature of women and wedlock' which preoccupied the literate sections of the French public in the middle of the sixteenth century. The dispute was fought out between two main positions, 'the Gallic tradition', which envisaged women in a negative light, and the 'idealizing tradition', which envisaged them in a positive, chivalric light. Rabelais belonged to the Gallic tradition, and as such, argues Bakhtin, we would not expect him to 'take the women's side' (1984: 239). However, what

tends to be overlooked is the fact that the Gallic tradition actually consisted of two lines of thought: 'the ascetic tendency... which saw in woman the incarnation of sin'; and 'the popular comic tradition' (1984: 240). Bakhtin explains this tradition's conception of women in the following manner:

The popular tradition is in no way hostile to woman and does not approach her negatively. In this tradition woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb.
(Bakhtin, 1984: 240)

This is the tradition within which Bakhtin situates Rabelais' representation of women. As such, Bakhtin concludes, Rabelais' attitude towards women is one of ambivalence rather than hostility.

There are two points worth raising in relation to Bakhtin's argument here. The first concerns Bakhtin's keenness to distance Rabelais from the negative conceptions of women current at the time. This enables him to situate Rabelais' representation of women within the popular traditions which, in Bakhtin's view, also informed all the other aspects of his work. Indeed, Bakhtin argues that, in appealing to a conception of women derived from the popular comic tradition, Rabelais carved out a unique position for himself in the *querelles des femmes* (1984: 242). In this way, as elsewhere, Bakhtin credits Rabelais' portrayal of women with the ability to shatter prevailing codes of representation. The second point is that Bakhtin posits an essential connection between women, the lower bodily stratum and the grotesque: women both destroy and give birth. Although his theory of the grotesque is

liberally peppered with references to the genitals, the phallus, buttocks, the anus, the mouth and the nose, the womb is in many ways accorded a privileged status within this anatomy.

It is this privileging of the womb that concerns Ruth Ginsburg, who has provided the most detailed analysis of the role of female imagery in Bakhtin's account of the grotesque. As she shows, female imagery invades Bakhtin's account at several points. His concept of the grotesque is highly reliant upon images both of the womb and of the pregnant body: the grotesque, Bakhtin claims, 'is *always conceiving*' (Bakhtin, 1984: 170; quoted in Ginsburg, 1993: 170). At the same time, his analysis of the regenerative aspect of the Rabelaisian chronotope similarly draws on the image of the womb: it is 'a pregnant time, a fruit-bearing time, a birthing time and a time that conceives again' (Bakhtin, 1981: 207; quoted in Ginsburg, 1993: 168). What disturbs Ginsburg about Bakhtin's use of such imagery is that, 'in the process of being elevated into the central site of carnival', this imagery is 'de-femalised' (1993: 168). One of Ginsburg's examples of this process concerns the scene looked at earlier, where Gargamelle gives birth to Gargantua. As we have already seen, Bakhtin interprets the scene in terms of 'a truly grotesque image of one single, superindividual bodily life, of the great bowels that devour and are devoured, generate and are generated' (Bakhtin, 1984: 226; quoted in Ginsburg, 1993: 174). However, he continues,

this, of course, is not an 'animal' or 'biological' bodily life. We see looming beyond Gargamelle's womb the devoured and devouring womb of the earth and the ever-regenerated body of the people. The child that is born is the people's mighty hero, the French Heracles.

(Bakhtin, 1984: 226; quoted in Ginsburg, 1993: 174)

As Ginsburg points out in response to this passage, although female (or, more precisely, maternal) imagery is of central importance to Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque, in the final analysis the woman's body is marginalised in favour of the body of the people as a whole, 'which comes forth in the image of a super-male young Heracles' (1993: 174). This marginalisation is similarly in evidence in some of Bakhtin's accounts of carnival. Ginsburg notes, for example, how the following passage constructs carnival as a male domain:

The influence of the carnival spirit was irresistible: it made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect. Not only schoolmen and minor clerics but hierarchs and learned theologians indulged in gay recreation as relaxation from pious seriousness.
(Bakhtin, 1984: 13; quoted in Ginsburg, 1993: 169)

The problem with Bakhtin's theory of carnival, Ginsburg concludes, is that, even while the theory remains preoccupied with images of the pregnant womb, women are actually expelled both from the theory, and from the carnival itself.

Mary Russo touches on similar ground in her discussion of the female grotesque, where she focuses on Bakhtin's comparison between the grotesque and the 'Kerch terracotta figurines of senile pregnant hags' (Russo, 1988: 219). Bakhtin offers the following analysis of the latter:

This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying, and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed.
(Bakhtin, 1984: 25-6; quoted in Russo, 1988: 219)

As Russo comments, for feminist readers such an assessment is problematic, reliant as it is upon 'all of the connotations of fear and loathing associated with the biological processes of reproduction and ageing' (Russo, 1988: 219). For all that there is an exuberance to Bakhtin's analysis of the figurines, Russo argues, it nevertheless reproduces patriarchal assumptions about women (1988: 219).

Given these problems, how ought we to respond? I would argue that, in spite of its problematic treatment of gender, it is nevertheless possible to see how Bakhtin's theory of carnival might contribute to feminist criticism along other lines. As Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed has noted, for example, the theory has proved fruitful to feminist analyses of hysteria. Here, the notion of the grotesque has provided a model for exploring the hysteric's body, while the concept of carnivalesque discourse has provided a framework within which to account for the rupture of the hysteric's discourse (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 1993: 192-3). Robert Stam, on the other hand, has argued that, just as the carnivalesque blurring of social categories works to relativise the established social hierarchy, so 'the blurring and shifting of gender distinctions', which Bakhtin identifies as belonging to carnivalesque practices, might work to emphasise the extent to which gender is a social construct rather than a given (Stam, 1989: 163). Finally, as Russo has argued, there is scope to reconsider the imagery of carnival in the light of feminist research. Returning to the Kerch terracotta figures discussed by Bakhtin, she records his remark that the 'senile pregnant hags... are laughing' (Bakhtin, 1984: 25; quoted in Russo, 1986: 219). She proceeds to ask 'the question that never occurred to Bakhtin... Why are these old hags laughing?' (1986:

227). The implication is that the image is more complex than Bakhtin would have us believe. While the women's age and their pregnant condition might well signify both birth and death, their laughter might signify a knowingness and celebratory potential that Bakhtin overlooks. A feminist analysis of carnival might pursue such an analysis of such images, both in order to challenge received interpretations, and in order to tease out new ones.

In this section, then, we have seen that Bakhtin's theory of carnival faces certain problems in terms of the way in which the symbolism of female imagery is interpreted. While the conclusions of such arguments were generally accepted, it was argued that Bakhtin's theory might still be of use within feminist criticism.

c) Politics

One of the aspects of Bakhtin's theory of carnival which has generated the most discussion concerns the overall political significance of carnival. Clearly, the problems surrounding Bakhtin's conception of the popular and his deployment of female imagery already have a political edge to them, since between them they raise issues of cultural politics, class politics and gender politics. I would argue, therefore, that such issues cannot be wholly divorced from a discussion of carnival's overall political significance. What I want to focus on in this section, however, is a number of issues concerning the sort of function that carnival might perform, the extent to which it provides either a site for political contestation, or a site where such conflict might be contained.

In our consideration of the theory so far we have already identified two levels at which carnival is assigned some sort of political significance. The first level is that of the carnival proper, which Bakhtin credits with the ability to provide the people of the Middle Ages with a collective, festive experience built around a range of rebellious grotesque imagery. The second level is that of carnivalised literature, a textual carnival of the sort provided by Rabelais. As we have seen, Bakhtin credits Rabelais' texts with the ability to challenge the medieval world view, and to construct a new historical and humanist world view. According to Bakhtin, this tradition of carnivalised literature stretches from Menippean satire through to Dostoevsky and beyond. Like Menippean satire, carnivalised literature relativises contending voices, challenging the centripetal forces that seek to shut them out. There is a clear connection between carnival proper and carnivalised literature insofar as the latter is either directly parasitic on the forms of carnival practices (as in the case of Rabelais), or, after the decline of carnival proper, is parasitic on the traditions of carnivalised literature which had been directly influenced by carnival proper (Bakhtin, 1973: 108). However, we also need to register the stark differences between the two phenomena, between, as Mikita Hoy has put it, 'the text which promotes the carnivalesque in linguistic terms, and the actual carnival of being and doing itself' (Hoy, 1992: 780). Since Bakhtin's theorisation of carnivalised literature needs to be contextualised within his overall theory of the novel, in this study I want to concentrate on the issue of function as it relates to the processes and political significance of carnival proper. Indeed, it is this aspect which has been discussed most fully in recent

work on comedy and comic theory (e.g. Eco, 1984a; Horton, 1991; Nelson, 1990; Palmer, 1994).

As we have seen, Bakhtin assigns to carnival a number of functions. Carnival not only performed a celebratory function, it also served a critical function. It was an occasion where the people inhabited an autonomous sphere, enjoying a sense of freedom and collective identity. Carnival's grotesque imagery provided a challenge to the official images of spirituality, stasis and fear, while carnival laughter had the potential to demystify the entire edifice of officialdom. Bakhtin would thus appear to identify an oppositional, rebellious potential in carnival, and it is the idea that carnival enjoyed such potential that has most frequently been challenged in discussions of the carnivalesque. I want to look at two problems on which such challenges have focused: the fact that carnival was a licensed affair, and the issue of carnivalesque transgression.

It is Terry Eagleton who puts the issue concerning carnival licence most succinctly. Forget the lords of misrule, the inversion of hierarchy and the comic dethroning of theocracy, the argument goes, if the carnival is licensed by the authorities, then it can amount to nothing more than a safety-valve, whereby the discontent of the people might be siphoned-off peacefully. 'Carnival,' Eagleton thus claims, is merely 'permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art' (Eagleton, 1981: 148). Carnival might allow for a hot-bed of satire, in other words, but this can be no more than comic relief.

We can, however, raise a number of arguments in opposition to this conception of carnival as a safety-valve. I want to begin to do this by returning to Peter Burke's discussion of the history of carnival. Burke accepts that there are certainly some aspects of carnival which would seem to lend themselves to the safety-valve interpretation. 'Comedies built round situations of reversal,' for example, 'and played during Carnival, frequently end... with a reminder to the audience that it is time to set the world the right way up again' (Burke, 1978: 202; see also Sheppard, 1990: 279). However, Burke argues that this only tells part of the story, and that we can identify several examples of carnivals where ritualised expressions of rebellion boiled over into actual unrest. As a result, edicts were frequently delivered against the carrying of arms at times of carnival, as a means of staving off the possibility of riots breaking out. At other times, carnivals were actually prevented from taking place (1978: 203-4). As we have already seen, Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of the Romans carnival illustrates the extent to which carnival might serve as a focus for unrest, unrest which led to the massacre of the peasants in 1580. In such cases, carnival needs to be seen as more than a mere festive safety-valve.

Burke goes on to detail the decline of carnival and the reform of popular culture that took place between 1500 and 1800. Again, he interprets this process not in terms of social control, where the ruling class were in a position to licence and authorise the various practices of popular culture with a *carte-blanche*, but as a series of struggles and conflicts between ruling and subordinate groups, a process that responded to diverse social, economic and political developments. Burke argues that one of the reasons why the

safety-valve view of carnival has perhaps acquired such force is because social anthropology has tended to be preoccupied by 'consensus at the expense of conflict' (1978: 203). This line of argument is also advanced by Eileen and Stephen Yeo in their critique of models of social control. Such models, they argue, posit the structural ability of the dominant social group to control the cultural practices of subordinate groups (Yeo and Yeo, 1981). The problem with such models is that they are profoundly unhistorical, assuming that static structures of control will always enable the containment of popular practices. These models thus overlook the historical specificity of the forms that particular practices take in particular contexts: '[t]he forms which emerge and dominate in any one place or time produce *different* social relations rather than just being one among many possible ways of producing the same (capitalist) relations' (1981: 141). Historians of popular culture thus need to attend to the *different* social relations that obtain within any particular context. As a result, the Yeos argue, we need to replace the social control model with a framework that views popular culture as an 'arena of contestation' between different social forces. The arguments of Burke and the Yeos thus suggest that the safety-valve approach to popular culture provides an inadequate analysis of carnival.

It is worth returning to Bakhtin himself at this stage in order to assess the extent to which this alternative conception of popular culture might be integrated with his theory of carnival. The first point to raise concerns Bakhtin's model of medieval culture, which in many ways would seem to support the social control model of popular culture. Bakhtin's model posits a binary divide between

official and unofficial culture, the latter being limited to the 'small islands of feasts and recreations' (Bakhtin, 1984: 96). Given this isolation, it is easy to see how the potential of carnival could be defused: for all that Bakhtin identifies in the people the autonomy to organise the carnival themselves, the fact that carnival was isolated from official culture would have meant that officialdom was itself able to avoid any symbolic challenges to its hegemony generated in the course of the proceedings. Such a model would appear to be consistent with a safety-valve interpretation of carnival.

However, elsewhere Bakhtin posits a more complex relationship between carnival and social power. Firstly, he argues that carnival practices acquired their rebellious frisson only in the light of the stringencies of the everyday. Carnival in this sense was not completely isolated from the official order, as the above model suggests, but rather provided a dialogic response to the official structures of fear, intimidation and prohibition. Secondly, Bakhtin views the legalisation of carnival not as a static state of affairs, but as an ongoing process of negotiation. This process 'was forced [and] incomplete,' he argues, it 'led to struggles and new prohibitions. During the entire medieval period the Church and state were obliged to make concessions, large and small, to satisfy the marketplace' (1984: 90). This dynamic model of the development of carnival is echoed in Bakhtin's analysis of its gradual decline after the Renaissance, which charts the way in which the realm of the grotesque has continued to 'struggle for its existence' (1984: 101). Finally, we could argue that this dynamic model of cultural change is actually underpinned by Bakhtin's

valorisation of the historicising potential of carnivalesque practices. As we have seen, Bakhtin identifies a value in the ability both of carnival proper, and of Rabelais' textual carnival, to challenge the stasis of official ideology. Similarly, his concept of heteroglossia envisages an ongoing struggle at the level of language between centripetal and centrifugal forces (1981: 272). It might be argued, then, that the corollary of this position is not a static model of social control, but a dynamic model of cultural contestation. As the Yeos argue, this historical understanding of cultural change itself has a political significance:

What was defeated or abandoned, and how that change occurred, itself composed part of what won or came to dominate. This mixture of the past in the present is our guarantee not that a different, better future is inevitable but that it is at least available through present struggle.
(Yeo and Yeo, 1981: 130)

Although we can perhaps identify some problems in Bakhtin's model of medieval culture, then, the general direction of his theory of carnival, along with much his overall theoretical project, would seem to support a dynamic model of popular culture, suggesting that carnival cannot always be interpreted as a licensed safety-valve.

We are now in a position to move on to the second of the two problems concerning carnival's political significance, the issue of carnivalesque transgression. As we have seen, the codes of carnival permit a transgression of the codes of the everyday: social hierarchies are inverted, official imagery is replaced with grotesque imagery, and forms of pleasure that are usually restricted or denied are indulged in. One interpretation of such transgressions is that they are inevitably subversive, and Bakhtin's theory of

carnival at times certainly directs us towards such a view. This interpretation of carnival has been challenged by Umberto Eco, and it is to Eco's argument that I now turn.

In his essay, "The Frames of Comic "Freedom" (Eco, 1984a), Eco focuses on the transgressions undertaken both during carnival and within comic texts. Arguing against Bakhtin's view of the subversive potential of carnival, Eco concludes that comedy and carnival are necessarily restricted to reinforcing the status quo. Positing carnival and comedy as related terms, he turns to an Aristotelian definition of comedy in order to produce 'a complementary definition of carnival' (1984a: 1)⁹. Aristotle defined comedy in terms of its representation of low life and lawlessness. His definition contends that tragedy similarly concerns itself with the violation of a law (Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother), but tragedy requires that the laws that are violated are spelt out in the text (it is wrong to kill your father; it is wrong to marry your mother). In comedy, however, the broken rules, rather than being spelt out, are merely presupposed by the text. Indeed, if we take the example of a pun, then as soon as the broken rule is spelt out, as soon as the semantic clash is explained, then the comic effect of the pun all but disappears.

In order to challenge the notion of carnivalesque subversion, Eco goes on to apply this analysis of comedy to carnival. If the rules that are flouted during carnival are, like the broken rules of comedy, presupposed in the very text of carnival itself, then, as Eco argues, 'the law must be so pervasively and profoundly introjected as to be overwhelmingly present at the moment of its violation' (1984a: 6). Eco concludes, therefore, that

comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule... the comic is only an instrument of social control and can never be a form of social criticism.

(1984a: 6-7)

For Eco, then, carnivalesque transgressions perform a conservative function because they necessarily emphasise to us the very codes that they violate.

There are a number of problems with Eco's argument however. Insofar as he uses an Aristotelian theory of comedy as a basis for his argument, he can be compared to the neo-Aristotelian Chicago critics of the 1950s¹⁰. They took a formalist approach, using the conventions and patterns of various genres as a framework within which to interpret individual texts. Indeed, Eco is similarly trying to establish the conventions and patterns of comedy and carnival as genres. Once he has achieved this structural task, he draws certain semantic conclusions about the limits of comedy and carnival. The problem with both the Chicago critics and Eco himself is that the concept of genre is used ahistorically. Eco is thus able to construct a generic model of comedy and carnival and use it in an *a priori* argument about their political status. My first point about this would be that, as an *a priori* argument, it does not necessarily work. A carnivalesque inversion might serve to remind us of the actual rules of social hierarchy, but, equally, it might prompt us to question their artificiality. My second point would be that, by assuming that questions about the politics of comedy and carnival can be answered purely in terms of their generic form, so the specific historical and cultural context of a particular comic or carnivalesque performance is removed from the equation.

A further problem with Eco's argument is that it focuses on carnivalesque images of inversion at the expense of other strategies deployed within the carnival. Eco takes images of animalisation, the use of masks, and the creation of an 'upside-down world' as the paradigms of carnivalesque transgression, and then tries to show, as we have seen, how such transgressions actually work to reinforce the norms of everyday life (1984a: 2). Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of carnival in many ways supports Eco's contention. In the case of Romans, he argues, images of inversion tended to be deployed most by the patricians; the inverted price list, discussed earlier, being one such example. In such cases, Le Roy Ladurie proposes, 'turning society temporarily upside down implied a knowledge of its normal vertical position, its hierarchy' (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979: 301). However, Le Roy Ladurie also identifies other strategies present within carnival, arguing that, rather than operating in a 'counterrevolutionary' manner (1979: 302), these strategies provided a potential focus for real political struggle. One of the symbolic purposes of carnival, for example, was to eliminate 'harmful elements... as a preliminary to Lenten purification' (1979: 311). At one level, there would have been a high degree of consensus around the sort of elements that needed to be eliminated: '[n]o one can argue with the fact that insect pests and fieldmice destroy crops, or that poisonous snakes and storms are threats to human welfare,' for example (1979: 313). However, when it came to the question of *social* ills, this consensus broke down. As Le Roy Ladurie argues, '[f]or the craftsmen a social ill might mean an indirect tax on meat or bread, while the municipal elite would consider the same tax beneficial' (1979: 313). Consequently, there were certain features of carnivalesque practice

which actually lent themselves to the fuelling of unrest. Such unrest was not necessarily contained by the ritualised behaviour of carnival, as the dénouement of the Romans carnival illustrates. In ignoring the range of strategies available within carnivalesque practices, then, Eco's argument would appear to be flawed. As a result, carnival is not necessarily consigned to performing the conservative function that Eco supposes.

We have thus explored two problems concerning the politics of carnival, the fact that it is a licensed affair, and the nature of its transgressive imagery. In both cases we have reviewed arguments to the effect that the apparent subversive symbolism of the carnivalesque can always be contained; in the former, because, since carnival is always licensed by the authorities, it must necessarily amount to a form of safety-valve; in the latter, because, in transgressing the norms of the everyday, carnival necessarily reminds us of those norms. In our discussion of these arguments, we have sought to develop more of a historical approach to carnival. We have argued that, while carnival might at times operate as a safety-valve, and while its imagery might at times reinforce dominant norms, it nevertheless maintains the potential to serve as the site of both symbolic and real forms of struggle. Given this, I would agree with Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's conclusion concerning such issues: 'the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 16). Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of the carnival at Romans is of value precisely because it undertakes this sort of historical examination. As I

have tried to show, Bakhtin's theory of carnival is consistent with this approach, because in exploring the dynamics of medieval carnival, and the manner in which the carnivalesque subsequently declined, he develops a concept of carnival as a historically variable category.

Carnival and utopia

For all that we can identify in the work of Bakhtin a theory of carnival as a historically variable category, however, Bakhtin's theory also seems to combine a utopian dimension. Not only does he frequently use the term 'utopia' to describe the sense of collectivity and freedom that existed during carnival (e.g. Bakhtin, 1984: 185, 264-5, 454), but the world of carnival is frequently referred to in utopian fashion as an alternative universe: '[o]ne might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state' (1984: 88). Some commentators have found this utopian dimension to Bakhtin's theory of carnival rather unfortunate. Dana Polan has argued, for example, that it essentialises the phenomenon of carnival, and that this essentialism detracts from Bakhtin's historicised analysis of the decline of carnivalesque (Polan, 1991: 141). What I want to argue in this section, in contrast, is that while the demarcation between Bakhtin's conceptualisation of carnival as a historical phenomenon and his conceptualisation of it as a utopian construct is never very clear, the latter nevertheless enjoys a critical potential.

We should perhaps begin by briefly describing the utopian dimension to Bakhtin's theory of carnival. Carnival is characterised as a world where freedom is absolute, where all of the various hierarchies and strictures of everyday existence are suspended. For Bakhtin, this situation has a number of implications. Firstly, it constructs a new sense of collectivity. Secondly, it makes possible new forms of communication. Thirdly, it goes hand in hand with a series of unrestrained physical and sensual pleasures in the form of food, sex, and laughter. Fourthly, it incarnates a sense of celebration and festivity. And fifthly, it incorporates a life-affirming range of imagery. Each of these aspects of the carnivalesque utopia are absent from everyday existence. Indeed, the everyday existence of the Middle Ages is presented as a dystopian alternative, based on structures of alienation, prohibition, denial, and fear.

Bakhtin puts this utopian vision to use in three ways. Firstly, he uses it to ground his critique of the historical development of laughter. Secondly, he uses it as a model for the valorised realm of dialogic discourse. Thirdly, he arguably uses it in a critique of the Stalinist system under which he suffered¹¹. I will look at each of these areas in turn.

a) Utopian laughter

As we have seen in our discussion of *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin assigns to carnivalesque laughter a utopian quality, characterising it as a phenomenon embodying fearlessness, collectivity, freedom and demystification. This utopian conception

of laughter pervades much of Bakhtin's corpus. In 'From Notes Made in 1970-71', for example, one of his final pieces of published work, he offers the following analysis:

Only dogmatic and authoritarian cultures are one-sidedly serious. Violence does not know laughter... Seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him.

The social, choral nature of laughter, its striving to pervade all peoples and the entire world. The doors of laughter are open to one and all. Indignation, anger, and dissatisfaction are always unilateral: they exclude the one toward whom they are directed, and so forth; they evoke reciprocal anger. They divide, while laughter only unites; it cannot divide... Everything that is truly great must include an element of laughter. Otherwise it becomes threatening, terrible, or pompous; in any case, it is limited. Laughter lifts the barriers and clears the path.

The joyful, open, festive laugh. The closed, purely negative, satirical laugh. This is not a laughing laugh...
(Bakhtin, 1986: 134-5)

It is worth raising two points about this passage. Firstly, the utopian qualities of laughter are clearly set out: it is liberatory, universal and conciliatory. Secondly, the final line suggests that the *true* nature of laughter is precisely this utopian version. While other forms of laughter certainly exist, they somehow represent an aberration of this true nature.

This opposition between true, utopian laughter on the one hand, and degraded forms of laughter on the other, structures Bakhtin's historical analysis of laughter. For Bakhtin, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance constitute the zenith in the development of laughter, because it was during these periods that the characteristics of utopian, carnivalesque laughter were fully realised. Since that time, however, the power of laughter has gradually declined, and it has lost the positive characteristics

associated with it during these earlier periods. According to Bakhtin, this process has produced an image of laughter where it is viewed 'not [as] a universal, philosophical form. It can refer only to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life. That which is essential cannot be comical' (Bakhtin, 1984: 67). Laughter has emigrated from the public world of the marketplace, then, to the privatised world of the home, and in the course of this transition the collective aspect of carnivalesque laughter has disappeared. In the eighteenth century, for example, Voltaire viewed Rabelais' 'gay, century-old laughter' as 'something despicable,' regarding Rabelais as 'chief among buffoons' (1984: 117). In the nineteenth century, laughter continued to be stripped of its 'gay and joyful tone' (1984: 38), becoming instead a negative, sardonic form. This has given rise, Bakhtin argues, to 'genres of reduced laughter - humour, irony, sarcasm,' (1984: 120) and these now constitute the dominant forms of laughter in the twentieth century. We have witnessed, in other words, a 'disintegration of popular laughter', a gradual erosion of laughter's utopian qualities (1984: 120)¹².

It might be argued that there is a contradiction in Bakhtin's analysis here between the historical project and the essentialist conception of utopian laughter. The premise behind the historical project would seem to be that laughter, like other cultural phenomena, always has a historically-specific significance. Given that this is the case, it just doesn't make sense to identify the essence or true nature of laughter, - or any other cultural phenomenon - because such a move tries to identify not a historically-specific meaning, but a meaning that transcends

history. I would argue, however, that we can defend Bakhtin against this criticism on two grounds. Firstly, I would argue that, while his utopian conception of laughter certainly does attempt to reveal the true nature of laughter, it nevertheless avoids the essentialist pitfall of trying to transcend history. The reason for this is that Bakhtin locates the source of utopian laughter in a precise spatio-temporal context: in the carnivalesque practices of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Utopian laughter, in other words, was realised in the particular historical configurations of those periods. Secondly, I would argue that it is precisely the appeal to a utopian conception of laughter that provides Bakhtin's analysis with its critical force. Not only does he chart the transitory significance of laughter, he also attempts to explain how the social, cultural and political conditions that allowed utopian laughter to be realised in the Middle Ages and Renaissance have subsequently limited the possibility of it resurfacing. Post-Renaissance forms of laughter are thus read critically in terms of the extent to which they depart from this utopian benchmark. In this way, Bakhtin's conception of utopian laughter grounds his critique of the historical development of laughter.

b) Utopia and language

The second area in which Bakhtin's utopian conception of carnival is put to use is in his theory of language, where it serves to illustrate the conditions under which discourse becomes dialogic. Bakhtin's account of the dialogic nature of language has both a descriptive and a prescriptive dimension, and it is the

prescriptive sense for which carnival provides an archetype. At the descriptive level, the account is set out most thoroughly in Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Voloshinov, 1973). Here, Voloshinov expounds his theory of the dialogic nature of language against the background of two alternative trends of thought in the philosophy of language, 'individualistic subjectivism' and 'abstract objectivism' (1973: 48). The former trend, represented by the speech-act theories of von Humboldt, Vossler and Croce is correct, he argues, in focusing on the unit of the utterance. It is mistaken, however, in treating this unit in isolation, and in accrediting signification either to the speaker him or herself, or to a system of normative rules which govern all utterances. The latter trend, represented by the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, is mistaken in privileging an abstract, linguistic system ('la langue') at the expense of the actual speech utterances themselves ('parole'):

The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances.

(Voloshinov: 1973: 94)

The dialogic nature of language, then, derives from the fact that the linguistic sign is an essentially social phenomenon, a locus of interaction between speaking subjects and the context within which they find themselves. The word, in other words,

is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee.

(1973: 86)

The word stands in a dialogic relationship to addresser and addressee, then, but it also enjoys a dialogic relationship with the utterances surrounding it and to all of the sedimented meanings generated through its past performances. Voloshinov's theory thus identifies signification as a dynamic process, a process inextricably bound to the dialogic context of communication.

The prescriptive dimension to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is closely related to this descriptive sense. Given the dialogic context of signification, each sign is necessarily going to be saturated with a range of different 'accents' (Voloshinov, 1973: 23). Language, in other words, is permeated through and through by contending accents, registers and dialects, each pertaining to different social groups. It is this heteroglotic quality of language that 'maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development' (1973: 23). Voloshinov argues, however, that it is in the interests of the dominant class 'to impart a supraclass, eternal character' to linguistic signs (1973: 23). This not only projects a sense of the unambiguity and univalence of serious discourse, - the medium preferred by those in authority - it also projects, as we have already seen, a sense of social and ideological cohesion (Bakhtin, 1981: 67). This centripetal tendency is threatened on two counts, however. Firstly it is threatened by the heteroglotic nature of language, which means that, in spite of the operations of the unifying tendency, there is always the potential within language for the 'social diversity of speech types' to be revealed. Secondly it is threatened by the dialogic dynamism of language, which entails that there is always the potential within language to challenge the alleged stability of signification. Apart from being the natural state

of language, then, - language as a locus of dynamic interaction between speaking subjects - the concept of the dialogic also has a prescriptive, valorised sense where it refers to forms of discourse capable of undermining the monologic illusion of a unitary language. In so doing, dialogic discourse is supposed to reveal the power relations reflected in the diversity of speech types, relations which monologic discourse works to conceal.

Bakhtin's favoured example of dialogic discourse in the field of literature is the novel, which he defines 'as a diversity of speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized' (Bakhtin, 1981: 262). By orchestrating a plethora of voices and styles in this way, '[t]he signifying process of the novel,' as Hirschkop has put it, 'lays bare the social materiality of discourse... in the form of' (quoting Bakhtin):

the actual and always self-interested *use* to which this meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker's position (profession, class, and so forth) and the concrete situation.

(Bakhtin, 1981: 401; quoted in Hirschkop, 1986: 101-2)

The dialogic nature of the novel thus lays bare the dialogic nature of language, and, crucially, Bakhtin traces this novelistic dialogism back to the folk practices of carnival. This is partly because it was in the language of the marketplace 'that devices were first worked out for constructing images of a language,' for laying bare the social materiality of discourse (Bakhtin, 1981: 400). For example, 'on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all "languages" and dialects' (1981: 273). Carnival thus provided the novelist, as

we have seen in Bakhtin's study of Rabelais, with a reservoir of dialogic practices, with a range of speech genres, accents and voices culled from the marketplace: it allowed for 'the carnivalization of speech' (1981: 426). However, Bakhtin's argument does not revolve simply around the historical connection between Rabelais and carnivalesque practices; there is also a utopian dimension to the argument. The utopian conception of carnival incorporates a communicative utopia: carnival is envisaged as a period of unbridled communicative freedom, giving rise to:

special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette decency imposed at other times.

(1984: 10)

As Peter Flaherty has noted, such a conception has strong affinities with Jürgen Habermas' notion of an 'ideal speech community', 'where all forms of communication might mingle freely in a utopian realm of full discursive equality' (Flaherty, 1986: 423). Carnival provides a site where such possibilities are first realised, and the novel in turn drew on this discursive utopia. Thus, as Gardiner rightly points out, 'for Bakhtin, the novel is a repository of critical social knowledge which most approximates his cherished ideal of dialogism and which positively accentuates this ideal' (Gardiner, 1992: 176). The utopian communicative conditions of carnival therefore provide Bakhtin with an archetype for dialogic discourse, and it is on the basis of such a model that Bakhtin undertakes his analysis of the novel.

c) Utopian critique of Stalinism

We have seen two areas within which Bakhtin's utopian conception of carnival provides a grounding for his critical project. The third area concerns the Stalinist system under which Bakhtin lived. As Clark and Holquist have argued, at the level of 'political allegory', the utopian conception of carnival constructs a liberatory alternative to the repression of the totalitarian regime (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 309). This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, as they point out, '[a]ttempts were made by Stalinists to coopt... carnival techniques of inversion for their own purposes' (1984: 309). Richard Stites' study of Russian popular culture is quite instructive in describing the way in which the Soviet system put its faith in the circus, for example (Stites, 1992). Secondly, in 1935 Anatoly Lunacharsky, Stalin's ex-Commissar of Education, had published an article extolling the safety-valve theory of carnival. As Clark and Holquist speculate, Bakhtin would probably have read this article, and his own theory of carnival's utopian potential can be interpreted as some sort of response to what can be seen as the official Soviet position (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 313). In identifying carnival as a site of liberation, popular protest, and fully egalitarian social relations, then, Bakhtin's vision of a carnivalesque utopia represents an allegorical alternative to the Stalinist system.

Dominick LaCapra's discussion of Bakhtin extends somewhat the conclusion reached by Clark and Holquist (LaCapra, 1983). Situating Bakhtin firmly within the traditions of Marxist thought¹³, LaCapra argues that Bakhtin's study of Rabelais 'can be read as a hidden polemic directed against Stalinist uses of Marxism in the

Soviet regime of the 1930s and 1940s' (1983: 321). The populism which pervades *Rabelais and His World*, - and which is most clearly in evidence in the utopian construction of the carnivalesque - can be seen, LaCapra argues, as an attempt by Bakhtin to reassert the populist impulses of Marxism which had been so distorted by Stalin. 'The fight to make Rabelais a man of the people,' in other words, 'is a fight to make Marx a man of the people' (1983: 322). Further, LaCapra argues, insofar as carnival is idealised as a festive alternative to the monotony of people's everyday existence, Bakhtin's text can be read as a 'rethinking of Marxism': Bakhtin corrects the productivist emphasis within Marxist economics by offering a counterpart of utopian freedom (1983: 322). While Marxism might provide a critical analysis of capitalist social relations, then, Bakhtin's utopian conception of carnival provides an important vision of an 'alternative social context' (1983: 324). Such a vision can be of value, LaCapra argues, in thinking creatively about the social and political structures that might replace capitalist social relations.

d) Conclusions

We have seen three areas, then, within which Bakhtin's analysis of carnival's utopian dimension operates with a critical impetus: his study of the historical development of laughter; his theory of dialogic discourse; and his relationship both to Stalinism and to Marxism. Before we leave this issue, however, it is worth turning to look at some critiques of utopian thinking in order to

consider the extent to which Bakhtin's own utopian project might be susceptible to them.

A good starting point for this discussion is Gardiner's two studies of the utopian dimension to Bakhtin's thought (Gardiner, 1992 and 1993). Gardiner identifies two problematic forms of utopian thinking, the 'nostalgic utopia' and the 'total utopia' (1993: 23). As Gardiner explains, nostalgic utopias look back to a moment from the past as a Golden Age, and this is idealised as an alternative to the problems of the present. Following Barbara Goodwin's analysis of such forms of utopia, Gardiner argues that they tend to be 'fundamentally fatalistic and unconstructive' insofar as they render 'the thinker impotent with respect to both present and future unless he hopes for a cyclical revival, or believes that social developments can in time be reversed' (Gardiner, 1993: 23; quoting Goodwin, 1982: 23). Total utopias, on the other hand, which advance a comprehensive blueprint for an alternative way of organising society, are usually flawed because of the way in which they conceal the real social contradictions of the present. As Gardiner puts it, they project 'a false unity which legitimates a particular power structure and obscures the reality of divergent material interests' (1993: 25). Frederick Engels advances a similar argument against the utopian approaches of Fourier, Owen and Saint-Simon in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Engels, 1975). The problem with these approaches, Engels argues, is that they attempt to transcend the reality of social relations. As a result, he concludes, they lack the necessary critical understanding of social relations, and, what is more, they are unable to provide an account of the manner in

which their utopian model might be brought about. For this reason, he contends, we need '[t]o make a science of socialism', to place it 'upon a real basis' (1975: 62).

In many ways, Bakhtin's utopian conception of carnival would seem to reproduce the problems cited here. Firstly, in discovering utopia in the carnivalesque practices of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Bakhtin would appear to leave himself open to the charges levelled by Goodwin; namely, that there is an inevitable conservatism to this process of idealising a particular configuration from the past. Secondly, although the Bakhtinian carnivalesque can't really be seen as a form of total utopia, it would in many ways seem to represent a similar flight from the real. As both LaCapra and Gardiner have argued, for example, Bakhtin's theory of carnival lacks a comprehensive account of the interrelationship between institutions, politics and carnival (LaCapra, 1983: 323; Gardiner, 1992: 187). In the absence of such an account, it is not altogether clear how the utopian conditions of carnival might effectively be realised.

However, in the face of these potential problems, Gardiner advances a convincing defence of Bakhtin. Here, he draws on Tom Moylan's concept of the 'critical utopia', which he characterises in two ways (Gardiner, 1993: 26). Firstly, the critical utopia maintains its links with the real. It doesn't simply project a vision of an imaginary alternative context, but attempts to negotiate the relationship between utopian possibilities, 'actual socio-historical movements and the activities and desires of particular social groups' (1993: 26). Secondly, the critical utopia adopts a sceptical view of the dominant tradition of utopian thinking, the tradition

represented by nostalgic and total utopias. Critical utopias, in contrast, resist the desire to advance a blueprint of a future utopian society, and insist instead upon 'the multiplicity of possible futures', rejecting 'the systematisation and closure characteristic of the traditional utopia' (1993: 26).

Bakhtin's utopian carnival, Gardiner argues, falls under the rubric of the critical utopia outlined here. In respect of the first characteristic, Bakhtin's carnival preserves its link with the real, and it achieves this in a number of ways. Not only does Bakhtin's theory locate the utopian potential of carnival within a specific historical moment, - a point noted above - but its description of carnival stresses the extent to which carnival is not simply an abstract realm, but a set of practices which are preoccupied with the concrete. As we have seen, carnival is dominated by the physical, the sensuous and the material: carnivalesque bodies merge together in a profusion of grotesque imagery. The 'utopian tones' of carnival, Bakhtin argues, 'were immersed in the depths of concrete, practical life, a life that could be touched, that was filled with aroma and sound' (Bakhtin, 1984: 185). In addition to this, the carnivalesque negation of official imagery, represented in images of 'the backside, the lower stratum, the inside out, and the topsy-turvy', is not, as Bakhtin argues, 'an abstract, absolute negation that clearly cuts off the object from the rest of the world' (Bakhtin, 1984: 411). Rather, it is inextricably linked to the material processes of reality:

it actually offers a description of the world's metamorphoses, its remodeling, its transfer from the old to the new, from the past to the future. It is the world passing through the phase of death on the way to birth.
(Bakhtin, 1984: 412)

As Gardiner argues, then, Bakhtinian carnival can be considered a critical utopia insofar as it projects not an abstract vision, but a world that is inextricably related to real practices and concrete, material imagery.

In respect of the second characteristic identified in the critical utopia, Gardiner argues that Bakhtin displays a critical awareness of the problems of the dominant tradition of utopian thought. Rather than constructing an image of a closed, static alternative order, Bakhtin's utopia is 'a ceaselessly dynamic one, always remaining confrontational, unpredictable, and self-mocking' (Gardiner, 1993: 37; and 1993: 139). As we have seen, carnivalesque imagery is preoccupied with ambivalence, transformation and metamorphosis. Indeed, it was precisely as a result of this preoccupation that carnival proved during the Renaissance to be such a furtive resource for challenging the stasis that pervaded the medieval world view. Carnivalesque grotesque imagery unleashed a new historical consciousness, an awareness of the contingency of current social arrangements, and of the potential for such arrangements to be transformed.

We might turn back briefly to Rabelais' work in order to contrast this dynamic form of utopia with its static alternative. Towards the end of the First Book, Gargantua builds a new monastic order, the Abbey of Thélème. The Abbey represented a reversal of all of the rules typically governing monastic life. Indeed, in the Thélème rule book 'there was only one clause: DO WHAT YOU WILL' (Rabelais, 1955: 159). In spite of this apparent freedom, however, Rabelais provides a detailed description of the Abbey: its architectural design; its inscription; the way in which to

enter the order; the monks' and nuns' apparel (1955: 149-63). Each of these details represents a transgression of the doctrines of religious life, and as a result, the Abbey of Thélème has been incorporated within the canon of utopian thought itself (e.g. Goodwin, 1982: 42).

Bakhtin's discussion of the Abbey of Thélème in *Rabelais and His World* foregrounds the distinction between static and dynamic utopias. While he registers the fact that the Abbey does represent a negation of the actual order, as much carnivalesque imagery does, he argues that it nevertheless has 'a rather formalistic aspect' in comparison with the concrete nature of true, carnivalesque negation (Bakhtin, 1984: 412). Indeed, he cites the Abbey of Thélème episode as one of those moments in Rabelais where 'bookish and official language prevail[s]' (1984: 453). As a result, he argues, the Thélème episode 'is characteristic neither of Rabelais' philosophy nor of his system of images, nor of his style' (1984: 138). 'This is not a popular festive mood', he concludes, 'but a court and humanist utopia' (1984: 138). In distinguishing between the stasis of the Thélème utopia, - which he situates within the sphere of official culture - and the dynamism of the carnivalesque utopia, - which embodies the rebelliousness of unofficial discourse - Bakhtin's utopian conception of carnival qualifies as a form of critical utopia.

Gardiner's analysis of the utopian carnival would thus seem appropriate. Bakhtin projects a dynamic, concretised vision of utopia, and in this way he is able to avoid some of the problems that have traditionally been associated with utopian thinking. As I have argued in this section, then, we can defend Bakhtin's utopian

conception of carnival on the grounds of its critical potential, and we can see three specific areas in Bakhtin's work where this potential is realised: in his analysis of the historical development of laughter; in his theory of dialogic discourse; and in his allegorical critique of Stalinism. Further, just as we argued earlier that a dynamic model of popular culture was capable of helping to provide us with a 'guarantee not that a different, better future is inevitable but that it is at least available through present struggle' (Yeo and Yeo, 1981: 130; quoted above), so it is possible that the dynamism of the utopian carnival might assist in a similar sort of process. I would agree with the conclusion drawn by Gardiner, then, that

the utopian dream furtively glimpsed in the symbols and practices of carnival and elsewhere must be linked to an anti-hegemonic or transformative politics, for only then can the authoritarian structures of modern bureaucratic societies be effectively challenged and created anew.
(Gardiner, 1993: 47)

Conclusion

In the course of this chapter, I have outlined Bakhtin's theory of carnival and explained the role that it plays in his analysis of Rabelais. While I have noted the problematic nature of certain aspects of his theory, I have sought to defend a conception of carnival both as a historical category and as a utopian category. Although the discussion of this utopian dimension has been of prime significance to a thorough exegesis of Bakhtin's theory of carnival, it has tended to move us away from the central issue with

which I am concerned: comic theory. What I want to do in the next chapter, then, is to refocus on the topic of comic theory by exploring some of the methodological issues relating to a historical analysis of comic theories.

Notes

- 1 Hellenistic and Roman culture consisted of a combination of Latin and Greek languages, amongst others. Most western European societies during the Middle Ages saw both Latin and vernacular languages in use.
- 2 Rabelais published *Pantagruel* in 1532, while *Gargantua*, the story of Pantagruel's father, was published two years later. The Third, Fourth and Fifth books, which continue to tell the tale of Pantagruel's eventful life, were published in 1546, 1549 and 1562-64 respectively. The Penguin edition includes all five books under the heading *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Rabelais, 1955). Similarly, Bakhtin's study broaches each of the five books.
- 3 In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains the timing of these events slightly differently. He says: 'America was still to be discovered, the Antipodes reached, the Western hemisphere explored, and the question arose: "What is under our feet?"' (1984: 271-2).
- 4 Rabelais had himself studied medicine.
- 5 There are two points to be made here. Firstly, Bakhtin's analysis of the folkloric chronotope centres largely on pre-class society, corresponding to the first stage of his cultural periodisation rather than the second binary stage where he locates carnival. Secondly, since Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope refers to the time-space co-ordinates around which a narrative is structured, strictly speaking carnival does not have a chronotope, since it does not have a narrative structure. However, there remains a clear overlap between the spatial and temporal features of carnival and the Rabelaisian chronotope.
- 6 Again, I am using the idea of the chronotope here not to refer to the spatio-temporal organisation of narrative, but rather to the space-time co-ordinates of the dominant world view in the Middle Ages.
- 7 In Chapter Seven, I will focus on John Fiske's attempt to use the concept of carnival as a theoretical category with which to analyse popular culture (Fiske, 1987, 1989a, 1989b).

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- 8 We perhaps need to consider the relationship between Bakhtin's cultural periodisation and the historical example of Romans in 1580. Within the terms of Bakhtin's schema, 1580 would seem to fall within the Renaissance stage. As a result it might be argued that, for all that Le Roy Ladurie's study perhaps contributes to our understanding of the historical development of carnival, the conclusions that we might derive from it do not necessarily count against Bakhtin's analysis of carnival practices in the Middle Ages. However, Bakhtin posits a continuity between carnival practices of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Indeed, it was on the basis of this continuity that carnival forms were able to penetrate high cultural forms during the Renaissance, and it was only after the Renaissance that such forms began to decline (Bakhtin, 1984: 33, 217-18). Similarly, Le Roy Ladurie situates the Romans carnival of 1580 within the lineage of popular traditions stretching back to the Middle Ages (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979: 294). It would thus seem reasonable to compare Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of carnival with Bakhtin's.
- 9 Aristotle's *Poetics* is generally regarded as the earliest work of literary theory. It was also probably the earliest work of comic theory, but unfortunately the second volume of the *Poetics*, where Aristotle supposedly dealt with comedy, was lost long before Aristotle's work was rediscovered in Europe during the Middle Ages. Undeterred, and drawing on a number of Medieval texts which seem to cohere with Aristotle's theory of tragedy, Greek scholars, literary theorists and comic theorists have been trying to piece together an Aristotelian theory of comedy ever since. In his book *Aristotle on Comedy - Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*, for example, Richard Janko draws on the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, probably from the tenth century, an anonymous *Prolegomenon to Comedy*, from the eleventh or twelfth centuries, and John Tzetzes' *Iambi de Comedia* (twelfth century), in a reconstruction of Aristotle's theory (Janko, 1984). Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose*, similarly includes a reconstruction of Aristotle's theory (Eco, 1984b: 90).
- 10 E.g. Northrop Frye, R. S. Crane, Wayne Booth.
- 11 Bakhtin fell foul of Stalin's authorities, and was arrested and exiled in 1929. It was not until the late 1950s that he was free to teach and write with impunity. It is partly as a result of this situation that there is confusion surrounding the authorship of some work now attributed to Bakhtin.
- 12 The discussion from chapter three onwards will attempt to situate various comic theories in relation to the historical framework set out here by Bakhtin. This will allow for a more lengthy consideration of the adequacy of this framework.
- 13 In Chapter Four I will consider the relationship between Bakhtin and Marxism in more detail.

Chapter Two

Reading comic theory

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Bakhtin's study of Rabelais not only advances an analysis of the various practices and forms of imagery associated with carnival, it also incorporates a thesis about the decline in the significance of those practices and forms of imagery in post-Renaissance culture. In the course of this dissertation, I want to use Bakhtin's thesis as a starting point for a historical analysis of comic theory. As such, my project might be characterised as a form of intellectual history, a field of study whose methodological principles have in recent years sustained a number of theoretical interrogations (e.g. LaCapra, 1983 and 1985; LaCapra and Kaplan, 1982; Rée, 1978; Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, 1984; White, 1978). In this chapter, I will address some of the methodological issues that have been raised in the field of intellectual history, in order to set out in more detail the form that my own analysis of comic theory might take. In the first section of the chapter, I will argue that Bakhtin's concept of dialogism complements a recent emphasis in the field of intellectual history on the dialogic imperative of historical analysis. In the second section, I will relate Bakhtin's analysis of carnival to some recent

work within the area of comic theory in order to reveal the extent to which his analysis complements contemporary developments within that field.

Reading Comic Theory

I use the label 'comic theory' as a means of drawing together theoretical explorations of a range of phenomena that can be classed as 'comic': carnival, jokes, comic narrative, comic imagery, puns, parody. One potential problem with such a label is that the range of phenomena grouped within the class 'comic' is so diverse, and it is not immediately clear that such diversity can be dealt with appropriately under a single heading. There would seem to be two ways to negotiate such a problem, the first of which would be to appeal to dictionary definitions of 'the comic'. This is an approach taken by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, who argue that, since the dictionary definition of 'comic' is 'causing, or meant to cause laughter', so 'its field of potential reference is extensive', ranging from particular texts to certain situations (Neale and Krutnik, 1990: 15-16). For our purposes we might need to modify this definition somewhat, since we want to exclude laughter that is brought about by nervousness, tickling or drugs from our scope of study. Further, we might expand the definition of the comic to include phenomena which might not produce laughter itself, but nevertheless produce the pleasurable feeling of amusement that typically accompanies laughter. What the dictionary definition approach allows us to do, however, is identify a unitary quality -

the potential to produce laughter and/or related pleasures - amongst a range of diverse phenomena.

The second way of negotiating the problem of diversity is to appeal to Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances (e.g. Eco, 1984a; Nelson, 1990: 22; Horton, 1991: 4). Eco adopts this approach in his critique of carnival, grouping it together with 'humour, comedy, grotesque, parody, satire, wit, and so on' under the heading of the 'comic' (Eco, 1984a: 1). The purpose of dealing with the comic in this way is that by explaining it in terms of a 'network of family resemblances', we are relieved of the burden of having to stipulate a unitary quality shared by all of the phenomena listed:

It should be noted that while the scope of the term 'comic' advanced in each of these two approaches is roughly equivalent, there are nevertheless certain differences between them. While the first approach, for example, would suggest that we need to distinguish between, say, *comic* and *non-comic* parody (Neale and Krutnik, 1990: 18), the second approach - at least in Eco's version of it - implies that parodic techniques *as a whole* bear significant resemblances to other phenomena included under the term 'comic'. Thus, Eco might argue, while certain forms of parody might not necessarily share the unitary quality identified by Neale and Krutnik, - the potential to produce laughter and/or related pleasures - the proximity between the structure of such forms and the structure of parodic forms which *do* enjoy that quality is such to merit their joint inclusion within the category of the 'comic'. In this sense, the scope of the term 'comic' advanced in the second approach would appear to be more wide-ranging than that

advanced in the first approach. At another level, however, while the second approach seems to limit its ascription of family resemblances to a range of different genres, forms and techniques, the definition offered by the first approach is more extensive, including '[a] real event... a real person or an instance of everyday discourse' within 'its field of potential reference' (Neale and Krutnik, 1990: 16). Given these discrepancies between the two approaches, it seems unlikely that we will be able to formulate an exact delineation of the term 'comic'. However, given the high degree of convergence between the two approaches, this would not seem to pose too many problems for an analysis of comic theory. Indeed, we might attempt to delimit the scope of the analysis by appealing to both of the approaches outlined. All of the theories with which we will deal, then, attempt *either* to investigate or account for phenomena which, whether intentionally or accidentally, might be productive of laughter and/or related pleasures; *or* to investigate or account for phenomena which, by virtue of a family resemblance with other related phenomena, might be classed as 'comic'.

It should also be pointed out that the diversity of comic phenomena does not simply pose terminological problems of the sort that we have been discussing, however. It also raises certain historical problems. As we have seen, it is Bakhtin's contention that the signification of comic phenomena has changed throughout history. 'Do we of the twentieth century laugh as did Rabelais and his contemporaries?' he asks (Bakhtin, 1984: 134). If the answer is 'no', as Bakhtin suggests, then the comic theorist of the twentieth century and the comic theorist of the sixteenth century

do not differ merely in terms of the disparate comic phenomena that they address. They might also differ in terms of the very meaning of the laughter which they set out to explore.

Consequently, it would appear that there is an important historical dimension to comic theory. In addition to these historical problems, it should be noted that the various comic theories we are going to address have been formulated within a disparate range of conceptual frameworks, from Kantian aesthetics to postmodern theory, via Bergsonian metaphysics, Freudian psychoanalysis and Brechtian theory. Given this diversity, it is likely that problems of incommensurability will arise in a comparative analysis of these various theoretical paradigms. We therefore need to consider the most appropriate way of negotiating these historical and theoretical problems in our analysis. In order to do this I wish to look first at what I consider to be two inappropriate forms of analysis: the 'History of Philosophy' approach, as it has been labelled by Jonathan Rée (Rée, 1978), and the 'reconstruction of the past' approach, as it has been labelled by Dominick LaCapra (LaCapra, 1983: 61). I will then proceed to outline what I consider to be an appropriate form of inquiry by looking at some methodological issues that have recently been addressed within the field of intellectual history, and by relating them to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism.

a) 'History of philosophy'

Jonathan Rée identifies several problems in what he calls the 'History of Philosophy' approach to philosophical texts. This

approach presents the history of philosophy as a succession of ideas, most of which can be viewed with hindsight as erroneous. As such, the value of investigating the history of philosophy is to indicate the mistakes of the past in order to legitimate contemporary philosophical positions. Such investigations are typically very limited, rarely exploring questions of historiography, and rarely consulting any sources beyond a range of canonised philosophical texts. Further, the 'History of Philosophy' approach projects a continuity between the philosophers of the past and today's professional philosophers, treating the former 'as though they were participants at a modern philosophical conference' (Rée, 1978: 2). Overall, argues Rée, such an approach is profoundly unhistorical. As such, he concludes, it

is perhaps less important for what it says than for what it conceals. It hides the way in which philosophical problems and the range of conceivable philosophical 'positions' vary historically; and the ways in which the present - including one's own philosophical outlook - is a product of the past.

(1978: 32)

We might cite John Morreall's anthology *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* as an example of this approach in the field of comic theory (Morreall, 1987). Although this is a very useful collection of extracts from philosophical discussions of comic phenomena, rather than an historical analysis of them, Morreall's introduction to the anthology displays several of the features identified by Rée. Morreall explains the traditional neglect of comic phenomena within philosophy as a result of Plato and Aristotle's treatment of them as 'ethically suspect' (1987: 3). And since the 'Superiority Theory'¹ of humour that they proposed was dogged by 'sloppy theorising', such sloppiness 'has troubled the whole history

of thought on laughter and humor' (1987: 4). In this way, Morreall presents the history of philosophies of humour as a largely self-contained process. While he does recognise historical transitions in the terminology surrounding comic phenomena, he doesn't consider the way in which factors beyond the scope of philosophical texts might have impinged on such processes. It is only with the advent of contemporary 'Incongruity Theories'² of humour, Morreall suggests, that the problems of previous theories of humour have finally been overcome. As such, the history of the philosophy of humour is presented largely as a history of mistakes. For all that Morreall's collection draws together an interesting range of readings, it is not clear that he leaves us in a position to address adequately either the historical problems (concerning the historically transitory significance of comic phenomena), or the theoretical problems (concerning the disparate conceptual frameworks within which comic theories have been formulated) that we have raised above.

b) Reconstructing the past

Another mode of inquiry that would seem to be unable to negotiate these problems adequately is the approach that Dominick LaCapra has labelled the 'reconstruction of the past'. According to LaCapra, this approach relies upon a 'documentary conception' of history (LaCapra 1983: 61), making use of documents from the past to reconstruct the meaning of particular texts. Such an approach is, as LaCapra admits, a vital part of any intellectual history. However, an intellectual history that relies

solely upon such an approach falls victim to certain problems. The first problem is that it often leads to a 'narrowly historicist' conception of history(1983: 62). In reconstructing a *specific* historical configuration, LaCapra argues, the narrowly historicist position tends to ignore historical *processes*, and the way in which a specific configuration might belong to a more long-term process. The second problem is that there is a tendency for the historian who adopts such an approach to fail to apply their historicism to their own historical position. The reconstruction of the past that they undertake, therefore, is considered to remain unaffected by any interpretative insights that might derive from their own specific historical location. As such, LaCapra argues, 'historical truth' is presented 'in an essentially nonhistorical way' (1983: 62). The third problem is that while this approach pays a great deal of attention to contextual detail in reconstructing the significance of a particular text at a particular moment - unlike the 'History of Philosophy' approach, - all too often the relationship between text and context is undertheorised. Very often, for example, this approach will appeal to the context in order to ground its reconstruction of the text's significance. However, such 'an appeal... is deceptive,' LaCapra argues: 'one never has - at least in the case of complex texts - *the* context' (1983: 35). LaCapra's critique of the 'reconstruction of the past' approach, then, would suggest that we need to look elsewhere if we are to negotiate successfully the historical and theoretical problems we have identified.

If we were to identify a text within the field of comic theory that incorporates the 'reconstruction of the past' approach, then we

might turn to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. As we have seen, one stage in Bakhtin's argument is to reconstruct the specific historical configuration that obtained in the Renaissance in order to determine the significance of Rabelais' text. However, Bakhtin combines this approach with a certain historical sensitivity, and in doing so he manages to avoid the problems identified by LaCapra. Firstly, he avoids a narrowly historicist position by situating the dominant features of Renaissance culture in relation to long-term processes of cultural transformation. Secondly, he attempts to historicise his own reading of Rabelais by situating it in relation to the historical trajectory of Rabelaisian scholarship. Finally, from the dialogic model of signification that Bakhtin expounds in more detail elsewhere, we can derive an account of the relationship between a text and its context that avoids the problem of oversimplification identified by LaCapra, a point to which we shall return later.

c) Dialogic approaches

LaCapra's response to the problems associated with the 'reconstruction of the past' approach is to propose a dialogic approach to intellectual history. I will argue that such an approach is capable of overcoming the problems encountered so far, and, further, that Bakhtin's theoretical position complements such an approach. I want to focus on two aspects of LaCapra's approach: first, his theorisation of the relationship between text and context; second, his formulation of a dialogic approach to intellectual history.

Much of LaCapra's recent work has explored the complexities involved in the relationship between a text and its context, and he has sought to draw certain conclusions from this concerning the way in which intellectual history ought to proceed³ (LaCapra, 1983 and 1985). LaCapra focuses on two principal factors which complicate the text-context relationship. The first factor is that our knowledge of particular contexts is itself acquired textually: 'the very reconstruction of a "context" or a "reality" takes place on the basis of "textualized" remainders of the past' (1983: 27). As a result, LaCapra argues, we cannot use a contextual reading to ground a fixed and final interpretation of a particular text, because historical contexts themselves call for interpretation. His response is 'to formulate as a problem what is often taken, deceptively, as a solution,' and to argue for a circumspect approach to the role of contextual information in an interpretation of a particular text (1983: 16). Contextual material not only needs to be treated as *though it were a text*, but we also need to register its multivalent quality. For any one text, in other words, there are always several contexts to which an interpretation might appeal: 'the author's intentions, a corpus of texts, a genre, a biography, the economic infrastructure, modes of production, society and culture..., codes, conventions, paradigms, or what have you' (1983: 16). In a similar vein, Hayden White has argued that the point of contextual analysis is not so much for contextual detail to fill in the gaps in our understanding of a particular text, but, rather, to allow us to analyse the extent to which 'the context is illuminated in its detailed operations by the moves made in [the] text' (White, 1982: 309).

The second aspect of LaCapra's approach - its dialogic quality - is closely related to his analysis of the text-context relationship. In order to do justice to the complexities involved in the text-context relationship, he argues, we need to address the manner in which texts signify; the way in which a text might signify differently at different times, or for different readerships. LaCapra's argument is neatly summarised in the following passage:

The historian who reads texts either as mere documents or as formal entities... does not read them historically precisely because he or she does not read them as texts. And, whatever else they may be, texts are events in the history of language. To understand these multivalent events as complex uses of language, one must learn to pose anew the question of "what really happens" in them and in the reader whom actually reads them. One of the most important contexts for reading texts is clearly our own...

(1983: 65)

Our interpretation of a particular text, then, is not only going to depend upon the particular contexts to which we appeal, it is also going to depend upon the sort of questions that we put to it. And our own context is going to determine, at least in part, both the contextual material to which we have access, and the range of questions which we might be inclined to raise in relation to a particular text. LaCapra thus proposes a dialogic approach to intellectual history in which, in accepting our own historicity, an interpretation of a particular text is envisaged as a dialogue between past and present.

If we consider the way in which this approach might be applied to our own historical analysis of comic theory, it would seem that three different dialogic relationships emerge:

- a) *The relationship between Bakhtin's texts and the other texts in our study.* Bakhtin's suggestions for a historical analysis of comic theory play a crucial role in determining the way in which we analyse these texts. For example, one of the central areas of investigation will be the extent to which each text appears to articulate the decline of the carnivalesque. In this way, our analysis of each text will not only use Bakhtin's thesis as an interpretative tool, it will also attempt to test out this thesis.
- b) *The interrelationship between the various comic theories to be analysed (i.e. those of Kant, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Freud and Brecht).* In performing a comparative analysis of a range of comic theories, our discussion constructs a dialogic relationship both between those texts and between the contexts within which they are inscribed (e.g. between the Enlightenment as an appropriate context within which to analyse Kant's theory, and Romanticism as an appropriate context within which to analyse Schopenhauer's: see Chapter Three).
- c) *The relationship between the present and the past.* Not only is our interpretation of Bakhtin (as advanced in the previous chapter) formulated in the context of current debates about his work and about the carnivalesque, but our interpretations of the other theorists to whom we will turn is similarly informed by current concerns within contemporary cultural theory. In this way, our discussion very much represents a dialogue between the present and the past.

Each of our interpretations will involve a combination of the three dialogic relationships outlined here. In this way, I hope to construct a historical analysis which, in LaCapra's terms, consists of 'a "dialogic" exchange both with the past and with others inquiring into it' (LaCapra, 1985: 9).

We are now in a position to consider the way in which such an approach might overcome both the historical problems (the historically transitory significance of comic phenomena), and the theoretical problems (the disparate conceptual frameworks within which comic theories have been formulated), identified earlier. Firstly, the circumspect approach to texts and their various contexts recommended by LaCapra would seem to offer an appropriate manner in which to negotiate the historical problems. Comic theory texts can be related to 'their various pertinent contexts' (LaCapra, 1983: 35) in a non-reductive and multivalent manner. We might investigate such texts, in other words, for what they reveal about the decline of the carnivalesque at a particular moment, for example. In this way, it might be argued, we will not only be in a position to perceive the way in which comic theories have developed through time, but we will also be in a position to understand the limitations of a particular theory in relation to the cultural configuration from which it emerged. This will enable us to relate the historical development of comic theories to the transitory significance of comic phenomena. Secondly, LaCapra's recommendation of a dialogic approach would seem to offer an appropriate manner in which to negotiate the theoretical problems concerning incommensurability. Unlike the 'History of Philosophy' approach, characterised above, which supposes an almost

universal commensurability between different philosophical theories, LaCapra characterises his approach in terms of a 'dialogue with an "other": 'a dialogue involves the interpreter's attempt to think further what is at issue in a text or past "reality," and in the process the questioner is himself questioned by the "other"' (1983: 31 and 32). Rather than playing down the problem of incommensurability, then, such a model would seem to suggest that, in accepting a theoretical text from the past as 'other', a dialogic approach is capable of negotiating its way between two or more disparate theoretical frameworks. LaCapra's theory would therefore seem to offer an appropriate approach for a historical analysis of comic theory.

It should by now be clear that, with its emphasis on the dialogic nature of such an analysis, LaCapra's approach would seem to complement Bakhtin's theory of signification. Indeed, Voloshinov's analysis of the process of understanding would appear to coincide with LaCapra's theory of historical interpretation:

To understand another person's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in the process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words...

Thus each of the distinguishable significative elements of an utterance and the entire utterance as a whole entity are translated in our minds into another active and responsive, context. *Any true understanding is dialogic in nature.*

(Voloshinov, 1973: 102)

What this quotation reveals is the extent to which the interpreter is him or herself caught up in the process of dialogic deferral, a point that we have seen LaCapra formulate in terms of the need for

interpreters to recognise their own historicity. Bakhtin returns to an analysis of these processes in two of the essays included in the collection *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Bakhtin, 1986)⁴, where he addresses them specifically in relation to an inquiry into methodological techniques in the human sciences. Written very much in note form, the two essays fall short of 'a finished, consecutively prosecuted argument', as Michael Holquist notes in his introduction to the volume (Holquist, 1986: xvii). Further, as Tzvetan Todorov has argued, there is a tendency for Bakhtin to fail to draw an adequate distinction between, on the one hand, a theoretical account of the *general* laws governing the relationship between an utterance and its context (a task undertaken in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*), and, on the other hand, a theoretical analysis of a *specific* utterance (or text) in relation to its various contexts (an undertaking which is very much the task of intellectual history) (Todorov, 1984: 24-8). Nevertheless, in spite of these shortcomings, we can identify within the two essays three key features of Bakhtin's discussion which complement LaCapra's approach to intellectual history.

The first of these features concerns Bakhtin's emphasis on the fact that the object of study in the human sciences is necessarily textual (Bakhtin, 1986: 103-4). Given that this is the case, we need to consider, in the course of any piece of analysis, some of the issues to which the object's textuality gives rise: '[t]he problem of the boundaries between text and context', for example (1986: 161). Such concerns bring us to the second feature of Bakhtin's commentary, his discussion of the significance of context. Here,

Bakhtin's position is eloquently summarised in the following passage:

There is neither a first word nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) - they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context).
(1986: 170)

Bakhtin's emphasis here upon the notion of an 'unfinalized context' (1986: 160) anticipates LaCapra's own problematisation of the procedures of contextual analysis, along with his insistence upon our inability to identify *the* context of a particular text. In his discussion both of the role of text, and of the role of context, within the human sciences, then, Bakhtin's position reveals strong affinities with that of LaCapra.

Given these affinities, it is no surprise that Bakhtin similarly proposes a dialogic approach to research in the human sciences, and this is the third feature of his discussion that I wish to comment upon. There are two aspects to this emphasis upon dialogism. The first concerns the need to treat texts as utterances dialogically inscribed within specific contexts (1986: 105). In this way, a particular text can be analysed both as a response to a particular interlocutor (e.g. an author; another text; a state of affairs; a problem), and as an utterance directed both at a particular addressee (e.g. a particular community of readers), and at what Bakhtin calls a '*superaddressee*...' (God, absolute truth, the

court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth)' (1986: 126). The second aspect concerns the imperative for the interpreter of a particular text to register their own dialogic relationship with it. Just as is the case in microphysics, so in the human sciences: '[t]he experimenter constitutes part of the experimental system' (1986: 123). As a result, we need to be aware that the way in which we frame a particular text ('for example, the selection of various utterances of various scholars or sages of various eras on a single question' (1986: 117)) will be a powerful determinant on the way in which a text is interpreted. Overall, then, Bakhtin's guidelines for a methodology in the human sciences share with LaCapra's approach to intellectual history a strong insistence upon the necessarily dialogic nature of analytical inquiry.

d) Dialogic approaches to comic theory

If we were to look for examples of analyses of comic theory that have been carried out in a manner consistent with the dialogic approach identified here, then Richard Keller Simon's book *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud* would seem to suffice (Simon, 1985). The title of Simon's study is a reference to Henri Bergson's characterisation of the comic as a labyrinth, a puzzling network of corridors that we attempt to navigate at our peril (1985: 7). Indeed, so perilous is such an attempt that, in many ways, 'the inquiry into the comic appears as 2,500 years of interesting failure' (1985: 241). Such a conclusion would seem to suggest that Simon's tack will be akin to a 'History

of Philosophy' approach to the subject. However, Simon's study rejects such an approach and embarks instead on a comprehensive analysis of four moments in the history of comic theory: the comic fiction of Meredith and Fielding; the philosophical exploration of irony in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard; the scientific psychological studies of humour produced by Bain, Darwin, Spencer and Sully; and the psychoanalytic theory of jokes advanced by Freud. His analysis of each moment not only reveals the way in which the analysis of the comic has developed over time, it also unpicks the various intertextual references in each body of work. The conclusion that he draws is that the history of comic theory reproduces some of the key features of the material it sets out to analyse. Firstly, in reproducing the failures and past mistakes of previous theorists, comic theory can be seen to be essentially parodic. Secondly, in displaying optimism where so many others have failed, the comic theorist has much in common with the comic hero. As a result, argues Simon, comic theory and comic fiction are revealed to be 'mutually interdependent forms' (1985: 6). It is not clear, then, whether it is finally possible for the theorist to find their way out Bergson's comic labyrinth unscathed. However, an analysis of the various attempts to do so can reveal important historical aspects of the moments within which such attempts were made: the way in which the comic was conceived at a particular time, for example, or the way in which a particular form of discourse (e.g. psychoanalysis) was advanced as a means for mastering the unmasterable (1985: 10). Thus, Simon concludes, when it is 'read as intellectual history, the inquiry into the comic is a rich and exciting discourse, a series of remarkable attempts to understand

the most essential characteristics of very difficult material' (1985: 241).

Simon's analysis displays several of the features recommended by LaCapra. First, it represents a clear departure from the 'History of Philosophy' approach. Second, it tries to show not only how particular theories relate to their various contexts, but, in tracing *intertextual* connections between certain theories - the relationship between Sully and Bakhtin (1985: 206-7), for example, or between Freud and Groos (1985: 219-20) - Simon's analysis explores the extent to which past theories construct a dialogue with their own precursors. Finally, by placing his own analysis within the problematic raised by Bergson - the labyrinthine qualities of the comic - Simon not only constructs his own dialogue with Bergson, but he also uses Bergson as an intermediary in his analysis of previous comic theories. In this way, Simon's analysis involves three dialogic relationships, each analogous to the three outlined above (a, b and c) that our own analysis will deploy. Our analysis covers different ground from that of Simon, and this is largely a result of starting out from an alternative problematic, one suggested by Bakhtin rather than Bergson. Nevertheless, as I have tried to show, Simon's study fulfils many of the objectives of dialogic inquiry recommended by LaCapra.

e) Problems

Up to this point I have argued that LaCapra offers an appropriate model with which to embark on a historical analysis of comic theory, and that this model is consistent with the framework

set out by Bakhtin concerning a methodology for the human sciences. However, I want to turn now to consider two potential problems that might be raised against it. The first of these concerns its epistemological status, while the second concerns its political implications.

The epistemological problem might be formulated in the following manner: by rejecting the documentary conception of history offered by the 'reconstruction of the past' approach (referred to earlier), LaCapra gives up the possibility of an objective account of history and is forced to lapse back into an untenable form of subjective relativism. There are two ways of responding to such a charge. First, as we have already seen in this chapter, the objectivist approach itself faces problems. Second, as LaCapra himself argues, subjective relativism is not the only alternative to documentary objectivism (LaCapra, 1985: 137). In accepting our own existence as historically-constituted subjects, we are not required to commit ourselves to a semiotic free-for-all. Indeed, LaCapra's approach is geared towards formulating a framework within which we might derive legitimate conclusions about the past through a circumspect analysis of particular text-context relationships. In his essay 'Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts', for example, he outlines six interacting contexts within which a text might be analysed: the 'relation between the author's intentions and the text'; the 'relation between the author's life and the text'; the 'relation of society to texts'; the 'relation of culture to texts'; the 'relation of a text to the corpus of a writer'; and the 'relation between modes of discourse and texts' (1983: 36-56). That the conclusions we draw are themselves context-bound

(i.e. dependent in part on the context within which they were formulated) does not entail that any possible conclusion whatsoever would have to be deemed legitimate. It might be argued in reply that LaCapra fails to lay down any procedures for adjudicating between two or more divergent interpretations of a particular text. However, his dialogic approach arguably provides us with just such a procedure: either the interpreters who produced the divergent readings enter a dialogue re-assessing the appropriate pieces of evidence until they reach a point of agreement; or, alternatively, they undertake a renewed analysis of the relevant text-context relationship, either reaching a decision about each interpretation's adequacy, or providing a dialogic synthesis of their respective merits.

This defence of LaCapra against the epistemological problems we have raised nevertheless brings us to the second problem that I wish to raise, its political implications. Insofar as he seems to recommend a process of hermeneutic dialogue, LaCapra's position can be compared to that of Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1989). In a similar fashion to LaCapra, Gadamer argues that the process of interpretation takes place in the form of a dialogue between a past text and a present interpreter. He also insists upon the idea that each act of interpretation is context-bound, and that a text will signify differently in different contexts. In spite of this radical historicity, Gadamer argues, our ability to interpret is preserved by the existence of a common tradition in the form, as Michael Gardiner has put it, of 'our shared membership in a particular linguistic-cultural community' (Gardiner, 1992: 115). This shared tradition

not only enables us to dialogise with the past, it also allows us to arrive at consensual decisions regarding divergent interpretations of particular texts. As such, Gadamer's position would seem to have much in common with that of LaCapra, and also, as Michael Gardiner has argued, with that of Bakhtin (1992: 108-23). In particular, Gadamer's conception of a comfortable dialogue providing us with the means for adjudicating between rival interpretations would appear to coincide with my explanation of LaCapra's possible response to the epistemological problems tackled above. And it is at this point that we can raise a number of issues concerning the political implications of such a position. Terry Eagleton, for example, has attacked Gadamer's concept of tradition in the following manner:

It assumes... that history is a place where 'we' can always and everywhere be at home; that the work of the past will deepen - rather than, say, decimate - our present self-understanding; and that the alien is always secretly familiar. It is, in short, a grossly complacent theory of history... It has little conception of history and tradition as oppressive as well as liberating forces, areas rent by conflict and domination.

(Eagleton, 1983: 72-3)

In a similar vein, Jürgen Habermas has attacked Gadamer for submitting to the contingencies of tradition rather than seeking to instigate a critique of tradition (Habermas, 1974). As such, Gadamer's hermeneutics amount to nothing more, in Christopher Norris' words, than 'a species of conservative pleading for the "commonsense" status quo' (Norris, 1985: 1). If there really is such a close proximity between Gadamer, LaCapra and Bakhtin, then, we clearly need to respond to these problems.

In order to do this, I want to turn to Michael Gardiner's eloquent comparison between Bakhtin and Gadamer. Gardiner

concedes that there is a lot of common ground between the two theorists. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is in many ways virtually synonymous with Gadamer's concept of hermeneutics (Gardiner, 1992: 111), and they also both share an emphasis on the centrality of language, the situatedness of signification, and the 'unfinalized nature of our experiential relation to the world and to others' (1992: 113). However, while Gadamer conceives of tradition in terms of a linguistic community conducive to dialogue and consensus, Bakhtin's conception of the linguistic community is, as Gardiner points out, markedly different. As we have seen, beneath the veneer of a shared vocabulary, Bakhtin identifies 'the clash of live social accents' (Voloshinov, 1973: 23). This is the point at which centripetal and centrifugal forces converge, the point at which social, economic and political power inscribes itself on the processes of communicative interaction. Bakhtin would therefore reject Gadamer's conception of the linguistic arena, envisaging it instead as a site of ideological contestation. As such, Gardiner concludes, Bakhtin would tend to side with Habermas' critique of Gadamer's conception of tradition, arguing instead that "tradition" should be critically interrogated' (Gardiner, 1992: 121). It would seem, then, that for all that there are some important similarities between Bakhtin and Gadamer, Bakhtin's alternative conception of the linguistic arena allows him to escape from the charges of conservatism that have been levelled at Gadamer.

We now need to consider the extent to which LaCapra's account of historical interpretation manages to overcome these charges. To what extent does he rely upon a notion of tradition akin to Gadamer's? To what extent does he conceive of communicative

interaction in the ideologically-charged manner preferred by Bakhtin? While LaCapra doesn't appear to formulate a specific model of communicative interaction, he does from time to time refer to the constraints imposed on such interaction (and, therefore, on dialogue), by socio-political factors. Such factors might include, for example, the situation of particular discourses within particular forms of discipline and/or particular types of institution (LaCapra, 1985: 140). The disciplinary and institutional location of a particular discourse, in other words, is going to have implications for the sort of things that can be articulated, and their eventual acceptance or rejection. For LaCapra, then, the dialogue necessary to adjudicate between rival interpretations does not take place in a vacuum, nor in the midst of a common tradition, but is bound up with a number of institutional factors. That LaCapra gestures towards such factors can be seen in his reaction to Bakhtin's work which, he suggests, could have done with addressing in rather more detail the relationship between power and language. He argues, for example, that

Bakhtin's stature as a social theorist is diminished by the fact that he devotes little attention to the workaday institutions and settings with which carnivalesque phenomena must interact in the larger rhythm of social life.

(LaCapra, 1983: 323)

We might conclude from this that, for LaCapra, the intellectual historian, like the social theorist, needs to reflect on the manner in which 'workaday institutions and settings' impinge on the processes of interpretation. Observations of this sort would seem to suggest that, while LaCapra might fail to advance a comprehensive theory of signification himself, he nevertheless

appears to reject a Gadamerian conception of sedimented, shared tradition. I would argue, then, that LaCapra, like Bakhtin, would appear to overcome the charges of conservatism directed at Gadamer.

I have argued in this section that a dialogic approach to historical analysis of the sort proposed by LaCapra offers an appropriate framework within which to undertake an analysis of comic theory. I have also suggested that there are some important affinities between such an approach and Bakhtin's own approach to the human sciences. Finally, I have sought to defend the approach against potential epistemological and political problems. Before we begin our analysis of comic theory texts from the past, I want to situate Bakhtin's work in relation to some recent work in the area of comic theory.

Recent comic theory

In the twenty-seven years since *Rabelais and His World* was first published in English, the text has been incorporated into the 'canon' of comic theory. On the one hand, Bakhtinian readings have been produced of comic texts, from Manfred Pfister's analysis of Shakespeare (Pfister, 1987), to William Paul's analysis of Charlie Chaplin (Paul, 1991). On the other hand, Bakhtin is seen as representing a particular position within the range of comic theories, a position which accredits the comic with subversive potential. This position has its supporters, such as Edith Kern, who equates the collective, grotesque festivity of Bakhtin's carnival with Baudelaire's concept of 'absolute comedy' (Kern, 1980). It also

has its detractors, such as Umberto Eco, who argues that the comic performs a conservative function (Eco, 1984a).

As I have argued in the previous chapter, I do not think that Bakhtin's theory of carnival can be so easily assimilated to the position that views the comic as essentially subversive. As we have seen, Bakhtin at times displays flashes of essentialist commentary, where he seems to imply that the comic enjoys universal capacities of subversion. However, if we take into account both his general theory of signification, and his analysis of the decline of the carnivalesque, along with the observation that his concepts typically involve both descriptive and prescriptive applicability, we can argue, as I have done, that Bakhtin's analysis in fact provides us with a theory of the way in which the signification of comic practices is historically variable. Nevertheless, I do think that we can use Bakhtin's theory of carnival as a position from which to critique certain types of comic theory, and this is the first task I will undertake in this section, by turning to Susan Purdie's own critique of certain traditions within comic theory. I will then examine the extent to which Bakhtin's theory might complement recent semiotic and semantic theories of comedy. Finally, I will look at how recent discussions of the historical development of comedy might be articulated with Bakhtin's theory of the decline of the carnivalesque.

a) Susan Purdie

In her book *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, Susan Purdie provides, amongst other things, an analysis of literary accounts of

comedy (Purdie, 1993: 150-67). Focusing on theories of comedy produced within the field of literary studies over the course of this century, she argues that we can detect in them a valorisation of 'individuality', in which individuality is perceived as something both natural and vital, and is constructed as existing prior to the 'social'. Purdie traces the origins of theories of comic individuality back to F. M. Cornford's *The Origin of Attic Comedy* and Sir George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, both published towards the beginning of this century. Both texts seek to identify a vital natural force that is bound up with the very essence of human individuality and which derives from primitive rituals. Cornford, for example, argues that Attic comedy derived from ancient rituals, and shares with these rituals the symbolisation of 'the same natural fact': 'the death of the old year and the birth and accession of the new, the decay and suspension of life in the frosts of winter and its release and *renouveau* in spring' (Cornford, 1984: 67-8). Cornford thus associates comedy with a regenerative impulse, attributable to ancient Greek affiliations between prototype comic forms and fertility rituals, and located in the structure of dramatic comedy. Cornford and Frazer's work has been influential throughout much twentieth century comic theory⁵. As a result the essence of comedy has regularly been defined in terms of a regenerative vital force produced by the narrative's 'happy ending', whose significance lies in its reassertion of the value of the individual over and above that of the social. Purdie cites the comic theories of Northrop Frye and Suzanne Langer as illustrative of this sort of approach⁶, but she also looks at some more recent examples, and it is to these that I want to turn.

The first example is provided by George McFadden in his book *Discovering the Comic* (McFadden, 1982). Here McFadden attempts both to provide an analysis of comic theories, and to advance his own definition of the comic. We associate the comic with several qualities, he argues, 'spontaneity, liberation from inhibition and constraint, unblocking, vital movement, and ease and grace of behaviour' (1982: 11). As a result, he contends, freedom must be an 'indispensable component' of the comic (1982: 11). However, McFadden's conclusion defines this notion of comic freedom in clearly delineated ideological terms:

If the comic is to survive... it will outlast, in literary art at least, the present wave of attacks upon the subject and the individual personality. The most severe test of all would come if freedom should one day cease to be the most valued of human desires and goals; if, for example, a commonality of status, risk and reward should become the most valued object of human activity.

(McFadden, 1982: 254; cited in Purdie, 1993: 156)

For McFadden, then, the freedom that is essential for the comic to exist is conceived in terms of a thorough-going individualism, which itself is threatened by the objectives of any sort of socialist or redistributive programme. Purdie argues that this sort of theorising is representative of humanist approaches to comedy, committed as it is to a concept of the individual as 'non-social' rather than socially-constructed. Comedy, by dint of its origins, is enlisted as a privileged site in which this vital essence of humanity might be revealed (1993: 164). Further, insofar as comedy is enlisted as a purveyor of metaphysical truths about humanity, the "'low" behaviour' characteristic of comic texts is dismissed as being of marginal importance to this 'deeper meaning' (1993: 165). In this way, Purdie concludes, humanist criticism accommodates comedy within a specific ideological perspective.

The second example comes from T. G. A. Nelson in his book *Comedy* (Nelson, 1990). As Purdie points out, Nelson's argument does not appeal to the same form of individualism as McFadden, but it nevertheless retains a conservative inflection, where comedy is deemed to reconcile us to the deficiencies of the world by summoning up the vital forces of life itself (1993: 164). Nelson concludes his study by noting the way in which comic endings are rarely as happy as we would like them to be. 'Perhaps,' he continues,

the most honest ending is that which simply returns us to the inadequacies of the world... to the awareness that life is a struggle in which nobody can always be on the winning side, and where each of us will sometimes fill the role of victim, scapegoat, or fool.

(Nelson, 1990: 186; quoted in Purdie, 1993: 165)

A similar formulation is offered in Robert Bechtold Heilman's *The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society* (Heilman, 1978; not cited by Purdie). For Heilman, comedy represents 'a making-do with a society that falls short of an imaginable rational order; it is an instinctive rather than rational coming to terms with subutopian actuality' (Heilman, 1978: 11). As Purdie points out (with reference to Nelson), there is an implicit conservatism in such statements, urging us to accept social arrangements as we find them rather than to challenge their legitimacy.

Purdie places Nelson together with McFadden in the same tradition of comic theorising, and she rejects this tradition on a number of grounds. Firstly, she rejects its humanist conception of subjectivity: her own theory of comedy, as we shall see later, draws on a Lacanian account of subject formation. Secondly, she calls into question the way in which it defines the essence of comedy in

terms of its 'happy ending', rather than in terms of the discursive formations involved in joking behaviour. Finally, she rejects the implicit conservatism of this tradition, proposing instead a theory of comedy that is much more attuned to the effects of power within comic practices.

It might at first seem that Bakhtin's theory of carnival could easily be assimilated within this tradition of comic theory. Not only does it include a similar emphasis on the festive nature of carnivalesque practices, it also identifies images of regeneration as a central part of the carnivalesque vocabulary. Indeed, two commentators, Nelson and D. J. Palmer, seem to place Bakhtin within this tradition (Nelson, 1990: 171-8; Palmer, 1984: 17-8)⁷. What I want to argue here, however, is that Bakhtin's theory of carnival actually complements Purdie's critique of this tradition. Firstly, Bakhtin provides an alternative to the humanist conception of individuality upon which that tradition relies. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov specifically rejects the idea that the 'individual' is a 'binary opposition' of the 'social', arguing that the binary opposite of the 'social' is, in fact, the 'natural' (a relationship now more usually formulated in terms of a binary opposition between culture and nature) (Voloshinov, 1973: 34). This concept of the 'natural' certainly includes a notion of the 'individual' as a 'natural, biological specimen', but it does not include a notion of the individual as a social agent, as an agent capable of interacting with socio-cultural processes. Given that this is the case, Voloshinov argues, in order to visualise the individual as an agent capable of socio-cultural interaction, we are obliged to conceive of it as a thoroughly social phenomenon.

Bakhtin thus provides us with an account of the individual as socially-constituted, and this complements Purdie's critique of the humanist tradition of comic theory. In addition to this, Bakhtin argues that the individual is subsumed by the social in the processes of carnival. Laughter, for example, is not simply 'subjective' and 'individual', but embodies 'the social consciousness of all the people' (Bakhtin, 1984: 92). Finally, according to Bakhtin, the grotesque imagery of carnival produces a unique conception of the body, not as the individualised body of the classical canon, but as an unlimited, dynamic phenomenon, where the 'confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies' are obfuscated (1984: 315). Bakhtin thus offers an alternative to theories which identify in comedy a valorisation of the individual *against* the social, by identifying in carnivalesque practices a valorisation of the individual *as it is subsumed by* the social.

We might also appeal to Bakhtin in relation to Purdie's observation that the humanist tradition is over-reliant upon the figure of the happy ending in formulating its theory of comedy. The concept of the happy ending would not seem to be of much import to an analysis of carnival, since the ending is precisely the point at which the alternative social relations established during carnival are replaced by the regular social order. Like Purdie, then, Bakhtin is interested more in the discursive formations that operate within the period of carnival. As we have seen, most of *Rabelais and His World*, for example, is concerned with the semiotic potential of various types of imagery, and, in particular, with their political and ideological significance.

The final point at which Bakhtin's theory complements Purdie's critique is in its rejection of the conservatism of the sort displayed by McFadden, Nelson and Heilman. There are two issues to raise here. Firstly, in advancing a theory of carnival as a historically variable phenomenon, Bakhtin would reject the idea that carnival or comedy perform a universal function; of reconciling us to the social order, for example. Secondly, in his utopian conception of carnival, Bakhtin nevertheless provides us with an alternative to the conservative conception of carnival. Here is a set of cultural practices that are geared to fostering a critical representation of current social arrangements, an exercise in collectivity and popular rebellion. While such a conception can, as we have seen, be called into question, it nevertheless provides us with a critical utopian alternative to conservative theories of comedy. Overall, then, Bakhtin's theory of carnival can be seen as complementary to Purdie's critique of the humanist tradition of comic theory.

b) Raskin and Palmer

Bakhtin's theory also complements some recent semantic and semiotic theories of comedy, and I want to look at two such theories: Victor Raskin's *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Raskin, 1985) and Jerry Palmer's *The Logic of the Absurd* (Palmer, 1987). Raskin tries to formulate a theory of the semantic processes involved in humour. Focusing solely on verbal humour, he proposes that a 'single joke-carrying text' is necessarily 'compatible, fully or in part, with two scripts', but that these two scripts are themselves opposites (Raskin, 1985: 99). By the term

'script', Raskin means the internalised 'semantic information' that surrounds a particular word for a particular speaker (1985: 81). The particular script that forms around a certain word for a particular speaker will depend upon his or her personal and social experience. Such a formulation allows us to explain the mechanism underlying any particular joke by specifying the two opposing scripts that are implicated in it. But because the ability to 'get' the joke depends upon a particular speaker's access to the appropriate script, we can also explain the importance of the context in joking behaviour. A speaker who lacks access to either or both of the scripts implicated in the joke will be unable to perceive the punch line as humorous. Rather than trying to explain particular jokes as necessarily funny, then, Raskin's theory allows us to explain the *potential* funniness of a particular joke.

We can perhaps provide an example to illustrate Raskin's theory by turning to Palmer's own semiotic analysis. Palmer formulates his theory around a visual gag from a short Laurel and Hardy film, *Liberty* (1929). Laurel and Hardy have escaped from prison, and they are finally pursued by a policeman to a building site, where they proceed to ascend the lift to the very top of the scaffolding. Later, they descend in the lift only for it to land on top of the policeman. The final shot, representing the visual punch line of the gag, shows the policeman emerging from under the lift as a dwarf. Palmer's analysis of this gag divides it into 'two moments':

- 1) a peripeteia, a shock or surprise that the narrative constructs for us;
- 2) a pair of syllogisms, leading to contradictory results:
 - a) that the process is implausible
 - b) that the process nonetheless has a certain measure of plausibility, but that this is less than the implausibility.

(Palmer, 1987: 43)

In the gag from *Liberty*, then, the peripeteia is constructed by the surprise of the policeman emerging from under the lift. Such an outcome has a degree of implausibility and a degree of plausibility. It is implausible insofar as we would have expected the policeman to have been killed by the accident. It is simultaneously plausible insofar as we know that 'the result of squashing is a reduction in size' (1987: 42), and the policeman's reduction in size therefore seems rather apt. According to Palmer, the outcome is humorous because the implausibility of the situation is greater than its plausibility.

It would not seem to be that difficult to transpose Palmer's analysis of this particular gag into the terms of Raskin's theory of humour. The gag is compatible with two different scripts (roughly comparable to Palmer's syllogisms), and these scripts contradict one another: on the one hand the outcome is plausible, on the other it is implausible. Further, just as Raskin insists on the importance of context in the actual success of joking behaviour, so Palmer's analysis is designed to illustrate the basic semiotic mechanism of humour ('the logic of the absurd') so that we are then in a position to understand the working of particular comic texts in particular situations. Indeed, one of the most important conclusions that Palmer draws is that 'humour is intrinsically paradoxical' (1987: 181). The fact that a gag is constituted by a combination of plausibility and implausibility entails that it is necessarily ambivalent. As a result, we cannot ascertain purely from semiotic analysis the *actual* effect of a joke within a particular context: in order to identify such an effect we need to perform some form of contextual analysis. '[In] and of itself,' Palmer concludes,

humour 'involves no commitment to anything except the act of levity... its meaning changes dramatically according to the circumstances of its utterance' (1987: 182). Like Raskin's theory, then, Palmer's theory allows us to explain the processes that contribute to humour, but it also allows us to explain precisely why it is that humour is capable of dramatic variations in terms of its significance.

We are now in a position to consider the extent to which Bakhtin's analysis of carnival might complement Raskin and Palmer's theories. There are, I think, three points to be made. Firstly, we need once again to distinguish between Bakhtin's utopian model of carnival and his model of it as a historically variable entity. Clearly, in implying that the subversive qualities of carnival imagery obtain universally, the former model runs contrary to Raskin and Palmer's emphasis on the contextual determination of humour. However, Bakhtin's analysis of the historically variable meanings of carnivalesque imagery would certainly seem to conform to Raskin and Palmer's models. The second point would be that, if we were to identify one concept that unites the various figures identified by Bakhtin in the carnivalesque (i.e. masks, inversions, parody, metamorphosis), it would probably be the concept of ambivalence. In his analysis of the medieval feast, for example, Bakhtin identifies a dual signification: an 'official, ecclesiastical face [which] was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order,' and 'the face of the people of the marketplace [which] looked into the future and laughed' (Bakhtin, 1984: 81). As we have seen, both Raskin and Palmer locate an essential contradiction or ambivalence within

each particular instance of humour. Insofar as carnivalesque imagery is itself imbued with this same essence of ambivalence, Bakhtin's analysis of it would again appear to have affinities with those of Raskin and Palmer. Thirdly, and finally, that carnivalesque imagery is essentially ambivalent entails that a contextual analysis is necessary in order to ascertain its significance in a particular time and place. Such imagery is, according to Bakhtin's historically variable model, not necessarily subversive, but liable to be transformed through time. Such an assessment is echoed in the work of Raskin and Palmer, particularly in the conclusion to Palmer's study. Bakhtin's analysis would therefore seem to have much in common with Raskin and Palmer's theories. We might argue that, in formulating precise, technical models of the mechanisms of humour, Raskin and Palmer's theories are capable both of complementing, and of providing further illumination of, Bakhtin's analysis of carnival.

c) Comedy and culture

Finally, I want to turn to two recent discussions of the historical development of comic genres and comic practices in order to consider their relationship with Bakhtin's analysis of the decline of the carnivalesque. I will begin by returning to Purdie's theory of comic discourse. As we have seen, Purdie offers a critique of a particular tradition of theorising comedy. However, she also offers a theory of her own which focuses on the discursive formations involved in comic phenomena. Humorous discourse allows us to exploit and advertise our discursive proficiency by playing with

linguistic and social rules: a joke might transgress certain semantic codes; equally it might articulate thoughts which transgress certain social codes. Our very ability to construct or perform these transgressions, however, rests upon our prior knowledge of the rules which we are breaking. Consequently, in the process of joking we project ourselves as 'masters' of discourse. And since subjectivity, following Jacques Lacan, is effected through our employment of discursive structures - the Symbolic Order, as Lacan calls it - so joking practices are a key site in the construction of subjectivity. Purdie summarises this argument thus:

joking paradigmatically involves a discursive exchange whose distinctive operation involves the *marked* transgression of the Symbolic Law and whose effect is thereby to constitute jokers as 'masters' of discourse: as those able to break and to keep the basic rule of language, and consequently in controlling possession of full human subjectivity.

(Purdie, 1993: 5)

Purdie draws a number of conclusions from this formulation, largely stemming from her theorisation of the Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order, she argues, provides us with a set of discursive rules which are predicated on the power structures which obtain in society. Since the Symbolic Order is the medium within which we make sense of the world, our shared knowledge about the world will bear the hallmarks of these power structures. The Symbolic Order will thus tend to reproduce the patriarchal values that prevail in our social arrangements: Purdie's definition of comedy as the 'mastery' of discourse is thus deliberate, signifying the way in which 'our patriarchal culture identifies discursive power with masculinity' (1993: 7). These values will also affect the

construction of subjectivity, the way in which we make sense of ourselves as 'a person': '[if] everything that "makes sense" involves mental representation within language, then it is not very contentious to claim that we know our identity within language' (1993: 17). If the practice of joking is necessarily tied to the rules of the Symbolic Order even as it transgresses them, then joking would seem to reinscribe such rules even if only ambiguously so. Consequently, comedy

is therefore very unlikely radically to challenge an Audience's perceptions, and we are all of us deeply saturated with a constructed 'knowledge' of masculine dominance which is thus implicated in our performance of Symbolic competence.

(1993: 147)

On Purdie's view, then, comedy would seem largely to confirm the existing set of social arrangements. If her theory is of value, it lies in the way in which she tries to formulate the complicated relationship between joking practices, psychic operations and social power.

It might be objected at this stage, however, that Purdie has failed to present an alternative to an essentialist account of humour, since her own theory assumes the universality of the Symbolic Order, and hence the universality of the discursive operations involved in joking behaviour. In addition, the Lacanian framework she employs would seem to imply that comic texts can but reinscribe current power structures irrespective of the context within which they are performed or articulated. If this is the case, then Purdie's theory would seem to be at odds with Bakhtin's historicised approach.

Purdie is aware of such problems, however, and tackles them in a postscript to her book (1993: 171-76). Here she argues that while the organisation of culture within any society may be conceived of in terms of a Symbolic Order, the precise relationship between the Symbolic Order and joking practices will vary socially and historically. For example, the emphasis on 'enacted taboo-breaking' (1993: 174) within pre-Renaissance comic practices, along with a preoccupation with 'illicit sexuality, physical aggression [and] scatological pollution' (1993: 173), suggests that there was greater freedom to transgress social codes than there is today. As the regularisation of language increased after the Renaissance (Purdie cites the inception of 'correct' spelling as an example), so previously unavailable forms of pleasure were opened up and verbal jokes came to predominate, where the punch line allowed for the transgression (and simultaneous reassertion) of linguistic rules. As we have already seen, Purdie argues that subjectivity is constructed through such processes. However, if language failed to enjoy the same symbolic significance before the Renaissance as it does today, and if the punch line joke was only of minimal importance, then it would seem that a different set of processes would have produced different constructions of subjectivity. Purdie argues, then, that the relationship between joking practices, psychic operations and the Symbolic Order is historically variable. Further, she maintains that this relationship is only one aspect of joking behaviour, albeit a crucial one:

Since joking is hugely overdetermined, there is more than one reason why most things are funny, and getting a joke will have more than one effect. Joking happens in actuality, not in theory, and each particular instance of joking and of comedy will have particular effects in relation to its context, its content and its interactions.

(1993: 147)

For all that the Symbolic Order is implicated in the performance or articulation of all comic texts, then, its *precise* significance within any particular context cannot be determined without an analysis of that context. In this way, Purdie avoids the pitfalls of advancing an ahistorical, universal model of humour.

We can draw two useful comparisons between Purdie and Bakhtin here. Firstly, her description of the development of comic practices maps quite neatly onto Bakhtin's description discussed in the previous chapter. Her citing of the Renaissance as the key turning point in this development echoes the importance afforded it by Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais. Secondly, although her theory of comedy seems to work against the possibility of comic practices as potentially subversive, her recognition of the potentially multivalent significance of a particular comic text within a particular context would seem to be consistent both with Bakhtin's theory of carnival as a historically variable entity, and with his overall theory of signification.

The second example of an analysis of the historical development of comic phenomena comes from Jerry Palmer's second book on humour, *Taking Humour Seriously* (Palmer, 1994). Starting out from his theory of the logic of the absurd, Palmer proceeds to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the occasions, functions, structure and limits of humour. In the course of this analysis, Palmer also offers his own explanation of the historical development of comedy, an argument which focuses on the relationship between comic phenomena and post-Renaissance cultural stratification (Palmer, 1994: 120-43).

Palmer argues that after the Renaissance there was an apparent downgrading of comic phenomena, and that this belonged to a more general process of constructing a hierarchy of classics and rubbish, which was supported by, and simultaneously lent support to, emergent social codes. He identifies three elements that were involved in this process:

(1) the separation between comedy and farce; (2) the marginalisation and eventual suppression of popular cultural humorous institutions; (3) the reorganisation of vocabulary and literary style.

(1994: 121)

It is worth turning briefly to look at each of these elements.

The separation between comedy and farce is closely related to the post-Renaissance distinction between serious and humorous discourse. According to Palmer, farce consists of comic texts and practices whose sole aim is to produce laughter, while comedy refers to comic texts which, while sometimes productive of laughter, are nevertheless deemed to enjoy a value and import which farcical texts lack (1994: 120). Farce represented the ungainly, the lower realms of the social order, and its subject matter was considered coarse and trivial. Comedy steered clear of such areas, and managed to articulate serious ideas, in spite of, rather than because of, any laughter it might have produced. While farce had been common in the theatres of England and France before the seventeenth century, from that point onwards it began to be excluded in favour of the more respectable comic forms (1994: 123). Such distinctions lent support to the new codes of decorum that helped to underpin the construction and consolidation of bourgeois hegemony after the Renaissance (1994: 122).

Following Stallybrass and White, Palmer turns to the work of Ben Jonson as an example of the way in which the separation between comedy and farce was enacted. Palmer argues that, although texts such as Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* incorporated several elements of farce, Jonson simultaneously scorned the vulgarity of such elements (1994: 124). Stallybrass and White identify in Jonson's reaction an attempt to establish the detachment of the poet from the tastes and activities of the populace:

Jonson was attempting to dissociate the professional writer from the clamour of the marketplace and to install his works in the studies of the gentry and the libraries of the universities.

(Stallybrass and White, 1986: 76)

If such a task was to be achieved, then the poet needed to reject the debased discourse of farce, and Jonson's discussion of laughter in *Timber: or, Discoveries; Made upon Men and Matter* further illustrates this recommendation. Here, Jonson argues that we need to distinguish between true comedy, which is instructive and deals with noble virtues, and the sort of comic representations enjoyed by the populace, which are geared to the production of laughter and deal with the 'wry and depraved' (Jonson, 1984: 37). The extent to which the distinction between comedy and farce is both aesthetic *and* social is amply demonstrated in Jonson's remarks:

jests that are true and naturall, seldome raise laughter, with the beast, the multitude. They love nothing, that is right, and proper. The farther it runs from reason, or possibility with them, the better it is.

(1984: 37)

Comedy, where 'true and naturall' jests are to be found, is thus conjoined with reason and propriety, while farce is rejected as the vulgar pursuit of the bestial populace.

According to Palmer, this separation between comedy and farce went hand in hand with a second element, the marginalisation of the vulgar pursuits enjoyed by the populace. Initially, as farce was exorcised from the theatre, it found a home in other sites, notably the fair. However, as the process of cultural stratification continued, popular sites and practices such as the fair also came under attack (Palmer, 1994: 123-31; Stallybrass and White, 1986: 33-4). Palmer notes how some of these vulgar pursuits had already incurred the wrath of Protestant authorities in countries such as England and Holland after the Reformation. Here, the marking of a saint's day with carnivalesque celebrations not only seemed indecent, but also smacked of Catholicism (Palmer, 1994: 127). The practices identified by Bakhtin as carnivalesque were increasingly marginalised from the realm of dominant cultural practices.

Along with Stallybrass and White, Palmer argues that such processes were inextricably bound up with the construction of a demarcation between serious and humorous discourse, and that this demarcation was crucial if a bourgeois public sphere was to emerge. Stallybrass and White contend that the 'spaces of discourse' of the public sphere needed to be '*de-libidinized* in the interests of serious, productive and "rational" intercourse' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 97). Consequently, the libidinal pleasures connected with laughter, the vulgarity of carnivalesque practices, and the grotesque body were gradually excluded from

the public arena. In their place, new 'spaces of discourse' developed. During the eighteenth century, for example, the coffee-house provided a sober discursive site where the interests and concerns of bourgeois culture might be articulated without interference from the hubbub of the populace (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 95-100; Palmer, 1994: 128-9). In short, the separation between comedy and farce belonged to a process of widespread reorganisation of cultural institutions whereby the bourgeoisie consolidated its hegemonic position.

The other element identified by Palmer that accompanies this process is 'the reorganisation of vocabulary and literary style', a factor also noted by Purdie (Palmer, 1994: 121; 132-41). Linguistic proficiency, he argues, gradually came to be perceived as a register of decorum, as evidence that someone had acquired the codes of decent society. A proficient, polite speaker would eschew the language of the populace, thus the vulgar language that Bakhtin associates with carnival - '*Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons*' (Bakhtin, 1984: 5) - was excluded from the realm of linguistic propriety. Furthermore, Palmer notes, from the seventeenth century onwards there was an increasing valorisation of 'plain style', a rejection of earlier more exaggerated styles of speech (Palmer, 1994: 134). The stress on plain style can be seen in the scientific and religious discourse of the period, and represented, according to Palmer, 'an attempt to create a language which would be transparent, a language in which the materiality of the signifier would have disappeared' (1994: 137). The result of this was that linguistic techniques which derived from the play of the signifier - 'puns, jokes, metaphors' - were marginalised from

the realm of serious discourse (1994: 140). As Palmer notes, this was a new development: during the Renaissance, for example, it had been perfectly acceptable for such forms to be used as epistemological tools.

Bakhtin identifies just such a function in Rabelaisian language. One of the techniques regularly deployed by Rabelais is the '*coq-à-l'âne*', a form culled from popular speech which flouts logical norms by absurdly juxtaposing two or more concepts, and Bakhtin posits for the '*coq-à-l'âne*' a distinct epistemological role:

In a period of the radical breaking up of the world's hierarchical picture and the building of a new concept, leading to a revision of all old words, objects, and ideas, the '*coq-à-l'âne*' acquired an essential meaning; it was a form which granted momentary liberation from all logical links - a form of recreation. It was, so to speak, the carnivalization of speech, which freed it from the gloomy seriousness of official philosophy as well as from truisms and commonplace ideas.

(Bakhtin, 1984: 426)

Bakhtin notes that this linguistic carnival was short-lived, that it prepared the way for 'a new sober seriousness' as the new social order after the Renaissance emerged (1984: 426). If Palmer is correct, then this serious sobriety was underpinned by an emphasis on linguistic decorum, from which the humorous play of the signifier was excluded. Such developments went hand in hand with the downgrading of farce in relation to comedy, and the marginalisation of popular sites of humorous discourse. Palmer's analysis thus provides us with a detailed explanation of the various processes involved in the reorganisation of comic genres, and, in doing so, supplements Bakhtin's analysis of the decline of the carnivalesque.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this section, then, is to relate Bakhtin's work to some of the problems and issues that have recently been addressed within the field of comic theory, and to identify the points at which we might begin to make links between Bakhtin's theory of carnival and some of the recent trends in comic theory. In the previous section, I related Bakhtin's work to some recent discussions concerning methodologies in intellectual history, and tried to formulate a number of issues that needed to be addressed in the course of a historical analysis of comic theory. We are now in a position to embark on that analysis.

Notes

- 1 This is the view that laughter is occasioned by a feeling of superiority over the object at whom the laughter is directed.
- 2 This is the view that equates the experience of humorous amusement with the perception of an apparent incongruity.
- 3 In recent years a number of theorists have raised historiographical issues concerning the practice of intellectual history. While not all of them are necessarily wholly in agreement with LaCapra, they nevertheless share his concerns about the need to formulate with greater clarity the modes of inquiry that intellectual history ought to employ (e.g. see LaCapra and Kaplan, 1982; R  e, 1978; Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner, 1984; White, 1978).
- 4 The two essays to which I am referring are 'The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis' and 'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences' (Bakhtin, 1986)
- 5 Indeed, Bakhtin himself cites them both in his survey of studies of folk culture. He argues, however, that the 'enormous bulk of literature' to which they belong tends to marginalise the importance of folk culture: 'That which we have called the one world of folk culture of humour appears in these works as a collection of curiosities, not to be included, in spite of its widest

scope, in a serious history of European culture and literature' (Bakhtin, 1984: 54).

- 6 See Frye's 'The Argument of Comedy', first published in 1948 (Frye, 1984) and Langer's *Feeling and Form*, first published in 1953 (Langer, 1984).
- 7 Purdie's only reference to Bakhtin cites him as a proponent of the 'carnival-as-necessarily-subversive' position (Purdie, 1993: 127). As I have argued, while there are passages which would seem to support such a reading, if we situate Bakhtin's theory of carnival in relation to the rest of his work, we end up with a theory of carnival as a historically variable phenomenon.

Chapter Three

Kant and Schopenhauer

In this chapter I will explore the extent to which the philosophies of humour to be found in the work of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer might be related to Bakhtin's thesis concerning the decline of the carnivalesque. Schopenhauer occupies an important position in philosophical discussions of humour, where his analysis is frequently cited as a prototype incongruity theory of humour. By comparison, Kant's treatment of humour has been relatively neglected. However, not only does Kant similarly advance a form of incongruity theory but, as I hope to show here, a thorough discussion of both his and Schopenhauer's analysis allows us to broach some important issues concerning the historical development of comic theory. The central issue concerns the way in which each theory envisages the relationship between reason and humour. This in turn can be related not only to shifts in philosophical notions of reason, from Enlightenment to Romantic accounts, but also to wider configurations that such positions might represent.

Kant's analysis of humour

Kant discusses humour in a brief but dense passage in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), his major work on aesthetics which, along with his first two *Critiques*, forms a framework for his entire philosophical project. The first *Critique*, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, with a revised version in 1787), had sought to establish the limits of knowledge and experience, while the second, *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), had attempted to establish a normative basis for moral judgements. The central task of *The Critique of Judgement* is to define the parameters within which judgements of taste are possible. What unites the three *Critiques*, then, is the concern to establish the universal features of reason and experience in the respective realms of epistemology (pure reason), ethics (practical reason) and aesthetics (judgements of taste).

Kant defines laughter as '*an affection rising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*' (Kant, 1951: 177), and proceeds to try and illustrate this formula with the following joke:

An Indian at the table of an Englishman in Surat, when he saw a bottle of ale opened and all the beer turned into a froth and overflowing, testified his great astonishment with many exclamations. When the Englishman asked him, 'What is there in this to astonish you so much?' he answered, 'I am not at all astonished that it should flow out, but I do wonder how you ever got it in.'

(1951: 178)

'At this story,' Kant adds, 'we laugh, and it gives us hearty pleasure'. According to him, the laughter results from the way in which the Indian's response undermines our expectation, his thoughts failing to conform to conventional reactions to opened

bottles of beer. However, Kant argues that the disappointment of our expectation is not on its own sufficient to produce laughter, a subtlety that tends to be ignored by commentators. Rather, a punch line must be capable of actually *straining* our expectation momentarily *before* that expectation dissipates into nothing. Kant illustrates this point by recounting the joke about

the grief of the merchant returning from India to Europe with all his wealth in merchandise who was forced to throw it overboard in a heavy storm, and who grieved thereat so much that his *wig* turned gray the same night.
(1951: 178)

For Kant, this punch line is capable of momentarily deceiving us, for it requires a double-take before we realise its absurdity. It is this '*play of thought*' (1951: 176), a momentary deception followed by dissipation into nothing, that produces laughter.

Kant's concentration on strained expectation as the source of laughter is problematic. For example, as Michael Clark has pointed out, 'the humour of many comedy situations depends on the audience's knowing precisely what is going to happen' (Clark, 1987a: 141-2). Since this is undoubtedly the case, we need to look for explanations other than strained expectation in order to account fully for the phenomenon of laughter. One such possibility, to use Palmer's formulation, is that we enjoy the incongruous conjunction of plausibility and implausibility as it appears in the joke (Palmer, 1987; see Chapter Two). However, that we might actually enjoy this incongruity *in itself*, rather than for the physical effects of laughter that our perception of it produces, is a possibility that Kant discounts, as we shall see when we look at his analysis of the relationship between humour and reason. Another possibility that he dismisses is that laughter

might result from a feeling of superiority. In his analysis of the bottle of beer joke, for example, he rejects the idea that someone might laugh out of a feeling of superiority over the Indian. It could be argued, however, that the superiority of the person laughing is itself implicit in Kant's own analysis of the joke. According to him, we laugh as a result of the surprise sprung on our expectation. In this instance, the surprise arises because the Indian obviously lacks the knowledge that we possess about bottles of beer. To use Susan Purdie's formulation, the Indian has failed to master this particular cultural discourse, and we advertise our own mastery of it, and our cultural competence in general, by telling or laughing at the joke (Purdie, 1993; see Chapter Two). The setting of the joke, a native Indian at a colonialist's table, further underscores this relationship. Moreover, towards the end of his section on humour, Kant tries to define the category of naivety, which arises when we perceive an opposition between 'the unspoiled innocent nature' of humanity and the 'commonplace manner' of artificiality to which people have become accustomed. In such cases, says Kant, we 'laugh at the simplicity that does not understand how to dissemble, and yet we are delighted with the simplicity of the nature which thwarts that art' (1951: 180). There is a dual response here, then, a mixture of superiority over and delight at such naivety, and the important point is that it is as a result of the feeling of superiority that we laugh. It is quite possible that this sort of response might have met the bottle of beer joke. If so, then Kant's analysis of the joke, which is supposed to illustrate his account of humour as a whole, has some serious shortcomings. Overall, it would seem that, short of fairly extensive modification, Kant's analysis of humour is of limited applicability.

In spite of these problems, however, it is worth pursuing Kant's analysis still further in order to uncover the relationship he sets out between humour, reason and beauty, key distinctions on which he draws in the course of explaining the pleasure of humour. Although humour consists in the '*play of thought*', the pleasure it produces derives from the *physical* gratification of laughter. Building on the formula of a strained expectation, Kant explains this process in the following way:

the play begins with the thoughts which together occupy the body, so far as they admit of sensible expression; and as the understanding stops suddenly short at this presentment, in which it does not find what it expected, we feel the effect of this slackening in the body by the oscillation of the organs, which promotes the restoration of equilibrium and has a favorable influence upon health.
(1951: 177)

Our engagement with a joke consists of a play of ideas, then, and, as our expectation is first strained and then dissipates, this movement is transmitted to our body in the form of laughter. It is the 'feeling of health' resulting from this 'that makes up the gratification felt by us' (1951: 177). While the exact mechanics of this process could be questioned, laughter is doubtless physically gratifying. Indeed, recent research into the beneficial effects of laughter on the circulatory system would seem to confirm Kant's medical conjectures (see Fry and Savin, 1988). However, Kant's argument is that physical gratification is the *sole* source of pleasure associated with humour, and that we need to distinguish this corpulent satisfaction both from the mental satisfaction associated with the exercising of reason, and from the contemplative pleasure connected with the experience of beauty.

Since humour is dependent on the absurd, it is something in which our understanding, directed as it is towards congruity and cogency, 'can find no satisfaction' (1951: 177). In Kant's system the understanding is one of the three cognitive faculties that define us as rational beings. It allows us to order the data of sense experience, while the second, reason, allows us to think consistently as autonomous subjects, and the third, judgement, allows us to administer approbation and disapprobation in accordance with reason. Some things are capable of satisfying us simply in the act of judging [them]' (1951: 175), and thus provide a form of mental satisfaction in accordance with our status as rational beings. But since humour runs contrary to the interests of the faculties that give us this status, it is only capable of providing us with a lower, animal form of gratification.

Having distinguished between reason and humour in this way, Kant continues by distinguishing between humour and beauty in a similar fashion. Beauty affords us a disinterested form of pleasure, but since humour provides us with physical gratification it cannot be disinterested. Kant sums up this sort of relationship earlier on the third *Critique*:

That which *gratifies* a man is called *pleasant*; that which merely *pleases* him is *beautiful*;... Pleasantness concerns irrational animals also, but beauty only concerns men, i.e. animal, but still rational beings - not merely *qua* rational (e.g. spirits), but *qua* animal also ...

(1951: 44)

Jokes, then, are pleasant rather than beautiful (1951: 177), and, as the above quotation suggests, the relationship between humour and rationality once again comes into play in this categorisation. Such hierarchical distinctions between humour, reason and beauty

are central to Kant's comic theory, then. What I want to argue now is that, far from being discrete theoretical classifications, they need to be understood within the social and philosophical context of the Enlightenment, and it is to this that I now turn.

Humour and Kant's Enlightenment philosophy

The Enlightenment is usually identified both in terms of a set of philosophical, political and social doctrines, and in terms of the period during the eighteenth century when those ideas first emerged. Thomas Docherty has offered the following characterisation:

The Enlightenment aimed at human emancipation from myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature through the progressive operations of a critical reason.

(Docherty, 1993: 5)

Kantian philosophy, preoccupied as it is with setting out the limits of critical reason, clearly belongs to this project. And since Enlightenment thought is unified by the way in which it identifies itself with the application of reason, I want to begin by considering the relationship between reason and humour.

Bakhtin addresses this relationship in terms of the reception of Rabelais during the Enlightenment, where he notes the tendency for Rabelais' work to be published only in abridged form, depriving it of the full force of its vulgarity. For Bakhtin, these acts of expurgation arose as a result of the contradiction between Rabelaisian humour and Enlightenment reason. The ambivalent, contradictory nature of grotesque imagery, he argues, 'could not be

reduced to the dimensions of the Enlighteners' reason' (Bakhtin, 1984: 118). Further, Bakhtin posits a link between the grotesque and madness, which he characterises in terms of a critical, defamiliarising optic, allowing people to 'look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by... commonplace ideas and judgments' (1984: 39). Since the Enlightenment sought to establish the sovereignty of reason, it is not surprising that it should also seek to banish the madness of the grotesque from within its province.

If we turn to the first half of the eighteenth century in Germany, we can perceive this sort of process at work in the controversy surrounding the comic Hans Wurst character (see Haberland, 1971; Sheppard, 1990; Van Cleve, 1980). Hans Wurst was a version of the Harlequin character from the *commedia dell'arte*. Developed in Vienna by Josef Stranitzky at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the character was popularised in Germany by touring companies who performed in the improvised style of the *commedia* (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1974: 986). As these performances gained in popularity, however, criticism of them proliferated. They were discussed in learned treatises on the relationship between art and morality, where their raucous laughter and vulgar humour were portrayed as forms of depravity. At the same time, as one account explains,

serious dramatic companies, notably the one headed by the actress-manager Caroline Neuber, heaped continual damnation on them and enacted the symbolic banishment of Harlequin from the stage.

(*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1974: 986)

It would seem, then, that the Hans Wurst controversy amounted to an attempt by the realm of 'serious' culture to distance itself from

the humour of popular comedy. Indeed, this is precisely the manner in which Bakhtin interprets the dispute, seeing it as an attempt to defend 'the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime' against the "low" spectacle of the marketplace' (Bakhtin, 1984: 35). That such a process should take place is consistent with Palmer, Stallybrass and White's arguments, discussed in the previous chapter, concerning the post-Renaissance reorganisation of culture and the development of a de-libidinized public sphere (Palmer, 1994; Stallybrass and White, 1986; see Chapter Two). What it suggests is that one element in the creation of this public sphere was the construction of a clear boundary between the propriety of reason and the vulgarity of humour.

In his discussion of the Hans Wurst controversy, Paul Haberland has argued that the 'criticism surrounding the popular comedy during the Enlightenment reveals a desire to rid contemporary society of its vices' (Haberland, 1971: 55). John Walter Van Cleve's more extensive study analyses the roots of this desire within a social and historical context. While the German bourgeoisie began to consolidate their economic power during the first half of the eighteenth century, their political power was still limited by the absolutism of the aristocracy, argues Van Cleve. As a result, it became increasingly important for the bourgeoisie to assert their identity in cultural terms, and it is this process that gave rise to the attacks on Hans Wurst:

Not surprisingly, the rising class demanded its own distinctive drama tradition, a tradition clearly separate from that of the ruling aristocracy and from that of the lower classes.

(Van Cleve, 1980: 165)

The cultural identity of the bourgeoisie was founded, at least in part, on its rejection of the forms of comedy enjoyed by the lower classes¹. It would seem, then, that critical responses to the Hans Wurst plays belonged to a much wider process of securing and consolidating the cultural identity of the bourgeoisie.

Although the Hans Wurst performances were no longer an issue at the time that Kant was writing, the sort of concerns raised by their detractors can be compared with concerns expressed in Kant's analysis of humour. While humour is contrasted with both reason and beauty, I will argue that Kant nevertheless suggests ways in which it might be incorporated into a bourgeois social life controlled by reason. In order to consider this, however, we need to begin by looking at Kant's aesthetic theory in rather more detail.

A central feature of Kantian aesthetics is the notion of the disinterested pleasure that a judgement of taste is supposed to occasion. When we judge something to be beautiful, 'we do not want to know whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of the thing, either for myself or for anyone else' (Kant, 1951: 38). Rather, our judgement, and the resulting pleasure associated with that judgement, is based purely upon a consideration of the formal qualities of the object. As we have seen, the physical gratification of laughter thus excludes humour from this contemplative realm.

This description of aesthetic judgement raises a problem for Kant, however, which he calls the 'Antinomy of Taste'. It is clear that the judgement of taste is a subjective experience: it consists of a particular act of contemplation on the part of an individual

human subject. Nevertheless, the disinterestedness of the experience entails that any personal idiosyncrasies that the individual might have are prevented from encroaching upon their judgement. What is more, it seems to be the logic of aesthetic judgements that, if we judge something to be beautiful, we expect that everyone ought to judge it in this way. The resulting antinomy is that aesthetic judgement appears to be both subjective and universal. Kant seeks to resolve this antinomy by arguing that the judgement of taste is subjective in so far as we cannot objectively prove that something is beautiful: we can never appeal to a determinate concept of beauty under which certain objects might be deemed to fall. However, the judgement of taste is nonetheless universal because we can appeal to the concept of a "*sensus communis*" or common sense, an *a priori* standard of taste that is common to all human beings, which is supported in empirical terms by there allegedly being such widespread agreement about what is beautiful. Accordingly, aesthetic judgements are both subjective and universal.

Kant's solution to the Antinomy of Taste is reminiscent of the approach that he develops in the first two *Critiques*. As he says in the third *Critique*, 'this problem of the *Critique of Judgement* belongs to the general problem of transcendental philosophy: how are synthetical *a priori* judgements possible?' (1951: 131). In other words, how can we derive the necessary (*a priori*) features of experience from what is given by experience (i.e. from what is synthetic rather than analytic)? In each of the *Critiques*, Kant employs this transcendental leap from the subjective and empirical to the necessary and universal.

Two recent discussions of aesthetic theory have argued that the third *Critique* in fact bridges the gap between the first two *Critiques*. Andrew Bowie's analysis of this relationship focuses on the way in which the discourse of aesthetics, from the late eighteenth century onwards, was bound up with the question of subjectivity. The realms of art and beauty, the typical concerns of aesthetic theory, seemed to offer a privileged site on which to understand the relationship between the physical world and individual human consciousness. In Kant's philosophy, for example, the first *Critique* addresses our access to the physical world, and the second seeks to account for our autonomy as rational autonomous subjects. Meanwhile, the third *Critique* posits a harmonisation between human subjects and beautiful objects in the physical world, the subject enjoying a disinterested form of pleasure as he or she contemplates the object in question. As Kant explains it, beauty 'brings with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems to be, as it were, preadapted to our judgment' (1951: 83). This, as Bowie explains, provides an essential link between subject and object, the domains of the first two *Critiques* (Bowie: 1990).

Terry Eagleton addresses the third *Critique* in a similar fashion in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, where he argues that aesthetic theory achieved the importance that it did at the time that it did for two reasons. Firstly, because art seemed to provide an 'idealized refuge' from the ever-expanding processes of market capitalism. Secondly, because aesthetic discourse nevertheless complemented the ideology of market capitalism (Eagleton, 1990: 9). Thus, Kant's first *Critique* accounts for how we can 'know one another

only as objects', while the second *Critique* determines how we might 'know and respect each other as autonomous subjects' (1990: 75-6). The problem is, however, that we can have little idea what this form of respect actually means unless we have a feeling of shared community to which these autonomous subjects belong. According to Eagleton, the third *Critique* resolves this problem by making the aesthetic judgement of taste dependent upon this very feeling. If I judge an object to be beautiful, for example, I necessarily impute that my judgement can be universalised, that all members of the community ought to be able to make a similar judgement. The social order is thus united by an assumed universal sensibility and, just as art transcends the mechanisms of the market, so this universal sensibility transcends the class divisions that structure capitalist society. Eagleton argues, then, that the ideological character of the judgement of taste derives from this transcendent universality.

Ted Cohen has sought to examine the relationship between this sort of universality and jokes. 'When you tell... a joke,' he asks, 'upon what basis do you expect anyone else to be moved?', issuing the following reply: 'Upon the fact that the joke moves you, plus your estimate that it moves you simply as a person and without regard to any idiosyncrasy of yours' (Cohen, 1983: 135). Given this, he asks, 'is] there such an argument for the postulation of a universal sense of humour?' (1983: 135). Cohen neglects to answer this question explicitly, but the implication is that he would reply in the affirmative. Kant, on the other hand, as Cohen is fully aware, would reject the idea that comic amusement is free from personal idiosyncrasies. As he says of the category of the

pleasant, to which humour belongs, 'everyone is content that his judgment, which he bases upon private feeling and by which he says of an object that it pleases him, should be limited merely to his own person' (Kant, 1951: 46). As a result, Kant would also reject the idea that the sense of humour might be universalised: just as the most logical expression of the judgement 'it is pleasant' is 'it is pleasant *to me*' (1951: 46), so we can assume that the most logical expression of the judgement 'it is funny' is 'it is funny *to me*'.

In spite of this, however, in the course of his analysis of humour, Kant does seem to universalise his own judgements about particular jokes. One joke 'gives *us* gratification', another 'gives *us* hearty pleasure', while at another *we* laugh loud' (1951: 178; my emphasis). If we return to Kant's discussion of the variability of judgements concerning the pleasant, however, it is possible to resolve this apparent discrepancy. Kant argues that, while such judgements cannot be universalised in the logical sense, we nevertheless do speak as though they could be. Thus, 'we say of a man who knows how to entertain his guests with pleasures (of enjoyment for all the senses), so that they are all pleased, "he has taste"' (1951: 47), as though his hospitality accorded with a universal judgement of taste. But, argues Kant, the universality implied in such a statement is merely based upon an empirical estimation of the person's 'sociability', rather than having a logical *a priori* basis, and the assumption seems to be that such estimations can be arrived at with a relatively high degree of impartiality.

The example of 'sociability' used by Kant here, based as it is upon a notion of good hospitality, is illuminating. Indeed, according to Kant, humour would seem to have a key role to play in the provision of good hospitality. Ranked among the pleasant arts, he claims,

are all those charming arts that can gratify a company at a table, e.g. the art of telling stories in an entertaining way, of starting the company in frank and lively conversation, of raising them by jest and laugh to a certain pitch of merriment...

(1951: 148)

What is striking here is the way in which the grotesque humour of the carnivalesque feast, celebrated in the work of Rabelais, has been replaced by a genteel form of humorous table talk. According to Bakhtin, the feast in Rabelais is bound up with images of the grotesque body. The communal dimension of the feast represents the grotesque body of the people as a whole, while images of the 'wide-open mouth' consuming flesh, centred as they are on the 'borderline between body and food images', symbolise a 'fusion of the devouring and devoured body' (Bakhtin, 1984: 279). As we have already seen in Chapter One, the comic aspects of the carnivalesque are inextricably bound up with this sort of grotesque imagery, and it is precisely this sort of imagery that is absent from the feast to which Kant refers. Above all, the feast has moved away from public sites and into the private home.

This is not to say that the bourgeois feast represents a complete rejection of the carnivalesque banquet. Rather, it represents a transformation of it, to the point where it can be incorporated within a new set of social relations. For example, Bakhtin cites the model of the ancient symposium as a possible influence on

representations of the feast in Rabelais. Such symposia consisted of a philosophical discussion between several speakers. In Rabelais, the feast becomes a grotesque version of this, where the 'popular-festive right of laughter and clowneries, the right to be frank was extended to the table' (1984: 284), allowing the critical and celebratory aspects of carnival to be articulated in grotesque and comic forms of language. In a footnote, Bakhtin refers to the transformations that the symposium underwent after this period, and cites 'Beethoven's table talk' as an example. Meanwhile, in a footnote in the third *Critique*, we find a reference to Kant's own table talk. Apparently, Kant

was accustomed to say that the talk at a dinner table should always pass through these three stages: narrative, discussion, and jest; and punctilious in this, as in all else, he is said to have directed the conversation at his own table accordingly.

(1951: 148)²

Although this sort of symposium would seem to be devoid of the more grotesque elements of its Rabelaisian counterpart, there is nevertheless a sense in which, by emphasising the feast as a discursive site, the idea of the symposium is maintained, albeit in a slightly modified form. In spite of this move, however, from the rowdy, collective festivity of the carnivalesque feast, to the more refined and more private atmosphere of the bourgeois feast, there is a clear transition. What I want to argue here is that this type of transformation belongs to the sort of process identified by Palmer, Stallybrass and White (see Chapter Two and above). As Enlightened culture consolidated itself by ensuring that the public sphere accorded with the 'interests of serious, productive and *rational* discourse' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 97), so suspect

cultural forms were either banished, or 'civilised' and incorporated into bourgeois practices.

A key point to note here is the way in which Kant's overall aesthetic theory is bound up with notions of the public sphere. As the judgement of taste is universal, so judgements concerning beauty are communicable, and this presupposes a social medium 'in which this communication is possible' (Kant, 1951: 116). However, the universal communicability pertaining to the realm of beauty is deemed to transcend both the vicissitudes of the marketplace, and the impulses of the body. As Eagleton puts it, 'what we have seen so far as the aesthetic might more accurately be described as an anaesthetic' (Eagleton, 1990: 196). The space within which our aesthetic experience of beauty is shared is thus a de-libidinized zone, and since humour is distinguished from beauty on the basis of the physical gratification it affords, it would seem to be excluded from this de-libidinized sphere.

The opposition between humour and reason would seem to reinforce the grounds for this exclusion, because Kant's conception of reason embodies assumptions about its relationship with the public sphere. Here, Kant propounds an account of reason typical of the Enlightenment. In his essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784), Kant defines the motto of the Enlightenment as 'Have courage to exercise your own understanding!' (Kant, 1984: 90). The Enlightenment thus consists of an escape from what Kant calls our 'self-incurred tutelage' (1984: 90), so that we are able to achieve freedom through the autonomous exercising of reason. When Kant briefly returns to this question in the third *Critique*, the link between individual

autonomy and social manifestations of Enlightenment reason become more apparent. Kant argues that self-legislation 'is indeed quite easy for the man who wishes only to be in accordance with his essential purpose and does not desire to know what is beyond his understanding' (1951: 137). What is more difficult to achieve is the constant affirmation of Enlightenment reason in 'the mind (*especially the mind of the public*)' (1951: 137; my emphasis). This requires not only that we think for ourselves, but also that we 'put ourselves in thought in the place of everyone else' (1951: 136), enabling us to reflect on things from a '*universal standpoint*' (1951: 137). While this universality might be more readily achieved at the level of aesthetic sensibility, it is clear that the proper exercising of reason is itself directed towards a consideration of the public sphere. Indeed, as Stallybrass and White suggest, Enlightenment thought tended to envisage this sphere as a site of rational discourse, all of which would seem to jeopardise the acceptability of humour within it.

In spite of this, humour is not completely excluded from the public sphere. We have already seen that, for Kant, humour is not altogether devoid of value: laughter itself provides us with a healthy tonic. But just as the significance of the aesthetic realm was dependent upon its transcendence of the body and the marketplace, so the links between humour, the marketplace and the body are downplayed in order for it to be incorporated into bourgeois social life. Although the physical effects of laughter play a crucial part in Kant's analysis, for example, he completely overlooks physical forms of humour, concentrating instead on verbal wit. On top of this, the relationship between humour and

the marketplace, identified by Bakhtin, is apparently severed. For Bakhtin, the marketplace was one of the sites where carnivalesque practices flourished, in the form of profane speech, billingsgate colloquialisms and the 'tones of the banquet' (Bakhtin, 1984: 185). As we have seen, Kant's analysis of humour moves away from such public locations, and cites instead the bourgeois feast as a suitable site for humorous interactions. This location represents a point of interaction between the private sphere (the home) and the public sphere (in the form of guests invited into the home), and itself serves as an arena for rational discussion. Further, humour is deemed to contribute to the 'sociability' of such gatherings, promoting social cohesion. Although this cohesive quality can only be identified empirically, and does not therefore have the same status as the logical *a priori* universality of either aesthetic sensibility or reason, it would nevertheless seem that Kant accredits humour with a limited function within the public sphere.

I have argued in this section that we need to situate Kant's analysis of humour within the social and philosophical contexts of the Enlightenment. The privileging of reason during the Enlightenment coincided with the consolidation of the cultural identity of the bourgeoisie, generating a process whereby the relationship between a range of cultural forms and practices was reconceptualised. Insofar as Kant both contrasts humour with reason and beauty, while simultaneously seeking to incorporate it within a public sphere policed by reason, his comic theory can be seen to belong to this process.

Schopenhauer's incongruity theory

Although Kant's analysis of humour relies upon a notion of incongruity, as I have tried to show, more often than not it is to Schopenhauer that commentators turn for a more refined version of incongruity theory (e.g. Clark 1987a and 1987b). Recently, Terry Eagleton has subjected this theory to some extensive discussion, arguing that, since the structure of Schopenhauerian pessimism apparently resides in the structure of a joke, so the sense of hopelessness derived from it might provide us with a useful antidote to over-celebratory accounts of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque (Eagleton, 1989: 180-2). I have already argued in Chapter One that a historicised notion of carnival avoids the problems of such optimism. Nevertheless, the link that Eagleton identifies between Schopenhauer's comic theory and carnival is worth pursuing. What I will argue here is that, despite some similarities that it shares with Kant's analysis, Schopenhauer's theory can be read as a form of Romantic reaction to Enlightenment thought. I will also argue that this reaction itself has affinities with the structure of carnival.

Schopenhauer's comic theory forms part of *The World As Will And Idea* (first published 1818, with a second edition in 1844), a massive work incorporating metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. As the title of Schopenhauer's text suggests, his philosophical system is predicated on a metaphysical distinction between the will and the realm of (Platonic) Ideas. The will operates in the physical realm as a blind, irrational force, generating a perpetual struggle between individual wills. This pessimistic view, however, is somewhat offset by Schopenhauer's

frank account of the relationship between the will and the human body, which reads at times like an anatomical textbook. According to him, the physical body is presented to the subject both as an object of perception and as a vehicle of the will. Thus, if we decide to raise an arm, for example, we are aware of it both as a result of seeing it move, and as a result of the movement being a manifestation of our will or desire. This amounts to a form of behaviourism, allowing internal desires to be read off from external conduct, as the following quotation suggests:

The parts of the body must, therefore, completely correspond to the principal desires through which the will manifests itself; they must be the visible expression of these desires. Teeth, throat, and bowels are objectified hunger; the organs of generation are objectified sexual desire; the grasping hand, the hurrying feet, correspond to the more indirect desires of the will which they express.
(Schopenhauer, 1907a: 141)

There is a sense of excessiveness to Schopenhauer's examples here which has affinities with the grotesque hyperbole associated with the carnivalesque body. And although laughter goes unmentioned in this particular passage, Schopenhauer does discuss it in a similar vein in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, when he looks at reflex movements of the body. According to him, the 'usual and thus mental excitation' of laughter

has to be explained from the fact that the brain-function whereby we suddenly recognize the incongruity of an intuitively perceptual representation and an abstract representation that is in other respects appropriate thereto, has a peculiar effect on the *medulla oblongata*, or else plays a part appertaining to the exciter-motor system, whence comes that strange reflex movement which at the same time convulses many parts of the body.
(1974: 168)

This description introduces Schopenhauer's notion of humorous incongruity as a discrepancy between perception and reason, and

this notion, as we shall see, is crucial not only to his comic theory, but to his entire philosophical enterprise. The fact that the passage is inserted between an analysis of cold baths, yawning, urinating, weeping and erections would also seem to maintain some sort of connection with carnivalesque imagery. Further, we can note similarities between this account and Kant's account of the mechanics of laughter. Indeed, since laughter is an objectification of the will, and since pleasure, for Schopenhauer, consists of that which is in accordance with the will (1907a: 131), Kant and Schopenhauer would seem to agree about the basis of laughter's physical gratification.

Further comparisons can be drawn between Kant and Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory. For Schopenhauer, while the will belongs to the physical domain, and is actualised in the body of the individual, aesthetic contemplation allows us access to the realm of Ideas, and is dependent upon our transcending the confines of the individual. He explains this process in the following way:

When we say that a thing is *beautiful*, we thereby assert that it is an object of our aesthetic contemplation, and this has a double meaning; on the one hand it means that the sight of the thing makes us *objective*, that is to say, that in contemplating it we are no longer conscious of ourselves as individuals, but as pure will-less subjects of knowledge; and on the other hand it means that we recognise in the object, not the particular thing, but an Idea...

(1907a: 270)

There are two senses in which this explanation approximates Kantian aesthetic theory. First, in distinguishing between the physical and the contemplative realm, it reiterates Kant's distinction between physical gratification and aesthetic pleasure.

Second, the assumption that the transcendence of individuality is a prerequisite for aesthetic contemplation can be compared to Kant's formulation of the disinterestedness, and consequent universality, of aesthetic judgement.

However, there are nevertheless important distinctions to be drawn between the two accounts, and these result largely from their respective epistemological assumptions. Kant's philosophy assumes a transcendental idealist position, a doctrine that Kant explains in the first *Critique* in the following terms:

appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only...

The objects of experience... are *never given in themselves*, but only in experience, and have no existence outside it.
(Kant, 1933: 345 and 440 respectively)

There has been a notorious debate over the interpretation of these and other references to transcendental idealism. Whichever interpretation we were to assent to, however, it is clear that, for Kant, our experience is not warranted access to the world of things-in-themselves, independently of the way in which those objects appear to us. By contrast, Schopenhauer talks of a physical realm consisting of things-in-themselves, to which we are readily accorded access. This apparent realism is misleading, though, since such objects are themselves deemed to be dependent upon a subject. As such, the Schopenhauerian thing-in-itself has a similar epistemological status to the Kantian representation. However, Schopenhauer also assumes that the thing-in-itself is merely a poor physical manifestation of an Idea, its abiding and essential counterpart, and it is here that the key distinction between his and Kant's epistemology is to be found. It is also

where the chief disparity between their respective aesthetic theories is located. Although Kant's third *Critique* does not make explicit the relationship between transcendental idealism and aesthetic experience, it is clear that the judgement of taste is concerned with the 'mere representation of the object' (Kant, 1951: 39), the way in which it appears to us, rather than the actual existence of the object itself. While Schopenhauer's theory similarly maintains the notion that aesthetic experience consists of the contemplation of representations, he nevertheless departs from Kant by arguing that such contemplation allows us to transcend the thing-in-itself - equivalent, as I have argued, to Kantian representations - in order to gain access to a realm of Platonic Ideas. It is only by entering this realm that we can escape our painful existence in the physical world. By contrast, Kant's judgement of taste, as we have seen, both instigates a rapprochement between the subject and the physical world, and assures us of the potential unity between human subjects in a social context. While both Kant and Schopenhauer accord aesthetic experience a privileged position within their respective philosophical systems, then, they nevertheless view its potential quite differently.

Having established the function of art in this way, Schopenhauer attempts a hierarchical classification of the arts, from architecture and horticulture at the bottom, to painting and poetry at the top, with music overrunning the scale and being placed in a position of its own above all other art forms. We have already seen Kant's distinction between humour and beauty, and, given its obvious physicality, laughter would seem to have an

equally precarious relationship with art in Schopenhauer's system. A comedy, for example, or any other work of art that incited laughter, would seem to preclude the possibility of aesthetic contemplation, at least while the laughing continued. This point is partly borne out in Schopenhauer's citing of tragedy as the summit of poetical art, a move which he justifies in the following terms:

The unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent, is here presented to us; and in this lies a significant hint of the nature of the world and of existence.

(Schopenhauer, 1907a: 326)

It would seem, then, that even while aesthetic contemplation allows us to escape from the wretchedness of the everyday, the superiority of tragedy derives from the fact that it reminds us of that very wretchedness, gesturing towards the nature of the Will. While tragedy effectively represents this hopelessness at the level of art, however, it is the structure of humorous incongruity that represents it at the level of our everyday existence. In order to understand this relationship, though, we need to examine Schopenhauer's incongruity theory in more detail.

Schopenhauer initially seeks to explain humour in a brief passage in the first volume of *The World As Will And As Idea*, but he returns to the subject in volume two in the form of a more lengthy discussion. Here, he is keen to distance himself from Kant's theory, but regards it 'as unnecessary to prove [its] incorrectness' (1907b: 270), as its insufficiency is so obvious. We have already identified several problems with Kant's analysis, and it is possible that Schopenhauer envisaged similar difficulties with it. Nevertheless, there are some important parallels to be drawn

between their two accounts, as can be seen if we remind ourselves of Schopenhauer's formulation:

the source of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and therefore unexpected, subsumption of an object under a conception which in other respects is different from it, and accordingly the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception.

(1907b: 271)

Kant's explanation of humour was centred on the way in which an incongruity undermines our expectation, and Schopenhauer seems to identify an identical process here. In both cases the subject relies upon abstract thought to conjure up an expectation of what will happen, but this expectation evaporates when it fails to conform to what concretely transpires.

In spite of these similarities, however, there is a crucial difference between Kant and Schopenhauer's comic theory, and this concerns their respective conception of the relationship between humour and reason. As we have seen, we are unable to enjoy humour *in itself*, according to Kant, because the understanding is opposed to the absurdity that it finds there. This conclusion, it was argued, derived from Kant's Enlightenment notion of the sovereignty of reason. For Schopenhauer, on the other hand, we enjoy humour not only for the physical gratification that it yields, but also *in itself* insofar as it represents the defeat of reason. Schopenhauerian incongruity consists of abstract thoughts undermined by concrete perceptions, and this epitomises the insufficiency of reason. Abstract thought is too unwieldy to represent the subtleties of the concrete: only perception, which 'is always unquestionably right' (1907b: 279), can accurately

represent such complexities. That this incongruity affords us pleasure is attributable to the fact that perception provides us with an immediate form of knowledge. As such, we do not have to go through the same sort of mental exertion that abstract thought requires. Therefore, Schopenhauer concludes, it 'must... be, diverting to us to see this strict, untiring governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency' (1907b: 280). It is here that we discover the utter hopelessness of our everyday existence: for all that we put our faith in the power of reason, it will never be up to the job. While tragedy represents the 'wail of humanity' at the level of art, then, our 'bitter laughter' at incongruity embodies it at the level of the everyday (1907b: 280).

There are several problems with Schopenhauer's argument here. For one thing he seems to assume the passivity of perception, an idea that Kant, in positing an active role for the understanding in making sense of representations, was keen to reject. What is so interesting about Schopenhauer's account, however, is not only the significance that humour assumes in his overall philosophy, but also the way in which his theory amounts to a form of Romantic critique of Enlightenment notions of rationality, and it is to this point that I now turn.

Schopenhauer, humour and Romanticism

John B. Halsted locates the era of Romanticism between 1780 and 1850. While ideas that had gained prominence during the Enlightenment were still influential, he argues, a new set of attitudes developed during this period. As he says,

... Romantic ideas arose both as implicit and explicit criticisms of leading eighteenth-century views; they were adumbrated largely out of a sense of the inadequacy of the dominant ideas of the Enlightenment and of the society which produced them - or what Romanticists identified as "those" ideas and "that" society. As time went on, Romantic ideas appeared in conflict against the inheritance and the inheritors of the Enlightenment - or again, what Romanticists took them to be.

(Halsted, 1969: 2)

Such ideas, as Halsted argues, need to be related to other concerns current at the time. Not only had the repercussions of the French Revolution led to certain political crises, but the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution had aroused moral and social apprehension. Romanticism responded to these anxieties with a critique of the Enlightenment order out of which the problems seemed to have arisen (1969: 3). And while the label of Romanticism cannot necessarily be applied to Schopenhauer's entire philosophy, there was nevertheless a congruence, as Halsted notes, between much of his work and the central ideas of Romanticism (1969: 42). In defining humour in terms of the pleasurable defeat of reason, this congruence is clearly seen in Schopenhauer's comic theory.

Bakhtin's discussion of Romanticism explores its relationship with the carnivalesque grotesque, and in so doing it shares with Halsted's analysis an emphasis on the extent to which Romanticism represented a rejection of the Enlightenment tradition³. While Enlightened culture had tended to subordinate carnivalesque elements, as we have seen, Bakhtin argues that Romanticism initiated a revival in the grotesque. He interprets this revival as

a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; it was a

rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners with their narrow and artificial optimism.

(Bakhtin, 1984: 37)

Insofar as Romanticism managed to rejuvenate the grotesque elements of carnival, then, Bakhtin views it in positive terms. However, he also stresses that the Romantic grotesque represented a transformation of its Renaissance precursor, that in retrieving these popular traditions Romanticism had provided them with a new set of meanings. Not only was the collective nature of the medieval and Renaissance carnival transposed into 'an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation' (1984: 37), but so too was the rib-tickling belly-laugh of carnival transposed into a reduced form of laughter. While Bakhtin is keen to identify Romanticism with a revival in the fortunes of the grotesque, then, he is also keen to stress the point that it did not represent a complete return to the regenerative and triumphant potential of carnival in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Insofar as humour represents not only a critique of the inadequacy of reason, but also a celebration of this inadequacy, Schopenhauer's theory can also be related to the structure of carnival. Just as carnival represents a momentary liberation from the prevailing power arrangements, for example, so Schopenhauer's account of humour rests upon similar sorts of structure. Reason, as we have seen, is a 'strict, untiring, troublesome governess' (1907b: 280; quoted above), and humorous incongruity thus enables the temporary overthrow of this oppressor. Indeed, this structure is not only present in the dynamics of Schopenhauer's theory, but also in several of the

examples that he uses to explain it, where the object of the joke is often an authority figure, such as a king, a policeman or a doctor (1907b: 272-3). However, the affinities between Schopenhauerian incongruity and carnival need to be pressed with a certain caution. Since the structure of this incongruity is, as we have seen, also the source of Schopenhauerian pessimism, there are good grounds for keeping the scale of its celebratory potential in perspective. This, argues Eagleton, is where Schopenhauer's theory might be of use in conjunction with a theory of carnival: in spite of the relentless hopelessness of Schopenhauer's philosophy, it does remind us that the 'dominant narrative of history to date has been one of carnage, wretchedness and oppression' (Eagleton, 1989: 182). Any 'Bakhtinian celebration' which remains unaware of this fact is, Eagleton concludes, 'politically futile' (1989: 182), a conclusion that is wholly consistent with my earlier discussion of Bakhtin. While it can be argued that the Romantic critique of reason instigated by Schopenhauer's comic theory has similarities with the structure of carnival, then, the melancholy which Schopenhauer's critique inspires reminds us of the need to approach the subject of carnival from a historical perspective.

Having identified the Romantic and carnivalesque overtones of Schopenhauer's theory, we can perhaps begin to situate it within a model of culture, as we did with Kant's analysis. It was argued that, while Kant differentiated between humour, reason and beauty, he nevertheless sought to assimilate humour within the bourgeois practices of the day, and that this was part of a more widespread cultural process. To what extent, then, might

Schopenhauer's theory of humour belong to a similar sort of process?

It was argued above, following Stallybrass and White, that one of the features of the Enlightenment period was the evolution of a rational, de-libidinized public sphere, free from the vulgar excesses of both the public body and individual bodies. While Kant assumed that humour could be made to conform to the manners appropriate within this public sphere, Schopenhauer identifies such conventions themselves as a source of incongruity. 'Good society,' he argues, 'in order to be thoroughly insipid, has forbidden all decided utterances, and therefore all strong expressions' (1907b: 274). As a result, 'scandalous' or 'indecent things' are expressed in the form of 'general conceptions' (1907b: 274). If someone is 'thrashed and kicked out' of a party, for example, it is said that 'He had unpleasantness at the ball', and if someone is drunk, it is said that 'He has done too well' (1907b: 274). This mismatch between concrete indecency and vague generality corresponds to the structure of humorous incongruity: such forms of protocol are simply laughable. To a certain extent, then, Schopenhauer's theory of humour is expounded in relation to a critique of the culture in which he found himself. Not only does he reject Enlightenment rationalism but, as one might expect from a philosopher who apparently revels in the details of human anatomy, he also ridicules certain aspects of a sublimated public sphere.

However, for all that Schopenhauer seems to enjoy the fact that humour marks the outwitting of reason, it would be inaccurate to read his comic theory *simply* as a championing of the plebeian over

the patrician. Rather, Schopenhauer strikes more of an ambivalent position towards the cultural order, and his discussion of humour as a distinct category of the ludicrous reveals a certain anxiety about the extent to which the public sphere was being vulgarised. For Schopenhauer, humour is the highest form of the ludicrous, allowing us to conceal seriousness behind a joke. This enables us to overcome the problems that the external world apparently imposes on our current situation. Schopenhauer despairs, however, of the widespread use of the term 'humour' to denote other forms of the ludicrous: the word

is not intended to be used as the title for all kinds of jokes and buffoonery, as is now universally the case in Germany, without opposition from men of letters and scholars; for the true conception of that modification, that tendency of the mind, that child of the sublime and the ridiculous, would be too subtle and too high for their public, to please which they take pains to make everything flat and vulgar. Well, 'high words and a low meaning' is in general the motto of the noble present, and accordingly now-a-days he is called a humorist who was formerly called a buffoon.

(1907b: 284)

While the juxtaposition of 'high words and a low meaning' is sometimes a source of amusement for Schopenhauer, as in the case of the insipid expressions referred to earlier, it can also be a source of despair, as in the case here. While the former represents the unnecessary politesse of the public sphere, the latter represents the decline of the cultural order. What I want to argue is that this ambivalence towards contemporary culture is bound up with the ambiguity both of Schopenhauer's comic theory and of his Romanticism.

The ambiguity of Schopenhauer's comic theory derives from the fact that humour is, as we have seen, not only a source of

celebration but also a source of hopelessness. Furthermore, not only does humour represent the defeat of reason but, insofar as humour consists of an incongruity between percepts and concepts, so (conceptual) reason is itself a prerequisite of humour (1907b: 280). It is precisely this ambiguity that structures Schopenhauer's Romanticism, for while humour demonstrates the insufficiency of reason, we are, as rational creatures, ultimately unable to avoid this insufficiency. For all that Romanticism develops a critique of Enlightenment ideals, then, such a critique will ultimately be tied to those very ideals. It is here that we can locate the ambivalence of Schopenhauer's relationship with the contemporary cultural order: at the same time as he develops a critique of the de-libidinized public sphere, he nevertheless distances himself from the vulgarisation of that sphere. Schopenhauer's theory of humour thus draws upon an ambiguity that not only lies at the heart of his overall philosophical system, but is also typical of Romantic critique in general.

Conclusion

The most obvious distinction to be drawn between Kant's and Schopenhauer's theories of humour concerns the way in which they locate the source of comic enjoyment. While Kant argues that such enjoyment derives from the physical gratification of laughter alone, Schopenhauer identifies an additional source of pleasure in the actual perception of humorous incongruity: we can enjoy the ludicrous *in itself*. What I have argued in this chapter is that by relating each theory to its pertinent contexts, the wider social and

philosophical issues which impinge upon them become apparent. In particular, it was argued that Kant's Enlightenment background and Schopenhauer's Romantic tendencies were crucial influences on their respective comic theories. Such a conclusion is certainly consistent with Bakhtin's thesis concerning the decline of the carnivalesque. However, by relating his thesis to two particular historical moments in the field of comic theory, we have also been able to expand and elaborate upon the trajectory of this decline.

Notes

- 1 I say 'in part' here because Van Cleve's quotation suggests that the bourgeoisie also rejected aristocratic practices. While such a process is vital to the construction of a middle-class sense of decorum, it is of less interest to a discussion of comedy. Norbert Elias' study, *The Civilizing Process*, however, provides a thorough account of the ways in which the German middle class did distinguish themselves from the nobility in the period we are discussing (Elias, 1978: 16-29).
- 2 The footnote attributes this information to Wallace's *Kant*, p.39.
- 3 Bakhtin equates the Romantic grotesque with a number of areas: with *Sturm und Drang*; with the work of Theodor von Hippel, Ernst Hoffmann and Bonaventura; with the theories of Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul (Bakhtin, 1984: 36-44).

Chapter Four

Bergson and laughter

The fundamental tenet of Bergson's theory of humour is easily stated: the comic consists in '*something mechanical encrusted on the living*', and laughter is a response which 'corrects' this rigidity (Bergson, 1980: 84). It is on the basis of this corrective function that Bakhtin cites Bergsonian laughter as representative of the negative streak in comic theory (Bakhtin, 1984: 71). When Bergson's remarks are taken out of the context of his overall philosophical position, as they frequently are (e.g. Nelson, 1990; Miller, 1988), it is never very clear why Bergson seems so preoccupied with the comic qualities of mechanical rigidity. One aim of this chapter, then, will be to consider Bergson's theory alongside an explication of his philosophical approach. However, I will also attempt to situate Bergson's comic theory historically in relation to modernity and modernism. As Wylie Sypher has noted in his introduction to the English translation of Bergson's 'Laughter', Bergson's essay can be read as a reaction 'against the coarse logic, the "machinery," of the nineteenth century' (1980: viii). While Sypher's commentary (first published in 1956) predates the more recent theoretical interest in the issues surrounding modernity and modernism, it nevertheless suggests an important

route to follow in developing a historicised reading of Bergson's theory. Such a reading would identify Bergson's vitalism as a critical reply to the perceived problems of modern society. This chapter will seek to build on such readings by relating Bergson's theory to recent theoretical discussions of modernity and modernism (see Giddens, 1990; Habermas, 1993; Giles, 1991; Burwick and Douglass, 1992). In addition, it will explore the Bakhtinian response to Bergsonism.

Bergson and the discourse of modernism

It is fitting that the Lumière brothers first projected pictures through their Cinématographe at the Grand Café in Paris in 1895. Six years earlier Bergson had published his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (translated as *Time and Free Will*), and, seven years after that, *Matière et mémoire* (translated as *Matter and Memory*). By 1907, when Bergson published his best known work, *L'Évolution créatrice* (translated as *Creative Evolution*), not only had cinema taken off, with Parisian crowds thronging to it every evening, but Bergson's own lectures at the Collège de France in Paris used to attract huge crowds of 'Five o' clock Bergsonians' (Antliff, 1993: 4; quoting Charles Péguy), who spilled out onto the street in their attempts to catch a glimpse of the now famous philosopher. And it was in *Creative Evolution* that Bergson developed his critique of the intellect on the grounds that it resembled a cinématographe, carving the dynamic flux of time up into finite, static frames (Bergson, 1960: 347). In order to appreciate fully the significance of the metaphors of mechanical

rigidity that abound in Bergson's comic theory (first published in 1900), we need to turn first to his analysis of the relationship between the intellect and time.

In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson seeks to establish an opposition between the spatial and social realm of the intellect, and the temporal and subjective realm of intuition, an opposition that grounds much of his subsequent work (Bergson, 1910). The intellect experiences time as 'a homogeneous medium in which our conscious states are ranged alongside one another as in space' (1910: 90; quoted in Easthope, 1991: 184). For Bergson, the problem with this conception is that it conceives of time in linear, spatial terms. In reality, time consists in a process of 'heterogeneous duration' or *durée* (1910: 237; quoted in Easthope, 1991: 184). This process is not one of linear progression, but of complex flux, where the past and the present merge into one another, 'as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak into one another' (1910: 100; quoted in Easthope, 1991: 184). Only intuition is capable of experiencing *durée*, 'of grasping,' as A. E. Pilkington has put it, 'the pure flow of consciousness before it is fragmented by the intellect into a collection of separate states and parts' (Pilkington, 1976: 16).

In both 'Laughter' and *Creative Evolution*, Bergson develops this opposition further. The intellect, he argues, directs itself towards the material world. Its task is to ensure that the body adapts to its environment, that we are able both to represent the external world to ourselves, and to determine appropriate courses of action within the world around us (Bergson, 1960: ix). The intellect, in other words, serves a pragmatic, quotidian purpose: it 'demands that we

grasp things in relation to our own needs' (1980: 158). As a result, it is ill-suited to perceiving the 'true nature of life' (1960: x). Science, for example, which is governed by the intellect, deploys a 'cinematographical method' (1960: 347), constructing a compartmentalised and spatialised picture of the world that is adequate to the goals of the intellect. In a similar manner, language, the medium within which the intellect articulates statements about the world, provides a system for labelling objects with signs. However, this labelling system 'only takes note of the most ordinary function and commonplace aspect of the thing' (1980: 159). As a result, Bergson argues, we tend simply to read the label attached to a particular object, rather than seeing 'the actual things themselves' (1980: 159). While the intellect is a necessary component of our existence, then, it limits us to a superficial understanding of reality:

the intellect, so skilful in dealing with the inert, is awkward the moment it touches the living. Whether it wants to treat the life of the body or the life of the mind, it proceeds with the rigour, the stiffness and the brutality of an instrument not designed for such use.

The intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life.

(1960: 173-4)

The reason that the intellect is particularly unsuited to comprehending life is that life itself is endowed with qualities similar to those of *durée*: it comprises 'evolution in time and complexity in space' (1980: 118). Given this, it is not properly susceptible to the processes of fragmentation and classification undertaken by the intellect. Alongside the intellect, however, there exists the faculty of intuition, a faculty which 'is moulded on the very form of life' because it treats everything 'organically' rather

than 'mechanically' (1960: 174). Rather than manipulating the world to suit the requirements of pragmatism, intuition is 'disinterested' (1960: 175). As a result, argues Bergson, it is able to grasp things in themselves, to perceive the reality of life and of *durée* as continuous and indivisible. While the intellect erects a 'veil' (1980: 158) between the mind and reality, then, intuition consists in a form of 'immediate consciousness, vision which hardly distinguishes itself from the object seen, knowledge which is in contact and even coincidence with this object' (Chiari, 1975: 41; quoting Bergson). This notion of immediate consciousness is crucial to Bergson's espousal of vitalism, the view that animate creatures possess a life force, or *élan vital*. As Bergson explains in *L'Énergie Spirituelle* (translated as *Mind-Energy*, and first published in 1919),

To create the future requires preparatory action in the present, to prepare for what will be is to utilize what has been; life therefore is employed from its start in conserving the past and anticipating the future in a duration in which past, present and future tread one on another, forming an indivisible continuity. Such memory, such anticipations, are consciousness itself.

(Bergson, 1920: 13)

In this remark, Bergson unites *durée*, intuition and the life force as three aspects of one complex realm of experience. Intuition is the means of perceiving *durée*, the qualitative continuity of consciousness, the embodiment of *élan vital*. In this way, Bergson posits a sharp binary divide between the intellectual realm of language and science, and the intuitive realm of immediate consciousness.

There are a number of issues we could raise in relation to Bergson's account of the relationship between the mind and

reality. Firstly, as Sanford Schwartz has argued, Bergson is not consistent in the precise relationship that he posits between the intellect and intuition (Schwartz, 1992: 291). At times, for example, the two faculties are deemed to complement one another (e.g. Bergson, 1960: xiii), while at other times the intellect is presented as being 'subordinate to intuition' as a result of its inability to perceive reality (Schwartz, 1992: 291; e.g. Bergson, 1980: 158-60). Secondly, Bergson's analysis of language puts his own philosophical project in an impossible situation. As we have seen, language can only represent the world inadequately. As a result, Bergson's attempts to represent the realm of intuition are necessarily flawed: 'by the very language I was compelled to use,' Bergson accepts, 'I betrayed the deeply ingrained habit of setting out time in space' (quoted in Rose, 1984: 97). The upshot would seem to be that philosophical discourse is in no better position to capture reality than science. Indeed, the activity where our intuitive powers are most effectively exercised is art rather than philosophy: this is the activity, according to Bergson, that allows our 'soul' to 'vibrate in perfect accord with nature' (Bergson, 1980: 158).

However, perhaps the most intriguing issue concerns the historical significance of Bergson's vitalism. Why was it that a philosophy which eschewed mechanism and science should achieve such potency precisely at the point at which those two processes were on the ascendancy? In order to address this question, we need to consider the relationship between modernity and modernism.

Anthony Giddens identifies modernity in terms of the 'modes of social life or organisation' (Giddens, 1990: 1) which, since the seventeenth century, have come to dominate first Europe, and then the entire globe. Conceived in such a way, he goes on to identify four interrelated 'institutional dimensions' to these modes of social life. The first such dimension is that of capitalism, the ability to sustain the production of commodities and the accumulation of capital. The second dimension is that of industrialism, the means to organise social life on the basis of mechanised processes. The third dimension is that of surveillance, the capacity to supervise and administer the population. Finally, the fourth dimension is that of military power, the ability of the state to control the means of violence (1990: 55-9). While the precise relationship between these four dimensions has varied between different spatial and temporal contexts, Giddens does identify three specific processes which have occurred in the course of the development of modernity. The first of these is that of the 'separation of time and space' (1990: 53). As modernity developed, Giddens argues, so calendars and clocks were used to standardise time across regions. As this took place, idiosyncratic means of temporal organisation within a particular locale (e.g. around the number of daylight hours within which work could be undertaken) gradually disappeared. At the same time, there has been a transformation in the relationship between a particular locale and space, as individual 'locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them' (1990: 19). In other words, modernity ushered in a process whereby time and space were separated from particular locales, and conceived instead in uniform and universal terms. Such a process

contributed to the second feature identified by Giddens, the 'development of disembedding mechanisms' (1990: 53). Here, Giddens is referring to processes which replaced 'local contexts of interaction' with contexts capable of ranging across various spatial and temporal zones (1990: 21). Money, for example, has allowed economic exchange to take place using symbolic tokens rather than bartered goods. As systems of foreign financial exchange developed, economic interaction became possible between ever more dispersed trading partners. Finally, the third process is that of reflexivity. By this, Giddens means that modernity ushers in a questioning of tradition. While pre-modern cultures were content to repeat traditions simply because they were traditions, modernity encourages a reflexive attitude towards social practices. In other words,

The reflexivity of modern life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character.
(1990: 38)

I will return to consider certain aspects of Giddens' analysis of modernity in relation to Bergson a little later, but first I will turn to the question of modernism.

Modernism is usually construed in terms of a range of artistic practices and movements¹ that developed in Europe in the period 1885-1935 (Sheppard, 1993: 1). The way in which such practices are characterised, however, is more problematic. One approach, as Richard Sheppard has shown, involves the attempt to equate modernism with certain 'key features' (1993: 2). The problem with such an approach is not only that it has produced an immense diversity of 'key features', but that these features are rarely

'specific to the modernist period' (1993: 2). A second approach, often operating in tandem with the first, attempts to locate modernism 'in a one-dimensional historical, literary-historical or sociological context' (1993: 3). While such an approach has advantages over the first insofar as it seeks to develop some sort of contextual understanding of modernism, too often it interprets modernism *simply* as a response to previous artistic movements, or, alternatively, as a precursor of subsequent movements. In doing so, this approach tends to minimise the complexity of the socio-historical context out of which modernism developed.

Given these problems, Sheppard devises a third approach which conceives modernism in terms of an interdisciplinary range of responses to the social and cultural upheavals experienced during the period (1993: 4-5). We have already seen Giddens' analysis of the sort of upheavals that modernity ushers in. In the light of this analysis, we could perhaps examine the extent to which some of the processes identified by him might have been experienced in a particularly intensified manner during the period when modernism developed². Deploying Louis Althusser's notion of a 'problématique', Sheppard argues that subjective perceptions of the modernist problématique might not necessarily have coincided with the objective state of affairs, and that it might only be with the benefit of hindsight that such variances can be discerned (1993: 11). As such, modernism can be seen to incorporate a variety of different responses to the one social, economic and cultural configuration. Viewed in this way, modernism is understood to be both complex and contradictory. Such a strategy thus avoids the problems identified in the first two approaches, while at the same

time prompting an interrogative attitude towards the relationship between modernist practices and modern social and economic relations that avoids the pitfalls of reductionism (1993: 5).

Having resolved some of these methodological issues, Sheppard proceeds to explore the modernist problématique in two ways: firstly, by outlining modernist *diagnoses* of the problématique; secondly, by surveying modernist *responses* to it. I want to use these two poles - diagnosis and response - as a way of examining Bergson's relationship with modernism and modernity.

Bergson's diagnosis of the modernist problématique would seem to revolve around his critique of the cinematographic treatment of time. Indeed, his philosophy of time is taken by both Habermas and Harvey as emblematic of a more general modernist preoccupation with time (Habermas, 1993: 99; Harvey, 1989: 201, 206). It is also apparent that Bergson's critique is applicable to the processes involved in the modern transformation of time and space identified by Giddens. While Bergson valorises the qualitative experience of time as it is given to us by intuition, the increasing rationalisation of time and space undertaken during modernity would seem to threaten the possibility of such experience. And while he argues that human life is necessarily organised by the intellect, the processes that took place during modernity - the imposition of uniform systems of time measurement, and the simultaneous supplanting of local contexts within much larger contexts - would have accentuated the extent to which the dominance of the intellect was increasing.

In addition to this critique of the rationalisation of time, we can also situate Bergson's position in relation to the ascendancy of science. As Schwartz has noted, by the 1900s Bergson's Parisian lectures were increasingly being seen as a viable alternative to the scientific outlook that had been promulgated by Herbert Spencer, amongst others (Schwartz, 1992: 288). Schwartz argues that one of the reasons for the popularity of the vitalism offered by Bergson was that it seemed to represent an affirmation of 'freedom' in response to the 'mechanistic determinism' that seemed to hold sway elsewhere (1992: 278). Bergson's contention that there is something comic about the way in which mechanical rigidity imposes itself on living forms suggests that he offered more than a rebuttal simply of mechanistic theories: he also offered a critique of the way in which mechanical processes had increasingly invaded social life. As Harvey has noted, while some of the forms of modernism that emerged after World War One - such as futurism, or the international style of architecture - celebrated such processes

the modernism that emerged before the First World War was more of a reaction to the new conditions of production (the machine, the factory, urbanization), circulation (the new systems of transport and communications), and consumption (the rise of mass markets, advertising, mass fashion)...

(Harvey, 1989: 23)

We can, I would argue, read Bergson as a form of modernist discourse by situating him within this strand of modernism. As we shall see in our discussion of 'Laughter', Bergson finds several key aspects of modern society risible. And although Bergson resists an overtly political critique of the sort of processes identified here by Harvey, his philosophy was the source of inspiration for sections of

the political left - notably the French anarchist Georges Sorel - to develop such a critique³ (see Schwartz, 1992: 296-7; Vout and Wilde, 1987).

We have moved on now from a consideration of Bergson's diagnosis of the modernist problématique to his response to it. One aspect of his response is clearly to reveal the shortcomings of reason and science. We have seen earlier, for example, his attempt to demonstrate the inability of the intellect to grasp reality. In response to this inadequacy, Bergson asserts the role of intuition in allowing us access to the flux of time. What is perhaps most interesting about Bergson's position, however, is not simply his own response to the modernist problématique, but the way in which it in turn influenced several forms of modernist aesthetic practice. This is not to say that Bergson himself endorsed aesthetic modernism. While Bergson likens the activity of intuition to aesthetic perception (Bergson, 1960: 175; 1980: 157), his own reaction to Cubism was, as Mark Antliff has shown, 'far from favourable' (Antliff, 1993: 3), disapproving of the extent to which the practitioners of Cubism had replaced intuitive creativity with aesthetic theory. Nevertheless, as Habermas has argued, 'the exaltation of the present' that was first apparent in Bergson's conception of time⁴ was a common preoccupation of aesthetic modernism (Habermas, 1993: 100). Sheppard, for example, has cited Bergson as a likely influence on Dada, a point to which we shall return later (Sheppard, 1979: 183). Similarly, Antliff has traced the relationship between Bergson and the Parisian avant-garde, arguing that Bergson's vitalism exerted a powerful influence on Cubism and rhythmism in particular, and that, at various

times, it was given both radical and reactionary inflections (Antliff, 1993). The idea that Bergson was a key player in the emergence of aesthetic modernism, however, has been stated most forcefully by Richard Lehan, who has argued that

it was Bergson who created a systematic, rigorous philosophy that gave foundation to basic modernist tenets, and it was Bergson who cleared the modernist landscape of a materialistic underbrush that could have choked modernism off at the outset.

(Lehan, 1992: 307-8)

In this way, Bergson can be seen not only to offer a far-reaching diagnosis of the problems of modernity in his critique of science and the intellect, but, in valorising the realm of intuition as the experience of the flux of time, he can be seen as a crucial influence on a variety of responses to such problems generated by aesthetic modernism.

What I have done in this section, then, is to explore the relationship between Bergson, modernism and modernity. I now want to turn to his comic theory in order to assess the relevance of that relationship to his analysis of laughter.

Bergson's comic theory

What does laughter mean? What is the basal element in the laughable? What common ground can we find between the grimace of a merry-andrew, a play upon words, an unequivocal situation in a burlesque and a scene of high comedy?

(Bergson, 1980: 61)

In addressing these questions, Bergson not only attempts to provide a characterisation of the comic, he also offers a

functionalist explanation of laughter. In the course of this section, I will look at the argument advanced by Bergson in his essay 'Laughter'. I will then explore contemporaneous alternatives to Bergson's conception of laughter, before examining the extent to which his comic theory remains tied to the modernist co-ordinates of his discourse outlined in the previous section.

a) 'Laughter'

Bergson prefaces his analysis of the comic with a description of his method. The problem faced by the comic theorist, Bergson argues, is that 'abstract definition[s]' of the comic fail to grasp the detail of its various contours: 'above all,' he argues, the comic is 'a living thing' (1980: 61). As a result, his analysis will try to avoid the distortions that the intellect imposes on living forms, and methodologically he tries to achieve this by offering a definition of the comic to serve not as a rigid formula, but as a more flexible '*leitmotiv*' (1980: 74). In this way, Bergson attempts to circumvent the theoretical problems posed by his vitalist position: how to perform philosophical analysis while overcoming the limitations wrought by language and intellectual reason.

The *leitmotiv* offered by Bergson is that 'rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective' (1980: 74). Comic rigidity, he argues, manifests itself in several areas. Human behaviour, for example, exhibits rigidity in the form of clumsy actions: a man running along in the street arouses laughter if he trips up over a particular obstacle, Bergson claims. And the reason for this response is that he has failed to display the behavioural 'elasticity' required to

negotiate such obstacles (1980: 66). Language is another area where comic rigidity might arise. One form of linguistic rigidity derives from the articulation of an absurdity within well-established idioms. Bergson argues, for example, that the comic effect of the 'lazy lout', who proclaims 'I don't like working between meals,' is dependent not simply upon the absurdity of the statement, but upon the way in which the statement itself incorporates the dictum 'One should not eat between meals' (1980: 134). Ideally, Bergson argues, language should exhibit a flexibility and subtlety capable of representing the world as accurately as possible: structurally, it should exhibit the dynamism of a living organism. As a result, the deployment of ready-made phrases signifies a lack of such flexibility (1980: 144)⁵. The final area where comic rigidity arises is in human character. For example, the way in which Don Quixote continually mistakes windmills for giants is comic, Bergson argues, because it represents a rigidity of character. Ideally, the human character should be attuned to the changing circumstances around it, and this requires a high degree of flexibility and adaptability. Don Quixote, on the contrary, latches on to the illusory idea of giants, and this thought then comes to determine his activity. It thus represents an 'automatism' of character, an 'obstinacy of mind' (1980: 180 and 179). Comic rigidity manifests itself, then, in character, behaviour and language. And in each of these instances, Bergson's explanation of comic potential is dependent upon his vitalism: rigidity represents a departure from the mobile, flexible qualities inherent in life itself.

The corrective function of laughter derives from its ability to correct rigidity and to realign behaviour, character or language with the vital forces of life. Bergson's account of this process rests upon a functionalist model of society, where society is envisaged as an organic structure, and various social phenomena are explained in terms of the function they perform in the maintenance of this structure. It is the duty of individuals to ensure their adaptability to the social system within which they live, Bergson argues. This means that '[e]ach member must be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment' (1980: 147). In other words, the individual must exhibit the flexibility of life itself. When they fail to do so - when their behaviour is rigid or clumsy, for example - other members of society will laugh at them to encourage them to change their behaviour:

society holds over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is really and truly a kind of social 'ragging.'
(1980: 148)

Bergson thus identifies laughter as a thoroughly social phenomenon serving a specific social function. However, while this notion of corrective laughter can be applied to cases where an individual unintentionally makes a fool of him or herself, Bergson is aware that it can't so obviously be applied to cases where humour is created intentionally. In such cases, in other words, in what sense is the resulting laughter corrective?

Bergson tackles this question while discussing the relationship between comedy and art. As we have seen, he likens aesthetic perception to intuitive experience, and the theory of art advanced

in 'Laughter' very much follows on from this equation. Our 'daily perception' is based around the 'generalities' and 'symbols' imposed by language and the intellect. In contrast, aesthetic perception is geared towards '*individualised*' experience (1980: 165). What art provides us with, Bergson argues, is a representation of feelings experienced in a particular time and place. To 'give general names to these feelings' betrays their aesthetic quality, and returns us to the realm of the everyday (1980: 165). Art has a universal quality insofar as the feelings it expresses can be universally communicated, but its object is necessarily unique.

Comedy - and Bergson restricts his discussion to dramatic comedy - shares with art the aim of producing pleasure (1980: 170), but in other crucial respects it is significantly different. While art aims at the unique, for example, comedy aims at the general: it 'depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again' (1980: 166). While tragedy centres on unique individuals (e.g. 'Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear' etc. (1980: 168)), comedy centres on types. As Bergson points out with reference to Molière, 'Le Misanthrope, l'Avare, le Jouer, le Distrain, etc., are names of whole classes of people' (1980: 166). The reason for this, Bergson argues, is that, by dealing with general classes of people who will be recognisable to the audience, comedy preserves the corrective function of laughter. The audience's laughter at the characters' comic rigidity serves to instruct the audience about the folly of such rigidity. As Sir John Vanburgh, the Restoration Comedy playwright put it, '[t]he business of comedy... is to shew people what they shou'd do, by representing them upon the Stage,

doing what they shou'd not...' (quoted in Palmer, 1984: 113).

Consequently, the corrective of laughter can operate in at least two ways. While laughter at unintentional comedy serves to correct the behaviour of the object of the laughter, the laughter produced by intentional comedy serves to correct the behaviour of those laughing.

Having outlined Bergson's comic theory, we are now in a position to examine some of the issues that it raises. The first area that I will explore concerns Bergson's analysis of laughter as a social phenomenon and the processes whereby particular objects are constructed as comic. In the course of his argument, Bergson mentions a large range of apparently comic objects. Hunchbacks, for example, exhibit comic rigidity in their deformity, at least as long as it is '*a deformity that a normally built person could successfully imitate*' (1980: 75). 'And why does one laugh at a negro?' Bergson enquires further. The answer, he suggests, is that they appear to be 'unwashed', as though they were 'daubed over with ink or soot' (1980: 86). Their appearance, argues Bergson, is thus analogous to the wearing of a mask, and since masks represent the imposition of a form of rigidity on the mobility of life, the 'unwashed' demeanour signifies as a form of comic rigidity. 'A negro is a white man in disguise,' is the conclusion drawn by the comic imagination (1980: 87).

The disturbing nature of these examples would suggest that they require rather careful inspection. The first point to make in relation to them is that Bergson is relatively pessimistic about laughter. While he argues that the overall function which it serves is beneficial to society as a whole, he accepts that, since the

purpose of laughter is to intimidate and humiliate, so individual cases might involve aspects of aggression and injustice (1980: 188-9). However, the model of society on which he predicates this analysis is itself problematic. Bergson claims, for example, that

Society will... be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short because it is the sign of an eccentricity.

(1980: 73)

This notion of a 'common centre' suggests that society is structured around a high degree of consensus. However, Bergson offers no indication of how this consensus is arrived at. Is it merely a point around which the majority happen to congregate, or is it produced in accordance with structures of social and economic power? How are 'eccentricities' defined and prejudices created, and why does laughter single out these 'separatist tendencies' as its suitable objects? His discussion of the hunchback and the negro is illuminating on this point. Hunchbacks appear comic to '*normally built*' people, while the negro appears comic because he is not white. In both cases, the comic effect is dependent upon the existence of a social norm, but in neither case does Bergson begin to enquire about the way in which such norms are constructed. In addition to these problems, Bergson's model also assumes the desirability of social cohesion: laughter is a force for good because it maintains social cohesion. This raises the question of whether social cohesion is 'good' *per se*, or whether we need to suspend judgement about it until we know what particular form of society is being held together by laughter. In some of the passages concerning laughter as a corrective, such

as the one above, Bergson projects an image of a society based on zealotry, coercion and intimidation, and it is far from clear that the cohesion of such a society is to be preferred to its revolutionary reorganisation.

Further, given that Bergson portrays laughter as a disciplinary force within society, it would seem increasingly inappropriate to ground his comic theory on the metaphysical distinction between vital, intuitive experience and systematic, intellectual abstraction. Laughter, he argues, serves to safeguard our adaptability and flexibility, and it achieves this by ensuring that our behaviour is attuned to the essential features of life itself. Any departure from this axis will be perceived as a form of comic rigidity and laughed out of court. However, particularly in the light of the examples explored above, Bergsonian laughter would rather seem to confer rigidity on the social group by imposing the stringent demands of normalisation upon its members. The implication of Bergson's analysis, then, is that the coercive, repressive power of laughter underscores a rigid form of social conformity. And this implication undermines the very opposition on which his theory is predicated. It would therefore seem that Bergson's comic theory faces a number of serious problems.

In spite of these problems, however, Bergson's identification of a form of laughter that seeks to humiliate would seem to have a fairly widespread applicability. His account of the way in which laughter serves to reinforce the dominant structures of society, for example, might usefully be used as a starting point for an analysis of the relationship between, say, racist and sexist joking discourse and the dominant structures of contemporary society. However,

the negative status which he assigns to laughter itself (even though its *overall* effect is beneficial) has led some commentators to question whether we might not be able to identify a more positive conception of laughter alongside this negative one. What I want to do now, then, is to consider what from these alternative conceptions of laughter might take.

b) Alternatives to Bergsonian laughter

Both Pete A. Gunter (Gunter, 1968) and John Lippitt (Lippitt, 1992) have suggested that it would have been entirely consistent for Bergson to have 'posited two sorts of laughter, one subsuming the intellect's superficiality, the other expressing the penetration of the intuition' (Gunter, 1968: 496). And both of them turn to Nietzsche as a source for envisaging what this form of laughter might sound like. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, they argue, Nietzsche identifies two forms of laughter, the 'laughter of the herd' and the 'laughter of the height' (Lippitt, 1992: 39; quoting Nietzsche). The laughter of the herd manifests itself when Zarathustra addresses the crowd in the marketplace on the subject of the *Übermensch*, a being who represents, in Lippitt's words, 'ascending life, self-overcoming and self-possession' (1992: 39). The crowd greet Zarathustra with 'scornful, mocking laughter' (Lippitt, 1992: 39): '... while they laugh they hate me too,' claims Zarathustra. 'There is ice in their laughter' (Gunter, 1968: 500; quoting Nietzsche). This, both Gunter and Lippitt argue, is comparable to Bergsonian laughter, insofar as it singles out an individual as eccentric and seeks to attack this otherness through

humiliation. In contrast, it is Zarathustra himself who expresses the laughter of the height. The key passage here, Gunter and Lippitt agree, is when the shepherd - who is really Zarathustra himself - is struggling to remove a black snake from his throat. When Zarathustra urges the shepherd to bite the snake in half

The shepherd... bit as my cry had admonished him; he bit with a strong bite! Far away did he spit the head of the serpent - : and sprang up. -

No longer the shepherd, no longer man - a transfigured being, a light-surrounded being, that *laughed*! Never on earth laughed a man as *he* laughed!

O my brethren, I heard a laughter which was no human laughter, - and now gnaweth a thirst at me, a longing that has never allayed.

(Gunter, 1968: 502-3; quoting Nietzsche)

Rather than the frustrated laughter of the multitude, then, Zarathustra's laughter of the height expresses, in Gunter's words, 'the attainment of desire' (1968: 505): it represents an ability both to overcome fear and to reject the herd instinct of the multitude. Gunter argues that this conception of laughter is applicable to forms that arise at moments of passing danger, such as the laughter of the surfer who, having negotiated giant waves makes it into calmer waters (1968: 506). Lippitt argues, on the other hand, that because the future always holds further sources of danger, so 'the laughter of the height, while certainly being joyous, also involves as an important element laughing at the comedy of existence, including one's own existence' (Lippitt, 1992: 44). In this sense, the laughter of the height represents a life-affirming acceptance of the futility of human existence.

I do not wish to examine the points at which Gunter and Lippitt's arguments diverge because there is such a high degree of

unanimity between them. However, I do want to raise two points. The first concerns the extent to which Bergson himself might have posited a more positive conception of laughter alongside the analysis provided in 'Laughter'. In one of his final publications, *Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (first published in 1932; translated as *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*), Bergson projects the opposition between intellect and intuition onto the field of moral philosophy. There are, he argues, two forms of morality. 'Closed' morality is 'a morality of pressure' (1935: 206; quoted in Lacey, 1989: 204): it is the means whereby a particular social group constructs a system of norms, injunctions and prohibitions to govern behaviour. The purpose of such rules is to secure the cohesion, and thus the permanence, of current social arrangements. There is an obvious affinity between the pragmatism of such a system and the operation of the intellect. Open morality, on the other hand, is concerned with a dynamic and spiritual form of intuition. To quote Lacey, it

involves aspiration rather than impulsion, is based on feelings or (higher) emotion rather than reason, is supra-intellectual rather than infra-intellectual, is universal rather than partial in its sympathies, follows individual example rather than rules, and leads to joy rather than mere pleasure.

(Lacey, 1989: 207)

Bergson's examples of those who have embodied this form of open morality include prophets, saints and mystics such as St. Paul and Joan of Arc (Bergson, 1935: 194; cited in Lacey, 1989: 207).

Although there is a certain distance between Zarathustra's Nietzschean will to power and Bergson's conception of open morality, I would argue that certain parallels can nevertheless be drawn between them. In both cases, an appeal is made to

individuals to respond to some higher calling in order to overcome or transcend everyday conditions and mores. Given this parallel, it is to *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that we should look if we are to find space within Bergson's framework for a Nietzschean conception of laughter of the height.

The second point I would raise in relation to Gunter and Lippitt's argument returns us to the topic of carnival. The problem with their argument is that it repeats Nietzsche's contempt for the 'herd' in assuming that a collective form of laughter is necessarily Bergsonian. In Bakhtin's theory of carnival, however, we have yet another alternative to Bergsonian laughter in the form of the celebratory laughter of the carnivalesque crowd. I want to address this alternative historically in relation to Bergson by looking at Bakhtin's comments concerning the modernist carnival. Describing the decline of the carnivalesque since the Renaissance, Bakhtin tries to identify particular texts which embody strong traces of the carnivalesque grotesque, and, as an example of the modernist grotesque, Bakhtin cites Alfred Jarry (Bakhtin, 1984: 46). Jarry was a contemporary and compatriot of Bergson whose best known work, *Ubu Roi*, was first performed in the theatre in Paris in 1896, four years before the publication of 'Laughter'. As Richard Stam's reading of *Ubu Roi* argues, the play is replete with carnivalesque imagery and techniques (Stam, 1989: 99-102). Parodying Shakespearean tragedy, *Ubu Roi* represents a carnivalising of the conventions of both Shakespearean theatre and bourgeois realism. Ubu himself is a reincarnation of Macbeth but, as Stam points out, he 'is motivated primarily by the prospect of having an unlimited supply of sausages rather than any ambition

for wealth and power' (Stam, 1989: 100), a gluttonous streak which pervades the entire play. This, along with the play's scatological language and its sequences of physical dismemberment, combine to signify Jarry's preoccupation with the grotesque. Although it is a textual form of carnival, rather than the real thing, in appealing to the carnivalesque tradition *Ubu Roi* nevertheless reminds us of the rebellious, collective laughter of carnival. Rather than legitimating dominant social structures in the way that Bergsonian laughter does, carnivalesque laughter celebrates the temporary reorganisation of them. Insofar as it embodies many of the central motifs of carnival, then, *Ubu Roi* suggests an alternative not only to Bergsonian laughter, but also to the Nietzschean 'laughter of the height' to which Gunter and Lippitt appeal.

We can expand on this point further by turning to another form of modernist practice contemporaneous with Bergson: Dada. First emerging in Zurich during the First World War, the Dadaist movement then spread to other cities (e.g. Munich, Cologne, Berlin, Paris). In each centre, Dada announced a rejection of the capitalist system, a denunciation of the bourgeois values that had led to the War, and an attack on the very institution of art. In its quest to construct a revolutionary aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) practice, Dada attempted to dissolve the boundaries between high and popular culture. In the light of its irreverent, comic flavour, Kenneth Coutts-Smith has called Alfred Jarry the 'father of Dadaism' (Coutts-Smith, 1970: 45). However, what I am more interested in here is the relationship between Dada and Bergson, and the extent to which Dada might have shared Bergson's philosophical position, but combined it with a very different

conception of laughter. That Bergson had a direct influence on Dada has been documented by Sheppard⁶ (Sheppard, 1979: 183). What is striking is the extent to which the Dadaists' diagnosis of the modernist problématique echoed Bergson's own. Sheppard, for example, identifies five assumptions which, the Dadaists maintained, underpinned civilisation, and which they consequently rejected⁷. Firstly, they attacked the 'anthropomorphic' organisation of reality (1979: 177), the extent to which the 'alien flux' (1979: 178) of time is carved up into pragmatically ordered units, a critique which echoes Bergson's account of the intellect. Secondly, they attacked the supposed superiority of humanity, emphasising instead the extent to which humans were merely one component of the natural realm. This echoes Bergson's theorisation of the life force and his valorisation of forms of experience which allow us access to this force. Thirdly, Sheppard argues, in their rejection of the idea of human progress, the Dadaists reconceived human history in terms of 'a conflict between the human urge to create fixed forms and the flux which perpetually sweeps such constructs away' (1979: 180). While Bergson doesn't necessarily offer an equivalent critique of progress, the Dadaists' reconception of history nevertheless embodies something of Bergson's account of the relationship between the intellect and intuition. The intellect/intuition relationship is also echoed in the Dadaists' critique of the fourth assumption underpinning civilisation: 'supremacy of reason' (1979: 181). Just as Bergson had done, the Dadaists sought to reveal the shortcomings of reason, valorising instead the imagination, a faculty which could, like Bergson's intuition, 'perceive the hidden patterns in fluid reality and relate them on their own terms' (1979:

181-2). Finally, the Dadaists developed a critique of language as providing us with a socially-constructed representation of the world rather than an accurate representation of reality (1979: 182). Again, this echoes Bergson's own diagnosis of the inadequacy of language.

The proximity between Bergson and Dada can be illustrated in relation to Bergson's comic theory with reference to an example of Dadaist practice, George Grosz's 1920 painting *Republican Automatons* (reproduced in Coutts-Smith, 1970: 100). The painting depicts two figures in an urban setting. The figure on the left is besuited, bowler-hatted and waves a German flag. His body is robotic, - composed mostly of cylindrical, jointed parts - and disfigured - bearing a prosthetic leg. The figure on the right is equally robotic and disfigured, but his head forms a receptacle, into (or out of) which flow numbers and letters, echoing the large number '12' printed on the blank face of the figure on the left. The figure on the left wears an Iron Cross medal, and his raised arm reveals a system of cogwheels attached to his body. On one level, the painting simply seems to invite a Bergsonian critique of the comic rigidity that the two figures embody. However, on another level this comic rigidity acquires a political significance. The two figures' clothing signifies their bourgeois status, and their automatism is ridiculed as a flag-waving, unthinking form of allegiance to the Weimar Republic. The system of cogs, meanwhile, not only underlines the automaton nature of the figures, it also refers us to the mechanised, dehumanising forces that were increasingly becoming central to the mode of production. Insofar as the picture enacts an aggressively satirical portrayal of the

Weimar bourgeoisie, then, it seeks to challenge the forces of social order and social cohesion. In this respect, then, for all that the Dadaist laugh directs itself at similar forms (i.e. rigidity, automatism, mechanism) as Bergsonian laughter, its counterhegemonic potential stands in sharp contrast to the hegemonic function of Bergsonian laughter.

We can expand on the differences between Dada and Bergsonian laughter by returning to Sheppard's discussion. Sheppard goes on to identify the sense of humour as an important aspect of the Dadaist response to their diagnosis of the problems of European culture and society, and he characterises this sense of humour in three ways:

First, Dada is typified by an ebullient and anarchic joy in the life force which expresses itself through absurd and spontaneous actions and works of anti-art. Second, Dada cultivated a scathing satirical fierceness whose aggressiveness prevents the *joie de vivre* from becoming endearing and therefore socially acceptable. But third, and most characteristically, Dada is marked by a highly developed sense of self-irony...

(1979: 194-5)

We can contrast each of these features with the key features of Bergsonian laughter. Firstly, Dada's humorous celebration of *élan vital* contrasts with the humiliating imposition of social conformity brought about by Bergsonian laughter. Secondly, then, while Dadaist laughter shared the aggressive streak of Bergsonian laughter, it nevertheless sought to remain beyond the scope of legitimate social convention. Bergsonian laughter, on the other hand, has legitimacy conferred on it by virtue of its role in securing social cohesion. Thirdly, the Dadaists' self-irony contrasts sharply with the strategy of Bergsonian laughter to intimidate an other. According to Sheppard, this self-irony ensured the provisional

nature of Dada, the ability to maintain a constantly sceptical and ironic attitude towards the present. It was only by demonstrating such an attitude that Dada could reveal its commitment to a world in constant flux (1979: 195). While Bergsonian laughter is repressive and negative, then, the self-irony of the Dadaist sense of humour signifies a positive aspect, 'a means', as Sheppard puts it, 'of lifting men above their situation, of overcoming malaise, of accepting failures' (1979: 195). 'Ultimately,' Sheppard concludes, 'and despite all its cynicism and subversiveness, the humour of Dada is affirmative' (1979: 195). Indeed, in a later article examining Dada poetry, Sheppard expands on the affirmative nature of Dada by arguing that the tropes of carnival resurface in Dada poetry (Sheppard, 1983).

A similar sort of argument has been advanced by Richard Stam, who situates Dada within the same trajectory as Jarry in its deployment of grotesque imagery, and its inversion of aesthetic and social codes and conventions (Stam, 1989: 98). The Dadaist attempt to dissolve the boundaries between high and popular culture can certainly be compared to the processes identified by Bakhtin both in his analysis of carnival, and in his analysis of the role of carnival in the work of Rabelais. Very often, the Dadaist critique of institutionalised aesthetics involved an appeal to popular comic forms and practices. In the early twenties, for example, the Dadaist Revolutionary Council of Berlin demanded 'the organization of 150 circuses "for the enlightenment of the proletariat"' (quoted in Coutts-Smith: 1970: 88). In this way, Dadaist laughter can be compared to carnivalesque laughter.

While there is a high degree of proximity between Dada and Bergson, then, it has been argued that, in spite of its neo-Bergsonian framework, Dada nevertheless managed to project a form of laughter that in many ways was at odds with Bergsonian laughter. In Nietzsche's 'laughter of the height', and in the forms of laughter associated with Jarry and Dada, therefore, we have identified historically contemporaneous, positive conceptions of laughter to situate alongside Bergson's negative conception. Both Jarryesque and Dadaist laughter emerged from within the vector of modernism, and this fact returns us to the question concerning the relationship between Bergson, modernism and modernity. I will finish this section by readdressing this question in the light of our discussion of 'Laughter'.

c) Bergsonian laughter and modernism

As we have seen, Bergson's comic theory posits laughter as a mechanism that works to guarantee social conformity and social cohesion. As we have argued, Bergson's theory is contradictory because it explains this mechanism in terms of the ability of laughter to correct rigid conduct by encouraging us to adopt more adaptable and flexible forms of behaviour. Rather than correcting rigidity, it was argued, Bergsonian laughter would seem to impose it.

If we situate 'Laughter' in relation to modernity, a similar sort of contradiction emerges. On the one hand, Bergsonian laughter can be seen as part of the very fabric of modernity, a mechanism that has been co-opted as a means of regulating social conformity. This

can be illustrated further by turning to Michel Foucault's critique of modernity. Foucault analyses modern society in terms of a 'society of normalization', a network of disciplinary procedures capable of ensuring social cohesion (Foucault, 1980: 107). These procedures are administered from some of the key nodes in the network of modern society: the asylum, the prison and the clinic. Each of these institutions is legitimated by specific forms of discourse: psychiatry, criminology and medicine respectively. Each of these 'apparatuses of knowledge', Foucault argues, organises its own set of 'dividing practices', which both produce and control the norms which allow us to differentiate the mad from the sane, the criminal from the legitimate, and the sick from the healthy (1980: 102). Such discourses augment the maintenance of domination both by determining what it is to be sane, legitimate and healthy, and by determining procedures for confining those who transgress these norms in any way. The manner in which Bergson analyses laughter as a mechanism regulating social norms and eccentricities, and consolidating dominant social codes, allows us to situate his analysis in relation to a Foucauldian model of normalisation. And the crucial point here is that, according to Foucault, the emergence of discourses of normalisation such as psychiatry, criminology and medicine is one of the key features of modernity. In this way, then, Bergsonian laughter can be seen as one component in the modern network of power.

We can pursue this relationship between Bergsonian laughter and modernity further still by turning to Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry. Published in the 1940s, this analysis can be read as a critique of the way in which modern

society produces a devalued, homogenised mass culture. The texts produced by the culture industry work to repress the desires of those who consume them. Hollywood's romantic films, for example, construct narratives predicated on desire. But rather than providing a real fulfilment of the desires that are set in place, the narrative resolution instead provides 'no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 139). The implication is that latent desires for self-fulfilment and liberation, which for the 'masses' will only be met in the form of social transformation, are held in check by the operation of the narrative. The narrative leads instead to a reassertion of the current status quo. As a result, the culture industry is able to structure the masses' leisure time in order to prepare them for work the next day. The reason that this is of relevance to Bergson's comic theory is that Adorno and Horkheimer explain the laughter activated by the culture industry in terms of Bergsonian laughter. Here, they draw a distinction between 'conciliatory' and 'terrible' laughter. Conciliatory laughter is 'an echo of an escape from power' (1979: 140). When an incongruous joke escapes the power of reason, or when a pun escapes the rules of language, for example, our response is to celebrate that escape with laughter. It is conciliatory because it is shared by everyone, providing a sense of solidarity (1979: 140-1). In contrast, the form of laughter generated by the products of the culture industry is terrible, and Adorno and Horkheimer evoke Bergson's comic theory in order to characterise it. Rather than marking an escape from power, it 'overcomes fear by capitulating to the forces which are to be feared' (1979: 140). The culture industry uses such laughter to sweeten the pill that it actually

offers, the pill that induces social conformity. Terrible laughter thus represents

the echo of power as something inescapable. Fun is a medicinal bath. The pleasure industry never fails to prescribe it. It makes laughter the instrument of the fraud practised on happiness.

(1979: 140)

And rather than providing a sense of collectivity, the audience indulging in terrible laughter represents

a parody of humanity. Its members are monads, all dedicated to the pleasure of being ready for anything at the expense of everyone else. Their harmony is a caricature of solidarity. What is fiendish about this false laughter is that it is a compelling parody of the best, which is conciliatory.

(1979: 141)

Adorno and Horkheimer do countenance the possibility of there being spaces within the culture industry where conciliatory laughter might be permitted. 'In some revue films,' they suggest, 'and especially in the grotesque and the funnies, the possibility of this negation does glimmer for a few moments. But,' they add, 'of course it cannot happen' (1979: 142). The power of instrumental rationality on which cultural production is predicated is such that 'the bunch of keys of capitalist reason' has replaced 'the cap and bells of the jester' (1979: 143).



There are a number of problems with Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis. They assume the passivity of the people who consume the products of the culture industry, and they envisage the culture industry as an overly monolithic entity. Further, they perhaps over-estimate the power of the media (radio, film and television) to perform functions of social integration and control. However, for all that it is problematic, it does provide us with a further model

with which to situate Bergsonian laughter in relation to modernity. On Adorno and Horkheimer's account, Bergsonian laughter is a symptom of the way in which modern, instrumental reason organises the cultural sphere. Although Bergson's analysis of laughter predates the historical emergence of the culture industry as envisaged by Adorno and Horkheimer, Bergson did, as we have seen, develop his own critique of the instrumentality of reason.

It can be argued, then, that Bergsonian laughter is one component in the very fabric of modernity. However, at the same time Bergson identifies several aspects of modern society themselves as comic, and it is in this sense that his analysis is somewhat contradictory. The capitalist division of labour, for example, gives rise to a stratified and compartmentalised organisation of production. As a result, Bergson argues, there is a tendency for

[e]ach particular profession [to] impress[...] on its corporate members certain habits of mind and peculiarities of character in which they resemble each other and also distinguish themselves from the rest.
(Bergson, 1980: 174)

For Bergson, the rigidity that the division of labour induces can be perceived as comic, 'the *professional comic*', as he calls it (1980: 175). On one level, the professional comic is greeted by laughter because the 'separatist tendency' of individual professions is a threat to overall sociability (1980: 174). However, on another level Bergson seems to find the division of labour a comic absurdity. It is responsible, for example, for the way in which individuals are subsumed by their job title, unable to break out of the mode of behaviour appropriate to that position (1980: 175). Further, the division of labour brings with it forms of jargon and forms of logic

which are deemed absurd on the grounds of their distance from common sense (1980: 143-4; 176-7). Overall, Bergson concludes, the self-importance that the division of labour confers on particular professions 'bring[s] about a kind of professional automatism analogous to that imposed upon the soul by the habits of the body, and equally laughable' (1980: 95).

Bergson doesn't attempt to explore the socio-economic reasons for the emergence of the division of labour. However, since it is essential to the processes of capitalism and industrialism, the division of labour can be seen as one of the key features of modernity. Firstly, as Habermas has argued, a cultural division of labour can be perceived in the post-Enlightenment process of 'cultural rationalization' (Habermas, 1993: 103), whereby the fields of science, art and morality became increasingly divorced both from each other, and from the realm of the everyday. While the Enlightenment had sought to develop fields of specialised knowledge that would be of universal benefit to humankind, after the Enlightenment these fields became increasingly institutionalised, to the point where, rather than benefiting humanity, 'the threat increases that the life-world, whose traditional substance has already been devalued, will become more and more impoverished' (1993: 103). For Habermas, then, cultural modernity consists in an increasing rationalisation and institutionalisation of forms of specialised knowledge, and an ever-widening gap between those forms and quotidian existence. It is this divergence between specialised discourses and quotidian existence that Bergson finds comic.

Similarly, Harvey identifies the division of labour as one of the key aspects of socio-economic modernisation. Drawing on Marx's analysis of wage labour and the power of the capitalist to organise the factors of production, Harvey explains how the division of labour within the workplace effectively subordinated the worker to the productive mechanism controlled by the capitalist (1989: 105). Not only that, but the fragmentation of the labour process diminished the power of the worker to control the instruments of production. As Harvey argues, '[t]his turns the labourer effectively into an "appendage" of the machine' (1989: 105). This process was espoused most emphatically in the doctrine of Taylorism derived from F. W. Taylor's *The principles of scientific management*, published in 1911, a doctrine that was put into practice in Henry Ford's car plant from 1913 onwards (1989: 28). As Antliff has argued, the 'temporal rationalization' on which Taylorism was based represented a new, intensified threat to the Bergsonian conception of the qualitative flux of *durée* (Antliff, 1993: 173). Indeed, Bergson himself identifies the subordination of humans to machines as something that is intrinsically comic: '[t]he attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' (Bergson, 1980: 79). The sort of processes associated with the division of labour would thus have contributed to this realm of the comic. And while Bergson presents this 'law' as an ahistorical tenet, it is reasonable to link his observation to the processes of modernisation that were happening around him..

In this way, then, Bergson can be seen to portray certain aspects of modernity as comic. And since the laughter that greets

the comic is accredited by Bergson with a corrective function, so we can read Bergson's theory on one level as a critique of modernity. Such a conclusion tallies with our earlier characterisation of Bergson's philosophy as a form of modernist discourse. However, Bergson's analysis of laughter is contradictory, and alongside the comic critique of modernity, Bergsonian laughter can itself be seen as a thread in the texture of modernity. Bergson tells us that an analysis of laughter can reveal to us the contours of the relationship between art and life (1980: 74; 145). What I have tried to show in this section is that an analysis of Bergson's comic theory can reveal some of the contours in the relationship between modernism and modernity.

Bergson and Bakhtin

In the first part of the twentieth century, Bergson's influence reached far beyond the lecture rooms of the Collège de France. As Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist have noted, for example, Bergson's work would have been familiar to the intelligentsia of Petersburg and Leningrad in the 1910s and 1920s, including those grouped around Bakhtin (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 387). Indeed, they cite Bergson's 'Laughter' as 'a likely source' for Bakhtin's thesis in *Rabelais and His World* (1984: 387). Carnavalesque laughter, they note, attacks the comic rigidity of officialdom, the stasis of its world view. As a result, they argue, there are significant parallels to be drawn between Bakhtin and Bergson's account of laughter. In the light of my discussion in the previous section, however, I would argue that Clark and Holquist's

speculation is misplaced. While there certainly are similarities between the comic rigidity that Bakhtin perceives in the official realm of the Middle Ages and the comic rigidity that is the object of Bergsonian laughter, Bakhtin and Bergson are diametrically opposed in the function that they each assign to laughter. While Bergsonian laughter enforces social cohesion, carnivalesque laughter accompanies a rearrangement of the social order. Indeed, Bakhtin's only reference to Bergson in *Rabelais and His World* contrasts the 'positive, regenerating, creative meaning' of carnivalesque laughter with the 'negative functions' of Bergsonian laughter (Bakhtin, 1984: 71). Bergson's 'Laughter' is thus situated by Bakhtin at a low point within the post-Renaissance trajectory of the carnivalesque. It is for this reason that the laughter associated with Alfred Jarry and Dada was earlier identified both as an alternative to Bergsonian laughter, and as a form of laughter which embodied traces of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin's account of carnivalesque laughter thus stands in contradistinction to Bergson's own negative account.

This is not to argue, however, that Bakhtin's work was devoid of any Bergsonian influences, and what I want to do in the rest of this section is to explore the Bakhtinian response to Bergson, focusing both on Bakhtin's response to the relationship between consciousness and the body, and also on his critique of vitalism. In so doing, I will try to delineate Bakhtin's own relationship with the discourse of modernism.

a) Consciousness and the body

It is Michael Holquist who has made out the strongest case for the influence of Bergson on Bakhtin, identifying it most directly at work in Bakhtin's earliest essays, now published together in the collection *Art and Answerability* (Bakhtin, 1990). Holquist portrays Bakhtin as 'a great reader of Bergson, who shared the assumption (particularly in *Matter and Memory*, 1896) that in so far as human beings are organisms, they cannot help but "pay attention to life"' (Holquist, 1990a: 152-3; see also Holquist, 1990b: xxxiii-iv), and his commentary directs us towards Bakhtin's discussion of the relationship between the body and consciousness. Bakhtin explores this relationship in his essay 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' (written between 1920-1923). 'How do we experience our own exterior?' he asks (1990: 27), and in answering the question he draws a distinction between the inner body, - our experience of our exterior - and the outer body - the other's experience of it. My experience of my exterior is always fragmentary, 'dangling on the string of my inner sensation of myself' (1990: 28). The reason for this is that my inner sensation is necessarily situated within a specific vantage point. 'By turning my head in all directions,' for example, 'I can succeed in seeing all of myself from all sides of the surrounding space in the center of which I am situated, but I shall never be able to see myself as actually surrounded by this space' (1990: 37). It is only the other who can experience my outer body as surrounded by this space, who can perceive me not as a fragmented body, but as a unified whole, 'as a delimited empirical object' (1990: 36). Thus, Bakhtin argues, 'a human being experiencing life in the category of his own *I* is incapable of gathering himself by himself into an outward whole that would be even relatively finished' (1990: 35). In other

words, the construction of an outward, unified body is dependent upon the activity of an other:

the body is not something that is self-sufficient: it needs the *other*, needs his recognition and his form-giving activity. Only the inner body... is *given* to a human being himself; the other's outer body is not given but *set as a task*: I must actively produce it.

(1990: 51)

This relationship between self and other is then deployed by Bakhtin as an analogue of the relationship between hero and author. Just as the other 'actively produce[s]' - or authors - the outer body of the self, so the author authors the physical identity of the hero.

As Bakhtin himself points out, his discussion of our experience of our own exteriority owes something to Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. There, Bergson conceives of consciousness, in Leszek Kolakowski's words, in terms of 'an indivisible continuity of heterogeneous and unrepeatable qualities' (Kolakowski, 1985: 43). This realm of inner sensation thus lacks the sense of unity which, for Bakhtin, only the activity of the other can bring. However, as Holquist argues, it is at this point that the similarity between Bergson's and Bakhtin's accounts comes to an end (Holquist, 1990b: xxxiv). Bergson privileges the consciousness over the body, the intuitive realm of what he later calls *durée* over the inert physical realm of matter. For Bakhtin, however, the body is not only the locus of the interrelationship between self and other, it is also a crucial site in the process of aesthetic (authorial) activity. Bakhtin's privileging of the body is seen even more clearly in some of his later work, particularly in *Rabelais and His World*⁸. There, as we have seen, Bakhtin contrasts the classic conception of the

body with its grotesque conception. The former represented the body as a complete, unified entity: indeed, we might compare this representation with the way in which the outer body is constructed by the other in *Art and Answerability* 'as a delimited empirical object' (1990: 36; quoted above). The grotesque body, so central to carnivalesque imagery, is characterised by Bakhtin in terms of an incomplete, amorphous entity. As we have seen, this body is accorded a privileged status as a result of the role that it performed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, not only representing an alternative to official conceptions of the body, but also embodying the affirmative aspect of regenerative time in its dynamic, ambivalent quality. While the influence of Bergson can be seen in Bakhtin's analysis of the relationship between the body and consciousness, then, his reversal in *Art and Answerability* of the Bergsonian hierarchy, and his increasing preoccupation with the status of the body in subsequent work, represents a significant departure from a Bergsonian framework.

b) Vitalism

A more general Bakhtinian response to Bergson can be seen in an article first published in 1926 entitled 'Contemporary Vitalism'. Initially published under the name I. Kanaëv, the essay is now acknowledged as Bakhtin's own work (Bakhtin, 1992: 76). Here, Bakhtin defines vitalism as a belief in the autonomy of life from mechanistic laws. This is a proposition that we have seen Bergson endorse in the distinction he draws between the continuous, indivisible realm of *durée* accessed by intuition and the spatialised,

fragmented experience provided by the intellect. Only intuition is capable of providing us with experience of the reality of life itself, because it alone perceives the world 'organically' rather than 'mechanically' (Bergson, 1960: 174; quoted earlier).

While Bakhtin cites Bergson as one of the key proponents of contemporary vitalism (Bakhtin, 1992: 81), the main focus of his essay is the vitalism of the German doctor and philosopher Hans Driesch. In particular, Bakhtin is keen to evaluate the biological experiments undertaken by Driesch in order to 'prove' the central premise of vitalism concerning the autonomy of life. For readers familiar with Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais, his discussion of Driesch's various experiments on dissected worms, hydra, sea urchins and Tubularia evokes images of dissection, dismemberment and fragmentation reminiscent of the grotesque. As Bakhtin explains, by showing that the cells of these various creatures each contains the information necessary to reform and grow even when dissected, Driesch tries to demonstrate the existence of life as an autonomous phenomenon that is both 'governed by laws of its own' and is 'an utterly objective quality' (1992: 83). The problem with Driesch's conclusion, according to Bakhtin, is that his experiments could equally be used in support of a mechanistic position, i.e. that life was reducible to physical and chemical processes. The onus on the mechanist would simply be to demonstrate the existence of the appropriate physical and chemical properties within the cells that allow growth to take place. And the reason why Driesch's vitalism is so flawed, Bakhtin argues, is that he advances it as the only alternative to a mechanistic position. The problem here is that Driesch only

considers the 'naïve-mechanist point of view', the point of view which assumes that living organisms function exactly like machines (1992: 96). This point of view is obviously incapable of developing an adequate account of the dynamic processes of life because it explains organisms in terms of 'fixed and immovable machines' (1992: 96). However, as Bakhtin concludes,

In opposition to Driesch stands not the naïve-mechanist point of view, with its fixed and immovable machines and its failure to recognize the machine as merely an analogical image, but the theoretical framework of modern dialectical materialism. Only dialectical materialism can provide the proper ground for an adequate, scientific presentation of such complex phenomena as the organic regulations.

(1992: 96)

Bakhtin thus posits dialectical materialism as a viable alternative both to naïve mechanism and to the vitalism of Driesch (and, we might add, Bergson). In order to assess the substance of Bakhtin's claim, we need to consider in more detail the extent to which he himself embraced dialectical materialism.

The extent to which Bakhtin's work adopts a dialectical materialist position is usually addressed in terms of his relationship with Marxism. However, since it is in the disputed texts - *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* and *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (Voloshinov, 1973 and 1976; and Medvedev, 1985 respectively) - where Bakhtin adopts a Marxist framework most explicitly, discussions of the relationship between Bakhtin and Marxism frequently revolve around the issue of the authorship of the disputed texts. Gary Saul Morson, for example, has argued that the attribution of such texts to Bakhtin is both 'unsupported and improbable' (Morson, 1991: 1072). In

addition, Morson argues, the fact that it was *Rabelais and His World*, with its preoccupation with a collective populism, which was the first of Bakhtin's actual works to be translated into English has further skewed the reception of his oeuvre (1991: 1072). In fact, Morson asserts, what we find in Bakhtin is not a variant of Marxism, but a rejection of it. Bakhtin's stress upon contingency and his insistence 'upon the specificity of each case' (1991: 1076) reveals him as an opponent of the abstract theoreticism of 'great system[s] of explanation' such as Marxism or, for that matter, Freudianism (1991: 1071). Commentators who equate Bakhtin's notion of 'dialogue' with 'dialectics' are, Morson argues, simply mistaken. Indeed, he cites Bakhtin's own warning in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* as evidence:

Dialogue and dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of the voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, [then] cram everything into one abstract consciousness - and that's how you get dialectics.

(Bakhtin, 1986: 147; quoted in Morson, 1991: 1072)

Given this apparent distancing of his own position from a Marxism, Morson concludes, it is totally unacceptable to include Bakhtin's work under a Marxist rubric (see also Morson, 1986: 84; and Shepherd, 1993: xvii-xx).

There are a number of possible responses to this sort of critique. The first would be to argue that, even if the precise identity of the authorship of the disputed texts remains finally unresolved, there are nevertheless enough continuities between those texts and the rest of Bakhtin's work to posit a certain unity between them (see Todorov, 1984: 11). The task then becomes one of analysing both the continuities and the discontinuities between

the disputed texts and the texts bearing the name 'Bakhtin'. It is Michael F. Bernard-Donals who goes furthest in this respect, arguing that, overall, Bakhtin's oeuvre (including the disputed texts) ambivalently straddles both phenomenological and Marxist approaches, and that it is this ambivalence that has led to certain impasses in his work (Bernard-Donals, 1994; see also footnote 8). Further, given that the disputed texts apparently seek to operate within a Marxist framework, there is a need to analyse the extent to which those texts (and the rest of Bakhtin's work) adopt positions consistent with those of Marxism. In some respects, for example, Bakhtin would seem to be at odds with Marxist orthodoxy, and Bernard-Donals has identified three points at which these differences emerge. Firstly, while in the disputed texts Bakhtin pays heed to the primacy of the economic base, he tends to overlook the specific ways in which those economic factors might play a part in human communication and perception. Secondly, while Voloshinov conceives of ideology as both 'determined and determining', the traditional historical materialist would maintain that ideology 'is determined in the last instance by the economy'. Thirdly, since all communication is, for Bakhtin, dialogic, he is unable to identify a position beyond the dialogic realm of language within which the historical materialist might preserve the objective scientificity of his or her own discourse (Bernard-Donals, 1994: 105). If this is the case, it would seem that Bakhtin's work cannot be wholly contained by the category of Marxist theory. Nevertheless, at the same time there are some important points of contact between Bakhtin and Marxism. Bakhtin's theorisation of the way in which the development of cultural phenomena (both language and literature) is inextricably

linked to transitions in social relations is, as Bernard-Donals notes, consonant with a historical materialist conception of culture that would view it similarly as a product of social relations (Bernard-Donals: 1994: 88). In this respect, Bakhtin can be seen to be 'working "alongside" Marxism,' as Stam has put it, '[and] certainly not *against* it' (Stam, 1989: 15). In addition, Stam claims, Bakhtin 'remedies some of the blind spots of Marxist theory' (1989: 16). One example of just such a remedy is suggested in LaCapra's analysis of Bakhtin, discussed in Chapter One. Bakhtin's preoccupation with 'language, the body, and laughter', LaCapra argues, allows him to introduce 'into a materialist dialectic forces that often appear as alien to it as they do to bourgeois society' (LaCapra, 1983: 322). As such, Bakhtin provides a 'counterpoint' to the 'productivist ethos' of Marxism (1983: 322), substituting 'a Rabelaisian for a Hegelian Marx' (1983: 323)⁹. In this respect, we might recast Bakhtin's distinction between dialogue and dialectics, quoted by Morson above, not as a rejection of dialectics, but as a distinction between a Rabelaisian and a Hegelian Marx. The task of the Hegelian Marxist is to determine the abstract patterns of historical development¹⁰. The task of the Rabelaisian Marx, on the other hand, is to uncover in the fabric of historical processes the heteroglotic exchange of voices, bodies and laughter. While the precise relationship between Bakhtin and Marxism is both complex and ambivalent, then, I would argue, *pace* Morson, that it is nevertheless a relationship that is important.

We are now in a position to return to the conclusion reached by Bakhtin at the end of his 'Contemporary Vitalism' essay to the effect that dialectical materialism is the only viable alternative to

vitalism. That essay was written around the same time as the disputed texts (*Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, 1927; *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, 1928; *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 1929), and the appeal to dialectical materialism can be likened to the explicitly Marxist framework to which those texts appeal. However, given the complexity and ambivalence of Bakhtin's overall relationship with Marxism, it would seem inappropriate to explain his appeal to dialectical materialism simply in terms of his apparent Marxism. What I want to do instead is to address it as a response to the vitalist conception of time.

As we have already seen, Bergson's account of time as continuous and indivisible is central to his vitalist position, that life itself is continuous and indivisible. From a similar standpoint, Bakhtin argues, Driesch rejects mechanism on the grounds that its key premise, that life can be reduced to mechanical processes, appeals to an image of the machine as static and fixed. In recommending dialectical materialism as an alternative both to vitalism and to naïve mechanism, then, Bakhtin is hoping to provide a more adequate model for accounting for the way in which phenomena develop over time. That time progresses dialectically through a process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, is a premise that is not necessarily at odds with the vitalist conception of time: it certainly projects a dynamic model of evolution, conceiving of time as a continuous state of flux. However, where dialectical materialism is more at odds with a vitalist conception of time is in its insistence that temporal change is embodied in material developments, whether those developments be at the level of

organic matter, or at the level of socio-economic relations. In contrast, Driesch insists that the essence of life cannot be reduced to the physical and chemical properties of particular organisms. In a similar vein, Bergson argues that *durée* is dependent upon consciousness; to use Kolakowski's words, that '[t]races of the past recorded in matter are thought of as "traces" only because consciousness is there to monitor changes; in itself, matter has no past or future' (Kolakowski, 1985: 42-3). It is this flight from the material world evidenced in the vitalist outlook that Bakhtin contrasts with dialectical materialism. Indeed, in his study of Freud (1927), he identifies this as one of the defining features of the contemporary thought of the day, including the work of Freud, Driesch and Bergson in his assessment:

A sui generis fear of history, an ambition to locate a world beyond the social and the historical, a search for this world precisely in the depths of the organic - these are the features that pervade all systems of contemporary philosophy and constitute the symptom of the disintegration and decline of the bourgeois world.

(Voloshinov, 1976: 14)

In contrast to these deficiencies, Bakhtin would maintain, dialectical materialism is able to conceive of temporal change in the texture of socio-historical processes. As such, he concludes, its dynamic model of transition, along with its ability to determine patterns within processes of transition (e.g. the transition from thesis and antithesis to synthesis, and so on), allows it to overcome the problems of Driesch's vitalism.

What I would add here is that this conception of a dynamic time perceptible in socio-historical processes is itself embodied in Bakhtin's theory of carnival. Carnival's grotesque imagery, for example, not only represents the process of becoming, it also

locates that process firmly within the body, whether it be an individual body (e.g. in the form of Gargamelle giving birth to Gargantua), or a collective body (e.g. in the form of the heteroglossia of the drunkards' conversation immediately preceding Gargantua's birth (Rabelais, 1955: 48-51)). Meanwhile, as we saw in Chapter One, the Rabelaisian chronotope is based upon a notion of time that is dynamic, regenerative and linked to the very processes of historical development. For Bakhtin, this specificity and concreteness derived from folkloric conceptions of time, which themselves were predicated on the collective and productive labour of pre-class, agricultural societies. Further, as we have also seen, it is within these 'depths of concrete, practical life, a life that could be touched, that was filled with aroma and sound', that Bakhtin locates the critical 'utopian tones' of carnival (Bakhtin, 1984: 185; quoted in Chapter One).

Bergson presents his account of *durée* as a metaphysical and universal truth: the problems that we encounter in achieving authentic experience of time itself derive from the very structures of language and reason. The important thing about Bakhtin's conception of carnivalesque time, however, is that it is socially-constructed. It derives not from metaphysical and universal truths, but from the manner in which material life was organised: it

was experienced by primitive man not as a function of his abstract thought-processes or consciousness, but as an aspect of life itself - in a collective laboring with nature, in the collective consuming of the fruits of his labor and in the collective task of fostering the growth and renewal of the social whole.

(Bakhtin, 1981: 211)

While Bergsonian time is located in the activity of immediate consciousness, then, Bakhtin's carnivalesque time is both materialist and socially-determined.

c) Bakhtin and the discourse of modernism

For all that Bakhtin's analysis of folkloric time, and its influence on the Rabelaisian chronotope, addresses the emergence of such conceptions of time historically, there can be little doubt that Bakhtin himself valorises these notions of time over other chronotopes¹¹. One explanation of this valorisation would be that, in foregrounding the processes of temporal transition, such conceptions of time are able to fulfil the sort of function attributed to carnival itself. Through its deployment of the grotesque, for example, and through its temporary rearrangement of social hierarchies, carnivalesque imagery was capable of calling into question the apparent stasis and eternity of the social order. In a similar fashion, the Rabelaisian chronotope was able to challenge the prevailing static world picture of the Middle Ages with a dynamic projection of 'a creative and generative time' (Bakhtin, 1981: 206). However, another possible explanation of Bakhtin's valorisation of this dynamic sense of time has been suggested by Ken Hirschkop, who has argued that we can see Bakhtin as 'imposing the figure of modernity on an image of medieval culture' (Hirschkop, 1989: 34). In Bakhtin's preoccupation with temporal dynamism, Hirschkop argues,

[t]he change and ceaseless rush of the modern reappears, but with the added claim that the relativity of history is a 'joyful relativity', because historical change itself appears in the tangible form of agricultural labour.

As we have seen earlier, the potential to transform the experience of time has been identified as one of the defining features of modernity. According to Giddens, for example, modernity ushered in a standardisation of time measurement, along with the consequent disembedding of particular places from their local contexts (Giddens, 1990). In the light of this analysis, I do not want to go along with Hirschkop's reading of Bakhtin as projecting the modern experience of time onto pre-modern social processes. Rather, what Bakhtin seems to be doing is appealing precisely to the specificity and concreteness of pre-modern conceptions of time, temporal qualities that have been lost under the conditions of modernity. In contrast to the disembedded conditions of modernity, in other words, Bakhtin identifies a utopian quality in the very embedment of pre-modern conditions. As a result, I would argue, although we can discern some important differences between Bergson and Bakhtin, we can begin to view Bakhtin's position as another possible response to the modernist problématique detailed by Sheppard. Since Bakhtin's discussion of time, along with his espousal of dialectical materialism, can be seen on one level as a response to the vitalist conception of time, however, this can only confirm the extent to which the discourse of modernism consisted of a heterogeneous and contradictory terrain.

Conclusion

In the course of this chapter, I have related Bergson's philosophy - and, in particular, his comic theory - to a discussion of modernism, arguing that while on one level Bergsonian laughter would appear to belong to the social configuration of modernity, on another level it is precisely that configuration which Bergson so often deems to be comic. In relating Bakhtin to the same problematic, it was suggested that his link with the discourse of modernism is similarly complex. While there were some interesting points of contact between Bergson and Bakhtin, however, there were nevertheless some important contrasts to be drawn. In undertaking this dialogic study, we were able to address some important issues within Bakhtin's work, such as his analysis of the relationship between consciousness and the body, and his affirmation of dialectical materialism. Above all, to refocus on the topic of comic theory, it was evident that there are some crucial points of departure between Bergsonian laughter and carnivalesque laughter. In this sense, Bergsonian laughter certainly represents a nadir in the development of the carnivalesque tradition. What I want to do next is to turn to look at the comic theory of one of Bergson's important contemporaries: Sigmund Freud and his theory of jokes.

Notes

- 1 David Harvey, for example, lists the following: 'impressionism, post-impressionism, cubism, fauvism, Dada, surrealism, expressionism, etc.' (Harvey, 1989: 22)
- 2 E.g. we could examine the acceleration in the processes of mechanisation and industrialism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, and the social, economic and military impact of the First World War. We would then want to trace the

-
- specific way in which such processes might have contributed to the dynamics of modernity as identified by Giddens.
- 3 As Mark Antliff has shown, however, Bergson was not only an influence on sections of the political left. Right-wing groups found the apparent organicism and irrationalism of Bergsonian vitalism appealing. According to Antliff, 'the French fascist party, the *Faisceau*, [was founded] in the name of these vitalist principles' (Antliff, 1993: 11).
 - 4 Bergson's notion of 'immediate consciousness' would seem to place the present in an exalted position.
 - 5 There is an apparent contradiction in Bergson's argument at this point. As we have seen, he argues that language necessarily provides a distorted representation of reality (1980: 159). If this is the case, it is not clear that language is capable of achieving the required flexibility. In addition, given that language is a tool of the intellect, it would seem to be inappropriate to view it in terms of a living organism.
 - 6 Sheppard states: 'Although Ball came to find Bergson's concept of *intuition créatrice* unacceptable, he records that Bergson was very important to him and other Zurich Dadaists at the time of the Cabaret Voltaire, and Picabia, several years earlier, had also come under the influence of the French philosopher' (Sheppard, 1979: 183).
 - 7 Sheppard does acknowledge the complexity of Dada, however, identifying three references of the term 'Dada': 'a bohemian movement..., a complex of existential attitudes... [and] the objective life force itself' (1979: 193). Given this complexity, it is to be assumed that different wings of the Dada movement (e.g. Zurich, Munich, Cologne) would have given the general Dadaist position their own particular inflection.
 - 8 The precise relationship between the early and the late Bakhtin is a complicated one. As Michael F. Bernard-Donals has recently argued, we need to distinguish between the phenomenological approach of Bakhtin's early texts, those texts which deal 'with the construction and nature of individual human consciousness' that is, and the Marxist flavour of his later texts, which deal instead 'with the construction of human social relations' (1994: 3). Given this tension, Bernard-Donals argues, it is not possible to present a unified version of Bakhtin. Although Bernard-Donals has little to say about *Art and Answerability*, its preoccupation precisely with the 'construction and nature of individual human consciousness' places it within the phenomenological strand of Bakhtin's work.
 - 9 We have already touched on LaCapra's argument in rather more detail in chapter one, relating it to our discussion of the utopian dimension of carnival.
 - 10 Bakhtin's reference to 'cram[ming] everything into one abstract consciousness' sounds more like a reference to a Hegelian conception of history as the dialectical development of spirit, rather than to a more materialist conception of history as the dialectical development of social relations (Bakhtin, 1986: 147).

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- ¹¹ One of the key chronotopes with which Bakhtin contrasts the Rabelaisian chronotope is that of the adventure-time of Greek romance. According to Bakhtin, Greek adventure-time lacks any particular sense of temporal transition. 'In this kind of time,' he argues, 'nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical life of the heroes does not change, their feelings do not change, people do not even age' (Bakhtin, 1981: 91). The places where events take place are interchangeable: 'what happens in Babylon could just as well happen in Egypt or Byzantium and vice versa' (1981: 100). What is more, the sequence of events in the Greek romance is itself also interchangeable. The units which constitute the narrative are, Bakhtin argues in a later essay, 'snatched at random from the temporal process' (Bakhtin, 1986: 11). As such, the adventure-time chronotope corresponds in many ways to the way in which the Bergsonian intellect perceives time, as something that can be unitised, as something that is interchangeable and reversible.

Chapter five

Freud's theory of jokes

First published in 1905 as *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (and now translated as *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*), Freud's theory of jokes occupies a dominant position within the history of comic theory. As Bob Hodge and Alan Mansfield testify in their analysis of the role of humour in forms of political protest, 'for the analysis of humour and effects, the classic text is still Freud's *Jokes*' (Hodge and Mansfield, 1985: 200). Given this canonical status, that Freud's theory is not even mentioned by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* strikes one as a curious omission. Indeed, its omission is doubly curious, because in 1927 a book-length study of Freud, entitled *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* (henceforth referred to as *Freudianism*), had been published under the name of Voloshinov, one of the notorious disputed texts¹. In the final section of this chapter, I want to try to rectify this omission by exploring the relationship between Freud's theory of jokes and Bakhtin's analysis of carnival in the light of the critique of Freud undertaken in Voloshinov's study. Indeed, in that study, Voloshinov recasts Freud's distinction between the unconscious and the conscious in terms of a distinction between

an unofficial and official conscious. Given the way in which Freud posits a significant relationship between jokes and the unconscious, and the way in which the dynamic between the official and the unofficial structures Bakhtin's model of carnival, this revised formulation of the Freudian model of the psyche would seem to invite just such an exploration. Before that, I will provide my own explication and analysis of Freud's theory. I want to begin, however, by noting the proximity between Bergson and Freud: just five years separate the publication of 'Laughter' (1900) and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). What I want to do, then, is to explore the relationship both between these two texts, and, more generally, between Freud and Bergson's respective theoretical programmes.

Freud and Bergson

As I argued in the previous chapter, Bergson's philosophy can be read both as a modernist diagnosis of the problems of modernity (the increasing mechanisation of life and the simultaneous rationalisation of time), and as a response to such problems (a valorisation of intuition over the intellect). Crucially, these aspects of his overall philosophical position were seen to play a central role in his theory of laughter.

To what extent, then, might Freud's theoretical project articulate concerns which could be related to this same territory? First and foremost, Freud's theorisation of the subject as an entity which lacks full self-awareness and whose rationality is threatened by a range of unconscious drives and desires, represents a

rejection of the dominant post-Enlightenment conception of subjectivity as a coherent, autonomous and rational entity. Along with Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, Richard Sheppard has argued that, in advancing this critique of subjectivity, the modernist contours of Freudian thought become apparent insofar as he contributes to the general modernist emphasis on 'the changing sense of human nature' (Con Davis and Schleifer, 1991: 86-7; Sheppard, 1993: 19-21; quoting Sheppard). In developing this critique, Freud's approach raises with Bergson's a question mark concerning the adequacy of reason. As we have seen, Bergson's vitalism commits him to a critique of reason as a realm of pragmatically-oriented experience, in contrast to the faculty of intuition which alone is able to grasp the reality of things in themselves. In a similar vein, Freud sought to reveal the extent to which the faculty of reason struggles to maintain its authority over the realm of the unconscious. As we shall see in his analysis of the relationship between jokes and the unconscious, it is the ability of the joke to bypass the censorship of reason by articulating nonsense disguised as sense with which Freud is particularly concerned.

A further point of contact between Bergson and Freud can be seen in Bergson's often overlooked study of dreams. Initially delivered as a lecture in 1901, Bergson's study was published in English translation in 1914. Bergson argues that a dream consists of an amalgam of various memories selected in accordance with the various sensations that we experience in the disinterested state of sleep.

[the] vague images which occupy my sight,... [the]
indecisive sounds which affect my ear,... [the] indistinct

touches which are distributed over the surface of my body,... [the] numerous sensations which arise from the deepest parts of the organism... [and the] affective tone of our general sensibility.

(Bergson, 1914: 38-9)

The disinterestedness of sleep means that memories which might not usually surface are able to 'raise[..] the trapdoor which has kept them beneath the floor of consciousness, [and] arise from the depths; they rise, they move, they perform in the night of unconsciousness a great dance macabre' (1914: 37-8). As such, Bergson explains in a footnote, the dream is a site where the 'repressed desires' analysed by Freud might surface (1914: 39). That Bergson should cite Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (published in 1900) approvingly here inclines us to assess the convergence between Bergson and Freud's respective theories. For Freud, the dream-work processes of condensation and displacement transform the latent thoughts into the dream itself, and it is only with the use of psychoanalytic techniques that we can decode the text of the dream into its latent components. Bergson's account would seem to rest upon a similar distinction between latent dream thoughts and manifest dream content. Further, for Bergson it is the memory which controls the various latent thoughts which end up in the dream itself, and, since we will rarely be able to determine after the event the various sensations to which the process of memory selection responded, it will never be wholly clear to the conscious mind the manner in which latent memories relate to the dream itself. As a result, the text of the Bergsonian dream would seem to demand a complex form of decoding along the lines suggested by Freud. Where we do need to distinguish between Bergson and Freud, however, is on the issue

of the function of dreams. Bergson has little to say about the function that dreams might perform in the ecology of the mind: rather, he is interested in accounting for the way in which they come about. Freud, on the other hand, argues that dreams perform a process of wish-fulfilment, transforming latent unfulfilled desires ('Oh! if only...') into satisfied desires in the manifest content of the dream ('It is') (Freud, 1991: 219). Unlike Bergson, then, Freud is explicitly concerned with the function that dreams perform within the mental life of the individual. As a result, Bergson's theory of dreams can be seen as more limited in scope than Freud's. Indeed, Edwin Slosson, who provides the introduction to the English publication of Bergson's *Dreams*, claims that it is precisely the more limited remit of Bergson's account that makes it more valuable than the 'wildest extravagances' to which 'fanatical Freudians' are inclined to go in their analysis of dreams. 'It is impossible to believe,' he argues,

that the subconsciousness of every one of us contains nothing but the foul and monstrous specimens which they [fanatical Freudians] dredge up from the mental depths of their neuropathic patients and exhibit with such pride.

(Slosson, 1914: 8)

While there are some similarities between Bergson and Freud's theory of dreams, then, there are also some important differences to be noted.

We now need to turn to consider the relationship between their respective comic theories. In the course of *Jokes*, Freud draws a distinction between jokes, humour and the comic, and it is in his discussion of the latter that he turns to Bergson's 'Laughter'. For Freud, as we shall see in the next section, jokes are inextricably

bound up with the realm of the unconscious, and typically involve three people - a joke-teller, a butt and an audience. Humour, on the other hand, need only involve one person. For example, the criminal who, facing his own execution on a Monday morning, exclaimed, 'Well, the week's beginning nicely', displayed a humorous attitude (Freud, 1991: 294). As Freud explains in a short 1927 essay on the subject, humour thus represents the capacity of the super-ego 'to console the ego' in the face of adversity by saying 'Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children - just worth making a jest about!' (1961: 166)². In contrast, the comic requires two people, one who is the comic object, and the other who laughs at this object, and Freud's explanation of the manner in which laughter arises in such instances is based upon a notion of psychic economy. Imagine, for example, a young child struggling to write, with her tongue sticking out. Such a sight incites laughter in the observer because of the unnecessary energy which the child seems to be expending in the course of performing the action (1991: 249). By comparing him or herself with the child, and imagining the reduced effort that it would take to complete a similar task, the observer is afforded a surplus of energy in comparison to the child's exertions. It is this surplus that is used up by the observer in the form of laughter (1991: 254). Alternatively, cases where someone expends *too little* mental energy can also prove comic, if their slapdash approach gives rise to 'nonsense and stupidity' (1991: 255). Again, Freud argues, the observer accrues a saving in energy by comparing themselves with the comic person. An increase in intellectual work, Freud assumes, necessarily allows us to conserve our physical energy: a point proved, he argues, by the

success of machines in saving labour-time (1991: 255)³. As a result, one's laughter at an individual's over-hasty intellectual efforts derives from the imagined physical energy saved had the job been done properly. In both cases, then, - comic actions and comic mental behaviour - '[t]he comic effect apparently depends... on the *difference* between the two cathectic expenditures - one's own and the other person's estimated by "empathy" (1991: 255).

Freud draws two favourable comparisons between his theory of the comic and that of Bergson. The first of these concerns Bergson's discussion of the relationship between the comic and childhood games. The first glimpses of the comic forms enjoyed by adults, Bergson argues, can be perceived in the mechanisation and repetition of games played by children. The jack-in-the-box, the dancing-jack and the snow-ball effect, for example, all embody something of the mechanisation of life in their form. As such, he concludes, we can identify 'the first faint traces of the combinations that make us laugh as grown-up persons' in a range of childhood toys (Bergson, 1980: 104). Freud is very impressed by these observations made in Bergson's 'charming and lively volume', and he sets out to pursue a similar line of enquiry (Freud, 1991: 286). However, as with their respective analyses of dreams, Bergson's discussion of the relationship between the comic and childhood is more limited in scope than that of Freud. Indeed, Freud's analysis of the relationship not only allows him to draw certain conclusions about the comic nature of childhood, but, more importantly, it plays a crucial role in his theory of jokes, as we shall see in the next section. In relation to the comic, Freud relates his economic explanation to an analysis of childhood

pleasure. If someone running down the street falls over, for example, a child will laugh out of a feeling of superiority over the victim. Not yet capable of the process of empathy demanded by the adult form of the comic (as explained above), the child's laughter amounts to a laugh of 'pure pleasure' (1991: 288). The adult's pleasure, on the other hand, is mediated by the process of comparative cathectic expenditure, and as a result the pure pleasure experienced by the child is not available to us. However, what the comic represents for the adult is an approximation of infantile, pure pleasure. As such, Freud concludes, the comic can be seen as 'the regained "lost laughter of childhood"':

One could then say: 'I laugh at a difference in expenditure between another person and myself, every time I rediscover the child in him.' Or, put more exactly, the complete comparison which leads to the comic would run: 'That is how he does it - I do it in another way - he does it as I used to do it as a child.'

Thus the laughter would always apply to the comparison between the adult's ego and the child's ego.

(1991: 289)

Although Freud is reluctant to apply this latter formulation to every instance of the comic, he is happy to assert its widespread applicability. Indeed, the 'quantitative contrast' between small and large expenditure (e.g. in the cases of a child writing and of over-hasty intellectual work, both cited above) that is central to Freud's explanation of the yield of comic pleasure seems to embody 'the essential relation between a child and an adult', a fact which would seem to emphasise the relationship between the comic and the infantile (1991: 292). For Freud, then, childhood pleasures do not simply represent a distant recollection of comic forms, as they do for Bergson. Rather, the comic provides adults with a means of

retrieving forms of pleasure which approximate the exuberant exhilaration they experienced as children.

The second point raised by Freud in relation to Bergson's 'Laughter' concerns the latter's characterisation of the comic as a mechanisation of life. According to Freud, this formulation can be subsumed by his own economic model of cathectic expenditure. 'Experience has taught us that every living thing is different from every other and calls for a kind of expenditure by our understanding,' Freud argues, apparently moving towards Bergson's own vitalist position (1991: 271). Consequently, he continues, 'we find ourselves disappointed if, as a result of complete conformity or deceptive mimicry [for example,] we need make no fresh expenditure' (1991: 271). The mechanisation of life, - its regularisation - thus provides us with a saving of the energy that would have had to have been expended had things been more lifelike. This saving can thus be discharged in the form of laughter. In this way, Freud concludes, Bergson's comic theory can be included under his own formula (1991: 271).

What Freud has done, then, is to transpose Bergson's preoccupation with the mechanisation of life into his own preoccupation with analogies of economic exchange. Such analogies pepper the text of *Jokes*. The various techniques of jokes, for example, are united by their 'tendency to compression,' Freud claims: 'It all seems to be a question of economy. In Hamlet's words: "Thrift, thrift, Horatio!"' (1991: 77). In the next section we will consider this economic dimension of the joke in more detail. For the moment, however, it might be suggested that, if Bergson's preoccupation with mechanisation reflects the

increasing automatisation of modern social life, so Freud's preoccupation with analogies of economic exchange might itself reflect the increasingly rationalised system of economic exchange on which the development of modern social relations were predicated (see Giddens, 1990: 21-7). If this is the case, then we can add this aspect of Freud's theory to the modernist co-ordinates of his discourse that we have already identified above.

In the course of this section, then, we have explored the relationship between Freud and Bergson's respective analyses of the comic. As we have seen, there are some interesting points of contact between Bergson and Freud, but, equally, some important differences to be drawn. In particular, it was noted in relation both to dreams and the comic that there is a tendency for Freud to pursue a particular path of enquiry further than Bergson would pursue it. The complexity of Freud's theory of jokes is doubtless evidence of this theoretical tenacity. It is to his theory of jokes that we turn next.

Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious

In the introduction to his theory of jokes, Freud notes how previous commentators have frequently located the joke in a conjunction of sense and nonsense, an observation that he finds promising (Freud, 1991: 42). In the course of his analysis, Freud frequently returns to this idea, trying to formulate the precise relationship between the joking conjunction of sense and nonsense; the techniques which allow such a conjunction to be created in the first place; and the manner in which the purpose

and pleasure of a joke relate to its specific combination of sense and nonsense. In what follows, I will structure my discussion along the lines suggested by the organisation of Freud's theory, looking firstly at joke techniques, and secondly at the purpose and pleasure of jokes.

a) Joke techniques

The joke mechanism that Freud identifies in *Jokes* is heavily indebted to the dream mechanism established five years earlier in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1953). As we have already seen, Freud's theory of dreams constructs a model whereby our latent dream thoughts - our unconscious desires and the residue of the day's events - are transformed into the manifest content of the dream. The two key processes operative in this transformation are those of condensation and displacement. The former is responsible for the way in which two or more latent thoughts might be condensed into a hybrid image in the dream. The latter is responsible for the way in which insignificant latent thoughts might be displaced to a point where they occupy a central position within the manifest content of the dream, and vice versa. Working from the premise that 'there is an intimate connection between all mental happenings' (1991: 46), a premise which underpins the entire psychoanalytic project, Freud proceeds to analyse a wide range of jokes in order to uncover the processes by which the latent joke thoughts are transformed into the text of the joke. It is on the basis of his analysis of the processes of condensation and

displacement⁴ that Freud derives his first important distinction, a distinction between verbal and conceptual jokes.

The technique of condensation is responsible for the production of verbal jokes. We are told the one about Baron Rothschild, for example, who treated an untitled acquaintance 'quite as his equal - quite famillionairely' (1991: 47); and we are told the one about the Yuletide festivities, or Christmas 'alcoholidays' (1991: 53). In each of these examples, two thoughts are condensed into one expression, an expression which constitutes the joke itself: 'familiarly' and 'millionaire' become 'famillionairely', while 'alcohol' and 'holidays' become 'alcoholidays'. As such, both 'jokes' consist of a conjunction of sense and nonsense: an apparently nonsensical expression acquires sense because of the context within which it is uttered.

The technique of displacement, on the other hand, is responsible for the production of conceptual jokes. How is it, for example, 'that cats have two holes cut in their skin precisely at the place where their eyes are?' Why is it that 'Nature has arranged it that as soon as a child comes into the world it finds a mother ready to take care of it!' (1991: 97). Each of these examples relies upon a displacement of the conventional train of thought. It is the fact that each 'joke' initially appeals to the procedures of rational enquiry, while at the same time subverting those procedures through a deviation into the realm of absurdity, that constitutes the joking combination of sense and nonsense in each case.

Comprehensive though Freud's classification of joke techniques may be, he acknowledges the fact 'that technique alone is

insufficient to characterize the nature of jokes', because most if not all of the techniques that he has identified are also employed in other areas of creative activity (1991: 113). 'Representation by the opposite', for example, is the technique typically deployed in the creation of irony (1991: 112-3). And, more obviously, condensation and displacement are central to the process of dream-work. In the light of this juncture in Freud's discussion, Samuel Weber has argued that Freud's analysis of joke techniques 'appears as an enormous and ultimately futile effort to determine the essential characteristics of a phenomenon that, by essence, eludes characterization' (Weber, 1982: 91). Weber's task is to provide a deconstructive reading of *Jokes*; in particular, to reveal the way in which Freud's attempts to his shroud discourse in scientificity come adrift as he grapples with the elusive quality of the joke. '[C]onfronted with theory,' Weber suggests, 'the joke inevitably has the last laugh' (1982: 91). I would not necessarily concur with Weber's assessment of the futility of Freud's analysis of joke techniques. On the one hand, Freud provides us with a typology of joke forms. As his subsequent argument makes clear - as we shall go on to see - it is precisely the capacity for this range of joke forms to make acceptable the potentially unpalatable thoughts lying behind the joke that protects the yield of pleasure to be had from the joke. On the other hand, Freud's foregrounding of the similarity between the techniques of joke-work and those of dream-work, even while pointing out the important differences between jokes and dreams (1991: 237-8), allows him to emphasise the extent to which the phenomenon of jokes, like the phenomenon of dreams, very much belongs to the ecology of the mind. However, Weber raises some interesting points concerning the scientific

status of Freud's theory, and I want to return to this issue below. In the meantime, however, since Freud's analysis of joke techniques has reached an apparent impasse, I want to turn to the second area of his study, the purpose and pleasure of jokes.

b) The purpose and pleasure of jokes

Just as Freud's discussion of joke techniques revolved around a key distinction between verbal and conceptual jokes, so his consideration of the purpose and pleasure of jokes revolves around a further distinction, this time between innocent and tendentious jokes. His elaboration of this distinction not only broaches the issue of the joking relationship between sense and nonsense that we have already touched on, it also returns us to his economic topography of the mind and to his analysis of childhood.

An innocent joke 'is an end in itself and serves no particular aim,' Freud claims (1991: 132). Innocent jokes thus lack any ulterior motive, and are more inclined to incite 'a slight smile' rather than a raucous belly-laugh (1991: 139). Since an innocent joke is an end in itself, the source of the pleasure derived from it must necessarily be located in the joke techniques themselves (1991: 167). In order to explain this yield of pleasure, however, Freud appeals to his notion of psychic expenditure. If we return to the examples of Freud's jokes already cited, we can begin to see how this process might operate. Taking verbal jokes first, a condensed punch line, such as 'alcoholidays', affords us a saving of psychic energy by drawing together two words in the one sign. The fact that the semiotic gap between 'alcohol' and 'holidays' is

bridged by the joke allows us to discharge as laughter (or, at least, a vague smile) the energy that would usually have been expended in drawing together two signs of this sort. In relation to conceptual jokes, such as the question concerning the positioning of cats' eyes quoted earlier, there is again a saving in psychic energy to be had. Rational thought, Freud argues, takes more effort than wayward departures from it. As a result, the technique of displacement is capable of providing us with a source of pleasure by allowing us momentarily to escape the strictures of rationality (1991: 174). Freud does not leave it there, however. Instead, he begins to explore the psychogenesis of jokes, and in doing so he supplements his economic account of their pleasure. The stage of childhood, he argues, makes available forms of behaviour that are forbidden in later life. For example, in the sphere of language-acquisition, the child is able to play with words not on the grounds that they make sense, but on the grounds that they provide an enjoyable combination of rhythms and sounds (1991: 174). Similarly, 'the pressure of critical reason' that is gradually imposed upon the child's discourse is pleasurably overcome by lapsing into absurdity (1991: 175). As a result, both condensation and displacement are capable of appealing to the pleasures experienced in childhood. However, - and this is the crucial point - to lapse simply into a childish discourse of incongruous sounds and equally incongruous logic is not an option open to the adult, since to do so would be to lay oneself open to the strictures of adult, rational criticism. And it is for this reason that the joke consists not simply of the nonsense beloved of the infantile stage, but of a conjunction of sense and nonsense: it is precisely the sense of a joke which allows it to bypass the wrath of rational criticism that would be meted out to

nonsense on its own (1991: 181). Freud's analysis of innocent jokes thus relates them to their economic appeal, their psychogenetic appeal, and their necessary combination of sense and nonsense.

Freud's explanation of the purpose and pleasure of tendentious jokes is more complex, since the point of a tendentious joke is precisely that it is more than an end in itself: a tendentious joke has an ulterior motive. The chief example around which he elaborates his analysis of tendentious jokes is that of smut, and it is worth spending some time reviewing this example. There are two key features to Freud's model of the smutty joke. First, it is a rigidly gendered model, assigning each of the points in the joking transaction to a particular gender. Second, it is tripartite model, expanding on the dynamic mentioned earlier between joke-teller, butt and audience. We will look at each in turn.

Freud defines smut as 'the intentional bringing into prominence of sexual facts and relations by speech' (1991: 140). In addition, however, smut is directed by a sexually aroused male to a female who, on hearing the smutty discourse, is herself expected to become aroused. At this point, argues Freud, we need to distinguish between smut *per se* and a smutty joke. The former simply consists of scatological language: it is to be found, according to Freud, amongst the lower social groups, where there are fewer prohibitions to be found concerning the decorum of language. The smutty joke, however, is found more amongst higher social groups, where the expected linguistic decorum proscribes the undisguised deployment of scatology. In such cases, the smutty joke is constructed around allusion, 'that is,

replacement by something small, something remotely connected, which the hearer reconstructs in his imagination into a complete and straightforward obscenity' (1991: 144). The purpose of this type of joke is thus to articulate in a witty and (more or less) socially acceptable form thoughts which, had they not been articulated in the form of a joke, would have been ruled unacceptable. Such jokes thus 'make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way' (1991: 144). The smutty joke thus makes use of the same techniques employed in innocent jokes, but the purpose of such techniques is to bypass the injunction that would usually forbid the articulation of such thoughts. Just as the innocent joke conceals nonsense in sense, so the smutty joke constructs an ingenious envelope in which to place the smutty allusion.

We can thus identify two forms of pleasure in the smutty joke. First, there is the 'fore-pleasure' provided by the technique of the joke, which allows the thoughts contained in the joke to be uttered in the first place (1991: 188; see Palmer, 1994: 79-89). Second, there is the extra yield of pleasure that derives from the lifting of inhibitions which the joke allows (1991: 189). Both of these forms of pleasure can be explained in terms of the process of psychic economy. Fore-pleasure, the pleasure gained from registering the techniques of the joke, can be explained in the same way as the pleasure of innocent jokes was explained, both in terms of the saving in psychic expenditure allowed by the joke, and in terms of the way in which such techniques return us, in a protected form, to the play of childhood. Similarly, the extra yield of pleasure

deriving from the overcoming of inhibitions has an economic dimension to it, because the internal maintenance of inhibitions requires a certain expenditure of psychic energy. The release provided by the lifting of these inhibitions can thus be discharged as laughter. The precise weighting between these two forms of pleasure is unclear, however: we are unable to determine to what extent the pleasure derives either from the joke techniques or from the purpose that they serve. 'Thus, strictly speaking,' Freud argues, 'we do not know what we are laughing at' (1991: 146). Our discussion of the first feature of Freud's smutty joke - its gendered quality - has thus led us onto explain several other features of the joke. Indeed, while we started with the idea that smut is directed by a man at a woman, the woman herself seems to have all but dropped out of the equation. The reason for her marginalisation in this way will become apparent when we turn to the second feature of the smutty joke, its tripartite nature.

In order for smutty discourse to develop into smutty joke-telling, three people need to be present: the woman who is the object of the first man's advances, and a third man to act as an audience for the first man's jokes. The reason for this tripartite structure derives once again from Freud's economic description of jokes. The first person, in creating and telling the joke, expends a certain amount of psychic energy themselves. As a result, the saving in energy produced by the joke itself is insufficient in volume to allow any excess to be discharged as laughter (1991: 202). It is for this reason that it is rare for people to tell themselves jokes - and laugh at them - when on their own. In order to end up in credit, then, the first person needs to ensure

that he has an audience. According to Freud, there are three reasons why this should be the case. Firstly, because the third person's laughter confirms the success of the joke; secondly, because there is a tendency for laughter on the part of the audience to arouse laughter in the joke-teller, as a result of its infectious nature; and thirdly, in cases where a joke is being told that has been told before, 'to make up for the loss of pleasure owing to the joke's lack of novelty' (1991: 209). While the woman, whose resistance to the first man's initial smutty advances, now finds herself as the butt of his smutty jokes, the third person now finds himself as a prospective ally of the first man. The woman thus becomes a passive victim in the exchange, while the two men fulfil two mutually supportive roles: the first providing the third with the pleasure of laughter, the third providing the first with the satisfaction that his jokes have hit the mark. As Freud puts it, '[a] joke is thus a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once' (1991: 208). It is this tripartite structure that underlies all tendentious jokes.

We are now in a position to explain the precise relationship between jokes and the unconscious. There are, I think, three aspects to Freud's argument at this point. Firstly, the techniques responsible for the production of jokes - condensation and displacement - do not belong to the conscious realm of rational thought, but, rather, are located in the province of the unconscious. The fact that dreams, which are obviously generated by unconscious processes, should employ similar techniques is used as supporting evidence for this argument. Secondly, the fact that jokes provide a mechanism for overcoming repression (e.g. by

articulating smutty thoughts) would suggest that there is a crucial link with the unconscious, which is defined precisely in terms of its role as a store for repressed drives and desires. Finally, the fact that the techniques of jokes return us to the pleasures of childhood behaviour suggest their link with the unconscious, since it is during the infantile stage that the unconscious is formed (1991: 225-8). For these three reasons, then, Freud accords the unconscious a primary role in the production of jokes. Even when a gag-writer consciously sits down to invent some new jokes, argues Freud, his or her imagination will dip into the unconscious as a source for the technique, purpose and pleasure of the joke (1991: 228).

c) Assessment

Having undertaken an explication of Freud's theory of jokes, we are now in a position to attempt an assessment of it. The first point to raise concerns the distinction between innocent and tendentious jokes. Since innocent jokes necessarily serve the purpose of protecting their yield of pleasure from the strictures of rational criticism, the hard-and-fast distinction between innocent jokes as an end in themselves and the instrumentality of tendentious jokes would, as Jeffrey Mehlman points out (Mehlman, 1975: 442), and as Freud as good as admits (Freud, 1991: 183), seem liable to collapse. Even innocent jokes enjoy a purposive, tendentious dimension, then. Indeed, at one point Freud introduces the following joke as 'the most innocent possible example of a verbal joke': 'A girl to whom a visitor was announced

while she was at her toilet complained: "Oh, what a shame that one mayn't let oneself be seen just when one's at one's most *anziehend*" (1991: 137). As a footnote explains, the joke revolves around the double meaning of *anziehend* as both 'dressing' and 'attractive' (1991: 137). Without explanation, however, Freud immediately changes tack:

Since, however, doubts arise in me after all as to whether I have a right to describe this joke as being non-tendentious, I will replace it by another one which is extremely simple and should not be open to objection.
(1991: 137)

Freud's reasoning at this point is not made clear, but his admission does seem to suggest that the distinction between innocent and tendentious jokes is a precarious one. An additional problem here is that Freud seems to assume that jokes are either innocent or tendentious, irrespective of the context within which they are delivered. The most ostensibly innocent of jokes, in Freud's terms, for example, might be told by someone at a solemn occasion (such as a funeral) with the express purpose of causing a commotion or causing offence. That the purpose of telling a particular joke in this way is independent of the joke itself suggests that, alongside a formal analysis of joke techniques, we also require a contextual analysis of joking practices.

It might be argued, however, that in his analysis of the tripartite nature of the tendentious joke, Freud provides us with just such an analytical model. As we have seen, the effect of a joke cannot be read off from the text of the joke itself, but can only be determined in the context within which it is told. The first person awaits the third person's laughter to confirm the success of the joke: as such the joke is very much a locus of interaction between

two active subjects, and a passive object (the butt of the joke). The telling of a joke is thus a negotiated transaction. What is more, it is a transaction that is overlaid with the contours of power.

Freud's analysis of smut, for example, gives explicit consideration both to the gender dynamics within which smutty activity is enacted, and to the co-ordinates of class and decorum which impinge on the joking process. That Freud's model of the tendentious joke provides an appropriate model for a contextualised analysis of joking practices can be illustrated by turning briefly to a recent example, Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney' character. Created by Paul Whitehouse and Charlie Higson, Loadsamoney appeared regularly on London Weekend Television's *Friday Night Live* in 1988. Loadsamoney was, according to his creators, a satirical, loud-mouthed member of the Thatcherite, entrepreneurial nouveau-riche. Within weeks, however, Loadsamoney had become the darling of the right-wing tabloid press, and was heralded as some sort of popular hero. As a Channel 4 discussion of popular comedy pronounced, 'ironically, Loadsamoney was most popular amongst those it satirised' (*Signals*, 1990). In Freudian terms, the third person had reinterpreted the purpose of the joke as a celebration of Thatcherite values. Whitehouse and Higson have since complained that 'you can't be responsible when people take it wrongly,' and that 'it was almost not treated as comedy' (*Signals*, 1990). Such admissions not only vindicate Freud's tripartite model of the joke, they also illustrate the ultimate dependency of the first person on the reaction of the third. In this way, Freud's theory of jokes would seem to provide an apt framework within which to analyse the dynamics of joking practices within specific contexts.

For all that Freud's analysis provides us with pointers for such an analysis of jokes, however, his discussion of tendentious jokes is not without its problems. *Jokes* is crammed full of examples of Jewish jokes. Jokes about Jews; jokes told by Jews; jokes that ridicule Yiddish modes of pronunciation; and a long series of jokes that focuses on the *Schadchen*, or marriage-broker. Indeed, Mehlman has noted how 'the shrewdly perverse marriage-broker... at times seems like the protagonist of Freud's volume' (Mehlman, 1975: 440). However, for all that there is wealth of tendentious jokes representing Jews in one form or other, Freud's paradigm case of the tendentious joke in fact focuses on the case of smut, as we have seen. And this even though, in the entire volume, there is not one clear example of a smutty joke. This has led Karen Smythe to argue that, in pursuing his analysis in this manner, Freud was actually displacing his own lack of self-worth as a Jew onto women (Smythe, 1991). We know, for example, that Freud himself had at times been anxious about the anti-Semitism that he had to face. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for instance, he cites one of his own dreams from 1897 which revealed his concerns about anti-Semitism possibly depriving him of the chance of promotion (Freud, 1953: 136-45). Given this anxiety, it could be assumed, Freud might also have been the butt of anti-Semitic jokes. However, as Smythe argues, in taking women as the most prominent tendentious joking butts, Freud in fact 'makes "women" the scapegoat for his own negative self-image as a Jew' (Smythe, 1991: 19).

A similar sort of argument has been advanced by Sander Gilman (Gilman, 1985; cited in Neve, 1988). According to Neve,

Gilman argues that Freud's concern with '*mauscheln*' jokes that revolve around Yiddish pronunciation of German words springs from his own embarrassment at 'his vulgar, but comic, father, Kallamon Jakob Freud, whose jokes may have been both provincial and, probably, sexual' (Neve, 1988: 38). In looking at such jokes 'through the gaze of psychoanalysis,' Neve paraphrases Gilman, Freud manages to 'replace... the insecurities of the vulgar, *mauscheln* Jewish joke with the new language, and the new, non-provincial security and authority of psychoanalysis' (Neve, 1988: 39). Thus, to conclude Gilman's argument, '[i]n explaining the Jewish joke, Freud escapes its grasp, the grasp of his father and of low social status' (Neve, 1988: 39)⁵.

This argument returns us to an issue touched on earlier, the apparent scientificity of Freud's discourse. As we have seen Weber argue, this scientificity is at times outwitted by the elusiveness of the jokes themselves. And one point at which this outwitting takes place is in Freud's brief reference to the *Aufsitzer*, or shaggy dog story. Weber begins by relating the position of the first person in the tendentious joke to the narcissistic impulse. On telling a joke, the first person narcissistically awaits the third person's laughter, which not only confirms the success of the joke, but also provides confirmation of the first person's ego (Weber, 1982: 114). In the case of the shaggy dog story, however, these dynamics are transformed. Here is one of Freud's examples:

A man at the dinner table who was being handed fish dipped his two hands twice in the mayonnaise and then ran them through his hair. When his neighbour looked at him in astonishment, he seemed to notice his mistake and apologized: 'I'm sorry, I thought it was spinach.'

(Freud, 1991: 190)

Freud provides the following analysis of examples of this sort:

These extreme examples have an effect because they rouse the expectation of a joke, so that one tries to find concealed sense behind the nonsense. But one finds none: they really are nonsense. The pretence makes it possible for a moment to liberate the pleasure in nonsense. These jokes are not entirely without a purpose; they are a 'take-in', and give the person who tells them a certain amount of pleasure in misleading and annoying his hearer. The latter then damps down his annoyance by determining to tell them himself later on.
(1991: 190)

Weber's discussion of Freud's analysis of the shaggy dog story is both ingenious and very revealing. Does the shaggy dog story really deserve the marginal status afforded it by Freud? Surely, Weber argues, if the telling of jokes is underpinned by a narcissistic dynamic (as Freud's remarks above suggest), then the most narcissistic of all jokes is the non-joke or shaggy dog story. With the joke proper, the third person decides the fate of the joke, but with a shaggy dog story, the first person decides the fate of the third. As a result, Weber continues, the shaggy dog story 'must clearly be the best joke of all, because it is the worst' (1977: 18). Accordingly, the shaggy dog story is the Freudian joke par excellence, and, crucially, it erupts at the point at which nonsense is deprived of any sense whatsoever. Weber's argument does not finish there, however, for Freud has himself been duped by the shaggy dog story, into treating it merely as a marginal form of joking. Psychoanalysis, Weber concludes, can thus be seen to be unable to 'escape the effects of what it endeavours to think' (1982: xvi). Since the unconscious will always inscribe itself on psychoanalytic theory in this way, so psychoanalysis is ultimately unable to preserve its own autonomy as a form of scientific discourse. Indeed, in a similar fashion, it was the purpose of

Smythe and Gilman's arguments above to pursue the extent to which Freud's theory of jokes itself bears the hallmarks of his own unconscious desires and anxieties.

In positing the existence of the unconscious, psychoanalytic theory leaves itself open to critiques of this sort. More recently, theorists such as Lacan have sought to overcome, or, rather, confront, these problems through an obtuse style of discourse that advertises its own opacity as a register of its self-awareness of unconscious drives. I do not want to conclude by rejecting Freud's entire theory. Indeed, what I have tried to do in this section is to identify both the strengths of his approach as well as its blind spots and aporia. The arguments of Weber, Smythe and Gilman, however, which have been discussed as a means of determining the nature of these aporia, can all be seen as valid forms of historicised analysis, insofar they each treat the text of *Jokes* in relation to the historical process of its own authorship. As David Fisher has pointed out, '[t]he history of the psychoanalytic movement is intimately related to Freud's personal and intellectual history. In a dramatic way Freud was his own most persistent patient' (Fisher, 1982: 275). What I want to do in the next section is attempt another form of analysis by relating Freud's text to Bakhtin's account of the decline of the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin, Freud and carnival

In this section I want to explore the relationship between the structure of the Freudian joke and the dynamics of carnival. As has already been pointed out, Freud's theory doesn't even merit a

mention in *Rabelais and His World*, but Voloshinov does provide a full-length critique of psychoanalysis in *Freudianism*. It is therefore to that volume that I will first turn.

a) *Freudianism*

Voloshinov characterises psychoanalysis as a species of 'subjective psychology' (Voloshinov, 1976: 18). The distinction between subjective and objective psychology echoes the distinction drawn by Bakhtin in *Art and Answerability* between the inner and the outer body (Bakhtin, 1990: 27-8; see Chapter Four). Just as our experience of our own exterior is always fragmentary, always situated within a specific vantage point, so subjective psychology, in relying upon verbal reports from the subject of analysis him or herself, is necessarily limited in scope (Voloshinov, 1976: 18). But the most important error committed by subjective psychology is that it assumes a clear-cut opposition between the individual and the social. The object of study for psychology is the individual: consequently, since the individual and the social are opposed to one another, subjective psychology deems it wholly appropriate to base a method of enquiry on an individual's own reports about their psychic condition. Voloshinov rejects such a position on two counts. First, he rejects it on the grounds that the subject isn't an abstract, autonomous entity, but is in fact 'the aggregate of social relationships' (Voloshinov, 1976: 15; quoting Marx). As such, the individual can't be seen in terms of an opposition to the social, since it is necessarily inscribed within the very concrete conditions of the social. Second, Voloshinov rejects subjective psychology on

the grounds that language, the medium within which the subject reports on his or her psychic condition, is itself a thoroughly social entity (1976: 21). As such, all language is overlaid with a range of social and ideological accents, and such a state of affairs undermines the supposed ability of the subject to provide a report on his or her psychic condition that is devoid of any socio-ideological inflection. In rejecting subjective psychology in this way, Voloshinov calls for a form of objective psychology that treats the subject as a thoroughly social entity. Since the very language which the subject utters is imbued with socio-ideological significance, objective psychology amounts to a form of ideological analysis insofar as it attempts to relate the various contradictions inherent in human behaviour to the social contradictions within which they are inscribed (1976: 88).

In accordance with this critique of subjective psychology, Voloshinov identifies a number of specific problems in psychoanalytic theory. Firstly, there is a tendency for phenomena to be stripped of any social significance, and only assigned an individual, psychic significance. Freud's comparison, for example, between the urge to hold back faeces and the desire to hold onto one's money lacks any attempt to identify particular aspects of the material world - whether they be in 'the organism itself or in the environment' - which might support such a process (1976: 72). In a similar manner, the Freudian analysis of the family locates the dynamics of the family entirely within a sexualised realm centred on the Oedipus complex. As a result, Voloshinov argues, '[t]he family, that castle and keep of capitalism, evidently has become a thing economically and socially little understood and little taken to

heart' (1976: 90-1). Voloshinov thus demands that more attention be paid to the material conditions and context of the family. Further still, the interactions on the basis of which Freud developed his theories took place in the context of a doctor-patient encounter. A number of factors and pressures will necessarily impinge upon such an encounter. Sex, age and class differentials, for example, will probably be played out in some form or other in the course of any exchange. So too will any feelings of resistance to the doctor's position on the part of the patient. In other words, 'it is in the midst of this complex and very special atmosphere that the verbal utterances are made' (1976: 78). The context within which the psychoanalytic encounter takes place is thus going to exert an unquantifiable influence on the findings of psychoanalytic theory. Finally, Voloshinov calls into question the concept of the unconscious. In ascribing to the unconscious such a complex range of mechanisms, - the mechanism of censorship, for example, - Freud simply imputes to the unconscious a number of conscious procedures. That such a vast range of mechanisms could be maintained at the level of the unconscious is, Voloshinov argues, unfeasible. Rather than an unconscious, then, Voloshinov recasts the Freudian concept in terms of an 'unofficial conscious' (1976: 85). In this respect, the official conscious is conceived in terms of those aspects of behaviour which conform to dominant patterns of thought and decorum, while the unofficial conscious refers to those aspects of behaviour which, while rooted in the material conditions of existence rather than being instinctual, nevertheless run counter to the dominant behavioural ideology. In this way, Voloshinov's critique of Freudian theory in terms of its flight from

materialist forms of analysis echoes Bakhtin's critique of vitalism (see Chapter Four).

We can, I think, raise a number of points in relation to this critique of Freud. Firstly, we might pause to consider the extent to which, in rejecting subjective psychology, Voloshinov falls into the trap of reductionism by reducing human behaviour to the economic and social relations out of which it arises. Had Voloshinov simply posited an official conscious which blithely reproduces the dominant codes of behaviour, then this charge of reductionism might have stood. However, in positing alongside the official conscious an unofficial conscious within which a range of oppositional behavioural possibilities are stored, Voloshinov is, I would argue, able to avoid such a charge. Indeed, in attempting to reveal the social, cultural and historical co-ordinates of psychoanalytic theory, Voloshinov's text can be placed in the same tradition as that of Erich Fromm, insofar as they both seek to integrate a psychological approach of sorts with a Marxist critique of culture (see Bocock, 1976: 148)⁶.

The second point concerns the semiotic turn undertaken in Voloshinov's critique. Since psychoanalysis operates within the realm of utterances, Voloshinov argues, so it needs to register that its primary object of analysis is linguistic. As Neal Bruss, amongst others, has pointed out, such a position would appear to pre-empt the semiotic turn undertaken by Lacanian psychoanalysis several years later (Bruss, 1976: 118; see also Emerson, 1986).

The final point I want to raise in relation to *Freudianism* concerns the extent to which the critique of Freud is valid. As

Bruss argues in response to Voloshinov's text, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which appeared three years after *Freudianism*, allegedly finds Freud addressing more explicitly the interrelationship between the subject and social processes, a line of enquiry that might have allowed him to have bypassed some of Voloshinov's criticisms (Bruss, 1976: 117). We might add that, on a sympathetic reading even of Freud's *Jokes*, there are perhaps grounds for challenging the drift of Voloshinov's critique. As I have argued in the previous section, for example, Freud's analysis of the tendentious joke not only registers the relations of class and gender which impinge on the joking process, it would also seem to invite a contextual analysis of such processes, as well as making the focus of such an inquiry the semiotic material of the jokes themselves. While Voloshinov's argument about the need for psychoanalytic theory to undertake a more thorough critique of the social, cultural and historical determinants in the ecology of the mind is certainly valid, then, it is possible, I would argue, to identify passages in Freud's work where such determinants are, implicitly if not explicitly, gestured towards.

b) The Freudian joke and Bakhtinian carnival

Having embarked upon this initial consideration of the relationship between Freud and Bakhtin, then, we are now in a position to turn to consider in more detail the relationship between Freud's theory of jokes and Bakhtin's theory of carnival. Charles Byrd has argued that we can identify in *Rabelais and His World* a powerful influence exerted by Freudian theory, and he identifies

three points at which this influence emerges. Firstly, in making ambivalence one of the key qualities of carnivalesque imagery, Bakhtin borrows one of the central concepts within psychoanalytic theory, where it is used to denote 'the simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes, or feelings in the relationship to a single object' (Byrd, 1987: 225; quoting Freud). Secondly, Bakhtin's emphasis on the ambivalence of the excremental preoccupations of material bodily imagery echoes Freud's theory of anal eroticism, 'the anal stage being... the developmental period in which ambivalence reaches its peak' (1987: 226). Thirdly, Byrd argues, Bakhtin's method of interpreting carnivalesque imagery by decoding its manifest content into its latent meaning is reminiscent of Freud's hermeneutics. And by providing the analyst with a high degree of interpretative leeway, as a result of the emphasis placed on the concept of ambivalence, so Bakhtin's interpretations are, for Byrd, susceptible to the same charges of randomness levelled at Freudian interpretative strategies (1987: 227). Byrd thus posits a close correspondence between *Rabelais and His World* and Freudian theory. Indeed, he argues that the central problem shared by Bakhtin's theory of carnival and Freud's theory of jokes is that in '[e]mphasizing laughter's rebelliousness... [they] both neglect humour's service to ideological authority and the *status quo*' (1987: 228).

Byrd is surely correct in noting that Bakhtin tends to ignore the degree to which humour might serve conservative forces. However, at the same time, Bakhtin's historical account of the development of carnival at least foregrounds the extent to which such forces have sought to marginalise carnivalesque practices. What is more,

as has been argued earlier, it is on the basis of the utopian dimension to his account of carnival as an essentially rebellious phenomenon that Bakhtin is able to undertake a historical critique of comic theory (see Chapter One). As a result, we perhaps need to qualify Byrd's assessment of Bakhtin.

As for Byrd's contention that Freud shares Bakhtin's neglect of the possible conservative functions of humour, we need to consider the extent to which Freud's theory of jokes appears to incorporate a conception of carnivalesque rebelliousness. One way of addressing this issue is to return to Voloshinov's transposition of the conscious/unconscious relationship into a relationship between the official and unofficial conscious. If, as Freud argues, jokes are resourced by the unconscious, then their unofficial nature (in Voloshinov's terms) - their ability to bypass prohibitions, for example, - would seem to lend itself to a reasonably close comparison with the rebelliousness of carnival. Further, in allowing criticism or aggression to be vented in a socially acceptable form (i.e. in the form of a joke), joking behaviour is, as Freud notes, well-suited to the goals of those who want to adopt a rebellious stance towards those in authority (1991: 149). In this sense, then, Freud would indeed appear to emphasise the rebellious potential of laughter. However, if we look at Freud's theory more closely, it becomes clear that he also considers the extent to which humour might perform a conservative function, and in so doing, he casts the realm of jokes in more of an ambivalent light than Byrd would appear to suggest. In the final sentence of *Jokes*, for example, Freud not only relates jokes to a pessimistic characterisation of the human condition, he also

identifies a function for jokes in maintaining the equilibrium of that condition:

the euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy - the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy.

(Freud, 1991: 302)

Such a passage would seem to attribute to jokes a safety-valve function. The joke, in other words, provides us with a release from the drudgery of our everyday existence, reconstructing momentarily for us the pleasures that were once available before the drudgery was imposed upon us. The suggestion here that jokes serve to maintain our psychic health by providing a temporary sense of happiness maps neatly onto a safety-valve model of carnival, providing momentary liberation from systems of social control in order that those systems might be maintained.

There are parallels to be drawn between this passage in *Jokes* and Freud's brief discussion of carnivals in *Totem and Taboo*. In the course of a discussion of ceremonial slaughter and totemic meals, Freud touches on the role of festivals in relation to such processes:

A festival is a permitted, or rather an obligatory, excess, a solemn breach of a prohibition. It is not that men commit the excesses because they are feeling happy as a result of some injunction they have received. It is rather that excess is of the essence of a festival; the festive feeling is produced by the liberty to do what is as a rule prohibited.

(Freud, 1955: 140)

While the festival promotes a sense of revelling excess as a result of the suspension of prohibitive rules, then, the crucial point here is

that such revelry is not *itself* generated by rebelliousness. On the contrary, it is the temporary conferment of liberty that is the primary factor in inducing such excess. As a result, Freud conceives of festivals not as an anarchic outpouring of rebelliousness, but as a mechanism closely regulated by a system of social control. Again, such a conception lends itself to a safety-valve notion of carnival.

On the one hand, all jokes (both innocent and tendentious) enact some form of rebellion against the way in which pleasure is officially policed, whether by retrieving the delights of childhood, or by articulating prohibited thoughts. On the other hand, Freud directs us to the function that joking processes might perform in maintaining the status quo. For Freud, therefore, jokes can be both unruly and benign; they can both provide mechanisms for rebelliousness, and provide forms of release necessary for the preservation of order. As a result, Byrd's argument about Freud's theory of jokes would appear to call for some additional qualification.

If, on the basis of this discussion, we were to compare Freud's theory of jokes with Bakhtin's theory of carnival, then, it would seem that Freud's theory straddles two standpoints. Not only does he identify in jokes a rebellious propensity equivalent to the critical capacity of Bakhtinian carnival, but, in identifying jokes as 'a safety valve for pent-up energies in the unconscious', as Voloshinov puts it in his discussion of *Jokes* (Voloshinov, 1976: 59), Freud also attributes to them a potential to perform a conservative function. What we might argue, however, is that, in emphasising the contextual significance of the tripartite dynamics

of joking behaviour, Freud's theory of jokes actually shares with Bakhtin's historical conception of carnival the view that the *precise* function performed by a joke in any particular context cannot be resolved without an analysis of that context. As a result, if we were to situate Freud's theory of jokes in relation to Bakhtin's thesis concerning the historical development of the carnivalesque, it would seem to represent neither a particularly negative, nor a particularly positive, conception of laughter⁷.

Conclusion

Although Freud engages very directly with Bergson's essay on 'Laughter', it would seem that his comic theory actually develops in a rather different direction. In the course of this chapter I have set out an account of this direction, and drawn attention to the various strengths and weaknesses of Freud's theory of jokes. Finally, in relating his theory both to Voloshinov's general critique of psychoanalysis, and to more specific connections between the carnivalesque and the Freudian joke, we were able to identify particular points of proximity and contrast. Situated against the backdrop of Bakhtin's account of the decline of the carnivalesque, Freud's theory is of ambivalent significance, combining in his account of jokes both a pessimistic dimension and a rebellious, critical dimension. Situated within the canon of comic theory, it is a text rich with argument, examples, and problems. Having focused on two contemporaneous comic theories from within that canon in the last two chapters, it is time now to turn to an area

that is rather less canonical as far as discussions of comic theory go: the work of Bertolt Brecht.

Notes

- 1 That *Rabelais and His World* should neglect Freud's theory of jokes in this way, when its author had arguably produced a comprehensive survey of Freud's work just a few years before perhaps adds weight to the argument of those who maintain that Voloshinov was actually the author of those works which appeared under his name. Indeed, the translator/editor and co-editor of *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, I. R. Titunik and Neal Bruss respectively, reject the idea that Bakhtin was in fact its author (Titunik and Bruss, 1976: xiii-iv). While accepting the coherence of the work of Bakhtin with that of Voloshinov (and Medvedev), they argue that it is unlikely that any individual would be able to produce four books on disparate fields (Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language and Freudianism*; Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*; and Bakhtin's *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*) - as well as at least three essays - within the space of just three years (1926-1929) (1976: xiii).
- 2 One of the key differences between Freud's analysis of humour in *Jokes* and his later analysis of it in 'Humour' is the model of the mind on which each is predicated. *Jokes* deploys Freud's economic model of the mind, which focuses on the the process of exchange and expenditure of psychic energy between the realms of the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious. By the time he returned to the subject, he had developed his topographical theory of the mind, focusing on the interrelationship between the ego, the super-ego and the id. Freud charts the differences between these two approaches in 'Psycho-analysis' (Freud, 1959).
- 3 In spite of Freud's apparent critique of the sovereignty of reason, mentioned earlier, Freud's argument at this point would seem to accept the role of reason in our cultural progression 'towards a higher level of civilization' (1991: 255).
- 4 In fact, Freud's classification of joke techniques is very comprehensive. He sub-divides the technique of condensation into no fewer than eleven specific forms (1991: 76-7). In reference to conceptual jokes, he differentiates between displacement, faulty reasoning, absurdity, indirect representation and representation by the opposite (1991: 87-92). Later on, he identifies condensation, displacement and indirect representation as 'the most striking' joke techniques

(1991: 222). I would argue, however, that indirect representation is just another form of displacement, as can be seen if we turn to Freud's example of a joke produced by the technique of indirect representation: 'This lady represents the Venus of Milo in many respects: she, too, is extraordinarily old, like her she has no teeth, and there are white and yellowish patches on the surface of her body' (1991: 109). While this example does not necessarily represent a deviation from a conventional train of thought in the way that Freud's examples of displacement proper do, it nevertheless represents a displacement of conventional standards of beauty. That condensation and displacement are the two key psychic processes identified by Freud throughout his analysis of the unconscious is generally accepted (e.g. see Weber, 1982: 91). Indeed, Jacques Lacan uses this distinction to ground his identification of metaphor (condensation) and metonymy (displacement) as the two key processes of signification in his analysis of the relationship between language and the unconscious (Lacan, 1977: 160-1).

- 5 Neve actually rejects in part Gilman's argument. Gilman's mistake, he argues, is to assume that tendentious jokes are simply hostile. On the contrary, as we have seen, they also provide a yield of pleasure. As a result, Neve argues, Freud's preoccupation with Jewish jokes can be seen not simply as a distancing of himself from his origins via the scientific discourse of psychoanalysis, but, rather as evidence of the multivalence of such jokes. They can be hostile, and Freud himself is sometimes implicated in such hostility, but they also have a more benign potential, and Freud is quite fond of this amusing dimension to such jokes (Neve, 39).
- 6 Fromm, however, sees psychoanalysis in more favourable terms than Voloshinov.
- 7 While we have been able to reach certain conclusions about the relationship between the Freudian joke and Bakhtinian carnival at the level of function, however, it should be pointed out that Freud is largely concerned with the joke as a linguistic phenomenon. As such, we can identify in his theory a shift from Renaissance conceptions of the comic, with their emphasis on carnivalesque physicality and extravagance, towards a post-Renaissance conception preoccupied with the linguistic forms of humour which emerged in the period. In Chapter Two, we looked in detail at Purdie and Palmer's accounts of these developments (Purdie, 1993; Palmer, 1994; see Chapter Two).

Chapter six

Brecht, theatre and comedy

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies two areas of twentieth century art which were keeping alive the tradition of the grotesque that had flourished so vividly during the Renaissance. The first of these areas was a 'modernist form' of the grotesque (Bakhtin, 1984: 46), and we have already discussed Alfred Jarry and Dada as representatives of this style in Chapter Four. The second area was that of 'the realist grotesque' (1984: 46), and here Bakhtin cites Bertolt Brecht as one of the key practitioners¹. For Bakhtin, this version of the grotesque 'is related to the tradition of realism and folk culture and reflects at times the direct influence of carnival forms...' (1984: 46). The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of Brecht's work in the light of these remarks. The first section will focus on the extent to which Brecht himself advances a theory of grotesque realism, while the second section will discuss the extent to which Brechtian dramaturgy incorporates a theory of comedy. The final section will concentrate on the dynamics of theatre and carnival in order to interrogate the relationship between Bakhtinian and Brechtian theory. Although reference will be made to some of Brecht's dramatic texts, the

central focus of the chapter will be Brecht's theoretical writings, particularly those drawn together in the collection *Brecht on Theatre* (Brecht, 1974).

Brecht and (grotesque) realism

Not only did the first part of Brecht's career overlap with the period within which we have located the development of modernism (see Chapter Four), but Brecht himself explicitly engaged with several of the issues which constituted the terrain of modernism². His rejection of traditional forms of dramaturgy, along with his quest for practices which would facilitate the creation of a revolutionary theatre, might both be seen as a response to the modernist problématique. In an essay written in 1940, he appears to identify this problématique in terms of 'a crisis of the emotions', citing the practices of Futurism and Dada, and the emotional hyperbole of Fascism, as symptomatic of this critical point, and advancing a valorisation of the rational as a possible response to this crisis (Brecht, 1974: 145). Given the proximity between Brecht's work and certain modernist preoccupations, then, we might feel inclined to situate his work in relation to modernism, a task which has certainly been attempted before (e.g. Wright, 1989: 68-89). However, in the light of Bakhtin's remarks, I want to address Brecht instead in terms of his analysis of realism.

The key reference point for Brecht's concept of realism is his essay 'The Popular and the Realistic', written in 1938 (Brecht, 1974: 107-15). Here Brecht advances a dynamic conception of realism, and tries to reveal the crucial connection between realism

and the popular. Realism, he argues, lays bare social reality by demystifying ruling class ideology, enabling 'truthful representations of life' (1974: 107):

Realist means: laying bare society's causal network/ showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators/ writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society/ emphasizing the dynamics of development/ concrete and so as to encourage abstraction.

(1974: 109)

In this sense, realism is an essential ingredient in the creation of a political theatre. For Brecht, however, the range of techniques which might fulfil the objectives outlined above cannot be described simply in formal terms, because the ability of a particular set of formal techniques to project 'truthful representations of life' is historically variable. For example, while at one historical moment the conventions of tragedy might seem to constitute the most appropriate form for articulating the truth, at another moment the conventions of farce might seem more effective. In this way, Brecht's conception of realism is both pragmatic and historical. It is also inextricably linked to a notion of the popular, for the demystificatory potential of realism serves the interests of 'the broad working masses' (1974: 107). What is more, realism can only fulfil the task assigned to it by Brecht if it is likely to be consumed with enthusiasm by the people: realism has 'to be suggestive and intelligible to them, i.e. popular' (1974: 107). As Brecht points out, however, the popularity of particular aesthetic forms is itself historically variable: '[w]hat was popular yesterday is no longer so today, for the people of yesterday were not the people as it is today' (1974: 110). Brecht's conception of the

popular is thus, like his conception of realism, both pragmatic and historical.

It should be pointed out here that there is a great deal of distance between Brecht's definition of realism and alternative definitions. Here, I will contrast Brecht's definition with the critique of realism undertaken in the pages of the film journal *Screen* in the 1970s (e.g. MacCabe, 1974 and 1976), and, more recently, within the discipline of television studies (e.g. Fiske, 1987)³. For MacCabe and Fiske, a realist text does not project a 'truthful representation of life', as it does for Brecht. Rather, the realist text 'reproduces the dominant sense of reality', as Fiske puts it (1987: 21). It achieves this as a result of its formal qualities. For Fiske, the realist text 'presents itself as an unmediated picture of external reality' (1987: 21). For MacCabe, the formal meta-discourse of realism consists primarily of an omniscient narrator, or, in the case of film, a set of filmic codes analogous to the function of an omniscient narrator. This meta-discourse constructs for the reader a position from which everything appears to be transparent, everything appears to make sense. As a result, the realist text creates a very comfortable reading position, resolving contradictions in the course of the narrative, and bestowing on the reader an ability to make sense of reality. As MacCabe explains it:

The simple access to the truth which is guaranteed by the meta-discourse depends on a repression of its own operations and this repression confers an imaginary unity of position on the reader from which the other discourses in the film can be read.

(MacCabe, 1974; quoted in Fiske, 1987: 35)

For MacCabe, then, realism is defined both in terms of a specific set of formal codes, and in terms of the ideological function which these codes are deemed to perform.

I would argue here that Brecht would probably concur with MacCabe's critique of these formal codes. From 1926 onwards, Brecht gradually developed a theory of epic theatre, a form of theatre which, through its cultivation of a detached and unemotional form of presentation, was capable of laying bare social reality in a critical and didactic manner. He contrasts this form of theatre with a theatre of illusion, and his characterisation of the latter in a 1949 analysis of *Mother Courage* incorporates much of MacCabe's critique of realism:

Too much heightening of the illusion in the setting, together with a 'magnetic' way of acting that gives the spectator the illusion of being present at a fleeting, accidental, 'real' event, create such an impression of naturalness that one can no longer interpose one's judgment, imagination or reactions, and must simply conform by sharing in the experience and becoming one of 'nature's' objects.

(Brecht, 1974: 219)

In passing itself off as an 'unmediated picture of external reality' in this way (Fiske, 1987: 21; quoted above), the meta-discourse of illusionistic theatre would itself be subject to the critique of realism advanced by MacCabe. The important point to emphasise here, however, is that the conventions that MacCabe identifies as realist do not fall under the rubric of Brechtian realism. Indeed, insofar as epic theatre seeks to fulfil the realist imperatives laid down by Brecht, it would specifically attempt to foreground its own construction. 'The illusion created by the theatre must be a partial one,' Brecht claims in his *Mother Courage* discussion, 'in order that it may always be recognized as an illusion' (1974: 219).

For MacCabe, on the other hand, realist texts seek to conceal the mechanics of their own construction. We are thus dealing with two radically different conceptions of realism⁴.

We are now in a position to explore the extent to which Brecht's conception of realism might be enlisted as a form of grotesque realism, in the way in which Bakhtin suggests. For Bakhtin, as we have seen, grotesque realism is a dynamic mode of representation that is preoccupied with material imagery and with processes of transition. The grotesque body is the primary site on which both of these preoccupations are projected. The materiality of the grotesque body is epitomised in the graphic physical imagery that abounds in the work of Rabelais. Meanwhile, its transitory nature derives from its ambivalent signification: the grotesque body is always incomplete, blurring the point at which we demarcate between different individuals, between humans and animals, and between humans and the world around them. For Bakhtin, it is as a result of these dynamic, material qualities that the grotesque can be put to the service of realism. Bakhtin's emphasis on historicity - an emphasis that can be perceived both in his analysis of carnival and in his theory of signification - leads to a concomitant understanding of reality not as a fixed state of affairs, but as a historically transitory state of affairs. Grotesque realism lays bare the historically transitory nature of reality, and it is precisely as a result of this propensity that it proved such an effective tool in blasting apart the static world view of officialdom at the time of the Renaissance. As a result, as we have seen, Bakhtin ascribes to Rabelais a pivotal role in furthering 'the artistic and ideological expression of a mighty awareness of history

and historic change' through his deployment of grotesque realism (Bakhtin, 1984: 25).

There are, I think, three points at which we might identify certain affinities between Brechtian realism and Bakhtinian grotesque realism. The first point is in their respective rejection of a conception of realism as an unmediated form of representation, the sort of conception discussed by Fiske and MacCabe. Just as Brecht rejected illusionist theatrical techniques in his espousal of realism, so Bakhtin's account of grotesque realism directs us, as Richard Stam has explained, to 'an anti-illusionistic style which remains physical, carnal, and material, which tells social truths, but does so in stylized, parodic, and hyperbolic rather than naturalistic form' (Stam, 1989: 236). For his part, in his essay on 'The Popular and the Realistic', Brecht specifically entertains the possibility that the grotesque might contribute to the fulfilment of his realist objectives. 'In the theatre reality can be represented in a factual or a fantastic form,' he argues. 'The actors can do without (or with the minimum of) makeup, appearing "natural", and the whole thing can be a fake; they can wear grotesque masks and represent the truth' (Brecht, 1974: 110). In this sense, then, there would appear to be a high degree of proximity between Brechtian realism and Bakhtinian grotesque realism.

The second point at which we might identify such affinities is their respective emphases on achieving a dynamic representation of reality. For Bakhtin, it was the ability of grotesque realism to project this dynamism that allowed it to contribute to the destruction of the static medieval world view. For Brecht, as we have seen, realism involves a similar commitment to representing

'the dynamics of development' (1974: 109). By representing social reality not as a natural given, but as a historically-constituted state of affairs, realism can contribute to an understanding on the part of the audience that social relations can be transformed through social praxis. It is in this sense that realism is endorsed by Brecht as a vital component in the creation of a political theatre.

As we have seen, Bakhtin claims that since the Renaissance the grotesque has been increasingly marginalised within European culture, but that it has been kept alive, and occasionally replenished, in the lineage of certain popular traditions. The third point at which Brechtian realism and grotesque realism compare favourably concerns Brecht's own intermittent appeal to such traditions. As we have seen, his definition of the popular includes a commitment to retrieve and remotivate popular forms from the past. Although Brecht's references to such forms are scattered throughout his writings, rather than concentrated in a specific text, we can at this point identify three such references of relevance to our discussion. The first is a brief essay on 'Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Breughel', written in the early 1940s but not published until 1957. Although Brecht's analysis of Breughel's paintings in this essay is fairly superficial, what does interest Brecht is Breughel's ability to deal 'in contradictions' (1974: 157). Such a comment is of interest not only because Bakhtin cites Breughel's paintings as one of the key sources of grotesque imagery (Bakhtin, 1984: 27), but because the propensity to deal in contradictions is also crucial to Brecht's understanding of comedy, a point to which we shall return in the

next section. The second reference that we might identify is the carnival scene in Brecht's play *Life of Galileo*, first performed in 1943. We shall return to this reference in more detail in the final section of the chapter, where it will be argued that the scene performs a pivotal role in the play. Finally, the third area to which we might turn concerns Brecht's scattered references to various popular, comic traditions. Such references are not only important in determining a Brechtian conception of comedy, they are also of significance in assessing the role of comedy within the project of epic theatre.

In the course of this section, we have both explained Brecht's understanding of realism, and sought to determine the grounds on which Bakhtin might have enlisted it as a form of grotesque realism. As we have seen in the previous paragraph, one aspect of Brecht's connection with the traditions of grotesque realism lies in the way in which he gestures towards certain forms of comic practice. I now want to turn consider the extent to which we might identify a theory of comedy in Brecht's writings.

Brecht and comedy

To what extent does Brecht's theory of epic theatre incorporate a theory of comedy? There are two problems to be faced in addressing this question. Firstly, Brecht's discussion of comic practices and techniques is scattered across several essays and articles. In the course of this section, then, I will try to piece together a Brechtian theory of comedy in relation to these scattered fragments. Secondly, his theory of epic theatre was

regularly revised and updated⁵. As John Willett complains in his introduction to *Brecht on Theatre*, 'too often [his] theory is treated as if it were a coherent whole' (1974: xiii). While Willett's assessment is undoubtedly correct, I would argue that Brecht's theoretical writings are nevertheless united by a familiar set of concerns, an outline of which Brecht provides in the following quotation:

Human behaviour is shown as alterable; man himself as dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them... In short, the spectator is given the chance to criticize human behaviour from a social point of view, and [each] scene is played as a piece of history.

(1974: 86)⁶

This passage provides us with a succinct expression of the objectives of epic theatre and, with its emphasis on representing reality as a dynamic state of affairs, it is evident that it complements Brecht's conception of realism.

In order to produce a critical attitude on the part of the spectator, Brecht argued that epic theatre needed to appeal to the faculty of reason rather than to structures of empathy. 'Instead of sharing an experience,' he claims, 'the spectator must come to grips with things' (1974: 23). He thus draws a distinction between the position of the spectator in illusionistic theatre, which he terms 'dramatic theatre', and their respective position in epic theatre. This distinction is drawn along the following lines:

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too - Just like me - It's only natural - It'll never change - The sufferings of this man appeal to me, because they are inescapable - That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world - I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it - That's not the way - That's extraordinary, hardly believable - It's got to stop - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary - That's great art: nothing obvious in it - I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.

(1974: 71)

There are two points to raise in relation to this passage. Firstly, for Brecht it is precisely the affective charge of the structures of empathy within the dramatic theatre which reinforces the apparent naturalness of that which it represents. It is as a result of this that any attempt to defamiliarise the naturalness of theatrical representations must seek to appeal to reason. Secondly, what begins to emerge in this passage is the possible structure of laughter within epic theatre. It is not a form of laughter that derives from an empathetic identification with the characters in the fiction, but, rather, a form of laughter that derives from the critical distance established between the spectator and the characters in the fiction. In examining this form of laughter in more detail, I want to explore three areas: the relationship between comic practices and epic forms of representation; the targets of epic laughter; and the function of Brechtian comedy.

a) Comic practices and epic techniques

If the theatrical representation is to be seen as historical, rather than natural, then the audience must be made aware of the way in which the representation itself is constructed. Not only does this require that the illusory fourth wall is removed, and the sets and lighting laid bare, but that the actors present themselves not as characters, but as actors acting the part of characters.

Such techniques were designed to produce a *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, thus opening up the critical distance which allowed the spectator to claim, 'That's extraordinary, hardly believable' (1974: 71; quoted above). According to Brecht, this alienation effect is 'familiar to us from comedy... certain alienation techniques come from the 2,000-year-old arsenal of comedy...' (quoted in McGowan, 1982: 64). There would thus appear to be an important connection between comic practices and the techniques of epic theatre, and in tracing this connection I want to focus on Brecht's remarks concerning the type of acting that epic theatre demands.

How should an actor seek to create an alienation effect? The aim is to ensure that the audience 'can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place' (Brecht, 1974: 92), and we can isolate three aspects of the actor's performance in Brecht's remarks. First, the actor needs to express his or her 'awareness of being watched' (1974: 92). This is a familiar technique in comic acting. Not only does it play an important role in the dynamics of pantomime performance ('Behind you!'), but it was also frequently deployed in early film comedy. In Laurel and Hardy films, for example, especially the silent shorts of the 1920s, Hardy's gaze frequently addresses the audience directly, signifying his awareness of the camera.

The second aspect of the epic actor's performance is his or her critical presentation of the character they are portraying, in the hope that this will in turn produce a critical response from the audience (1974: 136-7). As Timothy Wiles usefully explains, rather than being represented by the actor, 'the character is "re-

presented" (made present again, seen as historical and not "always present")' (Wiles, 1980: 72). In a 1936 essay on 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', Brecht praises the ability of Chinese actors to achieve this effect, noting that it is an ability that is lacking in most western actors, 'apart from one or two comedians' (Brecht, 1974: 94). In a reference to such techniques made in an interview two years earlier, Brecht cites Charlie Chaplin as one such comedian:

The actor doesn't have to 'be' the man he portrays. He has to describe his character just as it would be described in a book. If Chaplin were to play Napoleon he wouldn't even look like him; he would show objectively and critically how Napoleon would behave in the various situations the author might put him in. In my view the great comedians have always been the best character actors.

(1974: 68)

For Brecht, then, the requirement that the epic performer acts both with an awareness of the audience, and with a critical purchase on the character represented, are familiar features of comic performances.

The third aspect of the epic performance is what Brecht refers to as gestic acting. This consists of displaying gestures which reveal to the audience the social context of the character - his or her social relationship with other people, the social determinants of his or her existence. If the spectator is to adopt a critical attitude towards the events represented, then they need to 'be put in a position where [they] can make comparisons about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave' (1974: 86). If this is the case, then the actor has to reveal to the audience these behavioural determinants, hence the need for gestic acting.

We might identify an example of such techniques in Chaplin's 1916 film *Easy Street*. Volunteering as a policeman, Chaplin's tramp character sets about dealing with the social unrest gripping *Easy Street*. Having overcome one of the major perpetrators of the unrest, Chaplin catches a woman stealing from a shop. Instead of apprehending her, however, he is wooed by her story of poverty-stricken woe, signified by his bursting into tears. As a result, he happily adds to her pile of stolen goods, whereupon she physically collapses under its weight. The woman's collapse qualifies as a form of Brechtian social gest because of the way in which it acquires a social signification: it represents the woman collapsing under the weight of her poverty-inflicted troubles, and this signals to the audience the reason for her turn to theft.

One of the areas to which Brecht refers in formulating his notion of the gest is cabaret. Discussing the ability of certain types of song to perform a gestic function, Brecht claims that '[s]o-called "cheap" music, particularly that of the cabaret and the operetta, has for sometime been a sort of gestic music' (1974: 87). Frederic Ewen has suggested Karl Valentin, the Munich cabaret performer for whom Brecht had a great admiration, as a possible model here (Ewen, 1970: 65). Cabaret combined music and particular forms of comic performance, especially political satire. Devoid of the fourth wall, it facilitated the creation of an intimate 'smokers' theatre' (Brecht, 1974: 8), allowing for a certain critical detachment on the part of the audience. As such, Brechtian theory probably owes much to forms of cabaret theatre, as both Lisa Appignanesi and John Willett have argued (Appignanesi, 1984: 130; Willett, 1967: 87-8). While cabaret cannot be wholly

subsumed within the concept of comedy, the fact that cabaret theatre did essentially foster humour as a means of social critique and mockery suggests it as an important reference point not only for Brecht's concept of the *gest*, but also for a Brechtian theory of comedy. In a number of ways, then, comic practices provided an important resource for Brecht's theorisation of the techniques of epic acting.

b) Targets and function of epic laughter

The remaining two areas that I want to explore here are the targets of epic laughter and the function of Brechtian comedy, and I will look at them in tandem. Two important references for such a discussion are M. McGowan's article 'Comedy and the *Volksstück*' (McGowan, 1982), and the third chapter of Elizabeth Wright's book *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (Wright, 1989). For McGowan, the targets of epic laughter are the comic qualities of the social events and arrangements depicted on stage; their contradictory nature, for example. As McGowan explains, the function of laughter in such instances is closely related to the alienation effect, because comedy 'can be used to encourage critical distance and reflection in the audience' (McGowan, 1982: 64). McGowan characterises such processes in relation to what William Hazlitt, the eighteenth-century writer and philosopher, defined as the essence of humour, 'the incongruous', that gap between 'what things are and what they ought to be' (1982: 64). In other words, it is possible that the alienation effects of comedy might prompt the spectator to reflect on the gap between how things are on the

stage and how they *ought* to be, were it not for the various contradictions that the performance discloses. From here it is possible that the spectator might reflect on the gap between how things *are* and things *ought* to be in the world beyond the theatre. In this way, McGowan identifies a prominent role for comedy within Brechtian dramaturgy.

Wright draws similar conclusions in her analysis of Brecht's theory of comedy. The targets of Brechtian laughter, she argues, are the ridiculous or anachronistic features of the historical situation portrayed on the stage. In this way, Brechtian laughter derives from 'the amusement of an audience which is learning to perceive its historical advantage' (Wright, 1989: 50). Wright agrees with McGowan, then, that Brechtian laughter enjoys an important connection with the critical, historicising objectives of epic theatre. What is more, Wright argues, Brecht identifies the comic not as a universally stable quality, but as a historically variable quality that will be perceived in particular historical situations by particular, historically-situated spectators (1989: 50). Such a conception not only complements Brecht's theorisation of realism and the popular as historical categories, it also complements Bakhtin's account of the carnivalesque as a historical category.

Wright's analysis of the function which Brecht assigns to comedy draws on Freud's theory of jokes. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Freud's model explains the pleasure that a joke produces in terms of the psychic economy that it affords us. This saving in psychic energy is then discharged as laughter. For Brecht, Wright argues, the objective of comic techniques is to enable the spectator, on leaving the theatre, to channel this energy

into addressing the social contradictions which are the object of their mirth. The purpose of Brechtian comedy, in other words, is to leave 'the reader/audience with contradictions and the task of the resolution of them in life's praxis' (1989: 62), a formulation which accords closely with that of McGowan. In ascribing to comedy this socially-transformative function, Wright concludes, Brecht presents us with a radical departure from traditional theories of comedy which tend to emphasise its conservative function (1989: 62).

Brecht would thus seem to propose a dialectical theory of comedy. While 'bourgeois theatre' aims 'at smoothing over contradictions, at creating false harmony', the object of Brechtian laughter is 'the joke of contradiction' (Brecht, 1974: 277). Terry Eagleton has argued not only that historical contradiction is the key to a Brechtian notion of comedy, but that there is actually a strong comic undertone to the dialectical view of history. There is, after all, 'something darkly comic about the fact that the bourgeoisie are their own grave-diggers' (Eagleton, 1981: 161). In a similar vein, Brecht himself remarked that he 'never found anybody without a sense of humour who could understand dialectics' (quoted in Willett, 1967: 85). The crucial point about Brecht's dialectical view of comedy, however, is that the joke of contradiction is not resolved in the theatre, but in the spectators' social praxis beyond the theatre. Some notes by Brecht on *The Threepenny Opera*, written in 1937, pick up on this very point, in a reference to the 'Ballad of Immoral Earnings'. Sung jointly by Jenny and Mac the Knife, the ballad tells of life in the whorehouse. The ballad's third verse deals in a fairly light-hearted

fashion with Jenny's pregnancy; with the resulting adjustments made to their copulatory positions; and with the baby's eventual abortion. Brecht comments:

This is where those Macheaths who seem least inhibited from portraying his death agony commonly baulk at singing the third verse. They would obviously not reject the sexual theme if a tragedy had been made of it. But in our day and age sexual themes undoubtedly belong in the realm of comedy; for sex life and social life conflict, and the resulting contradiction is comic because it can only be resolved historically, i.e. under a different social order. So the actor must be able to put across a ballad like this in a comic way.
(Brecht, 1979: 94)

This passage foregrounds the extent to which, if social contradictions are represented on the stage as comic, then the dialectical resolution of those contradictions can only be achieved through a transformation of the social relations that gave rise to them in the first place. Insofar as epic theatre itself aims at furthering the possibility of such transformations, - at inciting the spectator to claim, 'That's extraordinary, hardly believable - It's got to stop' - then Brecht's dialectical theory of comedy can be seen to occupy a prominent position within his overall dramaturgy.

c) Assessment

I want to return to Chaplin's *Easy Street* at this point in order to consider the applicability of Brecht's theory of comedy. The film begins with Chaplin in a mission chapel, where he is encouraged by a female mission-worker to turn to religion as a means beyond his destitution. Ironically, *Easy Street* itself is a very violent street, plagued by a gang of thugs, including one particular bully. Chaplin decides to join the police force, and gradually manages

both to clean up the neighbourhood single-handedly, and to win the hand of the mission-worker.

If we were to interpret this text in the light of Brecht's theory of comedy, then it is probably appropriate to begin by turning to the ironies of the film's resolution. *Easy Street*'s narrative is circular, in that it begins and ends with the mission. Between the beginning and the end, however, there is a resolution to the social problems depicted: the street violence is eradicated; Easy Street's inhabitants are pacified; and the mission moves into the neighbourhood: the church and the police have successfully instilled peace, law and order. The inhabitants might still be poverty-stricken, but at least they now happily coexist.

Given that the text itself resolves the social conflict with which it deals, we might question the extent to which Brecht's comic theory is of relevance here. I would argue, however, that it is applicable insofar as the narrative route to this outcome is riddled with ironic contradiction. Not only are the police themselves a parody of the incompetence of the Keystone Kops, but their newly-found hero, the Chaplin character, who accepts religion in the first scene and has prompted the whole street to accept it by the final scene, is physically empowered to overcome the violence and pacify the inhabitants only by a shot of narcotics from a syringe, itself a symbol of urban deprivation. He thus paves the way for the religion of the New Mission to be brought to Easy Street. Religion, 'the opium of the people', in Marx's famous epigram (Marx, 1971: 115), is thus established thanks to a shot of opiate. Hence Gerald Mast's comment that, if a solution is provided in *Easy Street*, 'it deliberately shows the ridiculousness of expecting easy solutions'

(Mast, 1973: 23). Further, the consistent implausibility of the film's slapstick components - the fight scenes, for example, culminating in Chaplin's superhuman efforts at the end of the film; the chase scenes, which obviously rely on the split-second timing of the actors; Chaplin's comic cadenzas, which make conspicuous the workings of the narrative - each may prompt us to reflect on the plausibility of the narrative resolution. For all that *Easy Street* offers a resolution to social conflict, the very prospect that such a resolution should emerge itself seems contradictory. Given that this is the case, it seems possible that such irony might prompt the spectator to reflect on the gap between how things are in the film (narrative resolution: the cleaning-up of Easy Street and the merry co-existence of its inhabitants), and how they ought to be (continued violence and poverty), were it not for the implausibilities provided by the comic aspects of the film. From here, it is possible that the spectator might reflect on the gap between how things are, and how things ought to be, beyond the film, the arena within which the Brechtian dialectic is resolved. In this way, I would argue that *Easy Street* can be related to a Brechtian view of comedy.

For all that a Brechtian theory of comedy might have a certain applicability, however, we do need to consider its possible shortcomings. The most obvious problem is its preoccupation with the *effects* of comic techniques: Brecht is interested not so much in what comedy is, but in what it *does*. This is problematic because the task of ascertaining the effects that a particular text or performance might actually produce is such an inexact science. In the field of comedy, this inexactitude is particularly acute. As

Jerry Palmer reminds us, humour is necessarily ambivalent. Consequently, while the act of levity might enjoy a certain political potential, we cannot determine the *actual* efficacy of particular comic texts without recourse to an empirical study of the specific conditions of their performance and/or consumption. As we have seen, Palmer is not arguing merely that the meaning of comic texts is ultimately context bound (an argument that we could probably apply to any sort of text), but that the meaning of a comic text in any particular situation is especially precarious, given the ambiguity of the logic of the absurd (Palmer, 1987).

We might respond by arguing that comic techniques are particularly well-suited to the objectives of Brechtian theatre, because the implausibility and lack of verisimilitude to which they are committed makes them especially effective in questioning the 'naturalness' of dominant ideological constructions. However, it seems clear that comic practices are just as capable of assisting in the shoring up of such constructions as in undermining them. It is possible, for example, that Irish jokes might contribute to the widespread belief that Irish people are 'naturally' stupid. Further, it is possible that a comic text which displays the sort of features demanded by Brecht will fail to produce the sort of effect he desires. As Gerald Mast has pointed out, for example, rather than responding to the epic foregrounding of artifice by reflecting on the social causes of what we see, 'that reflection might just as well probe the artist's emphasis on the artificial' (Mast, 1973: 15).

If Mast and Palmer are correct, then we need to qualify our reading of *Easy Street* as merely one possible reading. We can certainly justify the claim that the film's narrative is littered with

ironic contradictions. However, short of an ethnographic analysis of the real effects of the text on those watching it, the question as to whether or not these moments will be read as ironic contradictions, or whether or not they might generate the desire in the audience to resolve such contradictions in their social praxis, moves us into the territory of conjecture. Such problems have been addressed in an article by John O. Thompson, who rejects the claim that we can identify the specific effects that an individual text might produce at a particular moment, even by undertaking ethnographic analysis. As he points out, not only is the notion that an individual text might be able to incite 'a meaningful political act' entirely unrealistic ('what sort of meaningful political act would one have any business undertaking *purely* on the basis of having just seen *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*...?') (Thompson, 1993: 293), but so too is the idea that individual texts actually operate as individual texts on their audience. '[O]n the *political level*', he says, '*texts can only operate in aggregate, and as elements of cultural formations of great heterogeneity*' (1993: 294). He concludes his argument thus:

Once we shift our attention from individual texts to groups of texts, and from how texts resemble one another to how they differ, the bringing into existence or promoting of the Perfectly Progressive Text ceases to look either possible or desirable. Instead, relations of juxtaposition and dominance within the textual aggregate become politically pertinent. Which texts/genres/media are given precedence over others, within 'common sense', at a given moment? What troubling of that consensus can be achieved by promoting a despised or ignored text, of challenging an admired or widely-promoted one? Can troubling that consensus in a given instance really be articulated with other, more politically central struggles?

(1993: 298)

In the light of Thompson's critique, we might conclude that Brecht's theory of comedy faces problems. In his espousal of a dialectical comic effect, Brecht would seem to overstate the manner in which an individual text might operate on the audience. In grounding a theory of political theatre on the supposed potential of techniques of this sort, then, Brechtian theory would seem to pay inadequate attention to the manner in which particular textual practices relate to the overall textual aggregate.

In Brecht's defence, however, we might argue that, in adopting a historically pragmatic approach to the categories of realism, the popular and the comic, he was actually in a position to tackle the very issues raised by Thompson. What concerned Brecht, in other words, was precisely the ability to stage a production which would most trouble the consensus at a particular moment. Such an objective necessarily involved an institutional analysis of the status of theatre (and its relationship with other media) at that conjuncture. Writing about epic theatre in 1927, for example, Brecht claims: 'It is not the play's effect on the audience but its effect on the theatre that is decisive at this moment' (Brecht, 1974: 22). While Brecht's theorisation of epic theatre at times might sound like a manifesto for the Perfectly Progressive Text, it is clear from the way in which he addresses a range of issues that he was equally concerned with developing a strategy that was pragmatic, institutionally sensitive and historically flexible. In many ways, then, we could begin to respond from a Brechtian perspective to the problems raised by Thompson.

If this is the case, then it would be inappropriate to reject Brecht's theory of comedy on the grounds that it seemed to be of

little relevance to the field of comic performance today. Rather, what is of interest in Brechtian theory, as has been argued in this section, is the way in which comedy was assigned such a prominent role within the project of epic theatre. Given this prominence, it is no surprise that Brecht was identified by Bakhtin as one of those helping to sustain the carnivalesque tradition. With this in mind, I want to return in the final section to a comparative analysis of Brecht and Bakhtin, and their respective positions on theatre, comedy and carnival.

Brecht and Bakhtin

One of the problems with Bakhtin's positive appraisal of Brecht in *Rabelais and His World* is that elsewhere he tends to advance a negative assessment of dramatic representation. I will begin this section by examining Bakhtin's approach to the theatre, before turning to an analysis of the relationship between the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and Brechtian comedy.

a) Bakhtin on theatre

As we have seen in chapter one, Bakhtin identifies the novel as the primary site on which dialogic discourse might flourish. Insofar as the novel enables a polyphonic orchestration of contending speech types, so it exposes the heteroglottic nature of social reality. In contrast, the realm of authority has favoured monologic forms of discourse which, by obscuring the reality of heteroglottic conditions, have enabled it to underscore its own

position of power. For Bakhtin, dramatic discourse lends itself to these monologic forms of representation. In 'Discourse in the Novel', for example, Bakhtin makes the following claim:

Pure drama strives toward a unitary language, one that is individualized merely through dramatic personae who speak it. Dramatic dialogue is determined by a collision between individuals who exist within the limits of a single world and a single unitary language.

(Bakhtin, 1981: 405)

While novelistic discourse is capable of reaching 'deep down into the internal dialogic essence of language itself' (1981: 405), dramatic discourse represents dialogue within a monologic context, a context devoid of the clash of ideologies and social accents which pervades real, heteroglotic conditions. As a result, Bakhtin concludes, dramatic discourse contributes to centralising social forces. He thus projects a negative assessment of dramatic discourse as the antithesis of novelistic discourse.

That Bakhtin should have reached such a dismal conclusion concerning the possibilities available within the theatre seems unfortunate, especially as there would seem to be no *a priori* reason why dramatic forms of representation should not be every bit as effective in projecting dialogic relationships as novelistic forms of representation. Indeed, Bakhtin somewhat undoes his negative assessment in a series of more positive appraisals of dramatic forms. In 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', for example, he cites the satyr play as a precursor to novelistic discourse. Performed at the Attic Dionysian festival, the satyr play would follow on the heels of three tragic performances, where it would enact a dialogic parody of tragic discourse (1981: 53-4). In a similar vein, *Rabelais and His World* is peppered with references to

Shakespeare as one of the standard-bearers of the carnivalesque tradition. Further, Bakhtin's account of dramatic discourse in 'Discourse in the Novel' (quoted above) itself receives two qualifications. First, he accepts that comedy is '[t]o a certain extent... an exception' to his negative assessment. Second, he adds in a footnote that this assessment is strictly directed at 'pure classical drama', rather than '[c]ontemporary realistic social drama [which] may, of course, be heteroglot and multi-linguaged' (1981: 405). As Graham Pechey has argued, Brecht is 'almost certainly one of the unnamed names' in this 'qualifying footnote' (Pechey, 1989: 58). For all that Bakhtin portrays dramatic discourse as a monologic form of representation, then, he is not entirely consistent on this point.

Given these inconsistencies, several commentators have sought to develop a more positive appraisal of dramatic discourse from a Bakhtinian perspective. Michael Bristol, for example, has noted how paradoxical it is that Bakhtin identifies the novel, rather than drama, as the 'exemplary genre in which heteroglossia and carnivalization are most powerfully manifested' (Bristol, 1985: 24). Bristol suggests that the Renaissance theatre made for even more of a heteroglottic experience than the novel. A public gathering place, which itself brought together 'a diversity of social speech types' (Bakhtin, 1981: 262), it offered a privileged site for 'the celebration and critique of the needs and concerns of the *polis*' (1985: 3). Maria Shevtsova has gone one step further, arguing that, with its emphasis on the utterance as a socially inscribed act, a Bakhtinian theory of discourse provides an ideal model with which to analyse theatre in the context of performance. Such a

model not only opens up an analysis of the dialogic relationship between the characters on the stage, but also of the dialogic relationship between the dramatic utterance and the audience (Shevtsova, 1989). Finally, Graham Pechey has explored the relationship between Brecht and Bakhtin in examining the latter's negative approach to theatre. Pechey arrives at three conclusions. First, he argues, insofar as Brechtian epic theatre aims to reveal the various social and historical determinants of human behaviour, it has a strong dialogic imperative itself (Pechey, 1989: 59). The social gest, for example, attempts to represent an action not as an isolated fragment of behaviour, but as a gesture that is necessarily inscribed in a dialogic context, a context within which the social forces operating upon the character and to which the character responds are made apparent. Second, Pechey continues, insofar as epic theatre draws upon this dialogic impulse, so it taps into the very traditions of novelistic discourse, of parody and the carnivalesque, which Bakhtin is so keen to valorise (1989: 60). In our earlier discussion of grotesque realism, we have already identified some of Brecht's own references to these traditions. Thirdly, Pechey echoes Shevtsova's suggestion that, as a result of its performative aspect, the theatre is perfectly suited to an analysis grounded upon Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic. And at the moments when this performative aspect is specifically foregrounded, such as in Renaissance tragedy, Pechey argues that a Bakhtinian approach would seem particularly appropriate (1989: 61). Contrary to Bakhtin's initial evaluation of dramatic discourse, then, his own theoretical framework would actually appear to lend itself both to an analysis of theatrical practices, and to a more positive appraisal of them.

b) Carnival and Brechtian comedy

Having negotiated the problems surrounding Bakhtin's treatment of dramatic discourse, we are now in a position to consider the extent to which Brecht's theory of comedy might reaffirm a Bakhtinian notion of carnival. In his book on Walter Benjamin, Terry Eagleton argues that Brecht's theory of comedy subsumes Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. Defining Brechtian comedy in terms of the irony of historical contradiction, Eagleton argues that this definition also embraces the structure of carnival:

The riot of carnival, the imprudence of inversion, the crackling of iconoclasm: these for historical materialism are moments within, not alternatives to, that deeper comedy which is the joke of contradiction and its pleasurable release.

(Eagleton, 1981: 170)

For Eagleton, carnival represents 'a temporary retextualizing of the social formation that exposes its "fictive" foundations' (1981: 149). The carnivalesque reorganisation of social relations has the ability to foreground the contradictions within, and the historical nature of, current social arrangements. As a result, its potential as a form of comic alienation effect becomes apparent, which makes Eagleton's contention that carnival is a species of Brechtian comedy seem plausible.

However, I think that Eagleton's argument faces two problems, the first of which concerns the relationship between the dynamics of carnival and the dynamics of epic theatre, the context within which Brecht formulates his theory of comedy. For Bakhtin, one

of the essential features of carnival is that it 'is a pageant without a stage and without a division into performers and spectators' (Bakhtin, 1973: 100). As such, Bakhtin draws a sharp contrast between the structure of carnival and the structure of theatre. 'Footlights would destroy a carnival', he claims, 'as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance' (Bakhtin, 1984: 7). In many ways, Brechtian dramaturgy eschews the deployment of footlights, since a deliberate attempt is made to demolish the 'fourth wall' between performer and spectator (Brecht, 1974: 91). It is required of the actors, for example, that they express their 'awareness of being watched' (1974: 92), and Brecht's approving references to the dynamics of cabaret performance add additional emphasis to this demand. However, in another sense, as Robert Cunliffe has perceptively pointed out, in attempting to foster a critical detachment between the audience and the events on the stage, Brechtian epic theatre simultaneously relies upon the maintenance of footlights (Cunliffe, 1993: 61). This ambivalence towards footlights also extends to Brecht's theory of comedy. At one level, his conception of comedy incorporates a commitment to the elimination of footlights, achieved through the deployment of anti-illusionistic comic practices. However, in appealing to a form of laughter that is derived from a detached assessment of comic contradictions, so at another level his theory of comedy involves the retainment of footlights. Given that this is the case, the complete subsumption of Bakhtin's notion of carnival within Brecht's theory of comedy would seem less feasible.

The second problem with Eagleton's argument concerns the similarity between the form of pleasure which Brecht's account of

comedy envisages, and the sort of pleasures identified by Bakhtin in his analysis of carnival. Here, I want to turn to Terry Lovell's discussion of Brecht's treatment of pleasure (Lovell, 1983). As Lovell argues, Brecht tends to view pleasure as something 'to serve learning rather than [something] to be valued in its own right' (1983: 94)⁷. Insofar as epic theatre is didactic, it seeks to harness pleasure as a means to that end, seeking to foster what Brecht terms 'pleasurable learning, cheerful and militant learning' (Brecht, 1974: 73). For Lovell, the problem here is that, in assuming that the only valuable forms of pleasure are those which accompany the development of a critical understanding of society, Brecht tends to overlook other forms of pleasure which might themselves possess a progressive or revolutionary potential:

social pleasures. The pleasure of a text may be grounded in pleasures of an essentially public and social kind. For instance, pleasures of common experiences identified and celebrated in art, and through this celebration, given recognition and validation; pleasures of solidarity to which this sharing may give rise; pleasure in shared and socially defined aspirations and hopes; in a sense of identity and community.

(Lovell, 1983: 95)

Lovell is aware that such pleasures might be fostered for reactionary purposes, but her argument does suggest another area where we might differentiate between Brechtian comedy and Bakhtinian carnival. The common, social pleasures to which Lovell refers are very much inscribed within the dynamics of carnival. For Bakhtin, the dissolution of footlights and suspension of hierarchy served to unite the participants in the carnival as one, affirming the collective power of the people. In contrast, Brecht's theory of comedy would appear to have little to say about the utopian pleasures of popular celebration.

We might respond to Lovell's argument at this point by looking briefly at Brecht's conception of the *Lehrstück*, or learning-play. Brecht wrote nine *Lehrstücke* between 1929 and 1930⁸ and, as Willett suggests, the principle underlying them 'was the notion that moral and political lessons could best be taught by *participation* in actual performance' (Brecht, 1974: 33; my emphasis). As a result, the *Lehrstücke* were written primarily for amateur performers (1974: 152). In the context of Lovell's argument concerning Brecht's neglect of collective forms of pleasure, Elizabeth Wright's characterisation of the *Lehrtheater* is illuminating. For Wright, the *Lehrtheater*

presupposes the existence of a socialist state and is thus a 'model' for a radically different theatre of the future, where the distinction between actor and spectator is entirely wiped out. The actors, all amateurs of one kind or another, occupy a double role of observing ('spectating') and acting, working and re-working a communal set text, which is perpetually alterable, the object being to turn art into a social practice, an experiment in socially productive behaviour.

(Wright, 1989: 24)

In this sense, the Brechtian *Lehrtheater* perhaps provides a space where the forms of pleasure identified by Lovell might be shared. What is more, with its abolition of footlights and its emphasis upon collective endeavour, the *Lehrtheater* would seem to construct a model of social relations that is more or less equivalent to the model which obtains during carnival.

If the *Lehrtheater* did gesture towards the social pleasures of the sort available during carnival, however, it is clear that such pleasures remained subordinate to the didactic objectives of the *Lehrstücke*. The performers in a *Lehrstück*, Brecht reminds us, 'must act like pupils' (Brecht, 1974: 33). As such, the *Lehrtheater* would seem to lack the celebratory potential that Bakhtin

identifies in carnival. Moreover, since Brecht's conception of comedy would seem to rest upon the construction of a critical distance between spectator and performer, a distance abolished in the *Lehrtheater*, it is unclear exactly how such a conception of comedy might figure in the *Lehrstücke*, if at all. As a result, even if we were to enlist the *Lehrtheater* as a vehicle for the social pleasures identified by Lovell, there would still seem to be some important differences between Brecht and Bakhtin's respective approaches to the subject. While Eagleton is correct to note the proximity between Brechtian comedy and Bakhtinian carnival on the basis of their shared propensity for demystificatory social critique, then, we also need to register the points at which they are at variance with one another.

The final point on which I want to focus concerns Brecht's own representation of carnival in his play *Life of Galileo* (Brecht, 1986). Written initially in 1938, the play was first performed in 1943, before being revised by Brecht and Charles Laughton in 1944-45. Apart from the obvious historical proximity between *Life of Galileo* and Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, which was submitted as a thesis in 1940, there are several significant points of contact between the two texts, including their positive assessment of carnival. Firstly, just as Bakhtin was concerned with the way in which Rabelais broached the popular realms of the marketplace, the body and the grotesque, so Brecht is keen to establish Galileo as a figure in touch with the culture of the people. Galileo is represented as a man who values the physical pleasures of food and drink: 'I value the consolations of the flesh' (1986: 76). What is more, in entertaining the possibility of the vernacular as a

vehicle for increasing the accessibility of his ideas, Galileo reveals his allegiance to those who produce wealth rather than those who control it:

I might write in the language of the people, for the many, rather than in Latin for the few. Our new thoughts call for people who work with their hands. Who else cares about knowing the causes of things? People who only see bread on their table don't want to know how it got baked; that lot would sooner thank God than the baker.

(1986: 80-1)

If, as Dominick LaCapra has suggested, *Rabelais and His World* represents Bakhtin's attempt 'to make Rabelais a man of the people' (LaCapra, 1983: 322), then *Life of Galileo* similarly dramatises Galileo's potential as a man of the people.

The second point concerns the similarity between Brecht's dramatisation of Galileo's life and Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais. As we have seen, for Bakhtin, Rabelais' deployment of grotesque imagery, with its emphasis on dynamic, historical transformation, contributed to the destruction of the static world view of the Middle Ages. Brecht situates Galileo within a similar process, focusing on the conflict between the powers of the church and Galilean astronomy. For him, Galileo's ideas had revolutionary potential because of their ability to challenge the static, earth-centred credo which underscored the power of the church. Not only did Galilean astronomy propose a new, dynamic model of the universe, but in so doing it lent itself to the construction of a new, dynamic model of human history: 'everything is in motion,' as Galileo claims (1986: 6).

In dramatising this conflict between Galileo and the church, the text invites the audience to adopt the position of the epic

spectator. The choice that faces Galileo is whether to risk death, and unleash the full force of his revolutionary ideas on the world, or to suppress his ideas in order to minimise his persecution. In spite of Vanni's request that Galileo take the first course of action, in the knowledge that the progressive middle classes of the north would support him in any struggle against the church (1986: 87), Galileo chooses the alternative path, and lives as a prisoner of the Inquisition until his death. In spite of his imprisonment, he manages to smuggle out a copy of his 'Discorsi' before he dies. The spectator is thus invited to assess the validity of Galileo's choice in the light of the historical circumstances which emerge in the course of the play. For Brecht, in passing over the opportunity to maximise the revolutionary impact of his ideas, Galileo was mistaken. He says of Charles Laughton's portrayal of this moment: 'Laughton showed Galileo in a state of great inner agitation during his talk with [Vanni]... He played it as a moment of decision - the wrong one' (1986: xxix). In representing Galileo's decision as mistaken, the performance would have foregrounded the historical contingency of decisions of this sort. That the more revolutionary course of action was eventually overlooked is an issue that Brecht leaves the audience to address in their own social praxis. In this way, the play appeals to an epic conception of spectatorship.

The third point of contact between Bakhtin's *Rabelais* and Brecht's *Galileo* concerns the latter's carnival scene, a scene which crystallises the revolutionary potential of Galileo's ideas, and hence the gravity of the decision which faces him. The scene is set amongst a masked crowd who are waiting for the carnival

procession to arrive. Two ballad singers present a song about Galilean astronomy, a song which emphasises the way in which, in inverting the ontological doctrines of the church, it paved the way for an inversion of social relations:

Up stood the learned Galilei...
And told the sun 'Stop there.
From now the whole creatio dei
Will turn as I think fair:
The boss starts turning from today
His servants stand and stare'.

Now that's no joke, my friends, it is no matter small.
Each servants' insolence increases
But one thing's true, pleasures are few. I ask you all:
Who wouldn't like to say and do just as he pleases?...

The serf sitting on his arse.
This turning's turned his head.
The altar boy won't serve the mass
The apprentice lies in bed.

(1986: 83)

When the procession arrives, it carries effigies ridiculing the Grand-Duke of Florence and the senior figures of the church, and a large puppet lionising Galileo as 'the bible-buster' (1986: 85). In this way, as Brecht explains, the scene represents the people 'relating Galileo's revolutionary doctrine to their own revolutionary demands' (1986: 124).

Brecht's representation of carnival has much in common with Bakhtin's analysis of it. Carnival is shown to be a locus of popular discontent, social critique and collective laughter. In appropriating Galileo's ideas for themselves, the people are revealed to have a certain autonomy. Popular cultural practices, such as carnival, are assigned a rebellious potential. This is not to assume that Brecht envisages carnival as a phenomenon that is necessarily transgressive. Indeed, the text would seem to

foreground the historical circumstances which provided the carnival with such potential at that specific moment. What is more, as Richard Sheppard has argued, we need to contrast the euphoria of the carnival scene with the suggestion in Scene 14 that it is Galileo's own 'carnavalesque ethos' which contributes to his eventual betrayal of the scientific community (Sheppard, 1990: 308). Such a conception is consistent with Bakhtin's own emphasis on the transitory significance of carnivalesque practices.

The carnival scene occupies a pivotal point in the play, for it is here that the revolutionary potential of Galileo's ideas is fully revealed. In the following scene, after he has turned down Vanni's offer of support, it is disclosed that Galileo had sought to condemn the carnival proceedings (1986: 88). That Galileo should distance himself from the people in this way underscores the sense that his eventual decision is the wrong one. The carnival thus marks a crucial turning point in the play, an interpretation which Brecht supports in his discussion of Laughton's Galileo. There, Brecht explains the way in which the costume design of the production was executed to reflect the carnival scene's pivotal position. For Brecht, 'the entire sequence of scenes had to have its development in terms of colour' (Brecht, 1974: 167). Beginning with delicate colours in the opening scenes, the costumes gradually became stronger, before being 'fully unleashed' in the carnival scene as a riot of colour (1974: 167). From that point on, the performance registered a 'descent into dull and sombre colours', further underlining the gravity of Galileo's decision (1974: 167). In making the carnival so central to the dramatisation of Galileo's life, then,

Brecht echoes Bakhtin's deployment of carnival as the key interpretative tool with which to dissect Rabelais.

Conclusion

There are thus several significant points of contact between *Life of Galileo* and *Rabelais and His World*. But what is most important for our purposes is the extent to which *Life of Galileo* constructs an image of carnival not as a marginalised anachronism, but as a vital, rebellious vehicle with the potential to catalyse social transformation. While we have identified certain differences between Brecht's theory of comedy and Bakhtin's theory of carnival in the course of this section, we have argued that *Life of Galileo* represents a vision of carnival which is suitably Bakhtinian. In putting carnival centre stage in this way, Bakhtin's estimation of Brecht as a guardian of the grotesque would seem to have a certain potency.

Notes

- 1 Bakhtin also cites Thomas Mann and Pablo Neruda as members of this group (1984: 46).
- 2 The best example of Brecht's intervention in the various debates related to modernism are included in *Aesthetics and Politics* (Bloch et al., 1980).
- 3 I do not want to imply here that MacCabe and Fiske share an identical analysis of realism. Indeed, the purpose of Fiske's discussion is to call into question the passivity on the part of the reader which MacCabe's model implies (see Fiske, 1987: 37-47).

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- 4 If we were to take MacCabe and Fiske's version as the more prevalent conception of realism, - and within the fields of film and television studies it certainly is - then Brecht emerges as an anti-realist, and he is often treated as such (e.g. Sim, 1992). David Harvey characterises aesthetic modernism in terms of its critique of the inadequacy of naturalism and realism (Harvey, 1989: 20), and it is perhaps on the basis of his rejection of the dominant traditions of realism (in MacCabe and Fiske's sense) that Brecht himself can be situated within the broad terrain of modernism.
 - 5 Indeed, by the 1950s Brecht seemed to accept that his theory of epic theatre was in need of an overhaul, proposing the term 'dialectical theatre' as an appropriate replacement (Brecht, 1974: 281). As we shall see, the concept of the dialectic plays an important role in a Brechtian notion of the function of comedy.
 - 6 Here, Brecht is commenting on the deployment of gestic acting in epic theatre, and is referring to a specific scene in *A Man's a Man*.
 - 7 We perhaps need to qualify Lovell's remarks here. While in his earlier work Brecht certainly viewed pleasure as something subordinate to the didactic objectives of epic theatre, in 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', written in 1948, Brecht seems to revise this judgement. The primary 'business' of the theatre is 'to entertain people', he claims (Brecht, 1974: 180). As a result, he argues, '[n]othing needs less justification than pleasure' (1974: 181). In this formulation, it would seem that pleasure no longer needs to be justified in terms of its ability to further the education of the audience, but is a quality that can be valued in its own right.
 - 8 The two best-known *Lehrstücke* are *The Baden-Baden Cantata*, performed at the Baden-Baden Music Festival in 1929, and *The Measures Taken*, first performed in 1930.

Chapter seven

Carnival and contemporary culture

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin's historical analysis of the development of the carnivalesque tradition takes us up to the point reached in the last chapter, the periodic re-emergence of the grotesque over the first half of the twentieth century. What I want to do in this chapter is to explore the extent to which we might update Bakhtin's thesis about the decline of the carnivalesque in order to take into account the terrain of contemporary culture.

In his 1940 essay, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse' (Bakhtin, 1981), Bakhtin argues rather ruefully that in 'modern times the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive' (1981: 71). While the medieval parodist was able to perform outrageous travesties of sacred texts, modern heteroglotic conditions have produced more democratised linguistic communities. Under such conditions, parody has been reduced to a mere shadow of its former self, for it no longer has the opportunity to ridicule such venerable forms of discourse. In 'From Notes Made in 1970-71', Bakhtin advances a similar claim. The 'proclamatory genres' once favoured by 'priests, prophets, preachers, judges, leaders, patriarchal fathers, and so forth', now only exist either in the form

of pastiche, or in the form of parody (Bakhtin, 1986: 132)¹. Irony has become 'the equivocal language of modern times' (1986: 132). If Bakhtin is correct, then, the expansive traditions of carnivalesque humour have given way to more sombre and sober forms of parody and pastiche.

That Bakhtin should identify these developments with 'modern' culture is striking, for although he died before the word 'postmodern' emerged as a key theoretical category, in many ways his comments anticipate current debates about the relationship between postmodernism and the comic. Fredric Jameson, for example, has argued that postmodernism has replaced the parodist with the pasticheur, producing a culture that is 'devoid of laughter' (Jameson, 1991: 17). In contrast, Jerry Aline Flieger has claimed that postmodernism carries with it comic credentials, and that fundamental to it is its 'ludic, ironic or parodic quality' (Flieger, 1991: 29). While Jameson's view would seem to be consistent with the proposition that the importance of the carnivalesque tradition has continued to dwindle, Flieger's account would initially seem to suggest that postmodern culture has had the effect of reinvigorating that tradition. If Bakhtin's thesis about the decline of the carnivalesque is to be updated, therefore, then the domain of postmodern theory would seem to provide fertile territory for discussion.

Postmodernism

One of the most contentious issues in the field of cultural theory at the moment concerns the currency of the term 'postmodernism' (e.g. see Chris Jencks, 1993; Smart, 1993; Storey, 1993). That a particular range of cultural practices might be enlisted as postmodern, or that the general condition of our contemporary cultural configuration might be characterised as postmodern, itself sets into motion a series of controversies and debates. And as John Storey has commented, even those who deny the existence of postmodernism 'contribute to the debate on postmodernism with their acts of denial and thus contribute to the substantiation of postmodernism' (Storey, 1993: 155).

In approaching this territory, I want to draw upon the framework with which we addressed the subject of modernism in Chapter Four. Following Sheppard (Sheppard, 1993), it was argued that modernism consisted of a complex and contradictory set of practices that emerged both as a diagnosis of, and as a responses to, a particular configuration of social, cultural and economic circumstances. In a similar vein, I want to argue here that the postmodern terrain is equally complex and contradictory, and includes both a range of theoretical diagnoses of contemporary conditions, and a range of cultural practices which can be viewed as responses to, and/or componental of, those conditions. The complexity and contradictoriness of this terrain is evidenced by the range of problems and issues which it spans. First there is the problem of how to characterise allegedly postmodernist cultural practices. Should they be viewed as a superficial and commodified form of cultural production (Jameson, 1991; Eagleton, 1988); or as a complex, dialogic practice, constructing a relationship either

between the past and the present (Hutcheon, 1988; Charles Jencks, 1993), or between high culture and popular culture (Collins, 1989; Easthope, 1991)? Second, there is the problem of the relationship between postmodernism and modernism. Is it possible to establish a break between postmodernist and modernist practices (Jameson, 1991), or are there rather more continuities between the two configurations than some are prepared to accept (Featherstone, 1988), in which case the term 'postmodernism' arguably becomes redundant? Third, what is the relationship between postmodernism as a set of cultural practices and recent socio-economic developments? Should the former be viewed as the counterpart to the current stage of capitalist development, such as 'late capitalism' (Jameson, 1991) or 'radicalised modernity' (Giddens, 1990); or have we witnessed the evolution of a radically new set of social and economic relations that we can refer to as 'postmodernity' (Bauman, 1992) or 'post-industrial society' (Bell, 1973)? Fourth, if radical shifts have taken place in cultural practices and social relations, to what extent will they be amenable to traditional theoretical paradigms, such as Marxism or psychoanalysis? Does the current 'incredulity towards grand narratives' require a new set of analytical practices (Lyotard, 1984), or is there still something to be salvaged from the Enlightenment tradition that spawned those grand narratives in the first place (Habermas, 1993)?

Since the purpose of this chapter is to update Bakhtin's thesis about carnival, I will focus on the manner in which the comic has been located within accounts of postmodernism. As a result, there will not be space to attempt to provide answers to all of the

questions raised above. Rather, I will use Jameson's analysis as a starting point, and will attempt to negotiate the problems and issues referred to here as they surface in the course of the discussion. It is to Jameson's account of postmodernism, parody and pastiche that I turn first.

Jameson and postmodern pastiche

In his seminal analysis of postmodern culture, Jameson makes the following claim about the current cultural climate:

In this situation parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs...

(Jameson, 1991: 17)

For Jameson, the ascendancy of pastiche and the decline of parody are key aspects of postmodernism. Before we discuss the accuracy of his claim, I want to explain Jameson's overall position in relation to postmodernism in rather more detail.

Drawing on Ernest Mandel's three-stage account of the development of capitalism, Jameson distinguishes between three periods of capitalist evolution: the market stage, established on the basis of steam technology; the monopoly or imperialist stage, established on the basis of electric and combustion technology;

and the current multinational stage (which Jameson also calls 'late capitalism'), established on the basis of electric and nuclear technology (Jameson, 1991: 35). He characterises this stage in the following way:

... its features include the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges..., new forms of media interrelationship..., computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale.

(1991: xix)

Jameson's next step is to identify the dominant form of cultural practice in each of these three stages². While the cultural dominant of market capitalism is identified as realism (Jameson, 1981: 151-4), Jameson posits modernism as the cultural dominant of monopoly capitalism (1991: 36; 307). Postmodernism itself is identified as the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism, and I want to focus on Jameson's analysis of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles in order to differentiate what he identifies as the definitive features of the postmodern condition.

a) The Bonaventure Hotel

The hotel, opened in 1977, is a vast glass and steel construction, and is popular as a tourist attraction. People enter it through rather inconspicuous doorways, but once inside, the hotel offers them 'a kind of miniature city' (1991: 40). The Bonaventure does not simply provide accommodation, it provides shops and other amenities. In the middle of it is a central column and a small lake, while elsewhere are to be found a greenhouse floor, revolving

cocktail lounges, a central lobby, and a series of escalators running up and down each of its four towers. I want to look at the key aspects of Jamesonian postmodernism as he identifies them in the fabric and experience of the Bonaventure Hotel.

According to Jameson, the construction of the building produces an environment where 'it is quite impossible to get your bearings', to such an extent that the hotel's shopkeepers despair of the inability of people to find them (1991: 43). The speed and scale of the escalators, for example, deprives the visitor of their own sense of movement, while a series of giant streamers hanging down from the ceiling deprives them of their sense of perspective. The Bonaventure thus produces a new form of postmodern space - the postmodern sublime - which our current cognitive capacities are unable to negotiate. You are in this hyperspace up to your eyes and body,' Jameson concludes (1991: 43).

Although the Bonaventure shares few of the stylistic features usually associated with postmodern architecture, as Jameson admits (1991: 38), it nevertheless exhibits most of the other features identified by Jameson as postmodern. For example, it produces a sense of 'depthlessness' that is so characteristic of postmodernism. Postmodern texts ruthlessly appropriate other texts: postmodern buildings 'quote' styles from the past; television adverts deploy an array of filmic and musical references; pop art remotivates images from the visual canon. Just as the Bonaventure disorients its visitors, so the consumers of postmodernism are presented with a disorienting, depthless intertextual web, where the distinction between past and present,

between the real and the artificial, and between the original and the copy, are blurred.

This combined sense of disorientation and depthlessness contributes to a new construction of subjectivity. The unsettling nature of the Bonaventure environment strips the subject of its sense of autonomy, because it is unable to map its location, or indeed move around, with confidence. While the modern subject experienced feelings of anxiety and alienation, epitomised in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, it nevertheless maintained a sense of self-sufficiency. In contrast, these modern psychopathologies are no longer a possibility for the decentred, postmodern subject, 'since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling' (1991: 15). As a result, postmodern culture has produced a 'waning of affect', replacing the individualised experiences of anxiety and alienation with a 'free-floating and impersonal' sense of euphoria (1991: 16). It is presumably something like this sense of euphoria that Jameson identifies in the Bonaventure experience, as its visitors (a collective 'hypercrowd' (1991: 40)) lose a sense of themselves as they hurtle up and down in the escalators.

Jameson also relates this euphoria to the schizophrenic nature of postmodern culture. The plethora of depthless images produces both a sense of euphoria (because of the overwhelming intensity of the situation), and, simultaneously, an inability to organise a 'coherent experience' out of them (1991: 25). For Jameson, the psychological condition of schizophrenia provides an apt metaphor with which to characterise this experience. While nostalgia films such as *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Rumble Fish* (1983) provide us with a wealth of glossy images of the past, they are unable to

provide us with a genuine sense of historical co-ordinates. This loss of temporality in postmodern culture culminates in the heightened sense of spatiality offered in the environment of the Bonaventure Hotel.

The Bonaventure Hotel example allows Jameson to identify several important aspects of postmodernism: depthlessness, decentred subjectivity, the waning of affect and schizophrenia. It also serves as a useful example to explain Jameson's theorisation of the relationship between cultural production and commodification in postmodern culture. Until our current stage of late capitalism, Jameson argues, cultural production enjoyed a position of relative autonomy from economic forces. This situation allowed, amongst other things, for the possibility of the avant-garde to fulfil a critical function, insofar as its relative autonomy from economic forces allowed it to maintain a critical distance. Under late capitalism, however, two transformations have taken place. The first is that cultural production has become entirely commodified. Indeed, while the Frankfurt School drew a distinction between the culture industry and autonomous art, Jameson notes the extent to which postmodernism has effaced this boundary by incorporating 'this whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film' (1991: 2). Today there is such economic incitement for cultural production that art has been subsumed by the system of commodity production, a process which is most apparent in the field of architecture, given its capital intensive nature. We might point, for example, to the way in which the Bonaventure Hotel not

only provides accommodation, but serves as a tourist attraction and shopping mall, as well as transforming the environment of downtown Los Angeles³.

The second transformation that has taken place is that there has been such an explosion of cultural production that culture now inhabits every aspect of 'our social life - from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself' (1991: 48). Again, we can see this process at work in the Bonaventure Hotel. Not only does the disorienting environment of the building have an impact on the economic activity of the shopkeepers, but its hyperspace works to produce the schizophrenia and decentred subjectivity characteristic of the postmodern psyche.

Jameson finally provides a bleak analysis of postmodernism. While he admits to being an 'enthusiastic consumer' of postmodern culture, he nevertheless argues that postmodern culture itself is an obstacle to social transformation (1991: 298). The indifference engendered by the postmodern waning of affect lends itself to a reinforcement of the current social order. At the same time, if the impulse to transform society is to be grounded on a collective will to create the future, then the postmodern pastiche of history not only inclines us to lose our own sense of history, it simultaneously undermines a sense of the future (1991: 46). Jameson warns against the futility of being either for or against postmodernism as a 'category mistake': to be for or against it involves the taking of a *moral* stance towards it, while what we really need to do is provide an *analysis* of its function (1991: 46 and 299). Nevertheless, as Jameson attempts to show in his analysis, postmodernism assists

in intensifying the mechanisms of (late) capitalism rather than opening up possibilities for those mechanisms to be challenged.

b) Pastiche and parody

We are now in a position to return to Jameson's argument about pastiche and parody, and to situate it in relation to his overall theory of postmodernism. Jameson equates both parody and pastiche with the wearing of a mask, and his examples of parodic masks are taken from modernist literature. As the scale of monopoly capitalism threatened to dwarf the modern subject, he argues, modernism took refuge in the projection of increasingly idiosyncratic, individual styles:

the Faulknerian long sentence,... with its breathless gerundives; Lawrentian nature imagery punctuated by testy colloquialism; Wallace Stevens's inveterate hypostasis of nonsubstantive parts of speech...; the fateful (but finally predictable) swoops in Mahler from high orchestral pathos into village accordion sentiment...
(Jameson, 1991: 16)

Faulkner, Lawrence, Stevens and Mahler, then, each adopt an idiosyncratic mask. The crucial feature of each of these examples, however, is that they qualify as idiosyncratic only insofar as they depart from certain norms of literary (and, in the case of Mahler, musical) construction. In each case, the norm ultimately 'reasserts itself, in a not necessarily unfriendly way, by a systematic mimicry of their wilful eccentricities' (1991: 16).

Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche turns on the alleged disappearance of norms of this sort. Social life, he argues, has suffered a 'linguistic fragmentation' (1991: 17). Even

'media speech', - such as BBC English - has become just another linguistic style in the proliferation of media texts. In addition, every niche of social life now operates its own dialect, both in terms of the jargon of different disciplines and professions, and in terms of the discursive style of different 'ethnic, gender, race, religious and class-factional' social groups (1991: 17). While society was once held together by the norms and ideology of the ruling class, argues Jameson, 'the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm' (1991: 17). Such a situation disarms parodic discourse, which is now unable to appeal to the norms crucial to its operation.

With the disappearance of such norms, Jameson argues, pastiche has become one of the most prominent features of postmodern culture. The pasticheur still wears a mask but, unlike the parodist, the wearing of the mask is devoid of both 'ulterior motives' and 'the satiric impulse' (1991: 17). In the field of architecture, for example, this has given rise to the practice of 'quoting' architectural styles from the past in the fabric of a contemporary building. But, argues Jameson, the only purpose of such a practice is 'the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past' (1991: 18), rather than a critical incorporation of them. In the field of cinema, pastiche is evidenced in the practices of the nostalgia film, mentioned above, which allude to representations of the past without actually exploring 'real history'. In the field of literature, Jameson identifies Claude Simon as a pasticheur, who embraces a Faulknerian style as though it were his own (1991: 133-53).

According to Jameson, there are two problems with postmodern pastiche. First, the social fragmentation with which it is associated places obstacles in the way of building a collective movement. This process thus contributes to the way in which postmodern culture as a whole impedes the possibility of a socialist transformation of society. Second, the prominence of pastiche is further evidence of the fact that avant-garde scenarios - the notion that art might serve a revolutionary function - are no longer a possibility. This is a point touched on by Terry Eagleton in his response to Jameson's argument. Agreeing with Jameson's pessimism about the decline of parody in postmodern culture, Eagleton nevertheless identifies one parodic aspect that has survived:

What is parodied by postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant-garde. It is as though postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of... revolutionary avant-gardism...

(Eagleton, 1988: 385)

Jameson would no doubt agree. As we have already seen, postmodern culture produces a decentred form of subjectivity, a lack of critical distance, and a waning of affect, and, together with pastiche, these would seem to combine to undermine the very possibility of avant-garde art. That postmodernism replaces the parodist with the pasticheur, then, is a development that Jameson views with pessimism.

Jameson's discussion of parody would seem to suggest that the decline of the carnivalesque charted by Bakhtin is now complete: postmodernism has produced a culture 'devoid of laughter' (1991: 17; quoted earlier). Indeed, Jameson's argument echoes Bakhtin's

analysis in two significant ways. Firstly, Jameson's argument concerning the emergence of 'discursive heterogeneity' (1991: 17; quoted above) echoes Bakhtin's contention that the medieval configuration of robust parodic styles alongside sacred and proclamatory norms has been replaced by a configuration of heteroglottic democracy where such norms have disappeared (1981: 71; cited above). Secondly, Bakhtin appears to identify a transition from parody to pastiche as one of the features of the process of decline. In his genealogy of the role of the mask, for example, Bakhtin describes the transition from its parodic function in the folk culture of the Middle Ages, to its nadir during the Romantic period. In its carnivalesque context, the mask served several 'ulterior motives':

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life...

(Bakhtin, 1984: 39-40)

As carnival declined, however, so too did the function of the mask, gradually losing its iconoclastic potential. During the Romantic period, for example, Bakhtin argues that the playful mask was replaced with a more 'sombre' version. Echoing Jameson's characterisation of postmodern pastiche, Bakhtin says of the Romantic mask: '[a] terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it' (1984: 40). There is thus a certain proximity between Bakhtin's analysis of the Romantic mask and Jameson's account of postmodern pastiche. There remains a crucial difference between them, however, and that is that Bakhtin is analysing what had become in the Romantic period a marginalised cultural form. In

contrast, Jameson is claiming the dominance of pastiche in contemporary culture. It is, he says, a 'well-nigh universal practice' (1991: 16). What we need to do now is attempt an assessment of this proposition.

If we turn to contemporary British television we can certainly identify examples of pastiche. In Granada Television's *Stars In Their Eyes*, for example, contestants perform a song in the style of a chosen star in as convincing a manner as possible⁴. Towards the end of the show, the studio audience vote on who they believe to be the most authentic. There is no attempt to parody the chosen star's style: the most successful contestants are those for whom the assumed mask conceals (or, indeed, subsumes) their own identity.

It is not clear, however, that such forms of pastiche constitute a *dominant* style in contemporary television. Indeed, the last ten years has seen a wealth of successful parody on British television, often in the form of political satire. Central Television's *Spitting Image* would be the prime example here, with the puppets providing satirical parodies of leading political figures. Such examples lead us to face the first problem with Jameson's argument, and that is its positing of postmodernism as the cultural *dominant* of late capitalism. Along with Steve Best and Douglas Kellner, for example, Simon During has argued that many of the features identified in Jameson's analysis are *emergent* rather than *dominant* qualities in contemporary culture (Best and Kellner, 1991: 187-8; During, 1993: 448). In response, Jameson might argue, with reference to the two examples just cited, that *Spitting Image* is a vestige of *residual* culture, that it owes its origins to the

traditions of British political satire dating back to the eighteenth century. He could point to the prints of William Hogarth, James Gillray, Richard Newton and Thomas Rowlandson as its precursors. In contrast, he could argue, the pastiche of *Stars In Their Eyes* belongs to the cultural dominant because it follows the logic of late capitalism. That is, it is consistent with all of the various features that make this stage of capitalism different from the other stages. The problem with such an argument is that it runs the risk of circularity, in that it takes *Stars In Their Eyes* as definitive of the cultural logic of late capitalism, but then defines this logic in terms of the stylistic features of *Stars In Their Eyes*. While Jameson provides several examples of pastiche, then, it is not clear that this has become a dominant cultural practice. If this is the case, then there is probably more scope for parodic practices within contemporary culture than Jameson would allow. In order to address this possibility, I want to look at a more extended example, Woody Allen's film *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986).

c) *Hannah and Her Sisters*

Hannah and Her Sisters follows the fortunes of four sisters and their respective partners over a period of two years, beginning and ending with a Thanksgiving meal. Woody Allen's character, Mickey, is Hannah's ex-husband, and in the course of the film he struggles both with a hypochondriac anxiety about his own health, and with a metaphysical anxiety about the meaning of life, variously seeking solace in Judaism, Catholicism and Krishnaism. Towards the end of the film, he recounts to Veronica, one of

Hannah's sisters, the episode when he tried to commit suicide, an attempt which failed. Walking the streets directly after the incident, he enters a cinema, and there on the screen is a scene from the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933). The experience of the film cures Mickey of his anxieties, making him realise that life is worth living: 'I started to sit back, and I actually started to enjoy myself'. What I want to focus on here is the incorporation of the footage from *Duck Soup*, and the possible function that it performs.

Woody Allen's films are not always included under the rubric of postmodernism: they certainly tend to be omitted from Jameson's filmography. It is Norman Denzin who has made out the most trenchant case for addressing Woody Allen's films in the context of postmodernism (Denzin, 1991). Denzin follows Jameson in identifying postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism (1991: ix). Although he advances his own critique of Jameson⁵, Denzin's characterisation of postmodernism nevertheless shares with Jameson's an emphasis on the way in which culture has invaded the entire social and economic environment. Postmodernism, he argues, consists in 'the cinematization of contemporary life' (1991: x), and he identifies three aspects of this condition:

First, reality is a staged, social production. Secondly, the real is now judged against its staged, cinematic-video counterpart... Third, the metaphor of the dramaturgical society... Art not only mirrors life, it structures and reproduces it.

(1991: x)

In the field of cinema, Denzin argues, these circumstances have given rise to a range of texts which both incorporate references to other texts, and evoke a nostalgia for the past. What I want to

argue in relation to *Hannah and Her Sisters* is that, while the Marx Brothers episode can be treated simply as an example of Jamesonian pastiche, this can only generate an impoverished reading of the passage, and that it is only when we also consider its parodic potential that the full complexity of the passage becomes apparent.

That cinema should be so preoccupied with its own history, and that cinematic texts should be so preoccupied with other cinematic texts, illustrates the staged, dramaturgical metaphor to which Denzin appeals. In Allen's movies, Denzin argues, these preoccupations are keenly felt, and the film narrative regularly incorporates visits to the cinema and footage from Hollywood's past⁶. The logic of such texts, Denzin argues, is to assert the myths embodied in Hollywood's past in the face of broken marriages and faltering relationships: 'This dream factory is all we have left. It must not be mocked. It is society's most sacred of social institutions. Inside its fairy tales the myths always work out' (1991: 103). However, since Allen negotiates this territory in the form of a comic discourse, there is often an interplay between deconstructing and reaffirming such myths in the course of the narrative. 'Woody Allen is postmodern America's cinematic moralist', Denzin concludes (1991: 95).

Denzin himself spends little time discussing *Hannah and Her Sisters*, suggesting simply that, in locating Mickey's volte-face in the cinema, the text 'explores the so-called ability of "classic" Hollywood films to bring positive value into postmodern life' (1991: 11). I would agree with Denzin's reading, and argue that it is precisely as a result of the parodic dimension of the film's pastiche

that this exploration is made possible. At the level of pastiche, *Hannah and Her Sisters* is constructed around several intertextual components, incorporating excerpts from songs, an opera, an architectural tour of New York, and a punk performance, as well as the scene from *Duck Soup*. What I would argue in relation to the latter is that its inclusion generates a self-reflexive, parodic motif which operates at a number of levels. This is not an outrageous form of travesty, however, of the sort identified by Bakhtin in his account of medieval parody, but, rather, a less expansive form of the sort he identifies in modern parody. First, in situating the spectator in the cinema, both looking at Mickey, and then looking at the screen, the film foregrounds its own construction as a cinematic text. This foregrounding is reinforced by the fact that the Marx Brothers belong to the same screen comedy tradition as Allen himself. Secondly, just as the scene in *Hannah and her Sisters* is a pivotal one, so the scene incorporated from *Duck Soup* is pivotal, involving a long drawn out decision to go to war, staged as a musical extravaganza. This moment leads onto the film's finale, a ridiculously comic victory in the war itself. In this way, *Hannah and Her Sisters* foregrounds its own narrative construction, drawing particular attention to the manner in which it might itself generate a happy ending. This foregrounding is also reinforced through dialogue: Mickey comments at the end of the film that his tale 'would make a great story'. Thirdly, since the inclusion of the Marx Brothers scene generates these self-reflexive points of interest, the extent to which a classic Hollywood film might 'bring positive value into postmodern life' (Denzin, 1991: 10; quoted above) is itself called into question. The audience are invited to consider both the extent to which *Hannah and Her*

Sisters might imitate the comic happy ending of *Duck Soup*, and the extent to which their own viewing of *Hannah and Her Sisters* might imitate Mickey's viewing of *Duck Soup*, and might in turn endow their life with value. The parodic charge of the Marx Brothers sequence operates at these various levels, then, in setting up a series of questions about the very mechanisms both of film comedy, and of cinema in general.

For Denzin, what differentiates postmodernism from other cultural configurations is the centrality of dramaturgical forms (including cinema), and the ability of those forms to structure the rest of social practice. In its preoccupation with the dynamics of spectatorship, and with the way in which the meanings of comic films might circulate, so *Hannah and Her Sisters* reproduces this postmodern primacy of the dramaturgical. Insofar as *Hannah and Her Sisters* articulates the cultural logic of late capitalism, Denzin would argue, so it can be enlisted as a postmodern text.

d) Problems with Jameson's pastiche

We can use this reading of *Hannah and Her Sisters* to challenge Jameson's interpretation of pastiche as a random form of eclecticism bereft of any 'ulterior motives'. While such an interpretation might seem to apply to *Stars In Their Eyes*, we might wonder whether it is the only way in which to understand eclecticism. In Charles Jencks' taxonomy of postmodern architectural style, for example, eleven 'emergent rules' are listed which, Jencks argues, constitute most of the key features of contemporary postmodern architecture. One of these rules is that

of '*tradition reinterpreted*', and Jencks provides the example of a boathouse at Henley designed by the architect Terry Farrell to illustrate it. According to Jencks, the design draws on 'the syntax and colour of the traditional temple form', and combines them in the fabric of the building (Charles Jencks, 1993: 291). However, the building is not simply wearing a mask without any purpose, as Jameson's definition of pastiche would imply. Rather, 'old forms [the temple] are given new meanings': '[t]he temple columns become paired pilasters, the broken pediment is extended down into the brick base to become a water gate for the boats, and the acroteria become spotlights' (1993: 291). When we understand this 'new validity', argues Jencks, 'the aura of pastiche disappears' (1993: 291). In a similar manner, *Hannah and Her Sisters* reinterprets *Duck Soup*, placing it in a new context, and inviting a parodic, self-reflexive reconsideration of the nature of film comedy.

Linda Hutcheon has further challenged Jameson, arguing that his distinction between parody and pastiche is based on an outdated definition of parody. This outdated definition takes parody to consist of 'ridiculing imitation' (Hutcheon, 1988: 26). That this form of imitation does not seem to be wholly apparent in the practices identified by Jameson as pastiche does not, as Jameson assumes, imply that such practices must be devoid of parodic qualities altogether. Rather, Hutcheon argues, it suggests that we need to redefine parody in accordance with the nuances of contemporary postmodern practices. The incorporation of previous styles in contemporary works is not, as Jameson would have it, a random eclecticism. Rather, it is a self-reflexive process that constructs a 'dialogue with the past' (1988: 23). In this redefined

sense, parody consists of 'repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity' (1988: 26). Jencks' example of the Henley boathouse would seem to fall neatly under the scope of such a definition. The building repeats features of the Greek temple, but maintains a distance from their original meaning (e.g. their sacredness) by ironically providing them with new meanings (e.g. secular, functional ones). In this way, the building combines similarity *and* difference, while Jameson's account implies that pastiche can only signify similarity. Hutcheon's reconceptualisation of parody is of equal applicability to *Hannah and Her Sisters*. In incorporating the Marx brothers sequence, the film signifies its generic similarity to *Duck Soup*, but it also invites the audience to consider the extent to which it might itself deviate from such conventions. In overlooking these more nuanced forms of parody, Jameson's analysis would appear to have its shortcomings.

A further problem is Jameson's univalent reading of postmodern culture. What I have tried to establish throughout this thesis is that a dialogic approach to texts not only provides an appropriate means for a historical analysis, but that it offers a particularly appropriate way in which to approach comic texts because of their semiotic ambiguity. In relation to *Hannah and her Sisters*, for example, I would argue that, while the Marx Brothers sequence might be read by some simply as an amusing incorporation of another text, others might relate it to the self-reflexive issues that I have outlined above. However, in spite of his thesis concerning the 'stylistic and discursive heterogeneity' of social life, Jameson's analysis of postmodern texts seems to

overlook the possibility both of aberrant readings, and of the ambiguities in a text prompting alternative readings to his own. Both Docker and Featherstone note the way in which Jameson seems to universalise his personal judgements about a particular text (Docker, 1994: 121; Featherstone, 1989: 126). As Docker points out, Jameson acknowledges that the rooms in the Bonaventure Hotel 'are in the worst of taste' (Jameson, 1991: 43), an assessment which would seem to imply a Kantian standard of aesthetic judgement. At the same time, as Susan Suleiman has argued, implicit in Jameson's claims about pastiche is 'the assumption that works of art determine their own reading and meaning' (Suleiman, 1990: 192). Since the work of pastiche is itself devoid of laughter, satire and ulterior motives, Jameson implies, it is therefore incapable of being subject to responses which might involve either laughter, satire or ulterior motives. Jameson therefore provides a univalent reading of the practices of the pasticheur, and we might contrast this reading with Bakhtin's analysis of the Romantic mask, mentioned earlier. While Bakhtin argues that the way in which the mask is deployed in Romantic culture connotes a sombre emptiness in comparison with its folk culture signification, he nevertheless maintains the possibility of its multivalence, arguing that it 'still retains something of its popular carnival nature' (Bakhtin, 1984: 40). Indeed, multivalent signification is often cited as one of the features of postmodern texts. Jencks, for example, includes '*double-coding*' and '*multivalence*' as two of the eleven emergent rules of postmodern architecture. The precise distinction between the two rules is rather unclear, but what Jencks seems to suggest in relation to each is that postmodern architecture is encoded to produce

variable decodings, acknowledging 'the simultaneous validity of opposite approaches and different tastes' (1993: 289). Jameson's analysis of pastiche, then, implicitly assumes that the pasticheur's texts are only capable of producing a single reading. We can question this assumption not only on the grounds that all reading is contextual (and consequently liable to produce a diversity of interpretation), but that the practices identified by Jameson as pastiche are allegedly more complex (and, therefore, more susceptible to multivalent readings) than Jameson would allow.

In assuming the univalence of postmodern texts, and, consequently, the passivity of the reader in consuming this univalent signification, Jameson's analysis lends itself to a position of cultural pessimism. Such a position can be called into question even on the basis of Jameson's own examples, however. The Bonaventure Hotel, for instance, embodies several of the key features of postmodernism. However, as Jameson notes, there is a certain irony in the fact that, although the hotel was built by a millionaire businessman, its shops are so difficult to find that 'all the merchandise is marked down to bargain prices' (1991: 44). Such contradictions might prompt rather different assessments of the Bonaventure Hotel, and it is at such points that cracks might begin to appear in the glossy veneer that constitutes Jamesonian postmodernism. If, as Jencks and Hutcheon have argued, postmodern culture is littered with examples of double-coded texts, then we can call into question the univalence of postmodernism, the assumed passivity of postmodern readers, and, consequently, the pessimism of Jameson's theory.

Jameson bemoans the decline of parody and the emergence (or, in his parlance, the dominance) of pastiche, with its absence of laughter and satiric intent. Given the centrality that he attributes to pastiche in the terrain of postmodernism, contemporary culture would not seem to tolerate an abundance of comic techniques. However, we have identified several problems, both in Jameson's analysis of pastiche, and in his overall account of postmodernism, all of which would suggest that his theory is in need of some modification. It is thus appropriate to contrast Jameson's analysis with theories that find more of an affinity between postmodernism and comic techniques.

Postmodern laughter?

For Jerry Aline Flieger, the comic is not simply *prominent* within postmodern practices, but actually *fundamental* to them. As a result, she would appear to offer an alternative to the conclusions reached by Jameson. Flieger begins by attributing to postmodernism an almost carnivalesque function. 'In our own day,' she says,

post-ing the modern continues to imply dethroning the serious, undermining the legitimate, and, most recently, exposing the profoundly parodic nature of those 'centrisms'... upon which Western philosophy and social order has been constructed.

(Flieger, 1991: 3)

Flieger accepts the validity of associating postmodernism with a number of key issues: a 'crisis of legitimation'; a 'problematization of the activity of representation'; a 'questioning of the concept of originality'; and an 'emphasis on excess, leftover, residue' (1991:

29). However, as the above quote suggests, it is the 'ludic, ironic or parodic quality' of postmodernism that Flieger takes to be fundamental, and she uses the word 'comic' as an 'umbrella term' to cover these related qualities (1991: 12-3).

Flieger's analysis of the way in which these features operate draws on the work of Charles Baudelaire and Maurice Blanchot. In 'Of the Essence in Laughter', Baudelaire distinguishes between two forms of comedy, 'referential' and 'absolute' (Baudelaire, 1972). Flieger likens each of these comic forms to types of cognitive process identified by Maurice Blanchot in *L'entretien infini*. Baudelaire's referential comedy can be characterised in terms of a feeling of superiority, argues Flieger (1991: 34). The person laughing adjudges the comic object to fall short of the social codes expected of them. This is a comedy of manners, which has the effect of enforcing social codes in the manner described in Bergson's theory of laughter. Flieger equates this form of comedy with Blanchot's definition of understanding ('parole d'entendement') as a process of 'identify[ing] by separating' (1991: 31-2). In laughing at the comic object, the person laughing not only separates themselves from the person who is the object of their mirth, but, in so doing, they confirm their own sense of identity. Flieger notes Jacques Lacan's citation of referential comedy as contributing in this way to 'the "illusion" of a unified ego' (1991: 39). Given the illusory nature of the unified ego produced here, the problem with referential jokers is that they 'blind themselves to their own vulnerability and implication in the downfall of their victim' (1991: 46)⁷.

Absolute comedy, on the other hand, affords the laughter the possibility of identifying with the comic object. This is a conciliatory, celebratory form of comedy that has been likened both to farce (Nelson, 1990: 25), and to carnival (Kern, 1980). Flieger also likens it to Blanchot's conception of reasoning ('parole de raison'), which Blanchot defines as a process of 'surmount[ing] by negating' (1991: 32). What is being surmounted here is not the comic object itself, but the limits that the comic behaviour transgresses (e.g. the rules that are broken during carnival). However, just as the broken rules are reinstated at the end of the carnival, so these transgressed limits will reassert themselves at the end of the joke. As a result, argues Flieger, the problem with absolute jokers is that 'they blind themselves to the permanence of the limits abolished' (1991: 46)⁸.

Up to this point in Flieger's argument, it is not entirely clear whether the appeals to Blanchot actually assist in clarifying the discussion of Baudelaire's categories. Flieger seems to be able both to characterise and to problematise these categories without any particular assistance from Blanchot. However, given the problematic status of both referential and absolute comedy, Flieger goes in search of a third comic form which might escape such problems, and in order to discover this form she appeals to Blanchot's third category of cognitive processes, 'literary process' ('parole littéraire') (1991: 32). Blanchot describes this category as a process of 'surmount[ing] by doubling' (1991: 33), and Flieger argues that this notion of doubling neatly approximates the comic operations of the postmodern text: 'a plural pleasantry, a worked and reworked text' (1991: 48). This third form of comedy, the

postmodern comic, employs the devices of repetition, recurrence and remotivation. As such, we can identify it at work in the passage from *Hannah and Her Sisters*: in inserting the Marx Brothers scene into the text, the film undertakes a re-working of it, deploying it in the self-reflexive mechanism outlined above. What is more, the sequence invites neither the superior laughter of referential comedy, nor the celebratory laughter of absolute comedy. If anything, it simply invites a wry smile. For Flieger, then, the postmodern comic provides an alternative both to referential comedy and to absolute comedy.

In identifying the comic as a fundamental characteristic of postmodernism in this way, Flieger presents us with an alternative to Jameson's vision of a cultural realm devoid of laughter. What is more, not only does she assign the comic a fundamental position within postmodern culture, but she attributes to it the potential to furnish us with critical forms of knowledge, and in this she concurs with Hutcheon, who similarly defines the constitutive features of postmodernism in terms of a practice of reinterpreting, reincorporating and remotivating. What unites their two accounts is the idea that postmodernism provides us with a crucial historical perspective on the present. Comic techniques (Flieger) and parodic techniques (Hutcheon) contribute to this process in a fundamental manner. For Flieger, the provisional nature of the postmodern comic - the idea that a text will be reworked - also reveals a commitment to an understanding of the historical process. The postmodern joker, she claims, is 'always en route, not superior to reality or able to control it, but caught in the process initiated by the fictive work...' (1991: 50). Meanwhile,

Hutcheon identifies a fundamental relationship between postmodernism and a problematisation of history. Her key definition of postmodernist practice is 'historiographic metafiction' (1988: ix), works of art, that is, which maintain a 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs' (1988: 5). This is why she identifies parody as such an important form within postmodern practices, because in incorporating styles from the past, such practices foreground the extent to which those styles are precisely historical human constructs.

We might cite *Hannah and Her Sisters* here in relation to Flieger and Hutcheon's arguments. On the one hand, the Marx Brothers scene would seem to foreground both films' (*Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Duck Soup*) historical position within the traditions of film comedy. At the same time, by inviting a comparative consideration of the dénouements of the two texts, the sequence would seem to draw attention to the construction of comic narrative.

In ascribing this sort of potential to postmodern practices, Hutcheon and Flieger distance themselves from Jameson's account of postmodernism. For Jameson, as we have seen, one of the key features of postmodernism is its ability to disorient us, both temporally and spatially, a view tackled directly by Hutcheon. Postmodernism, she argues, does not confound our ability to position ourselves in relation to 'real history', as Jameson imagines. Rather, it contests 'the very possibility of our being able to *know* the "ultimate objects" of the past', accepting that our access to history is necessarily mediated discursively, either through textual discourse or, for example, through the discourse of

architecture (1988: 24). Both Flieger and Hutcheon thus seek to establish a relationship between comic techniques, postmodernism and historical reflection.

The idea that comic techniques might perform some sort of historicising role has already arisen in relation to Bakhtin's theory of carnival. Bakhtin attributes to carnivalesque practices the potential to foreground the historicity of social arrangements by constructing a temporary, defamiliarising reorganisation of them⁹. It is thus worth considering the extent to which Hutcheon and Flieger's respective accounts of postmodern comic practices might be synthesised with Bakhtin's account of carnival.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon explicitly invokes a Bakhtinian perspective. Since the parodic, ironic status of postmodern practices provides them with a necessary ambivalence, and since such practices construct complex relationships between the present and signs and images retrieved from the past, so an analysis of postmodern texts requires a thorough interrogation of the dialogic context within which they are produced and consumed. With its emphasis on the dialogic nature of signification, Hutcheon argues, a Bakhtinian perspective provides us with just such a framework (1988: 54).

In addition to this endorsement of Bakhtin, in an earlier article Hutcheon explicitly draws on a notion of the carnivalesque as a means of characterising postmodern practices. Focusing on contemporary forms of narrative, she argues that postmodernist fiction embodies several carnivalesque structures. Firstly, in its metafictional preoccupations and its tendency to foreground the

artifice of literary construction, as in the work of John Fowles and John Barth, contemporary narrative enacts a carnivalesque rebellion against the official ideology of realism (1983: 83-4). Secondly, contemporary fiction has succeeded in blurring the distinction between high and popular culture, incorporating 'comic books, Hollywood movies, popular songs, [and] pornography' (1983: 87). Tim Robbins' novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, for example, includes two epigraphs, 'one from William Blake and one from Roy Rogers' (1983: 87). This process of cross-fertilisation between high and popular culture mirrors Rabelais' own plundering of carnivalesque imagery at the time of the Renaissance. Thirdly, there is a tendency for contemporary fiction to draw on sexual and erotic imagery, and thus to appeal to the material bodily principle of the carnivalesque. However, whereas Bakhtin emphasised the positive, reproductive aspect of the ambivalent bodily imagery of carnival, contemporary work, such as the novels of William Burroughs, tends to emphasise its negative, decaying aspect (1983: 89-90). If at one level the carnivalesque preoccupations of contemporary fiction acquire a negative aspect, however, at another level they direct us towards a very positive aspect:

today we are faced with self-reflexive forms of fiction which internalize the structures of more popular art forms as a way of activating in the reader both a self-consciousness about the literariness and fictiveness of what he or she is reading and also a subsequent acknowledgement of the value of such creative and ordering aesthetic processes.

(1983: 88)

If the decaying aspect of the carnivalesque body is represented in the erotic imagery of contemporary fiction, then its reproductive aspect is embodied in the very act of reading, which confers on the

reader a 'carnavalesque reproductive energy' (1983: 94). For Hutcheon, then, Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque provides a potent means of characterising postmodern literary techniques. Indeed, challenging Bakhtin's claim that the carnivalesque tradition has declined since the Renaissance, Hutcheon argues that 'our cultural forms today have become even more parodic and self-reflecting than ever' (1983: 84-5).

While Hutcheon is keen to establish the relationship between postmodern practices and the carnivalesque, however, Flieger draws a distinction between them. Indeed, her definition of the postmodern comic as 'a plural pleasantry, a worked and reworked text' (1991: 48), is explicitly advanced as an alternative both to a Bergsonian view of laughter as an expression of superiority, and to the position which sees laughter as a form of 'festival madness' (1991: 53). Although Flieger doesn't specifically mention Bakhtin here, it is this latter position which most approximates Bakhtin's conception of carnivalesque laughter. Apart from a shared emphasis on the propensity of comic techniques to provide us with a critical perspective on the present, then, Flieger's conception of the postmodern comic would seem to have little in common with a Bakhtinian conception of carnival.

In identifying comic techniques as central to postmodernist practices, and in attributing to those practices a critical potential, Flieger and Hutcheon's analyses provide an alternative to Jameson's pessimistic vision of a culture devoid of laughter. However, where Flieger and Hutcheon appear to differ is over the extent to which they are prepared to invoke the concept of carnival as a model with which to characterise postmodernist practices.

For Hutcheon, a notion of the carnivalesque provides us with an apt metaphor with which to explore contemporary narrative: in this sense, postmodern laughter is closely allied to carnivalesque laughter. For Flieger, on the other hand, postmodern laughter is devoid of the 'festival madness' (1991: 53) characteristic of carnivalesque laughter. What emerges as a point of contention, therefore, is the extent to which the concept of carnival might provide an appropriate model for an analysis of postmodern culture. It is to this issue that I now turn.

Carnival and postmodern culture

In Hutcheon's study of contemporary narrative, we have already seen one example of an attempt to deploy carnival as an analytical tool with which to investigate postmodernism. Hutcheon's study was limited to certain literary formations, however, and in this section I want to look at an approach which assumes that the category of carnival has a more widespread applicability. In three books, *Television Culture* (Fiske, 1987), *Reading the Popular* (Fiske, 1989a) and *Understanding Popular Culture* (Fiske, 1989b), John Fiske deploys the concept of carnival as one of his central categories, applying it not only to particular types of cultural practice (wrestling, game shows, MTV, *Miami Vice*), but also to the very dynamics of popular culture.

Fiske turns to the category of the carnivalesque because of the apparent inadequacy of certain other forms of analysis in the discipline of cultural studies (1989a: 1-13). Forms of analysis which focus predominantly on the economics of popular culture,

for example, tend to locate the control of popular culture with those who produce it, rather than those who consume it. As a result, such approaches tend both to overstate the hegemonic function of popular culture, and to take for granted the passivity of its consumers. Similarly, analyses which focus predominantly on the ideological form of popular practices tend to overstate the extent to which the consumers of popular culture simultaneously take on board the dominant ideological viewpoint which structures those practices. Both forms of analysis tend to view the pleasure associated with popular culture in fairly negative terms, conceiving it as a 'reward' in return for taking on board the hegemonic or dominant ideological viewpoint (1987: 225). In appealing to the category of carnival, then, Fiske hopes to avoid these problems by devising a more adequate account of pleasure, and a more dynamic model of the way in which people actually interact with popular culture.

Fiske rarely engages in detail with the debate about postmodernism. However, he does borrow the term to describe the intertextual nature of popular culture, its ability to blur genres, media, and cultural demarcations (1987: 254)¹⁰. Further, he characterises the view that treats pleasure as the opposite of ideology, rather than as its servant, as postmodernist (1987: 225). Insofar as his own analysis approaches the issue of pleasure from this angle, so Fiske would, on his own terms, seem to occupy the terrain of postmodern theory.

As we have seen, carnival provided a site where physical pleasures could be exploited to the full, and where the enjoyment of such pleasures carried with it both a celebratory and a critical

potential, at once celebrating the access to proscribed forms of pleasure, while at the same time enacting a critique of the structures which officially restricted such pleasures. In appealing to such a model, Fiske hopes to devise an account of cultural practices capable of identifying in popular culture a range of pleasures which, in embodying a celebratory and critical potential, actually work against the hegemonic drive of economic and ideological forces. In so doing, Fiske rejects the safety-valve approach to carnival (see Chapter One), and attempts to construct a dynamic model of popular culture. 'The threat to the power of the dominant', he claims, 'is evidenced by their constant attempts to control, delegitimize, and disparage the pleasures of the people' (1989a: 9). Since this is the case, he argues, the carnivalesque pleasures of popular culture must amount to more than a mere safety-valve; rather, they represent a site of resistance.

I want to focus on one of Fiske's examples of a carnivalesque site of resistance, the American TV game show *New Price is Right*, which appeared on British television simply as *Price is Right*. Staged as a competition between contestants' knowledge of the price of a range of consumer durables and household goods, Fiske argues that the show is carnivalesque insofar as it offers a revaluation of what are traditionally considered to be women's skills, skills which tend to be undervalued by patriarchal culture. Fiske identifies three areas in which carnivalesque inversions take place. First, the audience (largely made up of women) are encouraged to be as noisy as possible in their support for the various contestants. In allowing these moments of excessive behaviour, the show 'provides a carnivalesque inversion of the

more normal silence with which [women's] skills are met in everyday life' (1989a: 21). Secondly, the programme inverts the conventional rules of good housekeeping. In awarding contestants with cash and commodity prizes in return for displaying their knowledge of consumer prices, Fiske argues, 'the woman's skills are rewarded not by spending less of the family money..., but by money or goods for *her*' (1989a: 21). Thirdly, the show replaces the process of shopping as a form of domestic labour with the process of shopping as a form of leisure. As a result, Fiske argues, contestants (and viewers alike) are repositioned in relation to the commodity system (1989a: 140). Again, Fiske interprets this transformation in terms of a carnivalesque inversion of everyday hierarchies, whereby 'the normal ideological practice of making the producers' interests appear identical to those of consumers is momentarily disrupted' (1987: 277). At a number of levels, then, Fiske deploys the concept of carnival as a category with which to interpret the dynamics of *New Price is Right*, identifying the programme as a source of resistant pleasures.

Fiske is not arguing that *New Price is Right* is entirely free of contradictions. Indeed, his notion of resistant forms of pleasure is dependent precisely upon the idea that popular texts of this sort incorporate dominant ideological voices: 'they would not be popular', he argues, 'if they did not contain both contradictory forces, those of ideological dominance and of resistance to it' (1989a: 145). Further, he characterises the carnivalesque in terms of a *potential* within texts, rather than as an unrestrained and unlicensed certainty (1987: 277). However, the problem with his account would appear to be that, by neglecting the 'hegemonic

thrust' (1989a: 145) of such practices, Fiske tends to overstate their resistant potential. We might choose instead to focus on the extent to which *New Price is Right* glamorises consumerism, and on the relationship between this aspect of the programme and the advertisements which surround it as it is broadcast. Further, we might draw a sharper distinction between the experience of the studio audience, those who participate in a public display of excess, and the experience of the television audience, those who watch the show in private space of the living room. For all that Fiske might maintain that the television audience are equally able to participate in the carnivalesque inversions which structure the show, at an experiential level the opportunities for them to participate in carnivalesque excess would seem to be lacking. In other words, we need to distinguish, as Mikita Hoy has pointed out, 'between the text which promotes the carnivalesque in linguistic terms, and the actual carnival of being and doing itself (concert, festival, disco, club, shopping, and so on)' (Hoy, 1992: 780; quoted earlier). For a number of reasons, then, Fiske's carnivalesque analysis would seem to offer only a partial account of *New Price is Right*.

Fiske's deployment of the category of carnival provides us with some useful insights. Rather than making a case for the revolutionary potential of popular culture, in addressing the terrain of resistant forms of pleasure Fiske hopes to open up a space where we are able to explore the *progressive* potential of popular culture as it interacts with the lives of people at the level of the everyday (1989b: 161). However, as we have seen in relation to his analysis of *New Price is Right*, in focusing on such potential at the

expense of a text's hegemonic potential, Fiske tends to elide the contradictory detail of popular culture. And in championing pleasure in this way, while neglecting other factors, Fiske fails to situate popular culture within an adequately theorised model of social and economic forces. If pleasure is one of the key points in the postmodern terrain (Lovibond, 1993: 407), then Fiske attempts to describe the postmodern carnival. What I have suggested here is that his description has its limitations.

Conclusion

In the course of this chapter we have seen how Bakhtin's assessment of the status of parody in modern culture prefigures the terms of the debate concerning the relationship between contemporary, postmodern culture and comic practices. It is Jameson who, in envisaging a culture robbed of parodic possibilities, develops an account of postmodernism which would seem to take Bakhtin's thesis about carnivalesque decline to its furthest conclusion. However, in overstating the redundancy of parody, it was argued that Jameson's account was overly pessimistic. At the other extreme, it was argued that Fiske's account of contemporary popular culture as a source of carnivalesque pleasures was overly optimistic. In between, Flieger and Hutcheon identified in postmodernism a parodic imperative which afforded it a discrete critical potential. On the basis of this discussion, I do not want to try and locate the precise point at which contemporary culture currently finds itself on the declining trajectory of the carnivalesque. Rather, what I want to draw

attention to is the heterogeneity of contemporary cultural formations. In the course of this chapter, I have referred to examples from architecture, cinema, literature and television. With its focus on the relationship between literary formations and popular practices, it is unlikely that Bakhtin's theory of carnival is going to be able to encapsulate the entire realm of contemporary culture. Nevertheless, what I would argue is that Bakhtin's theory has at least allowed us to begin to address the status and potential of carnivalesque practices and comic techniques at different points across the range of contemporary cultural forms. In this way, I would conclude, I have tried to perform the task undertaken in the previous four chapters: to explore the relationship between issues within comic theory and the historical development of the carnivalesque tradition.

Notes

1 Bakhtin's words are as follows:

The speaking subjects of high, proclamatory genres... have all been replaced by the writer, simply the writer, who has fallen heir to their styles. He either stylizes them (i.e., assumes the guise of the prophet, a preacher, and so forth) or he parodies them (to one degree or another).

(Bakhtin, 1986: 132)

In this passage, Bakhtin's conception of stylisation can be equated with the technique of pastiche.

2 Here Jameson draws on Raymond Williams' distinction between dominant, residual and emergent cultural forms. According to Williams, any particular cultural configuration will consist of a combination of dominant, residual and emergent forms. Dominant cultural practices constitute the 'hegemonic norm' within any cultural configuration, but alongside that dominant cultural logic will exist both residual forms (the remnants of

-
- previous dominant forms), and emergent forms (newly evolving types of cultural practice) (Jameson, 1991: 6).
- 3 This first transformation effectively deprives the avant-garde of its critical function, because the commodification of culture deprives it of the necessary critical distance. At the same time, Jameson argues, any account of avant-garde art has to rely upon a notion of a centred subject, but this form of subjectivity is also undermined by postmodern culture (1991: 15).
 - 4 On 27 May 1995, for example, contestants 'starred' as Brenda Lee, k d lang, Phil Lynott, Johnny Cash and Bono.
 - 5 Denzin argues that Jameson provides an inadequate analysis both of the relationship between late capitalism and previous stages of capitalism, and of the relationship between postmodernism and previous cultural dominants. Further, he argues that Jameson overlooks the realm of lived experience, and that, in identifying the depthlessness of postmodern culture, he undermines his own attempt to provide an objective analysis of it (Denzin, 1991: 41-8)
 - 6 Denzin actually offers an extended analysis of *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989) (1991: 95-106).
 - 7 Susan Purdie develops a very similar account of the role joking behaviour in the construction of subjectivity. In allowing us to advertise our own mastery of discourse, she argues, the joke is a powerful site in the projection of a unified identity (Purdie, 1993; see chapter two).
 - 8 This is identical to the argument that rejects carnival as nothing more than a safety-valve. Since the form of carnival necessarily involves a restoration of broken rules, the argument goes, so carnival can only ever function as a means for venting discontent. We looked at such arguments in more detail in Chapter One.
 - 9 As we have seen in the previous chapter, Brecht's theory of comedy, which enlists comic techniques as a form of alienation device, also attributes to comedy a historicising function.
 - 10 Fiske cites music videos and *Miami Vice* as examples here.

Conclusion

The grotesque tradition peculiar to the marketplace and the academic literary tradition have parted ways and can no longer be brought back together.

(Bakhtin, 1984: 109; quoted earlier)

In my introduction, I considered some newspaper reactions to my research project. It was argued that they were underpinned by a key opposition between serious and comic discourse, and that this opposition had developed historically in relation to a series of cultural transitions. In the course of this thesis, I have explored particular moments in the history of comic theory in the light of this series of transitions, focusing in particular on the configurations of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism. What I would conclude in the light of this discussion is that, if the Renaissance marks the point at which the 'grotesque tradition' and the 'academic literary tradition' first parted company, then far from there being a smooth process of development since that point, the history of comic theory is marked by a series of shifts and reversals.

In Chapter Two I identified three relationships on which my historical analysis of comic theory would focus:

- a) The relationship between Bakhtin's texts and other texts.
- b) The interrelationship between different comic theories.
- c) The relationship between the present and the past.

In order to conclude my overall argument, I want to reconsider these categories in the light of my preceding discussion.

- a) *The relationship between Bakhtin's texts and other texts.*

In Chapter One, I argued that Bakhtin's theory of carnival incorporated both a historical and a utopian perspective, and in the course of this thesis I have sought to exploit both of these dimensions. In historical terms, I took Bakhtin's own account of the decline of the carnivalesque as a backdrop against which to set my own analysis of certain moments in the history of comic theory. Such an approach not only enabled me to relate developments in the field of comic theory to more general processes of cultural development, it also allowed me to elaborate on the trajectory described by Bakhtin, particularly in relation to the conjunctures on which I focused. For all that the utopian dimension to Bakhtin's theory of carnival would appear to detract from this historical project, I have deployed his utopian conception of laughter as a platform from which to explore subsequent comic theories. In so doing, I have tried to highlight the extent to which particular moments in the history of comic theory can be said to belong to a post-Renaissance process of carnivalesque decline. At the same time, in revealing the various configurations within which the status and function of laughter have been envisaged

historically, and in charting the transitory significance of comic phenomena, we are reminded of the ultimate futility of attempting to derive from Bakhtin's utopian perspective an ahistorical account of the essence of laughter.

While Bakhtin's theory has been used as a starting point for my discussion, then, so my subsequent analysis of comic theory has been an attempt both to reflect and elaborate upon his thesis.

b) *The interrelationship between different comic theories.*

In elaborating on Bakhtin's thesis in this way, I have sought to identify significant points of contrast between different comic theories. While Kant reluctantly mistrusted humour as the enemy of beauty and rational thought, for example, Schopenhauer celebrated it as the usurper of reason. And while Bergson viewed modern social relations as a source of comedy, he simultaneously conceived laughter in terms of a disciplinary tool capable of reinforcing prevailing social arrangements. Freud was equally ambivalent. Citing the joke's rebellious potential in bypassing codes of social decorum, he also identified it as a site symbolising the extent to which adult life fell short of childhood happiness. And while Brecht turned to the joke of contradiction as a powerful tool within the context of a theory of performance, more recently theorists of postmodernism have produced divergent accounts concerning the comic and carnivalesque potential of contemporary cultural practices.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies some of the fluctuations that have taken place in the historical decline of the carnivalesque. In attempting a comparative analysis of a range of comic theories, I have tried both to locate some of these fluctuations, and to relate them to their respective contexts.

c) *The relationship between the present and the past.*

Given the current prominence of Bakhtin's work within the field of cultural theory, in conducting a historical analysis of comic theory in the light of Bakhtin's account of carnival, my thesis very much constructs a dialogue between the present and the past; between current theoretical preoccupations with carnival, and earlier theoretical engagements with comic phenomena. Bakhtin first developed his account of carnival over fifty years ago, however, and so I have not only tried to reveal points of complementarity between his theory and recent work in the field of comic theory (see Chapter Two), but I have also tried to update his thesis in relation to current cultural configurations (see Chapter Seven). Moreover, in exploring the methodological issues surrounding a historical analysis of comic theory, I have argued that Bakhtin's work complements recent approaches to intellectual history. In particular, as the following quotation makes clear, Bakhtin envisages the process of inquiry in the human sciences - a domain which would include the discipline of intellectual history - precisely in terms of a dialogic relationship between the present and the past:

The transcription of thinking in the human sciences is always the transcription of a special kind of dialogue: the complex interrelations between the *text* (the object of study and reflection) and the created, framing *context* (questioning, refuting, and so forth) in which the scholar's cognizing and evaluating takes place.

(Bakhtin, 1986: 106-7)

In the course of this thesis, I have argued that Bakhtin's theory of carnival not only provides an appropriate 'framing *context*' within which to analyse comic theory texts, but that such a process might itself simultaneously generate an interrogation of, and an elaboration on, Bakhtin's theory. In the light of my overall analysis, it might be concluded that, while it comes as no surprise to find the press reacting to my research in the way that they did, in mapping the terrain across which comic theory has developed, and in charting the relationship between the 'grotesque tradition' and 'the academic literary tradition' since the Renaissance, it becomes possible to understand the historical antecedents of such a reaction.

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