

BK: Bergson Outline

1. The Comic Pertains to THE HUMAN - things not human are only funny in so far as they can be anthropomorphized
2. The Comic relies upon an ABSENCE OF FEELING – “laughter has no greater foe than emotion”; “comedy demands a momentary anesthesia of the heart.”
3. Comedy is inherently SOCIAL : “Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL significance.”
4. Comedy can be caused ACCIDENTALLY FROM EXTERNAL CAUSES through a “lack of physical elasticity”. Causes may include Rigidity and Momentum. The catalyst for the comical effect (obstacle) may appear spontaneously in the environment (an unseen banana peel to be slipped upon) or planted mischievously by a human agent of comedy (prankster). Regarding comedy caused by External Circumstances Berman says, “The comic is...accidental: It remains...in superficial contact with the person.”
5. COMEDY from INTERNAL CAUSES occurs when the “Lack of Elasticity” comes from within a person’s character. A primary example Bergson gives is ABSENTMINDEDNESS. He describes an “inborn inelasticity” which causes us to “continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer no longer audible, to say what is no longer to the point: to adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present.”
6. Bergson says that if we (the audience) know(s) the origin of the Comic Effect - if we are witness to the cause - it will seem more “Natural” to us. He says that the naturalness of origin, which he calls NATURAL CAUSES, WILL INCREASE THE COMIC EFFECT. For example, if we know that an absentminded hero (e.g. Don Quixote) fails to see a stumbling block because he is looking for an elusive star (his Dulcinea), our amusement will be heightened. He says that in the case of such a character “...their absentmindedness is systematic and organized around one central idea.”
7. Of VICE Bergson says “...vices have the same relation to character that rigidity of a fixed idea has to intellect.” Whereas Absentmindedness “borrows our flexibility” Vice adds its own rigidity to our character. In other words our character becomes controlled by the Vice in such a way as to render him comically rigid.
8. Comic Characters are in some degree AUTOMATONS, their behavior governed by a force outside of their control. In this way they resemble

puppets.

9. COMIC BLINDNESS: Comic characters are in blind in some measure. They have tunnel vision – like horses wearing blinders. Bergson says, "...a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious...he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world."
10. Bergson identifies TENSION and ELASTICITY as defining requirements of life. Tension is the required alertness and elasticity is the ability to adapt. According to Bergson, "If these two forces are lacking in the body...we have sickness and infirmity and accidents of every kind. If they are lacking in the mind we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity...if they are lacking in the character we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life..."
11. Laughter is a SOCIAL GESTURE expressing itself in order to correct inadaptable tendencies and eccentricity.
12. A MASK is a freezing of the physiognomy into a fixed expression "suggesting some simple mechanical action in which its personality would be forever absorbed."
13. Bergson concerns himself with MECHANISM. He says, "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion to the degree they remind us of a machine."
14. Mechanical behavior is imitable. IMITATION is funny because it points out the part of a person's behavior that is rigid and automatic.
15. Bergson claims that REPETITION is funny because really supple life would never repeat itself. In Bergson's view repetition is mechanical. He holds a similar opinion of REPLICATION.
16. Bergson cites the "CLOCKWORK ARRANGEMENT OF HUMAN EVENTS" as one method by which the comic dramatist uses MECHANISM to cause laughter.
17. COSTUME represents to Bergson "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," and is essentially comic.
18. CEREMONY is society disguising itself in a rigid pattern or form and is likewise mechanical and inherently comic. Bergson calls it "a human regulation of affairs usurping the place of the laws of nature."

19. Bergson considers the demands of the body comic because of their gross MATERIALITY in contrast to the suppleness of the soul. The tension caused by having a body is a source of constant comedy to him, especially as humans strive to live in a moral dimension. "Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person when it is the moral side that is concerned."
20. "We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being turned into a thing."

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