

Theories of the comic

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Abstract: *The present report brings into discussion, by investigating and determining some directions in its evolution, the comic, in the context of the new social, economic, political and cultural realities of contemporary comedy. We have as a subject of analysis a distinct form of the dramaturgy, namely the comedy, through the prism of the multiple forms through which it is presented, and of the recurrent aesthetic formulas of these dramatic species. We do not propose the discovery of new formulas, nor the reversal of the already existing ones, we try to offer an alternative, a practical way of analysis, a thematic approach specific to the actor, not the philologist. This and from the desire not to treat marginal comedy anymore, from the desire to be granted the proper status, the motivation of choosing the theme being a subjective one.*

Key-words: *comedy; comic; theatre; humor; satire.*

1. Introduction

Ancient Greece is the amazing place that has given birth to many of the words we use today in various forms and occasions, many of the most frequently used terms, which have given birth to word families with applications in politics, philosophy, medicine, history, geology, religion, theater or literature, having their origin here. We owe to *the Greek genius*, therefore, more than twenty centuries of continuous aspiration towards a European spirit which has borne wonderful fruit. It is difficult to imagine today a world without *logos, zoon politikon, democracy, orthodoxy, psalms, agora, anatomy, protagonist, tragedy.*

We want to start our research with *Komoidia* (comedy), which was first included as a distinctly spectacular form, in 487-486 BC, in Athens, within the Greater Dionysia, but pre-existing forms were widespread in Greece long before, perhaps even before the initial forms of tragedy. These forms are originally *merry songs* (derived from phallic songs), a type of folk processions (*komos*), to which *odes* (songs) were later added, which were ultimately nothing more than public feasts, organized in order to mark various events, where groups of avid consumers of Bacchic drinks, grotesquely dressed, wearing wreaths of flowers and leaves, or masks with beards and horns of goats, reminiscent of the legendary satyrs, uninhibited and with alcohol loosening their tongues, led in triumph the symbol of male fecundity, the *phallus*. All of them, affected by good mood, competed in offering each other harsh criticism, vicious responses, shameless improvisations, which constantly provoked, giving rise, in fact, in rudimentary forms, to what will later form the comic dialogue.

From these explosive satires, from these dithyrambic hymns, it is possible that Aesop drew his inspiration for his fables or Epicharmus for his parodies, later on, Cratinus, Eupolis or Aristophanes for their comedies. The transition from cult to ritual and from ritual to performance took place almost imperceptibly, and the dithyramb was transformed from lyric to choral, and from the choir came the leader, the coryphaeus, the one who engaged in a dramatized dialogue with the choir and who later on became the first actor. In fact, comedy was, as a genre in its own right, a little behind the tragedy, almost half a century, and that was because it needed to wait for the right conditions in order to manifest: clearer and freer minds, a more efficient and better understood democracy.

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Therefore, from simple dramatized satirical inventions, i.e. the direct dialogue, we move on to the new genre, the Athenian comedy, whose forefather is considered to be Aristophanes, who used all previous experiments regarding form and subject, choosing with great care and wide imagination the characters and work material. Unbound by the strict canons of tragedy, comedy could fly free, fantasy bringing on the comedy stage subjects taken from reality, but treated exaggeratedly, bizarrely, phantasmagorically. We witness, throughout his works, the creation of the comic genre. Comedy becomes a living organism, through which the community of the citadel, humanity itself, acquires the moral capacity to judge itself and reflect, due to impulse, the comic stimulus, which comes from revealing its own contradictions, comedy meaning, therefore, not only a means of entertainment, but also a serious form of manifestation of citizens' consciousness.

Comedy, in its turn, has undergone an entire evolution, old comedy always giving way to a newer one. The old forms, with their rudimentary outbursts, can no longer cope with the new tastes, which are more and more sophisticated, more selective, more in tune with the new conquests of civilization, art and philosophy. A process of regeneration appears, of reconfiguration of the patterns, of the rules of composition and there is a refinement, a psychological deepening, a literary differentiation. Gradually, the primitive sarcasm, the boundless fantasy, the triumph of free play are given up in favor of a reason which halts exaggerated poetic adventures in favor of the real need for truth, penetration and analysis, fantasy characters and buffoonery are given up in favor of a literary architecture, able, in the context of a coherent action, to bring a progression to situations, to lead them to a valid outcome, the choir is given up, and the important representative of this new wave is Menandros, his contribution being unanimously appreciated by the specialists as being close to that of Aristophanes.

Most of the comedies written in these first centuries have not been preserved for us, we can only speculate about them in terms of some titles which have been recovered. Still, from some testimonies about those times (Demosthenes, Plato, Aristotle, Suidas) we can get an idea about the progression of the respective topics. Thus, the mockery of mythological characters, motives and legends, passions and political portraits are left in the shadow, new characters appear: lustful old men, social parasites, boastful soldiers, wealthy merchants, love and amorous seduction situations appear on the comedy stage. Still, even so, Athenian comic art is gradually dying out in Greece, to be reborn in front of a new, younger, therefore more naive audience: the Latin audience.

Apparently, this regenerated comedy is very similar to the previous one, and its notable representatives are Plautus and Terentius. Through them, comedy acquires new attributes, the panoply of masks is enriched, the choir is abandoned, the intrigue is perfected, the prologue appears, and subjects which until this moment belonged only to tragedy: the mirroring of morals and passions, become means of dramatic expressiveness also on the comedy stage, yet the most important innovation in the development of comedy is the portrayal of love. Through love, through this important tool in depicting morals, a decisive step was taken in the constitution of the future comic drama. Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, Molière, Shakespeare, Gozzi, Goldoni, Beaumarchais, Marivaux and many others are just brilliant heirs and successors, makers of immortal comedies.

It seems strange to us that shortly after Terentius and before Machiavelli and Ariosto or the first medieval farces with unknown authors, such as *The Farce of Master Pathelin*, i.e. approximately between the years 100 BC and 1400, therefore more than a millennium and a half years ago, we have no information or names, or fragments of comedies, in the true sense of the word, only a few *palliata comedia* belonging to Livius Andronicus, Ennius or Naevius, *comedia togata Atellane and mime* or writings with a comic subject, some satires belonging to Horace, Juvenal, Martial, Petronius, or the farces Chaucer collected in *The Canterbury Tales*.

One wonders why nothing was being produced during this time, or why nothing was kept, at least partially, from what could notably be produced in the field of comedy? Was the desire to write and play in comedies completely dead? Certainly not! Everything has a logic explanation, we believe.

With the emergence and flourishing of the new Roman Empire, the rulers of Rome understood that it was more important and useful to numb the spirit of the people if they offered in sufficient quantities and in as many days of the year possible, the illusion of happiness and abundance, by means of *bread and circuses*. Thus, theater performances received the coup de grâce, being replaced by demonstrations of force: gladiatorial fights, chariot racing, animal fights, naval battles organized in mammoth amphitheaters, circus games. No other period in human history has been so exciting, history knows no other example in which those in power flattered the common people with such grandiose spectacles.

But that would not last long either. Under the increasing pressures of the peoples in search of new lands, or of the peoples who wanted their lost freedom, the Empire weakened, the resources became limited, the entertainment buildings became emptier, the municipalities no longer felt obliged to maintain them, so they degraded and were left in ruins. Then, another cause appears: the emergence and spread of Christianity. The Christians were against these games, the more Christians in the empire, the more massacres in the arenas ceased, and with the adoption of the Christian religion as the official religion in the Empire, the Church not only saw a form of obscenity in the theater, but also a part of an adverse religion. Therefore, it had to limit its possibilities of expression to a minimum, or to bring it closer. This is what it did a few hundred years later, and the closeness was much more successful than its restriction. Christianity prevailed by assimilation, transforming a pagan custom into a God-pleasing one, the services taking spectacular forms, and by a dramatic configuration of the passions of Jesus or of the saints, it sealed the transformation of the theater into religious celebrations. At least for a while!

2. About comic

We are aware of this long, yet necessary introduction. We cannot study a phenomenon outside the environment of its manifestation; in order to make a correct diagnosis we need a critical anamnesis, the comic itself means nothing, it is just another notion, but studied according to the evolution of the corresponding dramatic genre, of the comedy, we can get the big picture. Only now can the problem of defining comedy and the comic be raised.

The theme of the comic has been and still is approached from many and various directions, being one of the most debated concepts of aesthetics. We try to investigate the vast field of the comic without the pretense of a scientific researcher who elucidates the entire range of problems in his/her sphere. We are, we think, a comedy actor, one who claims to have some skill in the making of the comic character; without having the competence of the esthetician, however, we will try to cover certain theoretical aspects, to make a foray into the reception of the mentioned aesthetic category - the comic, the representative dramatic form – the comedy, the impulses provoked by these—the laughter.

We will try to conduct a systematic research of the comic starting, as can be observed, from the historical context, to that of literary theory, of the comic as an aesthetic value and category, knowing that in the most and the most important philosophical systematizations and theorizations in the European and North American culture space, the *comic* is recognized as an *aesthetic* category. An entire tradition has prepared and, in the end, has succeeded in imposing this status, and this recognition does not necessarily contradict the admission of an equally important truth, namely that the comic *phenomenon* is much broader in meaning and

much deeper in explanations than what we commonly call *laughter, as a psychological reaction*.

The theoretical basis of comedy and the comic genre is, without a doubt, the concept of comic, a notion extremely difficult to analyze uniformly, both due to the numerous and distinct variants, and to the confusions or interpenetrations produced in all the spheres of manifestation, not only the literary ones. Not every comic is literary, just as not all the ways of explaining the phenomenon are aesthetic, and this is because, over time, all sorts of overlapping notions, synonyms, have misappropriated meanings; the comic has been assimilated into comedy, but the scenic representation, alone, cannot cover the numerous aspects of the comic, as the comic also has non-theatrical dimensions. The term comic has an enormous scope, substituting many other words for which it works in parallel, detailing them, at the same time, through aesthetic delimitations.

Noticing that a unitary theory of the comic turns out to be utopian, we have undertaken a possible detailing of the aesthetic phenomenon. The plural and multiple definitions of the comic have come through the channels of psychological, philosophical, aesthetic, linguistic studies, keeping, as invariant, the contrast between opposite elements. We have used an entire range of theorists as sources, starting with Aristotle, Henry Bergson, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Théodule Ribot, Sigmund Freud and others.

It strikes us from the outset that the major function of the comic, humor, is social criticism. Responding to unacceptable realities with the so-called comic attitude, writers have, over the centuries, used different procedures, but pursued essentially the same thing: the destruction with laughter of all that is outdated, pessimistic, unjust.

The comic is more than a double-edged sword, it is a tool with multiple uses and this is what gives meaning to its presence or imposition in certain moments and situations. The revelation of the comic or the invention of a comic situation is done to the detriment of a certain human deficiency and this act involves an intellectual and a moral attitude, attitudes which can often come into conflict. The laughter caused by the comic situation, more than once can turn against the one who does not know how to use it properly. To laugh for free, out of malice, to laugh foolishly signals and condemns in the most categorical way the precarious level of culture or moral compromise. Hence, the exceptional importance of laughter and imagining comic situations from a social point of view.

There is a lot of research undertaken to define or frame the comic, the situations that elicit laughter, the essence of the act of artistic or intellectual creation of the genre. After all, laughter is an individual reaction, a response to a certain incidence of the external reality, a signal through which a state of mind, an emotion is propagated. We do not all laugh or laugh in the same way at the same situation. Laughter is an attitude, a warning, sometimes of gravity, that arises within the social group, an ethical weapon, having a high pedagogical function when used properly, when it correctly and promptly sanctions deviations from the moral norms. Mechanical laughter is superficial and fun, critical laughter is corrective and the more corrosive it is, the more the dissolving acid attacks the obsolete, degraded values and principles. Hence, the allergy to the comic of closed systems, the instinctive reflex, the permanent alarming of political, moral, social, religious hierarchies, in front of the comic's offensive, because it attacks myths, clichés, manners, prejudices, superstitions, masks, imposture.

Compared to the genesis, the mechanism and meanings of laughter, in their traditional sense, Bergson's *Theory of Laughter* brings forward certain elements of comic theory which make it a fundamental work for the modern aesthetics of the early twentieth century (1900). All too often only the famous quote was invoked: "the mechanism behind life", forgetting that this treaty means the first systematic and comprehensive approach to concepts related to many other disciplines, that we must put the living character and human dimension of the comic

first, that there can be no comic outside the human, that animals, objects, phenomena, become laughable only in contact with the man, with the borrowed human value, then that laughter needs witnesses, an echo, complicity with others, hence its social function. But before Bergson, among his loyal guides, Herbert Spencer was the first to analyze and develop a satisfactory theory of the physiology of laughter in *Essays-The Physiology of Laughter* (1891), then Theodor Lipps in *Comic and Humor* (1898), in addition to these, Théodule Ribot in *The Psychology of the Emotions* (1897) and *The Logic of the Emotions* (1904) and Ferdinand Baldensperger in *The Definitions of Humor* (1907) helped Bergson return with additions to his work (1919).

According to Dexonline [Online Dictionary], “the comic is the aesthetic category whose sphere comprises the acts, situations or characters of life or art that elicit laughter, which is the basis of ridicule, funny part, comic element or effect, ridiculous note represented by something or someone”²; in the Dictionary of General Aesthetics, the comic “manifests itself in a determined time and space: *hic et nunc*, results from the discrepancy between appearance and essence, content and form, part and whole, value and non-value, purpose and means, etc.”³ The comic is a material aesthetic feature of man in his social relations, an aesthetic relationship in which the object, voluntarily or not, appears disguised, and the subject noting the incompatibility of the object with itself, challenges its different appearance by means of a critical attitude, most often expressed through laughter, and its perfect form of its manifestation is comedy.

Aristotle defines comedy as “the imitation of boorish people, but not an imitation of all the aspects offered by an inferior nature, but of those who make the ridicule a part of the ugly. Ridiculousness can be defined as a flaw and an ugliness of a certain kind, which brings no pain or harm: just as the mask of comedians is ugly and troubled, but not to the point of suffering”⁴. In other words, the comic is the representation of all that is weak in man and it ceases where it produces suffering and pain. Friedrich Dürrenmatt has his own idea of the comic: “Man’s freedom is revealed in laughter, his needs in tears. The comic passes as an inferior, dubious, indecent genre (...) but should it be recognized as dangerous, defiant, moralizing, it will be tossed from the hand like a red-hot iron, for art can be everything it wants, as long as it stays comfortable”⁵. In a less-known work: *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud states that humor (comic) is a reaction of the unconscious to cultural repression in order to achieve the principle of pleasure (laughter). For him, comic is a very serious matter, as it allows the release in a pleasant way of a tension which appeared as a result of the functioning of some restrictive rules of the society. The existence in such a diverse and abundant form of jokes and wisecracks on topics considered by the rules of civilization to be *politically incorrect* (racist, sexual, religious, etc.) indicates that the rules are perceived by our psyche as repressive, not incorrect or unfair. In Jean-Marc Defays’ *The Comic - Principles, Procedures, Development*, comic is based on means (the *grotesque* is a mediation between *beautiful* and *ugly*, and *humor* a mediation between *good* and *evil*), emphasizing that its forms are multiple, dynamic and always loaded with relative and relativizations. Nicolai Hartmann, in his *Aesthetics*, claims that it is in comedy’s nature to expose weaknesses or lack of logic and to cancel them by disclosure, by the fact that he names them. For him, comic is about the object, it is its quality, and humor is about the one who contemplates or the creator, as they see the comic. In *Aesthetics-Interpretations and texts*, Vasile Morar, performing an analysis of the work *The Aesthetic Categories*, by

² <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/comic>

³ *Dictionary of General Aesthetics [Dicționar de estetică generală]*. 1972. București: Editura Politică, p. 71.

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics [Poetica]*. 1998. București: Editura IRI, p. 70.

⁵ *The uninterrupted dialogue of the theater in the twentieth century [Dialogul neîntrerupt al teatrului în sec. XX]*, II, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, “Problems of the Theater” [Probleme ale teatrului], p. 192.

Evangelos Moutsopoulos, comments: “The Greek esthetician places the comic within the *determinative* aesthetic categories. The comic is considered, in this case, a *dynamic* category, along with the *epic*, *dramatic* and *tragic* (poetic, lyrical and idyllic are also *static* categories, not dynamic)”⁶. Mihai Ralea, in *Lectures on Aesthetics*, examining the mechanism for making the comic, presents its attributes as a contrasting effect between two terms of equal importance, solved by a pleasant feeling.

It is observed that, despite the many, often contradictory definitions, the comic is and must be understood as a consequence of behavioral automatisms, of thinking and language automatisms, and laughter can be seen as a release, a form of superior reason and individual release, beyond any ossified norms or rules.

3. Conclusion

The comic, it is well known, can be of several kinds: of movement, of words, of characters or of form, it can be of name, of language, of situation, of manners, and it can be present in all the forms of the literary genre, but we must also consider what comic means from the point of view of the literary theory, where the notional value is a *sine qua non* condition, and where there is a clear distinction between the aesthetic category - the comic and the corresponding dramatic genre –the comedy. Thus, the comic is an aesthetic category which implies comic conflict, situations, characters, which elicit laughter. It has many variants: humorous, farcical, burlesque, tragic or tragicomic, sarcastic, grotesque and characteristic of the comic are the satire, irony, sarcasm, persiflage, etc., and comedy is a form of dramatic genre, in verse or prose, which presents characters, situations, events, which trigger laughter and which end in a happy and moralizing way. This cannot be clearer, more concise and, at the same time, more comprehensive!

As we could see, analyzing the materials we had at our disposal, the field of the comic was approached from many and varied directions. The mystery of laughter’s emergence fascinated all people of spirit, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists or physiologists. We have tried to explain, in a few thoughts and assessments, related to this extensive and tireless area covered by researchers, with a clearly limitative intention, to go through the rich and nuanced range of this miraculous aesthetic category, just a miniscule space, a few notes that have demanded our attention for the time being.

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⁶ <http://ebooks.unibuc.ro/filologie/morar/7.htm>.

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