

Funny moves

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1. Humor is a broad category that characterizes a wide range of behaviors whose common denominator is that they usually trigger mirth and laughter among those who observe them. From verbal jokes to slapstick comedy, the degree of embodiment progresses from mere symbolic representation to actual enactment. In this paper, I will focus on the latter. Let me emphasize at the onset that the production of humor through body movements is a cultural artefact rather than a natural occurrence. It is also important to understand that the production of humorous gestures involves the construction of a context both in the diachronic and synchronic dimensions. This means that we have to take into consideration not only the chain of events that leads to the humorous body event but also the information that is provided by the contextual situation.
2. No dynamic behavior or gesture can be humorous in and by itself. The often quoted example offered by Henri Bergson in his book on laughter: someone is walking and suddenly slips on a banana skin, misses the point. Indeed, if the person concerned is a pompous and pretentious man who is walking arrogantly as if he were immune to the liabilities of ordinary human beings, his sudden loss of face may trigger laughter. But if the victim is an elderly person or a pregnant woman, this accident will prompt us to help and sympathize rather than laugh. A colleague, who may be present here, told me that some time ago he was in Paris on Boulevard Saint Michel during a heavy rain. He was waiting to cross the street with a group of people who were hesitating to walk through a large puddle of water that had accumulated in the gutter. It did not seem to him to be a major problem and, assuming that these people were just reluctant to wet their feet, he bravely moved forward pushing the people aside only to discover, too late, that the puddle was indeed quite a deep pool of dirty water. He got soaked up to his knees. His feat of heroism was greeted by a collective burst of laughter. No harm

but a definite loss of face for someone whose action implied that he had passed a judgment on his fellow humans. Let us note that both the notion of “loss of face” and the behavior that qualify for causing it are culture sensitive. We must keep this in mind when we consider examples of embodied humor in the form of pratfalls.

3. An interesting example is the case of street entertainers who perform in front of the patios on Paris’s or other cities’ boulevards in the hope of getting some coins if they make people laugh. One of their tricks is to follow an unsuspecting man or woman while closely imitating their gait. I have often observed this case of a “funny move” and puzzled about the cause of laughter. Why does the imitation of something which is not funny in itself make us laugh? We could think that Bergson’s tentative theory of laughter which he assigned to the projection of mechanistic motion on live movement accounts for this effect. But this is not very convincing as it simply describes the process without explaining it. We need to call upon particular cultural contexts in order to account for this kind of humorous behavior.
4. Another example that was observed recently at a street corner in Toronto along the track of a streetcar raises a similar problem, albeit triggering a different feeling of mirth. A tramp silently dances on the sidewalk and, from time to time, freezes in a posture for an undetermined length of time. Onlookers are intrigued and watch. The man starts moving again. Then freezes again in a different posture. After a few minutes, people start putting some change in the hat he has placed on the ground. This occurs in front of a streetcar stop. The passengers who are seated or standing on the right side can observe the scene while the car waits for the green light. Everybody’s attention is focussed on that man. After the second freezing posture, they start smiling, look at each other, make comments, and initiate casual conversations. The whole social atmosphere within the confined space of the streetcar has suddenly been changed into a euphoric collective moment. What did happen in the brain of the passers-by and the

streetcar passengers? There is no doubt that the inner transformation they experienced was caused by the movements of this man. (Pascal Michelucci, personal communication, June 9, 2016).

5. I will take the fourth set of examples from the gesture repertory of circus clowns. This kind of gags takes place within an antagonistic narrative structure. The representative of law and order, who is also in general the enforcer of the cultural norm (white-face clown, ringmaster, or any institutional embodiment of authority), objects to the disruptive behavior of the clown (auguste, tramp, or any variation of the transgressor's role). The latter behaves in a submissive manner while he is being scolded but as soon as the master turns his back, apparently satisfied that he will be obeyed, the clown produces a gesture that is either aggressive or insulting. However, this typically aggressive gesture is suddenly transformed into an innocuous gesture when the master turns his head while he is walking out. The aggression is defused on the fly, so to speak, thus revealing the skillful manipulation of social gestural conventions by the transgressor who manages to save his skin while having demonstrated his lack of respect for authority. Thus, a vengeful raised fist becomes an attempt to kill a mosquito or a cosmetic gesture to arrange his hair; or a raised middle finger becomes a pointing gesture to the top of the tent by instantly substituting the index for the middle finger. This can be characterized as a repair gesture that consists of switching from one category of gesture to another. Using Ekman and Friesen's categories, we can conceptualise the switching as going from emblem to index or to adaptive gestures. The timing is crucial as the categorical bifurcation must be unpredictable for this sort of gag to be effective, that is, to cause laughter.
6. Studies of gestures have shown that we decipher the meaning of a gesture when it reaches the apex of its trajectory. In the circus gags we have described above, it is crucial that the clown creates a fast momentum that reaches that point and quickly delivers the switching that modifies the meaning of the gesture. Flipping from one meaning to another requires a simultaneous flipping of the postural context. If we

try to understand the formal dynamic structure of this kind of gag, we have to construe the dynamic sequence as an argument in which the premise is the initiating of a gesture that carries a distinct cultural meaning and the conclusion is the instant and unexpected bifurcation that transforms the gesture into a gesture of a different, even opposite nature. A gesture of defiance when the social danger is absent becomes neutral or submissive when it is present. A cultural gesture in a given social situation becomes a functional movement when the situation changes. The crucial surprise factor that is the absolute condition for a gag to be successful comes in this case from the fact that the human brain constantly anticipates on the basis of the available information (any brain, actually, does that and this is why it is so difficult to catch a fly). The brain has already concluded the gesture and decided about its meaning before it is actually completed. Hence the shock that triggers laughter.

7. I would like to offer in concluding some theoretical perspective on the nature of mirth and laughter. It is well known that all positive feelings and experiences of euphoria are caused by the stimulation of the reward centers of the brain. Such stimulation is associated with the production of specific neurotransmitters. The problem with which we are confronted is therefore how to understand the correlation between the body movements we have described above and the production of these neurotransmitters. Three types of explanation have been proposed to explain laughter: i) *aggression* in the sense that mockery targets those who break the social norms or behave like automats rather than living beings; ii) *incongruity* in the sense that humor is often generated by absurd associations or behavior; iii) *surprise* in the sense that the outcome of an action that triggers laughter is unexpected. It seems that these factors are indeed more or less present in the funny moves we examined above. However, each one of these explanations can characterize examples that are not funny at all. It depends on which kinds of norm or rule are broken; what degrees or nature of incongruity are produced; and what is the magnitude of the surprise that is created. Laughter can be affiliative as well as aggressive; congruence depends on the level of abstraction that is at play;

surprise is relative to a particular set of expectations. Most theories that have truly advanced human knowledge are counter-intuitive, that is, they are not grounded on phenomenological description and intuitive evidence but they are mediated by logical reasoning on empirical data that leads to novel conclusions.

The theoretical perspective I have developed in my book on clowns proposes to consider laughter and mirth as an accidental effect (or a side effect, or a perverse effect) of a surge of culturally relevant information in the brain which triggers a chain reaction involving neurotransmitters and the neuro-muscular systems. The advantage of this hypothesis is that it is not purely speculative but can be empirically tested and, more importantly, falsified, that is, proven not to be correct thanks to the investigative methods currently available.