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7 The Significance of Humour and Laughter for Utopian Thought

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Imagine a superior society.¹⁵ Is it a peaceful place? Are people living in harmony? Are there no wars? These are typical features related to utopian worlds. However, people seldom ask, if there would be humour and laughter in such a perfect society. Despite the supposedly innocent character of humour, the question is important because the given answer reveals something essential about humanity and how it is conceptualized.

This chapter analyses humour and laughter in relation to utopian thought. This is done by combining the leading theory amongst humour researchers, the incongruity theory, with the notion of utopia as a method of imagination. The relationship between utopia and humour is a rarely studied subject, as most often utopia is merely seen as a boring and humourless place. In opposition to this common standpoint, it will be argued that there are at least three different ways in which humour is related to utopia:

- 1) Laughing at utopia
- 2) Laughing with utopia
- 3) Laughing in utopia

In this chapter, the term 'humour' is treated as an umbrella concept, covering various genres of humour from farce to satire, from irony to buffooning, and from slapstick to witticism. On a theoretical level, humour is based on a contradiction as stated by the incongruity theory: A classic example would be a man wearing women's clothing or a human being acting like an animal. This theory covers the whole field of human action and thinking; a person slipping on a banana peel is humorous, because normally people should be aware of their surroundings, and similarly a professor forgetting where they put their glasses while they are resting on their forehead is humorous, because a bright mind should be able to handle simple matters of their

¹⁵ It is crucial to note that not all utopias are distant islands or 'places'. However, envisioning a different and better kind of place in comparison to the prevailing social order is a work of imagination. Therefore, utopia as a place and as a method of imagination come close to each other.

everyday life. Roughly, humour occurs when expectations do not meet the actual occurrences in the world. Furthermore, nothing is humorous in itself, but only in comparison to something else; a camel is not humorous on its own but only when it is compared to, for instance, another animal, or put in on a peculiar setting, like in a joke about whiskey drinking in a bar. To summarise, humour is a relational subject matter (see Raskin et al. 2008).

Laughter, for its part, is understood as a reaction to humour, and not, for example, as a reaction to tickling or triggered by intoxication. On the simplest level, laughter expresses that the subject has perceived something ridiculous about the object / situation, which is treated in a humorous manner. It is amused, mirthful, or joyous laughter which does not always require a physical expression – people can laugh silently in their hearts, so to speak. This position is based on Helmuth Plessner's (1970) idea that laughter has an expressive character; what laughter expresses is not fixed and universal (e.g. 'laughter is always a sign of happiness' is not so, as it may reveal embarrassment), but it nevertheless expresses something, and this something is connected to the social values and cultural categorizations which are shared in a society or culture. Human beings are always located in a specific historical period, which gives structure to every single individual, and *vice versa*, a society is always formed by individuals. On this deeper level, laughter expresses, as Plessner puts it, the human condition in the world.

As noted, utopias can trigger laughter. In the light of the incongruity theory, considering a utopia ridiculous means seeing something contradictory judging by the criteria of the prevailing social system in the utopia in relation to the prevailing social system. This ridiculous aspect is in some way inferior to what is perceived as the normal situation, and therefore undesirable. Laughter *at* utopia is conservative. Laughing *with* utopia, in contrast, accepts the deviation from the existing society as articulated by the utopia. This kind of humorous but critical way to relate to utopia is based on affirmative laughter; laughter confirms that there is something wrong with the prevailing system, and through utopian thought it aims to change the undesired social features. The third category, laughing *in* utopia, moves beyond the binary division of critical/conservative humour. This kind of humour challenges the prevailing cultural basis of current humour; it offers something completely different. This category can be further divided into *humour within utopia* and *a utopian kind of humour*. I argue, that laughing in utopia

requires that humanity (and humour within it) is necessarily in a state of fluidity. This type of humour is shaking and disturbing, hilarious and scaring.

This threefold distinction helps to understand the relationship between humour and utopian thought in a more profound manner than in previous studies, and it opens up new possibilities for both research on utopias and humour studies.

Laughing at utopia

It is easy to understand why utopias can be considered silly places, at least if they are seen as blueprints for better societies (see the Introduction of this book). They portray a picture of a place that is in many ways oppositional to the present society. Be it the biblical Garden of Eden, Plato's *Republic* (381 BC), Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) or Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), the outcome is often an unrealistic dream which in some sense or other is ridiculous. The eternal peace in the Garden of Eden is impossible because human beings are not always peaceful; the Republic with its strict rules considering, for instance, comedies and laughter, cannot be realised because human psyche does not work in the demanded way; Utopia will collapse because of its absurd politics; and New Atlantis will eventually sink when scientists try to act as leaders. These kinds of blueprint utopias will not work because they are ludicrous and impossible dreams.

Philosophy of humour helps to clarify why people laugh at utopias. A sense of humour is an essential human trait, and it guides how people deal with incongruities and surprises. According to the incongruity theory (see Raskin et al. 2008), humour is based on paradoxes that need to be solved. When cultural conceptualizations are in contradiction, people have to be able to make some sense of the perceived oddity. For instance, if someone tells a joke: 'Two goldfish are in a tank. One looks at the other and says: I'll drive, you take the guns.' one has to be able to consider the double meaning of the word 'tank'. If the keyword, tank, would have been, say, bowl, the joke would have been altogether different.¹⁶ In this version, tank can refer both to an

¹⁶ Obviously, when you have heard the joke dozens of times, you can try to add some absurdity with an alternative choice of words.

army vehicle and to a water container. Getting the joke (whether you consider it funny or not) is a sign of the flexibility of the human mind. Humans can play with conceptualizations and categorizations. If people would stick to the exact meaning of every word, their outlook on life would be much more restricted because there would be no room for paradoxes. Flexibility enables human beings to look beyond their current condition. In humour, things are different – and this can be a positive or a negative state of affairs for the individual perceiving the oddity.

Scholars of humour such as Aarne Kinnunen (1994) and Charles Gruner (1997) point out that the ridiculed target cannot be taken seriously. If the target happens to be a person, this target will not be highly esteemed any more.¹⁷ Even if a joke, a caricature, or a situational comedy focuses on, for example, a person's particular feature (e.g. oversized nose, old-fashioned style, stammering), ridicule functions as a stigma and questions the potential seriousness of the whole personality. Cruelly enough, if your hair is funny looking and others mock you because of it, it is hard to change the minds of the deriders with any kind of intellectual argument about your otherwise deep and virtuous characteristics. The easiest solution for the weak-minded is to have a proper haircut, which other people will accept. Because of the social nature of humour, laughter offers a potential challenge for every kind of deviation from the norms.

According to Henri Bergson (1914), laughing at different kinds of aberrations is social bullying. He argues that laughter punishes those who behave in ill-mannered or unsuitable ways. This kind of laughter both punishes and encourages you to change your behavior. You make the mistake of wearing a pink shirt at the factory, and the co-workers will most definitely make the corrective gesture – mocking laughter – so that you will never repeat the mistake. According to the superiority theory of humour, people laugh when they notice some eminency in themselves in comparison to others (see Morreall 1987). Thomas Hobbes (1962 [1651]) claims that this reaction stems from a 'sudden glory', and it is a sign of individual's superiority to others. Following this theory, laughter expresses disbelief and scorn towards ridiculous sights.

¹⁷ Evidently, the politics of humour are much more complicated than Kinnunen and Gruner claim; ridiculing can, for example, strengthen the power of a politician (see Kessel & Merziger 2012).

Laughter can in a similar way be a means of expressing doubt towards utopian thought. If one argues for utopian possibilities like Ruth Levitas (2013) and considers it a realistic alternative for the current social form of living, she or he is dealing with the core of humour. A utopist expresses something different from what the others are used to hearing. As the incongruity theory states, the offered vision is in contradiction with so-called normal ways of living. Utopia is a better place, that is not here (see Introduction of this book), and thanks to this distance to the surrounding world, humour is, at least potentially, present instantly – and the vision for the better world is always in danger of being ridiculed in the way described above.

The offered utopian model attacks the prevailing way of life, and this rarely happens without contest – there are always people who are satisfied with the existing state of affairs, and of course those who may be dissatisfied but are afraid of possible change. Capitalism is a great example of this. It offers a good enough habitat for a relatively large group; because of this, for example, socialist or communist alternatives are not attractive options to the prevailing order. If a theorist or a revolutionary comes up with a socialist dream state and offers it to the people in capitalistic societies, the alternative possibility will most likely encounter scorn and laughter. Laughing at utopia rips the potential seriousness of the alternative and strengthens the prevailing order.

A historical example serves as an illustration. In the 1600s, Galileo Galilei challenged the geocentric model of the world by claiming that the Earth was not the center of the universe, but revolves around the Sun instead. He based his argument on the new scientific evidence gained with for example the use of a telescope. Galileo's position was strictly against the prevailing order, and the church could not accept it. For some 1500 years, the Bible had taught that the Earth stood still and the objects in the sky revolved around the Earth. There was strong evidence for this position in the holy book, and the heliocentric view was condemned, as were those who defended this position. (For a detailed view on the controversy, see Heilbron 2010.) There are some pieces of historical evidence which suggest that Galileo was seen as a fool because of his views in physics (Bethune 2007 [1830]). Fools, in general, are ludicrous and a constant target of laughter.

This kind of conservative laughter laughs at absurdity. This laughter underlines the strength and significance of the prevailing social circumstances for the people living in them. If one has always lived in a culture which repeats the idea that the Sun revolves around the Earth, the very basic worldview is built on this idea; it is hard to see how things could be otherwise. In Galileo's time, a member of the church could hardly understand how this position could be wrong. Galileo challenged the medieval understanding of the universe, which made his ideas seem absurd. Even if the church has nowadays accepted the Galilean position, in 1610 it was impossible to achieve a so-called objective position to solve the controversy. Galileo was not able to offer watertight proof for his claims, as he had only uncertain evidence. Because Galileo's suggestion appeared absurd to many, he was ridiculed for his claims. People laughed at his alternative reality and through laughter expressed their disbelief.¹⁸

Conservative laughter can also be used as a political tool. When a republican president of the United States of America ridicules and laughs at, for example, alternative politics offered by democratic politicians, he uses humour and laughter as means for his own politics; ridiculing the opposite aims at enforcing current political agendas (for a detailed view of political humour, see Hietalahti 2019). Reportedly, in Germany the right-wing party *Alternative for Germany* has developed this technique even further; during parliamentary debates the members of the party attempt to drown out other members' speeches with coordinated laughter. This is accompanied with insults at opponents and jeers to party fellows. If, for instance, a left wing or a Green parliamentarian tries to argue for humane immigration policies, the right-wingers attack with coordinated laughter.¹⁹ (Witte and Beck 2018).

Naturally, it is uncertain what the actual consequences of this kind of laughter are (see Kuipers 2008). Analogically with racist humour, laughter may strengthen the questionable attitudes behind the offensive joke, but it is possible that racist humour functions inversely and questions the shared racist attitudes (see Weaver 2011). Simply put, telling a joke does not automatically

¹⁸ Obviously, the geocentric worldview was ridiculous to Galileo, which is revealed in his letters to Johannes Kepler. Galileo wishes that they could laugh together at the remarkable stupidity of both the common herd and the philosophers who declined to look through his telescope: "Oh, my dear Kepler (...) what shouts of laughter we should have at this glorious folly!" (Bethune 2007, 29.)

¹⁹ Apparently, the Green and left-wing parties have adapted a similar tactic by using taunts and guffaws to question the right-wing politics (Witte and Beck 2018).

lead to the triumph of the joke-teller and their political agenda. Whatever the actual consequences are, laughing at utopia nevertheless reveals something about the attitudes of the laughers; they see something ridiculous in the alternative world. This type of laughter is conservative because it, at least in principle, strengthens the *status quo*.

Laughing with utopia

Even if laughter is often conservative, there is variety in guffaws. Various philosophers of humour (e.g. Hutcheson 2009 [1750], Kant 1987 [1790], Freud 1968 [1927], Morreall 2009, Hietalahti 2016) have noted that even though absurdity makes people laugh, it is not necessarily triggered by the feeling of their own priggishness and superiority. Instead, a twist in conceptualizations may be enough in itself to trigger amusement. A change of perspectives can be also affirming, and it can agree with the expressed humorous alternative. In regard to utopian thought, this means that people can laugh and agree with the new perspective or suggestion for societal evolution. Utopia can be *amusing* in the positive meaning of the word.

For instance, Thomas More describes a place entirely different from England in his time; creating a tension between the dreamlike island and the existing society. As described in *Utopia* (1516), England is a dreadful place full of inequality, suffering and hopelessness. Utopia, in comparison, is an island where people happily flourish. They have the possibility to live their lives in peace and harmony without envy or fear of violence and criminality.

In relation to humour, More's description turns the tables: Utopia is the good place and England a country that can and should be improved socially, culturally, and politically. Contemporary England, one may reason, starts to look like a rather silly place, when an alternative is presented. Presumably the commonly shared non-sensical situation can trigger laughter, and this laughter does not need to be condemnatory, but it can stem from the possibilities to change the real world into a better place. Laughter with utopia is positive and affirmative laughter, which supports the offered alternative. In this light, the satirical structure of More's *Utopia* is apparent (for a more detailed take on More's literary techniques, see Elliott 1963).

In the field of literature, satire offers a typical form of critical utopian thought. It ridicules culturally shared follies and vices by shaming corporations and government, indeed, quite often the very society itself. This genre has been present for millennia, as the authority of divine emperors and famous theologians has been satirically mocked at least since Lucius Anneus Seneca's times. (Kivistö 2016.) By comparing Utopia to historical satirical masterpieces, Robert C. Elliott (1963, 321) convincingly shows that Utopia has both a critical attitude and a normative model. More criticises his contemporaries and calls readers to laugh with his utopian model. Humanistic theorist Erich Fromm highlights this idea when he describes the shared insanity of the Western world. In an ironical manner, Fromm discusses how for his contemporaries, heaven would look like a huge shopping center full of all kinds of shops and new gadgets. The individual would have a tremendous amount of money – and of course a little bit more than his neighbors – and he would just keep buying with his mouth widely open in wonderment (Fromm 2008, 131). From a humanistic standpoint, this is foolish. Fromm goes on and lists a bunch of modern paradoxes between humanistic values and perceived reality, and reveals how everyday practices are eventually ludicrous. This can trigger bitter but nevertheless hopeful laughter:

‘Does it make sense to spend millions of dollars on storing agricultural surpluses while millions of people in the world are starving? Does it make sense to spend half of the national budget on weapons which, if and when they are used, will destroy our civilization? Does it make sense to teach children the Christian values of humility and unselfishness and, at the same time, to prepare them for a life in which the exact opposites of these virtues are necessary in order to be successful? (...) Does it make sense that we live in the midst of plenty, yet have little joy? Does it make sense that we are all literate, have radio and television, yet are chronically bored?’ (Fromm 2006, 92-93).

Fromm's own ideal society is a sane society in which people can live in harmony with others and with themselves. This is possible when a society meets the existential needs of an individual; a society exists for its inhabitants, not the other way round. Fromm offers a detailed list of alternative ways to arrange a society beginning with new democratic practices and ways

of distributing wealth and goods. According to him, this is a distant but real possibility. (Fromm 2008). A reader agreeing with Fromm's vision may very well laugh delightedly with Fromm's utopian vision. This laughter expresses that the currently shared Western insanity portrayed by Fromm is ludicrous.

Fromm admits that there is no guarantee that his paradise-like society would be realized by following his suggestions, but for him, it is important to try to imagine a real alternative for current practices. Fromm's position is largely compatible with Ruth Levitas' (2013) understanding of utopia as a method of imagination. It offers a possibility to think beyond the prevailing social systems. Humour and laughter are instruments in this process. They both foster imagination and strengthen the offered possibilities. The more ridiculous the present-day social organizations and international institutions appear to be, the more there is room and possibilities for utopias. Laughter enhances the possibility of change.

Even if the conservative laughter is aimed at absurdity, absurdity in itself is not necessarily something negative. Even if utopia may sound in some sense absurd, it does not mean that the offered alternative is worthless. This idea is present already in Erasmus of Rotterdam's *The Praise of the Folly* (1511). Erasmus argued that laughter can break down the strongest structures of reason, by which he refers to widely accepted social customs. According to Erasmus, a rigid (in his context, biblical) reason does not meet the standards of flourishing human life. Instead, humanity is built on both reason and silliness, both of which are necessary. Absurdity, then, is inherent in human life and it should not be pushed aside. Erasmus paints a vision in which foolishness thrives and funny-sounding ideas are not immediately rejected because they appear to be against the normal order of the world. Instead, foolishness equals openness to various possibilities. On this metalevel, the medieval and scholastic way of describing humanity and humans' place in the world – despite the somewhat stale style of scholastics – starts to look ridiculous. On the other hand, fools and folly make people laugh, but in the way that opens eyes for new possibilities. This laughter is laughing with utopia. It is critical laughter which aims at changing the prevailing social reality – be this aim conscious or unconscious. This laughter expresses that there is a strong yearning for something else than what is offered in current societal conditions.

Laughing in utopia

As seen above, laughter can be either conservative or critical in relation to the prevailing social setting: if laughter is connected to the wish to change the prevailing circumstances, it is critical. If it aims at preserving how things are, laughter is conservative. (See also Kuipers 2008.) Both forms of laughter are in a sense external to the offered utopia. They express an attitude against or for a different society. However, the binary distinction between conservative and critical laughter does not cover all the possible ways how laughter and utopian thought are intertwined. The third possibility is laughing *in* utopia.

With this type of laughter, it is possible to overcome the rigid dichotomies people assume toward humour and laughter. Instead, it refers to the laughter that happens in an entirely different social situation. Because humour is by definition interpersonal and socially formed (dependent on cultural categorizations), it expresses shared worldviews of and in a society. Laughing in utopia, then, is a reaction to humour that occurs in a new world. This category is two-folded: There is *humour within utopia*, and a *utopian kind of humour*. First, I will handle humour within utopia.

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, it is a gross exaggeration to see utopias as necessarily boring, even if the claims are understandable. Thomas More describes his ideal island as a place where there are no opportunities for wickedness (More 2012 [1516]); this may sound rather dull to those who think that humour should always break boundaries and challenge morality. In this light, it is not surprising that Gregory Clayaes concludes that a utopian society offers security, but 'is not really a fun place.' (Clayaes 2016, 16). Similarly, Arthur Schopenhauer has commented on another form of utopia, the Christian paradise, in a more drastic manner: 'after man had transferred all pain and torments to hell, there then remained nothing over for heaven but ennui.' (Schopenhauer 1910, 402.) Charles Gruner further claims that '(h)umor could hardly exist in this aggressionless, peaceful utopia' (Gruner 1997, 35.)

In the hands of these thinkers, the idea that utopia is a boring place becomes a deep criticism; utopia offers security, but the cost of this is an aching boredom. As ennui is seen as worse than social injustice, utopias turn out to be ultimately dystopic (e.g. Moravia 1965).

This criticism is based on, first, the idea that humour and laughter are in themselves valuable (and lack of them is unwelcome), and second, on a misunderstanding about the nature of utopia. The first ideal is arguably wrong, because fun and amusement do not justify anything in themselves – funniness and its social value has to be evaluated in relation to morality (see Hietalahti 2016), so I will focus on the second aspect in this last part of this article. Let us have a look on Thomas More's Utopia to clarify the misunderstanding.

Even if More's utopian island seems like a boring place to the modern reader, this does not mean that Utopia is a dull society. On the contrary, More describes various forms of entertainment and humorous occasions from which the Utopians gain pleasure.²⁰ They have fun, even if the described forms of humorous entertainment would not be enjoyable for modern Western people. However, modern readers do not have a monopoly over fun; modern human beings cannot dictate the universal requirements for amusement and entertainment. Instead, they should be understood in the light of the different social conditions of the different society, that is, Utopia. If one believes More, Utopians are not bored, but clearly enjoy how they pass time.²¹

Besides descriptions of fun, there is a utopian element of humour in More's book; this can be found from the treatment of fools. More writes how Utopians 'take great pleasure in fools (...) they do not think it amiss for people to divert themselves with their folly' (More 2012, 146). This idea is related to the basic mood of Utopians, as none of them should be too sullen or severe to enjoy fools' 'ridiculous behavior and foolish sayings' (ibid.). It may sound striking that

²⁰ I recognize that 'entertainment' and 'humour' are not synonyms; there are various forms of non-humorous entertainment as well as humour that is not a form of entertainment. However, in a general level, there is plenty of entertainment that is based on humour, and often humour is entertaining.

²¹ Analogously, it would be implausible to claim that, for instance, Mauritius is a boring place just because the ways of living and forms of humour in the island are (presumably) different from in the writer's home country, Finland.

people laugh at, for example, mentally handicapped individuals, but this was actually a humane and progressive idea in More's time. He clarifies the moral aspect of this kind of laughter:

'If any man should reproach another for his being misshaped or imperfect in any part of his body, it would not at all be thought a reflection on the person so treated, but it would be accounted scandalous in him that had upbraided another with what he could not help.' (More 2012, 146.)

Clearly, there is room for humour in More's Utopia, and it has an obvious connection to morality. This is an imaginative idea if one thinks that humour is an opposite to a virtuous life. By combining amusement and morality, More challenges the general idea about humour and laughter in his own time; that is, how people laugh as described in the light of the superiority theory above. When imagining morally eminent humour, More is a humanistic thinker: He demands openness in relation to humour, and prefers laughter which does not mock or belittle. Laughter triggered by fools' sayings is not laughter at them; it is laughter that expresses openness of thinking and enjoyment of alternatives.²²

More's approach to humour and laughter is intriguing, but remains at a somewhat simple level. In his treatment, both laughter and humour signal ethical values which can be understood from a modern perspective, too. However, they can be pushed even further; it is possible that humour and laughter express something which is incomprehensible to modern readers. Arguably, utopian humour should be inconceivable. If utopia offers an entirely different social reality, humour and laughter should express humanity within this context. Then, humour becomes imaginative and cannot be easily grasped with commonly shared conceptualizations and within what is perceived as the so-called normal social setting. This leads to the second part of the category, the utopian kind of humour.

The idea of possibly incomprehensible humour can be approached and clarified with help from Ludwig Wittgenstein. According to Wittgenstein, a word or a sentence can mean something if it is expressed within a 'language-game'. Language used in an ill-mannered way is

²² It is worth mentioning that Thomas More had his own domestic fool, Henry Patenson, who was included in More's family portrait by Hans Holbein – a rare honor in that era.

incomprehensible, as the rules of the game are not followed. (Wittgenstein 1986 [1953]). A sentence like 'Is more sophisticated than real or a clockwork?' does not make sense even if the words are familiar to the reader. However, it is logically possible that in some different form of human life the sentence would make sense – even if it is hard to imagine what such a context would be like. It would be an entirely different setting, and understanding people from that reality would be tremendously difficult for humans from another kind of social reality. Wittgenstein argues that people could not understand lions even if they could speak (Wittgenstein 1986, §327). Their entire life situation would be so different that human beings' cognitive capabilities just would not match theirs. Here lies the most extreme challenge for utopian thought.²³

This brings us back to humour. As argued above, humour is triggered when something unexpected happens. The deviation may very well be an unusual linguistic expression. It is possible to create a sketch in which the above-mentioned sentence would be in some way sensible. Or in some peculiar comedy, people could use this kind of silly language, and the audience could understand the funniness of the non-grammatical style of words. Reportedly, Wittgenstein suggested that it is possible and even desirable to write a philosophical work in the form of a joke (Malcolm 2001). It is not entirely clear what kind of humour would be philosophically valuable, but supposedly it would be in some way or another utopian humour. This Wittgensteinian kind of joke-telling can be called utopian kind of humour. However, in utopian thought it would be necessary to move beyond regular ways of joke-telling, which could mean getting rid of particular kinds of setups and punchlines as well as traditional themes like differences between sexes or stupidity of politicians. Utopian humour challenges both the form and the content.

Helmuth Plessner offers a fruitful theory of laughter which is useful to deepen this idea. According to him, laughter has an expressive character, even though the social significance of laughter is not clear. For Plessner, a genuine laughter is stripped from external meanings, and it expresses the human position in the world. Laughter is not laughter at or with, but *in* a human

²³ Clearly, not all utopias are this remote from everyday practices; there are 'real' utopias which draw from current circumstances and try to offer something familiar but different (see Wright 2010).

body; yet the body is always located in a specific historical context. (Plessner 1970). In utopia humour would not have the same burdens which it has in contemporary society (e.g. demand for funniness, recognizable form, etc.).

Because this utopian type of humour is so different from what people are used to in their shared comedies and jokes, it is hard to describe it in detail. The main principles of utopian humour are that it does not merely challenge the limits of behavior and morality, but the limits of humour themselves. Therefore, utopian humour most likely will not be offered in traditional forms (e.g. jokes, stand-up shows, sit-coms, etc.), but it challenges existing formats. Philosopher Theodor W. Adorno sees this type of humorous and revolutionary power in the works of Samuel Beckett. According to Adorno, Beckett's books and plays are not merely absurd without any significance, because then they would be just trivial. Instead, Beckett's works are meaningfully absurd because they challenge the way people use reason and rationality in the Western world – they put the meaning on trial, as Adorno claims (Adorno 2002, 153). Simon Critchley has made a similar kind of analysis on Beckett, where he claims that Beckett's plays laugh at laughter – they question the whole nature of humour and fun (Critchley 2002).

If humour is about paradoxes and surprises, then it cannot offer sameness. Adorno is highly critical towards a culture industry which tries to enclose humour into a safe form (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 114). In this process the cultural products become dull and repetitive, and humour is stripped away from its very core: A peculiar kind of merry non-sense which challenges the way people usually see the world. Following Adorno, humour and laughter should not be anything fixed but expressions of human freedom and imagination. This utopian element is easily left aside if one considers humour as merely a tool for fun.

This type of utopian humour and laughter are close to what Friedrich Nietzsche calls 'the golden laughter'. It is laughter that is not bound to the everyday morality, but resonates with the new humanity which has moved beyond conventional ideas about good and evil. (e.g. Nietzsche 2016 [1883], 2013 [1886]). In this new situation, laughter still has an expressive character, but it is basically impossible to evaluate this laughter, for instance, in the framework of traditional morality. It is laughter by a new type of human being who is not bound to the old ways of living.

As it happens, Nietzsche would like to rank philosophers according to their way of laughing – the best ones would be those who are capable of golden laughter (Nietzsche 2013 [1886]).

From a contemporary perspective, humour in utopia is essentially ambiguous because it is born from different cultural categorizations and exists in a different social reality. Therefore, it can be unsettling, disturbing, funny and scary, and because of its potentially incomprehensible nature, it can appear as nonsensical to an audience from a different kind of society. But as Adorno reminds, there is a possibility for a utopian kind of laughter already in the present circumstances, even if what he calls culture industry tries to suppress humour and laughter into a product of simpleminded fun. There is an ongoing dialectic process that reveals something essential about the prevailing conditions of humanity: the prevailing ‘false laughter’ (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 112; see also Hietalahti 2017) signals the negative aspect of current unimaginative humour, yet the glints of a utopian kind of humour remind us that things could be otherwise. The fantastic form and content of humour offer a challenge for both utopian thinkers and scholars of humour, as well as to contemporary comedians.

Understanding humour in utopia requires imagination, which allows one to transcend the social expectations of the current society.

Understanding utopian humour requires openness to alternatives. Of course, for a comedian, this task is tremendously hard if one aims to create a new kind of humour: Current audiences are unlikely to regard it funny. But even if the masses do not laugh, there might be philosophical depth in this new kind of humour. Utopian humour challenges the ways in which humour and laughter can be understood in general.

Endgame

So, what is the answer to the question given at the beginning of this text? Is there room for humour in the imagined perfect place? If the answer is negative, and the perfect world would lack humour and laughter altogether, the concept of the human being is altered considerably. But, if one agrees that humour is an essential human feature, laughter probably occurs in the perfect place. However, the trick is that the current forms of humour may not be very utopian.

If one tries to force utopian humour to fit his or her own sense of humour or taste, something essential may be left aside. Preferably, one should push for radically different humour – even if it might be too strange to the current ways people assess funniness as such.

I have argued that utopian thought and humour are related in at least three different ways.

First, people can laugh at utopias. This type of laughter is conservative, because it rejects the alternative articulated by utopia. Laughing in this sense is related to preserving the prevailing social conditions. Second, people can laugh with utopia. This laughter is critical, because it expresses a wish to change the *status quo*. Laughing with utopia is affirmative and it states that there is something wrong with the current society – and this something should be changed.

Third, there is laughing in utopia, which is a two-fold category. Obviously, there is humour within utopia which refutes the idea that utopias are boring places. Furthermore, utopian kinds of humour is philosophically not only the most interesting, but also the most demanding.

Utopian laughter is not merely about preserving or criticizing: it expresses a new kind of humanity and a new kind of society. Because of this, utopian humour and laughter can be incomprehensible to contemporary people. Furthermore, utopias are not merely places, but methods of imagination. In the process of imagination, humour and laughter should not be neglected. They are pivotal human traits which in their own peculiar way express essential aspects of the prevailing and of an entirely different society. However, this expressive character is not fixed and rigid, but dynamic and fluid. Utopian thinking therefore demands openness to alternative forms and contents of humour.

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