

MIKITA BROTTMAN



# Funny Peculiar

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and the  
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## **Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor**

MIKITA BROTTMAN

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*“The watchdog’s voice that bay’d the whisp’ring wind,  
And the loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind.”*

Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*



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# Introduction

Do you know anyone who has “a nervous laugh”? Perhaps you have one yourself. I first came across a person with a nervous laugh when I was 14 or 15, and I found it really quite frightening. My mother had been seeing a man named Andrew whom she’d met at the local pub. When I was about to be introduced to him for the first time, my mother mentioned to me that he had what is commonly referred to as a nervous laugh.

I think it was the first time I’d ever heard of anybody with “a nervous laugh,” and the very thought of it scared me a little. Andrew, who taught geology at the local university, turned out to be a bald man with a very round, florid face, and his laugh was a terrible kind of wheezing guffaw that contorted his whole mouth into an awful flushing grimace. His laugh made him shake and sweat as though his entire head were about to explode.

And it happened *all the time*. That boisterous laugh of his burst through conversation like some kind of involuntary punctuation mark. Anything at all would set it off; it didn’t have to be a joke—any conversational pleasantry, any unexpected pause. It would erupt even in the middle of serious discussions. But worst of all was that it seemed to make everybody else laugh as well—whether out of awkwardness, or because they’d also been infected by it, I wasn’t sure. It even made me laugh sometimes, despite myself, partly as a simple nervous reaction and partly because there *was* something ridiculous about this laughter that was completely unwarranted, entirely out of proportion to the circumstances.

I found the whole experience rather creepy and tried to avoid Andrew as much as possible. Later on, after my mother had broken up with him, she told me that Andrew had a lot of problems and that he never wanted to do anything except go to the pub. She joked about how he smoked hand-rolled cigarettes and subscribed to a journal called *Soil Quarterly*. And he was always drunk. He used to drive the college bus, packed with students, blind drunk through the mountains. I also learned that he suffered from terrible depressions and would lapse into the most bleak and desperate moods. I had the feeling that this misery must have been very closely related to his “nervous laugh.”

A couple of years ago, I learned that Andrew had died. He’d “drunk himself to death.” It wasn’t really a surprise to anybody. He used to spend every night in the pub, and often most of the day as well. He wasn’t particularly old—in his early 50s, maybe—but he had a lot of trouble moving around and eventually started to become very weak. He lived only a couple of streets away from the pub, but regulars noticed that he had started turning up and leaving in a taxi. In the end, he couldn’t walk, could hardly stand, couldn’t really do anything except drink. And laugh.

### ***Nervous and Other Laughter***

Isn’t it interesting how people can be defined and even transformed by their laughter? I’ve met people who laugh loud but not long, and others who laugh long but not loud. I know a man whose shoulders shrug up and down emphatically when he laughs, not so much as a side effect of his laughter but more as a sign, as if to say, “I’m laughing.” And there’s nothing more unnerving than witnessing a person you respect and admire laughing just as hard at the miserable witticisms of others as they do at your own smart repartee.

I once knew a girl who was much too heavy to be considered attractive, but I’ve rarely met anyone more popular. Everybody wanted to be around her, including plenty of love-struck admirers. She could have had her pick of men, despite her weight—and it was all because of the way she laughed. She laughed readily and with a wonderfully seductive, appealing sound, implying that never in her life had she heard anything

quite so charming or so funny. When she laughed at something you said or did, it felt as though nobody had ever quite understood how smart and amusing you were until that moment; she made you feel as though nobody had ever quite “got” you until then. And that was the point—her laughter didn’t transform her, it transformed *you*.

I also knew a girl who was quite the opposite. She was really quite gorgeous, smart, and funny—but it was all ruined by the way she laughed. She was a nervous person generally, smoking constantly and talking all the time, but her laugh made you want to turn immediately and run away. It was a loud, long, violent, and nasty sort of yelp, with no mirth about it. It spoiled her completely. Without her laugh she would have been good company, but once you had heard that horrible noise three or four times, it was all but impossible to be around her. What made matters worse was that she laughed at anything anyone said, whether it was meant to be funny or not, and usually topped off her laugh with a little tribute to the person who had set her off—“Nice one!” or, more often, “Good call!”

I once had a boyfriend who had an odd laugh; actually, an odd series of laughs, each with something different to say. He had a reputation for being great fun to be with, and I suspect that he went to some lengths to perpetuate this illusion. His “natural” laugh was a pleasant, lubricated giggle, perhaps a little more effeminate than he would have liked, which might be one of the reasons why he didn’t let it out very often. More usual was a kind of loud barking noise, which I knew was at least half fake because it sounded so *dry*, as opposed to his real laugh, which was definitely *wet*. Sometimes, when he was drunk, this bark would grow loud, demonstrative, and just a little bit nasty. This happened mostly when he was laughing at his own jokes or anecdotes, especially in public. Once I distinctly heard him launch into a fake laugh that suddenly became genuine halfway through, when he unexpectedly “got” the joke.

Worst of all, however, was a laugh of his that resembled a kind of neighing bray, which sounded plausible at the beginning but always went on for slightly too long. When he started to laugh it was like watching someone take a seat on a Ferris wheel, but by the end of the laugh—when the wheel had turned and the seat came into view again—it was suddenly, shockingly, empty. Even if the laugh was genuine to start with, by the

time it ended it had become a lie. And it was through the sound of those last, dry, false drawn-out chuckles that I was given my first glimpse of the anger and bitterness that constitute the nature of the constitutional pleasure lover.

Laughter in large groups of people always upsets and disturbs me, and I try to avoid being a member of an audience whenever possible. I especially try to avoid going to see “funny” movies. Unfortunately, however, it’s hard to escape laughter at the cinema, whatever the style and tone of the film. I remember once going to see a series of experimental animated short films from Eastern Europe at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London—a pretty safe bet, one might imagine, for anybody hoping to avoid outbursts of public hilarity. But I couldn’t have been more wrong. So thrilled was the tiny audience by their cultural superiority, so attuned were they to the films’ self-referential ironies and political critique, that they seemed compelled to express this intellectual acumen in the form of high-pitched squawks of delight.

That was the kind of laughter that loudly announces an understanding of the subtlest reference, the most arcane allusion, the most unorthodox pastiche. It’s this kind of tittering laughter that ruins many film screenings, both public and private. In fact, film critics are sometimes the worst offenders in this regard, with their knowing snobbery lazily masked as tittering laughter, the kind of laughter that yells out, “Look at me!” At the 2003 Cannes Film Festival, for example, I attended a critics’ screening of a self-indulgent but not especially ridiculous film selected in competition for the Palme d’Or. I witnessed the audience of “élite critics” lapse into the kinds of jeers, giggles, and hoots that would not be out of place among children watching a Christmas pantomime.

Even worse than film critics, however, are theater audiences. I stopped going to the theater some time ago for this very reason—because I find the kind of public laughter it provokes very disturbing. The last time I saw a play was four or five years ago, and even then I agreed to go only because I thought I’d be able to get out of it. A theater director had invited me to the opening of his latest production, an experimental play based on the story of three adulterous couples. When it turned out that I could not avoid going, I thought it wouldn’t be too difficult to turn up, say hello, then slip off as soon as the lights went down. So when I arrived at

the theater I was a more than a little dismayed to find that the director had reserved for me the seat next to his. Still, I thought he was sure to go backstage when the performance started, and it was with a mounting sense of horror that I began to realize that I was in a very makeshift kind of theater and there *was* no backstage.

Although the play was a serious one, it nevertheless elicited copious waves of laughter—not the thoughtless, blustery laughter of the moviegoer, but the whiney, goosey, tittering laughter of the self-styled cognoscenti. These awful sounds were provoked not only by the occasional gag, but by any reference to current affairs (especially politics), any mild piece of ribaldry, and—worst of all—any long pause, in which the play was not deficient. Unable to bear the silence, these patrons of the arts felt compelled to release their own mounting tension with irrepressible tweets and squeals of mirth (and among these laughs was the director on my right, who was just about the worst of the lot).

The final straw came when what was supposed to be a quiet and serious sex scene elicited a further round of squeaking titters, leaving everyone breathless with hilarity. I suspect these same tittering theater lovers would have a number of “issues” with this same scene were it to take place, for example, on an episode of *The Benny Hill Show*, where it would have been considered highly offensive to women. Such laughter, it struck me at the time, is the collective voice of a public paralyzed by fear, desperate for the externalization of any kind of comforting distance that will protect them from recognizing their own anxieties writ large before them in a manner uneasily, disturbingly real. Even more than a cinema audience, a theater audience is obsessed with sexuality, and afraid of it. I just couldn’t stay there any longer, so I mumbled something about feeling queasy, got up, and left. The director later called me to see if I was all right. Although I did feel a bit uneasy about lying to him, I can still remember the enormous relief of getting out of that theater away from the horrible echoes of that trapped, tense laughter.

### ***“Laugh and the World Laughs with You”***

Is it just me, or are there more people with nervous laughs now than there were 10 or 15 years ago? Maybe it’s just because I’ve been paying much

more attention to it recently, but it seems as though there's nervous laughter all over the place today. Just turn on the television. Larry King a while ago had a show in which he interviewed the parents of murdered intern Chandra Levy, at the time missing for months and presumed dead. While Chandra's father broke down in tears three or four times during the interview, her mother grinned, smiled, and shook with nervous laughter as her husband wept.

The close relationship between jokes, laughter, and personal anxieties was made clear to me over and over again while I was researching this book, but never so vividly as during a course I took titled "Freud and Humor." This course was taught by a professor of psychology, a practicing psychoanalyst. It was part of an extracurricular program of extended study at Indiana University, where I was a visiting professor at the time. If I had researched this program a little more carefully, I'd soon have discovered that the people who enrolled in the course were mainly older people living in the retirement community where the course was being held. It was not a course of university-level study, as I had thought it would be. Rather, it was one of several classes that brought the residents together for an evening's entertainment—wine tasting, flower arranging, embroidery. Even realizing that this wasn't going to be the kind of academic class I had in mind, I decided to stick it out—and I'm very glad I did, because it taught me a great deal.

The class was composed of about 20 people. Most, apart from myself and one or two others, were married couples or widows. When the professor asked us to name our favorite comedians, the names that came up again and again were Jack Benny, Ernie Kovacs, George Burns, and Sid Caesar; the most recent shared point of reference seemed to be *I Love Lucy*.

I immediately disliked the professor. He was one of those confident, facile types who always win teaching awards and love to engage their students in the "dynamics of learning" by putting on what he, and probably most of the students, regarded as a highly entertaining performance. He carried a battered old leather briefcase bulging with important-looking papers, and his beard was carefully clipped to make him look like the Hollywood version of a psychoanalyst—possibly based on Montgomery



Clift in the movie *Freud*. There was a touch of the quiz-show host about his teaching style, which involved lots of animated gestures, plenty of anecdotes about his children, and endless clips from the Marx Brothers. He was, needless to say, enormously popular.

In one particular session, he went around the group and asked us all to tell him our favorite joke. Almost without exception, the jokes dealt with the anxieties associated with aging: fear of death, impotence, senility, deafness, colostomy bags, and so on, which vividly clarified, at least for me, the many connections between laughter, humor, and fear. One joke, I remember, told by a shaky gentleman in his 80s, was typical:

Two old men are sitting on a park bench and complaining about their aches and pains. "If only my wife would die," lamented one to the other. "I'd get myself a sexy young girlfriend with long legs, blonde hair, a tight ass, and . . . (gestures with cupped hands in front of his chest). "I can understand the long legs, blonde hair, and tight ass," replied the other. "But why the hell would you want a girlfriend with *arthritis*?"

Interestingly, throughout his entire discussion of Freud's theory of jokes, the professor never once commented on the examples of neurotic and confessional joke telling that were being offered up in class every week and that seemed to provide concrete substantiation of Freud's theory. To me, however, the relationship between laughter, joking, and anxiety became increasingly obvious in the jokes told week after week by these stalwart old folks—and it was this, not the professor's lectures, that taught me all I needed to know about the psychodynamics of public laughter.

Incidentally, the professor himself told very few jokes of his own during this class, but one he did tell struck me at the time as rather significant:

Two psychoanalysts are having a drink in a bar, and one of them says to the other, "Do you know, Dr. Schwartz, I myself made an interesting Freudian slip the other day. I intended to say to my wife, 'Could you please pass the salt, dear?' but what I actually said was, 'You've screwed up my life, you bitch!'"

Let us not speculate on the domestic circumstances that entered into that particular choice of joke.

### *Laughter in Theory and Practice*

What is this strange thing we have learned to call “humor”? What does it mean for something to be “funny”? My intention in this book is to reconsider what we take for granted when we use these words.

To this end, I approach the subject of humor from a perspective different from that of most other scholars—I look at a number of alternative ways to conceptualize the meaning of this strange phenomenon. In the process, I hope to unveil some of the mistaken assumptions I believe dominate our social attitudes toward humor, at least in the West. Accordingly, this book is an attempt to defamiliarize not only the mechanisms and procedures of humor, but also its relation to the body and to the senses.

Fair warning: this exercise may lead you to a knowledge you might rather not possess.

First of all, it is essential to understand that, contrary to popular opinion, “humor” and “laughter” are two very different concerns, and they are not always connected. Physiologically, laughter consists of a mechanical or quasi-mechanical series of brief, uncontrollable paroxysms of the diaphragm and thorax, accompanied by short intakes of breath and a succession of vocal intonations ranging from a gentle gasp to a clamorous yelp. An efferent reaction of the autonomic nervous system, this bizarre series of motor spasms is often, though not always, accompanied by a twisting and contorting of the mouth and a baring of the teeth in a grim rictus, which in any other species would seem to signify aggression.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Joseph Addison (1712) pointed out, “If we may believe our logicians, man is distinguished from all other animals by the faculty of laughter.”

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<sup>1</sup> “We’re the only animal that laughs. The only one,” claims the stand-up comic Eddie Waters in Trevor Griffiths’s 1976 play, *Comedians*. “You know when you see the chimpanzees on the PG Tips things snickering, do you know what that is? Fear. They’re signaling their terror” (p. 62).

When considering the origins of human laughter, it is very important to distinguish between the biopsychological capacity to laugh and a characterological reliance on “social” laughing, with its obvious defensive implications. In their studies of the ontogenesis of smiling and laughter, psychologists L. Alan Sroufe and Everett Waters (1976) explain how an infant’s earliest smiles occur in situations potent for eliciting positive affect and therefore appear to have an important adaptive significance. Sroufe and Waters examine how the infant’s earliest endogenous smiles encourage bonding with the mother and how the sounds that make infants smile and laugh involve the fluctuating release of tension, which helps them learn the dynamics of arousal and excitation. Of course, this kind of smiling and laughter is spontaneous and innate and is very different from adult “social” laughter, with its psychological basis.

Most modern theories of adult human laughter relate it to health, vitality, happiness, and survival instincts. Humor scholar John Morreall (1982) proposes the universal formula that “laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift” (p. 39). Philosopher Dana Sutton (1994) argues that laughter is a “purgative,” relieving the spectator of various “bad feelings” and encouraging an attitude of “disdain” toward its “targets,” thereby generating “a kind of antitoxin that inhibits the target’s capacity to induce bad feelings in the future” (p. 29). In modern psychology, laughter is generally regarded as a sign of mental well-being and a positive affirmation of the capacity for play.

The literature on laughter is enormous, although many of the important studies on the subject seem to have been written prior to 1950, and most humor scholars disagree on a number of strategic points. It seems clear to me that this great volume of early writing attests less to our knowledge of human laughter than to the elusiveness of its meaning. Most of these early studies can be divided into three categories: the cognitive-perceptual, the social-behavioral, and the psychoanalytic.

More recent writers on the subject, however—such as Jenkins (1994), Sanders (1995), Peter and Dana (1998), and Wickberg (1998)—tend to insist that human laughter is “fundamentally” transgressive and liberating. Its transforming force is invariably regarded as having great therapeutic value; focused “humor therapy” has been applied as a curative treatment

with apparently salutary physiological effects in the management of chronic pain, the encouragement of social cohesion, the reduction of stress, and the relief of suffering. Historical and cultural studies of the role of laughter tend to regard it as a creative affirmation of the spirit of comedy and carnival, an iconoclastic and demystifying sign of what 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes described as “sudden glory,” but without the connotation of crowing glee—pleasure in another’s downfall—that Hobbes originally attached to this phrase.

Nevertheless, a few scholars and scientists have been brave enough to suggest that there is nothing funny about laughter and it is not necessarily connected to feelings of mirth. Biologist A. M. Ludovici (1933) suggested that there is something sinister about the process. He argued that “laughter is becoming no more than one of the many anodynes with which modern men are rocking themselves into a state of drowsy insensibility” (p. 115). Theories like this are clearly too disturbing to become popular, and Ludovici’s book on laughter was never really taken seriously. Anybody who suggests, like Ludovici, that *all* adult laughter is hostile is invariably dismissed as a humorless misanthrope, even though such speculations go back to Ecclesiastes (“A fool lifteth up his voice with laughter, but a wise man doth scarce smile a little,” xxi, 20).<sup>2</sup> As Ludovici (1938) pointed out, “Who could ever imagine Christ laughing?” (p. 115).

Morris Brody (1950) argues that the laugh is capable of affording only a partial release of tension. Unable to express the sadistic drive more directly, the man who laughs turns part of the sadism against himself.

Laughter . . . has a definite relationship to both masochistic and compulsive dynamisms. The depressed person, involved with his own hates, is unable to laugh because its meaning is too evident to him. The clinically recognized type of the fat, jolly person basically is an unhappy individual who denies his sorrow and in reaction-formation laughs at everything [p. 195].

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<sup>2</sup> The same sentiment is echoed in a letter to his son written by Lord Chesterfield on October 19, 1774 in which he advises that “loud laughter is the mirth of the mob, who are only pleased with silly things; for true wit or good sense never excited a laugh since the creation of the world. A man of parts and fashion is therefore only seen to smile, but never heard to laugh.”

Is it possible that human laughter is connected not to feelings of good will at all, but to a nexus of deep emotions revolving around fear, aggression, shame, anxiety, and neurosis? Is it possible that laughter is, in fact, the most serious thing we do in our lives?

In the process of studying the etiology of laughter and its relationship to humor, I have considered the work of those many philosophers who have been intrigued by the subject, from Plato and Aristotle to Hobbes, Voltaire, and Kant; from Schopenhauer and Bergson to Darwin, Freud, and Koestler. One man in particular, however, seems to me to have taken both laughter and humor more seriously than any other. This is the remarkable scholar Gershon Legman, whose erudition in the field is unsurpassed and whose investigation of this difficult and controversial subject is exceptional for its personal honesty and daring candor.

Once described by reviewer R. Z. Sheppard (1975) as “the Diderot of the dirty joke” (p. 96), Gershon Legman, who died in 1999, was completely self-exiled from the formal world of humor scholars, academics, and the cultural establishment in general. He had devoted much of his life to his two enormous scholarly studies of the dirty joke. But although his relationship with the academic world was always contentious, Legman was a genuinely erudite scholar who knew everything there is to know about comic erotica and who has an enormous amount to teach us about the way we think and talk about humor. Since his death, the importance of his work is becoming increasingly clear. In Janny Scott’s (1999) obituary of Legman, he is described by Bruce Jackson, Professor of American Culture at State University of New York–Buffalo, as “the person, more than any other, who made research into erotic folklore and erotic verbal behavior academically respectable” (p. 29).

The bold subjects and quirky style of his work made Legman an easy target in the world of “serious” academic scholarship, but his writing quickly became widely sought-after outside the academy and finally developed a legendary underground reputation. Totally incapable of separating his strong personality from his academic writing, which rankles with deeply felt emotions and prejudices, Legman became most widely known and best respected in that demimonde of “outside scholars” on the fringes of the academy—a world haunted by ghost writers, booksellers, and those