



**THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE LOGIC
OF THE ABSURD IN COMEDY:
approximations between Bergson's "Laughter" and Jarry's *Ubu Roi***

A FUNÇÃO SOCIAL DA LÓGICA DO ABSURDO NA COMÉDIA:
aproximações entre "O Riso" de Bergson e *Ubu Rei* de Jarry

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The social function of the logic of the absurd in comedy: approximations between Bergson's "Laughter" and Jarry's *Ubu Roi*

Abstract: The parallels between the arguments in Bergson's "Laughter" and the aesthetic resources (presented four years earlier in *Ubu Roi*) by his former student Jarry are remarkable. This study analyzes these similarities to point out the social function of the comic. It looks at aesthetic resources such as artificiality, impersonality, generality, exaggeration, repetition, fixation, and mechanization to list certain social aspects that require correction of their existential weight, thus enabling indirect moral reflection. The influences of children's games, such as puppets, spring puppets and snowballs, on the way events are presented in comic dramaturgy are also analyzed to encourage the acknowledgement of inadequacies in behavior and character in a light and palatable way. The central argument states that laughter has a social, critical and corrective function that is triggered by an absurd intellectual mode of operation separated from reason and close to imagination and dreaming, which proves to be fundamental for the elaboration of important issues society strives to deny.

Keywords: Henri Bergson; Alfred Jarry; laughter; comedy; absurd.

A função social da lógica do absurdo na comédia: aproximações entre "O Riso" de Bergson e *Ubu Rei* de Jarry

Resumo: Os paralelos entre os argumentos apresentados em "O Riso" de Bergson e os recursos estéticos apresentados quatro anos antes em *Ubu Rei*, de seu ex-aluno Jarry, são notáveis. Este artigo analisa tais aproximações para indicar a função social do cômico. São analisados os recursos estéticos usados na comédia, como a artificialidade, a impessoalidade, a generalidade, o exagero, a repetição, a fixação e a mecanização, para isentar de peso existencial certos aspectos sociais que necessitam correção, possibilitando assim uma reflexão moral indireta. São analisadas também as influências do modo de operação de brincadeiras infantis, como marionetes, boneco de molas e bola de neve, no modo de apresentação dos acontecimentos na dramaturgia cômica a fim de propiciar o reconhecimento das inadequações de comportamento e de caráter de modo leve e palatável. O argumento central é de que o riso tem uma função social, crítica e corretiva e é disparado por um modo de operação intelectual absurdo, apartado da razão e próximo da imaginação e do sonho, que se mostra fundamental para elaboração de importantes questões que a sociedade se empenha em negar.

Palavras-chave: Henri Bergson; Alfred Jarry; riso; comédia; absurdo.

1 Introduction

This study aims to trace relations between the ideas about the comical in Henri Bergson's 1900 "Laughter" and the play that preceded it by four years *Ubu Roi*, which immortalized one of his former students at the Henri IV lyceum, Alfred Jarry, as one of the most important playwrights of modernity. We aim to explore some relationships between the authors, indicating the importance of a mode of intellectual operation in comedy detached from reason and closer to the absurd, imagination, and dream, which is fundamental for elaborating on important issues society strives to deny. The pertinence of such an analysis stems from the fact that Alfred Jarry's ideas in theatrical comedy influenced numerous works in the 20th century and inspired some contemporary philosophers.

2 The philosophical relevance of Jarry's work

Alfred Jarry worked as an artist in literature and theater (achieving more success with comedy). He never intended his ideas to be taken seriously. However, his posthumous influence encompasses a wide range. Countless academic studies attest to his inspiration on dadaism, surrealism, cubism, situationism, the happening, the theater of the absurd, the theater of cruelty, and the epic theater.

Roger Shattuck (1968) argues that he triggered the artistic avant-garde of modernity. Christian Bök (1997), Edward Shanken (2013), and Ihab Hassan (1993, 2003 *apud* Haan, 2014) find that his influences exceed modernism and reach postmodernism. Via satire, Jarry confronted the epistemological supremacy of rationalism. Thus, his work can be considered an early symptom of the transition from the absolutist paradigm to a relativist one (Bök, 1997; Shanken, 2013), which would make him a kind of proto-postmodernist (Hassan, 1993, 2003 *apud* Haan, 2014).

Hassan (1993, 2003 *apud* Haan, 2014) states that Jarry influenced Derrida and Baudrillard, the latter even publishing a small book based on Jarry's ideas entitled "Pataphysics". Bök (1997) analyzes similarities between his ideas and aspects of the philosophies of Baudrillard, Derrida, Deleuze, and Serres. Bök (1997, p. 141-142) and Shattuck (1960, p. 28) also find approximations with aspects of Valhinger's philosophy, whereas Alastair Brotchie (2015, p. 30) indicates approximations with Fechner's philosophy. Deleuze (2006, p. 103-106; 2011, p. 129-137) establishes approximations between Jarry's ideas and the philosophy of Alexos and Heidegger. He even wrote two articles characterizing Jarry as the predecessor of Heidegger's phenomenology, published in "Desert Islands and Other Texts" (2006) and "Essays Critical and Clinical" (2011).

According to Higgs, (HIGGS [...], 2012) when Deleuze was still a student, he heard from his professor, Jean Buffet, that it would be necessary to speak and think in German to really understand Heidegger. Deleuze replied that Jarry had not only understood him, but preceded him



(HIGGS [...], 2012). Years later, he published his two articles on this subject, the first in 1964 and the second in 1993. Note that Jarry remained in Deleuze's attention from his student years to one of his last books.

Deleuze ignored that Jarry spoke German as he had "private tuition in both English and German" (Fell, 2010, p. 18). So much so that from 1888 to 1890, via Professor Bourdon (Shattuck, 1968, p. 193; Bök, 1997, p. 57), he encountered Nietzsche's texts even before they had been translated into French. Scheerer (1987, p. 91) suggests that he probably read "Beyond Good and Evil" (1886) and "The Antichrist" (1888). Scheerer acknowledges some of Nietzsche's influence on "Caesar Antichrist," which Jarry wrote in 1894. He also states that important aspects of several of his texts seem to have been directly influenced by "On the prejudices of philosophers" (Scheerer, 1987, p. 91). As an adult, Jarry became friends with Henri Albert, the first translator of Nietzsche's complete works into French (Brotchie, 2015, p. 101). So, Jarry not only influenced philosophers, but was influenced by them as well.

3 Jarry and Bergson

In addition to Nietzsche, Bergson (with whom Jarry engaged directly) influenced Jarry's work the most. In 1891 and 1892, Jarry was a student of Bergson at the lyceum Henri IV by the time Bergson had written "On the problems of specialization"¹ (our translation), "The Philosophy of Poetry: The Genius of Lucretius"², and "Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness" (1889).

Jarry received the influence of Bergson's conceptions of time and perception in a somewhat imprecise and uncompromising way (Scheerer, 1987, p. 93; Brotchie, 2015, p. 29; 31-33, 120, 177; Deleuze, 2011, p.123). Especially in "Commentary and Instructions for the Practical Construction of the Time Machine"³ which Jarry wrote in 1899 using very sharp references. However, this study will only pay attention to the considerations about the comic in Bergson's "Laughter" and their approximations with *Ubu Roi*.

4 *Ubu Roi*

From 1893 onward, Jarry began to collaborate as a writer for the most important literary platforms of his time (ALFRED Jarry [...], 2020). However, he obtained greater financial

1 "La spécialité" (1882)

2 "Extraits de Lucrèce, avec un commentaire, des notes et une étudie sur la poésie, la philosophie, la physique, le texte et la langue de Lucrèce" (1884).

3 "Commentaire pour servir à la construction pratique de la machine à explorer le temps" (1899).

compensation as a chronicler. His success came from his description of ordinary aspects of everyday life, which caused strangeness in his readers, making the morality of the most normalized social rules sound ridiculous (Fell, 2010, p. 159). His critical eye for French society was so sharp that Brotchie (2015, p. 271) compared him to an anthropologist estranged from his own civilization.

He became best known in the theater, especially for *Ubu Roi*, which premiered in 1896 at Théâtre de l’Oeuvre (one of the most important in France, known as a stronghold of the symbolists). Its tumultuous premiere drew the curiosity of Paris to its author (Fell, 2020, p. 75-95; Brotchie, 2015, p. 149-170). The scandal due to the ruptures of theatrical language was such that the result was not “only comic, but hallucination and nightmare” (Fernandes, 2007, p. 19). Critics engaged in a movement of repudiation, publishing books and articles that belittled the spectacle as art. Contemporary critics and more conservative spectators were unable to conceive how one could reconcile grotesque and apparently uncommitted aspects with an intellectually reflective and critical proposal (Fernandes, 2007, p. 17-23).

Today, *Ubu Roi* is considered a classic, the first modern theatrical play, essential to understand the origins of all avant-garde movements in French literature of the 20th century (Polanskis, 2016). Its numerous ruptures with the conventions in theatrical language impacted its public so intensely that they reverberated into the future, making deconstruction a new line of language research. The lack of commitment to narrative logic and realist psychology, the grotesque satire of social conventions, the acid criticism of power structures, the recognition of the meaninglessness of existence, and the resistance to rationalism paved the way for *nonsense*. Artists such as Antonin Artaud, Roger Vitrac, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Fernando Arrabal, Dario Fo, Tadeuz Kantor, and many others recognized a strong libertarian potential in Jarry's experimentalism. *Ubu Roi* defined an avant-garde model, legitimizing the experimentalism of language, linking artistic value to rupture, to radicalism, to the overcoming of formal restrictions. It made scandal, shock, and misunderstanding one of the fundamental features of modernism (ALFRED Jarry [...], 2020).

5 Relations between *Ubu Roi* and “Laughter”

It is interesting to consider that Jarry studied with Bergson from 1891 to 1892 and that *Ubu Roi* premiered in 1896 the latter's “Laughter” in 1900. The relationship between Jarry and Bergson may have constituted the source of some contribution from the latter to the former. The aesthetic peculiarities of *Ubu Roi* and its social impact suggest interesting approximations with Bergson's arguments in “Laughter.”

According to Shattuck (1968, p. 238), Jarry claimed to have heard Bergson extemporaneously talk about his ideas about the comic. However, Jarry's extensive transcriptions of Bergson's classes included no notes on this topic (Brotchie, 2015, p. 177). Jarry's inverse influence on Bergson also seems plausible. If the debate in *Ubu Roi* was so intense among the Parisian intelligentsia, it is

difficult to suppose that Bergson, who had been reflecting on the comic for years, would have had no knowledge of the play.

Intertwining aesthetics, morals, and psychology, Bergson argues that comedy serves social reflection (Pinto, 2018, p. 7). Although he acknowledges the relaxing character of comedy, the loosening of common sense which lays thought to rest, Bergson primarily characterizes it as social critique the distance of which from parodies enable it to address the pathological aspects of society that require correcting, which would be difficult to directly elaborate given the moral weight of the theme.

The tyranny in *Ubu Roi* offers a clear example; if presented as something other than satire, the theme would have an unbearable moral weight. Although war is an ancestral practice, a technically systematized genocide was not yet something common sense could consider. None had glimpsed the Nazi holocaust. Jokes, songs, and curious machines tell of the escalation of the murder of all those who opposed the reign of *Ubu Roi*'s amoral whims in an absurd tone. *Ubu Roi* made visible the inadmissible under the appearance of unreality. As Bergson (2018, p. 81) says, "Comedy in character strikes far deeper roots into life".

Such is just the kind of pleasure that is provided for us by drama. Beneath the quiet humdrum life that reason and society have fashioned for us, it stirs something within us which luckily does not explode, but which it makes us feel in its inner tension. It offers nature her revenge upon society. Sometimes it makes straight for the goal, summoning up to the surface, from the depths below, passions that produce a general upheaval. Sometimes it effects a flank movement, as is often the case in contemporary drama; with a skill that is frequently sophistical, it shows up the inconsistencies of society; it exaggerates the shams and shibboleths of the social law; and so indirectly, by merely dissolving or corroding the outer crust, it again brings us back to the inner core. (Bergson, 2018, p. 107).

The reaction to *Ubu Roi* attests to this capacity. For Bergson (2018), comedy, no matter how apparently light, absurd, or unreal, always has a moralizing function that meets social needs. However, Jarry shows no moralizing intention; on the contrary, it seems only interested in attacking, taking revenge on society by portraying it as ignoble and vile (Brotchie, 2015, p. 177).

Ubu Roi perfectly fits the Bergsonian agenda of comedy: "it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. [...] The inflexible imposition of an individual desire on the undeniable need to adapt to social welfare. [...] This corrective is laughter. [...] Laughter must be [...] a sort of SOCIAL GESTURE" (Bergson, 2018, p. 75). *Ubu Roi*'s laughability derives from the demoralization of a political leadership incapable of rendering its selfish impulses flexible in favor of social needs, proving itself to be infantilized, irresponsible, inconsequential, unreasonable, and unstoppable.

"This accounts for the comic being so frequently dependent on the manners or ideas, or, to put it bluntly, on the prejudices, of a society" (Bergson, 2018, p. 97). By distinguishing a certain pejorative character by exaggeration, the comic shows what is out of step with the social parameters

that demand adaptability. The evidence from amplifying, repeating, and fixating a certain aspect lies at the root of the laughability of the grimaces and the body expression of clown comedy. *Ubu Roi* extends this resource to voice and staging, causing "our attention [to] be diverted from the matter to the manner" (Bergson, 2018, p. 60).

Bergson distinguishes the laughable from the deformities empathy would render embarrassing. "The comic (...) appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion" (Bergson, 2018, p. 98). "The comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart." (Bergson, 2018, 39). From this comes the almost always artificial character of comedy, avoiding emotional embarrassment and enabling the indirect elaboration of uncomfortable issues. Since the function of comedy is correction rather than punishment, it almost always presents the problems it addresses in a generalized and impersonal way, free from the moral and existential weight it would have on real individuals.

In "On the Uselessness of the Theatre in the Theatre" (1896), Jarry states that

"Only those who can imagine a character without a correspondence in everyday life should write for the theater. This unique, abstract character must function as a complex synthesis of different characters. Thus, the actors who will represent them must wear a mask and acquire 'the voice of the role' to more easily achieve complete impersonality" (Jarry *apud* Fernandes, 2007, p. 23).

Bergson's agreement is clear: "But, on the other hand, just because laughter aims at correcting, it is expedient that the correction should reach as great a number of persons as possible. This is the reason comic observation instinctively proceeds to what is general" (Bergson, 2018, p. 111). This generalization, taken to its ultimate consequences, leads to a kind of dehumanization. "The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life" (Bergson, 2018, p. 75). Moreover, "THE ATTITUDES, GESTURES AND MOVEMENTS OF THE HUMAN BODY ARE LAUGHABLE IN EXACT PROPORTION AS THAT BODY REMINDS US OF A MERE MACHINE" (Bergson, 2018, p. 49). Such hybridity was explicit in *Ubu Roi*; the actors deliberately imitated the movements and voice of puppets, anticipating or possibly having directly inspired such propositions.

Another point of approximation with "Laughter" refers to the childish tone of *Ubu Roi* and its playful atmosphere, which coincides with the structures of children's games Bergson found in the dramaturgical strategies of comedy. Such infantilism is evident in the names of the characters Father Ubu and Mother Ubu. *Ubu Roi* also notably refer to children's games, such as puppets, spring dolls, and snowballs. The instrumentalization of one character by another derived from the puppets occurs between Father Ubu, Mother Ubu, and Captain Bordure. The tension between expression and repression derived from the spring doll in the laziness, action, courage, cowardice, hunger, and gluttony of Ubu. Moreover, Ubu's progression of violence shows the cumulative effect

of an aspect that develops progressively, adding to itself, which Bergson likens to the dynamics of a rolling snowball.

According to Bergson, another characteristic of the comic is the absurd, which shows an inadequacy of character, a discrepancy with the social order or a divergence with the normal order of facts. "Theophile Gautier said that the comic in its extreme form was the logic of the absurd. More than one philosophy of laughter revolves round a like idea. Every comic effect, it is said, implies contradiction in some of its aspects. What makes us laugh is alleged to be the absurd realised in concrete shape, a "palpable absurdity";--or, again, an apparent absurdity, which we swallow for the moment only to rectify it immediately afterwards;--or, better still, something absurd from one point of view though capable of a natural explanation from another, etc." (Bergson, 2018, p. 116).

Ubu Roi exposes absurdity at all its levels. Ubu neither acts nor argues reasonably; on the contrary, he twists his discourse to find the most bizarre justifications for the most incoherent acts, contradicts himself, and ignores the principles of causality. Even the dramaturgy is absurd, operating unprecedented spatial displacements and chronological leaps at the time.

[...] Jarry explodes the notion of rationality and subjects the elements he mobilizes to an indiscriminate proliferation that destroys the principles of causality and non-contradiction, the structures of time and space [...], the imperatives of moral consciousness, the immemorial rules of life in society [...] further highlighting the absurdity of the characters' behavior, averse to the most primary logic (Fernandes, 2007, p. 16).

Such absurdities had one target: to deconstruct common sense. All these elements, converging in abnormality, indicated an irrational mode of operation, a logic of the imagination unlike that of reason (even opposing it) that philosophy must consider in the study of the comic and in other like investigations. "It is something like the logic of dreams, though of dreams that have not been left to the whim of individual fancy, being the dreams dreamt by the whole of society." (Bergson, 2018, p. 54).

If for Bergson (2018, p. 118), "Comic absurdity is of the same nature as that of dreams", in *Ubu King*, absurdity was of the order of nightmare. It is easy to assume that Jarry wished no social critique consensually following argumentative deliberations in his play, aiming to abruptly assault discernment, to affect. "Hence our attention nods, until we are suddenly aroused by the absurdity of the meaning" (Bergson, 2018, p. 86).

However, for Bergson this abrupt inversion of the ordinary flow of understanding can dynamize thought and enclose it in illusions:

"So we see that absurdity, when met with in the comic, is not absurdity IN GENERAL. It is an absurdity of a definite kind. It does not create the comic; rather, we might say that the comic infuses into it its own particular essence. It is not a cause, but an effect--an effect of a very special kind, which reflects the special nature of its cause. [...] It is a very special inversion of common sense. It consists in seeking to mould things on an idea of one's own, instead of moulding one's ideas on things, --in seeing before us what we are thinking of,



instead of thinking of what we see. [...] thus it is reality that now has to bow to imagination, its only function being to supply fancy with a body. [...] Such, then, is the origin of his [Don Quixote's] delusions, and such the particular logic which controls this particular absurdity (Bergson, 2018, p. 116-117).

This excerpt seems to explain the procedure of the pseudo-philosophical parodies in Ubu's lines, which emulate complex statements to spin aimlessly. Simulating formality, depth, or scientificity, many of Ubu's lines resemble childish attempts at theoretical elaboration in which the comic results from inverting roles between those who explain and those who are confused. Thus, they show the possibility of interpretation in two simultaneous senses Bergson addressed in his examples of "the bar lecturing the magistrate; at a child presuming to teach its parents; in a word, at everything that comes under the heading of 'topsyturvydom'" (Bergson, 2018, p. 78).

In the passage above, although Bergson refers to the aspect under which comics evince the absurdity of trying to force things to conform to abstract ideas that are inadequate to them, they also evince the process by which philosophical thought loses its relationship with reality by fixating on abstractions. In "Laughter," Bergson associates the normal with what adapts to the flow of life and the abnormal with the fixity of ideas that intend to impose themselves on the real at any cost, opposing the malleability reality demands. Any fixation shows a lack of synchrony and generates estrangement, becoming laughable, subject to criticism, and an object of correction. The lack of movement, behavior, and thought malleability constitutes the target of criticism as it indicates a demand for correction.

6 Conclusion

Bergson's ideas in class and Jarry's thoughts and use of comedy for social criticism (as in *Ubu Roi*) may have indirectly influenced or even inspired some of Bergson's ideas about the comic in "Laughter."

In Jarry and Bergson, laughter functions as a social gesture, operating a criticism softened by the generality and impersonality of characters and situations far from reality. Under the poetic license of the absurd, satire evinces the pathological aspects of a society that demand correction. Such exaggeration makes explicit the fixity of behaviors or thoughts that go out of sync with the flexibility of reality and oppose the malleability life in society demands, causing estrangement and becoming laughable. Absurdity, by distancing itself from reason and approaching the logic of dreams and imagination facilitates the indirect elaboration of themes that are difficult to elaborate intellectually and emotionally.



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