Beginnings with Laughter or Humor's Zany Comedy

»We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they're humorless, they fail.«
(bell hooks 2015)

»›You live and learn. Then you die and forget it all‹. – But what if you live and learn and don't die?«
(Matthew Bevis 2013, 60)

bell hook's appeal in this passage places humor at the dynamic center of any (›meaningful‹) revolution. At the same time, she implicitly links humorlessness to failure. But the failure she marks as the result of humorlessness is not the same failure she alludes to in the first sentence of the statement: »We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor«, which is also based on the idea of failure. In this sentence, bell hooks draws a triangle of relationships. She speaks to a ›we‹, she refers to a goal, a ›meaningful revolution‹, and she raises the question of humor as an essential necessity for the realization of this goal by ›us‹. Humor is linked to a ›meaningful revolution‹. It is also tied to a specific context and a specific performing subjectivity. The statement, moreover, indicates a space and a spacing in a complex encounter: of different discourses, of different subjectivities, and of audiences present and absent (a ›we‹ and a ›not-we‹, however imagined), and a revolution within the economy of power.

Humor stands here as a dynamic, life-giving motor for what bell hooks calls a ›meaningful‹ ›revolution‹. While ›revolution‹ evokes what in German can be perceived as *Begehren* and *Aufbegehren*, desire and revolt, the indispensable, affective movement from thought to action, the word ›meaningful‹ evokes a thoughtful, distanced attitude to this desired thought-act of political critique, as well as, in its necessary narcissistic demand for self-care, a thoughtful, critical reflection on the performing subjectivity inherent in the call for the revolutionary movement that takes place and comes into being at the same time. In this way, bell hooks not only places humor at the beginning

of a ›meaningful revolution‹ as a life-enhancing dynamic, but also understands it as a permanent necessity that facilitates the analysis and confrontation of the failures that are inherent in this movement, so it can be perceived as ›meaningful‹ and proceed within this discontinuous unlearning process of self-scrutinizing ruptures. It thus does not exclude failure from a meaningful revolutionary act, but places it squarely within its process. In this statement, there is also the desire to achieve a ›meaningful revolution‹. This desire implies not only a goal, but also a relationship, an encounter, a space between ›us‹ and ›the world‹. It can also be read as an *a priori* ethical desire to encounter the *O/other*,[1] as well as the desire to do it differently, not to exercise power, not to be violent and genocidal in order to achieve this goal, but to be *committed to the desire* to achieve it – by adhering to humor as the beginning, the limit, and the limitation of a ›meaningful revolution‹. Both ›revolution‹ and humor subtly evoke images of affectivity – a spectrum of different ›affects‹. While ›revolution‹ is connoted as ›love‹, grief, rage, and determination, humor, by contrast, indicates an openness to pleasure, and joy, and (the sweetness of) melancholy in dealing with pain. bell hooks' statement also links humor to political movements and to power, counter-power, and their discourses within an asymmetrical economic web. Her indicative definition seems to include and speak to Matthew Bevis's playful interjection and performance of humor as an interventionist rhetorical act: *What if we don't die and don't forget?* This is »the most scientific of all possible hypotheses«, as Friedrich Nietzsche might have claimed, for there is a resemblance between bell hooks' understanding and Bevis' humorous concluding remark, and the crux of Nietzsche's much discussed theory of *eternal recurrence* – a theory that is also debated in terms of its ethical implications.[2] How would we behave? – Would we behave differently if we did not die and not forget? And what role might not-forgetting play? Would we be obliged to behave in a particular way? (And which subjectivities are evoked by the pronoun ›we‹ here?) How would that affect our choices, and how would we face the O/other, both the Other with a capital O, as a power that can also be found in the traits of the self, and the other with a small o, which represents otherness, and which also resides at the margins

1 See footnote 3.

2 Nietzsche's famous notion of eternal recurrence – that everything will happen over and over again – is now seen as a central concept in his thought. In his work, Nietzsche mentions it in *The Gay Science* (§ 341) as well as throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Nietzsche, this is in fact not a happy thought, but a heavy one, a blow (with regard to all the disgust that is part of life); although Nietzsche writes that he knows this concept from »other thinkers« (and he mentions H. Heine in this context, see Kaufmann 2013, 317), he still describes it as a sudden »revelatory« moment. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche seems to develop this idea further as an affirmation and poetics of living along the horrors and pitfalls of life, as moments, worthwhile, ›full‹ forms of living, against conventionalized norms, beliefs, and constraints. This concept not only affirms life in the (nonsensical) way it appears to be; it also affirms non-death, the impossibility of ›dying‹. An ethical quest seems to emerge from this ›call‹: how to live in the quasi-knowledge that everything returns and must be faced anew? A thought that seems to require infinite internal and external reflection, deceleration? (Fantasy? Imagination? Creativity? Justice?) Nietzsche's thought is particularly interesting because it is outside any ›law‹, religious conformity, and dogma, and even questions them (as aberrant human conventions). For an overview see Anderson (2017); Kaufmann (1974, 2013, 317 ff.); and Nietzsche/Kaufmann (1974, 273, 1978, 219, 70 ff.); Deleuze (2002, 27 ff.).

of the self, giving it structure?[3] And how would we indulge and invest in the future, if we did not die and did not forget? Humor, as in this evocation, refers to the possibilities of the impossible (in conventionalized thought); it *re*captures an iteration, albeit one that shifts the impossible to the possible, while also opening up the revolutionary philosophical and ethical dimensions that such a shift might entail.

This study and search for an understanding of humor is guided by such questions.

While bell hooks integrates humor as a vital and self-critical marker of a discourse initiated by a (Black feminist, critical) intervention, it has not always been welcome in other discourses, especially those representing dominant (Western?) canons and archives. Somehow, elsewhere, humor seems to get in the way in an unwieldy manner, queering the flow of authoritative thought, an interrogative quality not always appreciated (Amir 2017).

Indeed, theorizations of humor are seen as a rather modern phenomenon, at least in ›the West‹. According to John Morreall, »from antiquity to the 20th century, the most any significant philosopher wrote about laughter or humour was an essay, and only a few lesser-known thinkers such as Frances Hutcheson and James Beattie wrote that much« (Morreall 2020).

It is interesting that while Aristotle's work on tragedy has survived, his work on comedy has been lost – or only lost in translation, until perhaps one day it is found in the layers of an Arabic work in the depths of some forgotten library from the time of ›Islamic Spain‹ or in some archive in (North or Sub-Saharan) Africa or Hindustan?[4] However, the ghost of this work by one of the most celebrated (Western?) fathers of philosophy has

3 On the definition of O/other and othering, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985, 247–272). Spivak's theorization builds on Lacan's psychoanalytic approach to the formation of the subject in the infant. Seeing itself mirrored in the mother's gaze (the Other as the absolute pole of address), the baby conceives of itself for the first time (and if all goes well) as a stable and intact entity, and desires to become this mirrored other-image (Lacan's mirror stage); Spivak applies this approach to the relationship between ›empire‹ and the ›colonized world‹ in colonial discourse, in which, too, subject-formations take place. But Spivak also implements a Derridean reading of Lacan's mirror stage in her approach, suggesting that meaning formation takes place on both sides of the divide. *Othering* signals the discursive processes and material effects in which these relations of supremacy and inferiorization that regulate structures of power and domination are construed.

4 In his study on tragedy *The Greeks and Us* (2019), Simon Critchley follows the trail of Aristotle's lost book. He focuses on the *Tractatus Coislinialus*, a 10th(or 17th?)-century Byzantine text thought to be a summary of Aristotle's second book of *Poetics*, which is said to deal with comedy. Although the authenticity of the text is controversial among classicists (with Critchley arguing for its validity), it seems to have already influenced the discourse on humor. The *Tractatus Coislinialus* arrived in Paris from Cyprus in 1643 and became part of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*. It was brought to a wider readership by J. A. Cramer in 1839 and became influential through the work of the philologist Jacob Bernays (*Two Treatises on the Aristotelian Theory of Drama*, published in 1880), who happened to be the uncle of Sigmund Freud's wife, Martha Bernays. It was Bernays's theory of catharsis, based on a reading of this text, that influenced Sigmund Freud's famous and still much debated work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). For fruitful discussions of the possibility of Afro-Asian roots in Greek and Roman culture, see also Daniel Orrells, Gurminder K. Bhambra, Tessa Roynon (2011). See regarding a discussion of the contents of the *Tractatus* in literary theory Frye ([1975] 2020, 166ff., 172 ff.).

been enough of an incentive to give way to a haunting pursuit of the idea, concept, literary form, and genre of comedy in literary studies, but also in philosophy, otherwise the sense of ›laughter‹ and humor might have disappeared forever from the somber and solemn undertakings of (philosophical) thought (at least ›in the West‹?).[5] Laughter had already been discredited by Plato's negative and suspicious inclinations towards it, especially in the *Republic*, and was banned from thinking (law and order), indeed made philosophy's other, well into (post-)modernity (Stott 2005; Amir 2017; Geisenhanslüke 2017).

Aristotle, although he, too, described humor as abusive, was less apodictic about it (Carroll 2014, 6; Bevis 2013, 20 ff.) – but then there is the gap of his missing work. Whether this could be read as the tragedy of comedy, or the comedy of tragedy, or both, or of humor's salty traces in the tracks of (philosophical) thought – who will ever know (this *Geschick* and *Geworfenheit*)? Interestingly, Matthew Bevis makes a connection between the degradation of humor in ancient Greek (European) philosophy and the Dionysian mysteries (Bevis 2013, 8). The Dionysian mysteries and rites symbolize liberation from social constraints and conventions. Intoxication, dance, trance, and fertility rites represent rebirth, creativity, and new beginnings. These implicitly mock conventionalized power structures and create space for thought by including the senses and experiences of transcendence (Bevis 2013, 8 ff.). More interestingly, Demeter, the mother of Dionysus, is often associated with the mother goddess* Cybele, who, coming from ›the East‹, remained to a certain extent ›foreign‹ and ›exotic‹.[6] Perhaps here are some early traces of the othering and *selfing* that later became fundamental to (only Western?) self-understandings, as well as the philosophical divide between thinking, which is linked to ›reason‹, and sensuality, and everything else that was seen as purely outside of ›reason‹ and excluded from philosophy. This rift, which was critically addressed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)[7] and captured as the Apollonian and

5 Regarding ›seriousness‹ as a kind of presupposition for philosophy to define itself, see Derrida ([1993] 1995, 100 ff.). Derrida develops this idea from Hegel's reading of Plato as a separation from the ›mythic *form*‹. In ›essense‹, this could be ›translated‹ as ›literary writing‹ – which seems such an essential part of Platonic thought-writing. Odd.

6 Beginning with the archaeological finding of a Cybele figure in Afghanistan dating back to Bactria, Philippe Borgeaud attempts to trace the figure in a historical analysis; the figure of Cybele represents not only a mother-goddess* who seems to be found throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe, but one who, according to Borgeaud, also represents ›exotic otherness and ancestral heritage‹ (Borgeaud [1996] 2004).

7 Nietzsche's intervention is also often seen and discussed in conjunction with theories of tragedy. In his seminal work *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1978) and in particular its appendix *The Fourth Stage*, Wole Soyinka reads this in(ter)vention of Nietzsche as the anchoring of tragedy in Western thought and argues for an opening of the search for the epistemologies and meanings of tragedy around the globe, beginning and emphasizing the Yoruba God Ogun as a complementary figure that integrates the tragic with a unification of the Appolonian and Diyonesian parts depicted by Nietzsche. Yet I think Nietzsche was not so much interested in drawing a binary distinction here and emphasizing tragedy for European needs, as in criticizing and deploring the lopsidedness of what was perceived as ›reason‹ in European philosophy. In this sense, Nietzsche can be read in conjunction with decolonial readings and himself may in fact be conceived as an *Esu*-figure, *signifyin*(g) with this contentious book the overpowering and patterned rule of thinking along with what was deemed to be ›reason‹. For the meanings of the mythical figure of *Esu*- and divinity, as well as the rhetoric of *signifyin(g)* as a critical practice in African American and African diasporic cultural and

Dionysian concepts, can also be traced in modern Western thought (Nevo 1963; Carlevale 2005; Geisenhanslüke 2011; Amir 2019). Humor, therefore, – or rather, its absence – may have a much more significant trace in the shaping of (only Western?) philosophy than it might appear at first sight.

Despite these negative ascriptions, studies on humor have emerged in scattered and disparate ways, undermining the ban. The concept, category, and genre of comedy, even in the narrower sense, and all the more so in all its overarching and specific meanings, and the category of humor, which is often attached to it in different ways, now comprise such a vast field of research and scholarly attention that it seems impossible to come to terms with it in the confines of a library, let alone in a single study.[8] It might be compared to being swept over or sunk under the very fine and powerful weight of the sands of a desert. Klaus Schwind attributes this partly chaotic and magisterial level of scholarly attention to humor to the rather late engagement with the disparate categories attached to it and the unsystematic, predominantly negative connotations associated with it (Schwind 2001, 332; see also Morreall 2020). Another reason for this rather late interest and the huge amount of work on humor is the revaluation of humor and the desire to understand it at different levels of philosophical, cognitive, psychological, literary, and aesthetic inquiry that has been unleashed in the wake of (post-)modernist and poststructuralist critiques, which question the supremacy of ›reason‹ and ›knowledge‹ (that have centralized and universalized a *white*, ›able‹, cis-normative, middle-class, (enlightened ;-)) male subject of *Christian* descent). Furthermore, as Simon Critchley puts it, there is something about humor (perhaps its [presumed] otherness?) that attracts thought, maybe because defining it seems such an ›elusive task‹. Critchley describes his attempt as an attraction to an ›impossible object‹ that ›philosophy cannot appropriate or conceptualize‹, that resists ›philosophy as discourse‹, and to watch ›what happens in this play of resistance and attraction‹ (Critchley 2005).

This section, too, while attracted to and captivated by humor and how it works, cannot offer a concise overview. Rather, it is a sober attempt (without any guarantees) – how could it be otherwise, given all the fine sand and its derailing effects – to come to terms

literary productions, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. [1978] 2014. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s encompassing theory of *signifyin(g)* as ›the trope of tropes‹, as a, *the*, rhetorical device for infinite forms of *resignification*, and as the work of (literary) theory per se is a still underexplored foundational work. See also annotation 21, p. 84.

8 An overview of this trace of ›the comic‹ within literary and philosophical thought,can be found in Achim Geisenhanslüke (2017, 68–77), and, in particular with regard to ›the joke‹, in Bettine Menke (2021). For a broader historical overview, see Klaus Schwind (2001, 232–283). Lydia Amir's recent three-volume work can be seen as a first in-depth attempt to change this situation and to fill this gap in philosophy from a (continental?) philosophical point of view. Amir is painfully aware of this lack in philosophy and attempts to show the importance that humor has had in the work of various philosophers, reading their work as explicit and implicit traces of humor. According to Amir, humor is an important ›tool‹ in philosophy (Amir 2017). Amir's work encompasses the work of (Western) philosophers from the so-called Middle Ages to modernity. Her search is accompanied by a reluctance to engage with ›postmodernism‹ in which she places the work of Jacques Derrida, but from which she distances George Bataille and Gilles Deleuze (Amir 2022, 4). Following an Aristotelian-inspired gesture, Amir's aim is to show the interconnectedness of humor with the notion of *good life* (see Amir 2017, 2019, 2022).

with some configurations of the humorous in terms of its possible (affective) functions and functionalities within the various techniques of language inscribed in the asymmetries of the workings of language and power – all of which are also reflected in discourse, the materiality of the wor(l)d, and thus also in (contemporary) literary works.

The aim of this section, therefore, is not to provide yet another concise, let alone exhaustive, tidy overview – or definition – of literary understandings of the term, to discuss the centrality of the term as a genre, or to explore the relationship between what is presented as comedy or humor in conjunction with, other terms used for the humorous. In line with Edward W. Said's understanding of a critical stance, this approach »improvises, in acts of an often inspired bricolage order out of extreme discontinuity. Its culture is a negative one of absence, antirepresentation, and […] ignorance« (Said 1983, 146). Its method is »incorporative; it converts what seems to be alien, or in some cases quixotic and trivial material, into pertinent dimensions of the text«, in which texts are seen as »deviations, exaggerations and negations of the human presence. They are at times phenomena of excess and rupture« (Said 1983, 147), put on a (discontinuous) line to see »how language signifies, what it signifies, in what form« (Said 1993, 147).

As Judith Roof writes about humor (and I take this as a further insight for this study):

> »The logical difficulty here, as you might have noticed, is how one knows some event is comic in the first place. If one does not understand how comedy operates, and if one's task is to figure that out, then pruducing a taxonomy as a first step seems to rely on an analysis that has already been completed. How do you know what the comic is unless you know what it is? This might sound suspiciously like the problem of inseparability […].« (Roof 2018, 9)

Indeed, it may well be the case, and I follow Roof in arguing for such an understanding, in which humor cannot be separated and thought of independently from other concepts of the comic, as well as the political, ethical, theoretical, epistemological, and sociopolitical issues it touches upon.[9] Its understanding and function, as well as reflections on it can only be understood as contingent and slippery – but, nevertheless, as a ›social practice‹ as well as a literary and performative cultural expression that is worth paying closer attention to. Taking this suspicion of inseparability as a starting point, I wish to open up an approach to humor understood, on the one hand, in its relation to affectivity as a form of ›touch‹ (a concept with its own inseparabilities). Indeed, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (2009), Eric Weitz defines ›laughter‹ as the ›physical effect‹ of humor that takes place without touching (Weitz 2009, 3), implicitly considering humor as a form of touch that functions without an immediate haptic sense. In this text, too, touch is not necessarily understood as a physical phenomenon but rather problematized as an intersubjective, affective relationality, enunciated in language that points to something within an occurring event, whether large or small. On the other hand, by focusing on its relations and embeddedness in affectivity, performativity, and language, I aim to think about it in a way that scrutinizes its rhetorical setting-to-work dynamics, and to consider these

9 See also Bettine Menke (2021, vii–viii).

workings within a narratological analysis of novels that, however implicitly and differently, address and perform these issues in the (con-)textual spaces they invoke. As Lydia Amir notes in the introduction to her work *Philosophy, Humor and the Human Condition* (2019): »Rather than laughing off our ridicule, however, we should take it seriously and own it. Affirming it enables us to reach the highest promises of philosophy and religion, of the East and the West« (Amir 2019, ix), and of the South and the North, one might add, which can be sensed in the ways in which the poetics of (literary) writing (of any kind) affects them in different ways, and which may indeed contain the promises and flavors of other, more inclusive, more earth-bound ways of thought.

The first part of this section gives an overview of different theories and approaches to humor. The second part proposes theoretical approaches that provide a basis for theorizing *affective humor*. Finally, the third part of this section is concerned with the interrelation of affectivity, humor, and touch and the spaces of interrelationality that this opens up. Here, I consider and centralize the meaning of touch along the lines of Jacques Derrida, whose work remains an important contribution to the understanding and further development of the term. In light of all these aspects, I understand humor as a doubly spatial phenomenon that carves out a space of encounter and, within this space, opens up another space for negotiating dialogicity beyond itself.

A-View-Over-Humor

Although there have always been attempts to come to terms with the phenomenon of humor and to philosophize and theorize its ›nature‹, processes, and effects, one of the difficulties in tracing its whereabouts and understanding is that the term collapses into several other terms such as ›comedy‹, ›the comic‹, ›joke‹, ›wit‹, ›irony‹, and ›laughter‹ – often in the same text. So, the confusion or complexity of humor is already inherent in the process of defining it. Andrew Bennet and Nicolas Royle express this in the following way: »There are few things worse than the prospect of trying to talk about laughter, or trying to define what is humorous« (2023, 145; see also Menke 2021, vii-viii). This is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's idea of the deferral and the infinite metonymic procedure of *différance* in language and the production of meaning, which already escapes what it proposes to say and fix by alluding to something else in order to make that argument. This whole process and the desire to finally define something may have been a humorous pleasure and a mild melancholy for Derrida, who may have said: »If you had looked at what I had to say to you, you might have wanted to start somewhere else. But just keep on trying …«.

For some time now, perhaps since (European?) antiquity (or since Aristotle's work was lost?), it is no secret that there is a certain hierarchy between the concepts of comedy and humor (Schwind 2010, 340; Geisenhanslüke 2017, 68; Morreal 2020). While comedy occupies a sophisticated place in the most refined heights of (literary) theory and scholarship (a place it shares to some extent with the concepts of ›irony‹ and wit), humor is predominantly treated rather inimically as a kind of not *trés chic* interloper, misfit, and pariah of (philosophical) thought. Humor and ›laughter‹ are somehow seen almost as a threat and ridicule – of the self, of stability, of order(s)? – and are negatively associated

with an assumed ›lightness‹ that seems incompatible with the weight of thinking per se in (›Western‹) philosophy (Critchley 2005; Banki 2017; Wirth 2017, 122; Morreall 2020).

Achim Geisenhanslüke attributes this tendency to marginalize humor within philosophy to its self-understanding as a field of wisdom and ›knowledge‹, to which humor (*das Komische, die Komik*) is considered a counterpart. According to him, this movement explicitly takes shape in modern philosophy. Humor is thus often seen as the other of philosophy, and also as the other of what philosophy understands as ›knowledge‹ or ›reason‹, a tendency in philosophical thinking that Geisenhanslüke attributes to Immanuel Kant's evocation of humor (*Witz, Witzigkeit*) in relation to ›reason‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 25 ff., 2017, 14 ff.). By emphasizing the *philosophical wit* of *literature*, Geisenhanslüke establishes a noteworthy connection between what is perceived as ›philosophical‹ and ›literary‹ utterances, implicitly alluding to the performative and metaphorical play of language, which he simultaneously enacts in saying: »It is in the wit of poetic writing [*Dichtkunst*] where philosophic acumen not only finds a mirror, but also a limit« (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 49; translations mine). Geisenhanslüke not only *re*inscribes a connection between literary writing, humor, and philosophy, but also suggests an aporia of philosophical reasonableness that opens up to and is limited by its other – the space of literature (and imagination?) – while it, at the same time, must succumb to the poetics of humor that the statement invokes.

The philosophically quite humorless attitude towards humor can be read as a strategy of control (Berlant 2017, 2018), not only of the thinking subject, but also in a broader sociopolitical sense. In this context, Berlant speaks of humorlessness as a political ›affect‹ used by different social groups for political control: »People on the top of social hierarchies use humorless performativity to produce the fear that protects power; people on the bottom perform it to refuse to extend and legitimate the top's self-pleasure« (Berlant 2018, 157 f.). The rejection of humor in philosophical thinking, in combination with what is seen as its opposite, sobriety – an attitude that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called the »usual disinterested academic style« (Spivak 1996, 30) – can be seen as pointing to an epistemological topology in academic thinking as well as to a desire for control that controls the *limits* rather than the *limitations* of thinking. This may be the most striking difference between philosophical thinking and humorous play (or, conversely, between philosophical play and humorous thinking): While philosophical thinking unfolds at the limits of ›knowledge‹, humor unfolds at its limitations; while philosophy sets the grounds for thinking, humor opens them up.

Although Berlant does not name it explicitly, their definition of humorlessness and humorless comedy (2017, 307) also refers to the central role that the materializations of the concept of ›race‹ play in sociopolitical structural hierarchies. For othered people, humor and laughing at this kind of humorlessness (of dominant thinking) means something else; it is not only a strategy of survival and resistance, but also an epistemological topology with an ethical affinity that seeks to transgress both sociopolitical and epistemological boundaries in search for new ways of thought[10] – or so it can be hoped.

10 The importance of humor in relation to antisemitism/racism is addressed in Sigmund Freud's *The Joke and its Relation to the Subconscious* (1905) in different open and more hidden ways as will be discussed further below.

Within literary studies, it is not only the philosophical approach to humor that provides the basis for understanding it, but also an internal factor: the genre of comedy. Comedy occupies an important, ancient, and central place in literary studies that is linked to drama, is well studied, and over centuries, remained »stubbornly intact« (Leggatt 1980, 1). This is also evident in publications that depict the term by emphasizing its central status within literary studies (Weitz 2009). The term ›comedy‹ is also regularly applied to a number of subgenres, subdivisions, and other, older and modern, forms of humorous expression and style, such as pastoral comedy, comedy of manners, stand-up comedy, cartooning and caricature, sitcom and slapstick, and so on (Stott 2005, 2). There are also a number of other terms in literary studies and literary theory that refer to humorous representation in writing, language, and literature, such as wit, pun, satire, ›irony‹, parody, the grotesque, farce, or the burlesque. Thus, while the humorous diversity of literary and artistic expression is not denied, it is ›comedy‹ that is taken as the overarching term for naming them. Matthew Bevis therefore suggests that we think of comedy »as a literary genre and a range of non-literary phenomena, experiences and events« of everyday life (Bevis 2013, 2).

In more recent publications, however, and while comedy retains its important place in literary studies, the term ›humor‹ is increasingly used as an umbrella term to capture the many facets of the humorous in order to be able to analyze it across the spectrum of its meanings. Thus, despite its poor ranking, humor is now being discussed in literary studies, but also in philosophy and other fields, as another more comprehensive term, and is recently – at last – seen as explicitly related to comedy (Stott 2005; Weitz 2009). In line with the paradigm of the unfixity of the subject (– and certainly since postmodernist theorizations –) humor in these new approaches to the comic seems to signal a kind of (epistemological) democratization process of what can be regarded as the value of insight that is attached to the humorous. Here, the corporeal aspect of humor and the centrality of the body play an important role. In these different approaches, ›humor‹ is often taken up as an umbrella term that refers to different expressions and functionalities of what is considered ›funny‹/›comic‹/›comedic‹ or as ›laughter‹.[11] Following the OED's approach

11 For example, the editors of the journal *Anglistik – International Journal of English Studies* speak of ›the comic‹ in their special issue on the humorous and the way it is used and reflected in (English) literature (27/2016, 5 ff.). This may be related with the German context in which the study is situated, at least physically, where the term humor not used in this general, overarching way. Florian Klaeger uses the term *negative hilarity* to highlight another »bitter« comedic expression and literary mode of disillusionment in contemporary literature that has a diegetic as well as meta-critical trait. Often depicted as ›non-comedy‹, it also understands itself as ›non-tragedy‹. This critical tone does not comply with ›old‹ understandings of the genre of comedy and tragedy awaiting something new that has yet to arrive. See Klaeger (2009, 71–84). In German *humor* generally signifies a *sense* of humor. The terms *Komik* and *das Komische* appear to be more overarching depiction of humor – a topic that has recently become en vogue again, and is much under scholarly scrutiny, with some very insightful publications. See, for example, *Komik – Ein interdiszipliaeres Handbuch*, 2017, edited by Uwe Wirth. The very particular quality of these two terms is their ambiguity and equivocality, especially in their modern meanings. In the expression »*Wie komisch!*« they can refer back to a witty remark as a resentful response. Thus, rather than to be the last word, *Komik* appears here with a teasing quality. However, *komisch* is not only jocular or zany, but also odd, curious or even uncanny or creepy – a trait lacking in humor, even in satirical humor. Therefore, I do not know,

to comedy as »a broader impulse at work and play in life«, Bevis links humor to comedy without distinguishing between the two terms or their historical setting. He sees humor as a feature of comedy and as an artistic expression, but also as a lens of and for its critical analysis. Regardinga the workings of comedy he asks: »How can humor be used? When do we laugh, and why? What is it that speakers as well as writers enjoy – and risk – when they tell a joke, indulge in bathos, talk nonsense, or encourage irony?« (Bevis 2013, 2). This does not make the task of defining the humorous more specific or easier, but it may show the limits of defining what ›comedy‹ is and of differentiating it from humor.

In older considerations, humor in the sense of ›wit‹ is discussed as being of some value, for example in Cicero's characterization of it as a winsome gift – albeit one that cannot be taught systematically; an idea that is also reflected in Kant's understanding of *Witz* as *ingenium* (Geisenhanslüke 2017, 71; see also Menke 2021, xix ff.). Humor in this sense of insightful, playful thinking is thus somehow related to the ›nature‹ and ›character‹ of human beings (only philosophers?), and in this sense also to the process of gaining a kind of aesthetically generated, sophisticated insight. Humor is then also seen as a form of (literary) aesthetics, as the experience of the liminality of being human per se, and as the limit of (philosophical) reasonableness, and even as philosophy itself (Geisenhanslüke 2017, 76) – considerations in which it appears as a marker of knowledgeability and reflective thinking in and of itself. However, the overall and main understandings of theories of humor suggest that humor has been predominantly understood negatively in philosophy (Critchley 2005; Geisenhanslüke 2017; Wirth 2017; Morreall 2020). Apart from some scattered appreciation of the humorous in ancient texts by Aristotle and Aristophanes – and some modern reflections – it is only recently, and in line with the explosive use of various forms of (performative) humor in the media and entertainment industry, that humor has been seen as a purposeful and ›healthy‹ site of human behavior and ability, often within quite biologist, evolutionary approaches along theories of play (Boyd 2004; Linge 2006; Cann/Collette 2014). It is therefore interesting to see in which directions discourses on humor will go and take us, especially when defining humor itself seems to become a comic act (or play?). As Critchley points out, implicitly highlighting the constructed nature of finding a starting point for humor in order to situate it within a framework, while also acknowledging other approaches:

> »No one can agree what comedy is, what comedy is not, what the difference is between irony, humor, satire: these are incredibly contested and contestable topics. I chose humor, partly, because I can tell a clear historical story about it: humor begins as a concept in the English language at the end of the seventeenth century, with the shift from the medical theory of the four humors to the modern idea of humor. You can locate it, and its location is one that you can tell a story about in so far as the birth of humor as something jocular (and not as the doctrine of the humors in classical medicine) is tied to the development of what we now think of as liberal democracy.« (Critchley 2005)

whether the German terms *Komik* and *komisch* are favorable in the German context or if the debate would also benefit from the use of *Humor*.

Andrew Stott and Lydia Amir emphasize the interrelation of humor with the tragic, but also with other forms of the humorous (Stott 2005; Amir 2017, 2022). Stott points to the difficulty of finding a generic definition that is not too narrow and that can be applied to the variety of forms in which humor can be expressed. In order to address the diversity of humorous elements and to be able to analyze specific features and themes in these different forms, Stott extracts a denominator for ›the comic‹, which he takes to be its ›tonal‹ rather than ›structural‹ feature. Instead of ›the comic‹, he therefore proposes to speak of ›humor‹ as »a specific tone which operates free from generic constraints and which, while not the exclusive property of comedy, is closely associated with it« (Stott 2005, 2). Following Stott, humor is understood here as a *tonality*, a rhythmic deployment, as a more general characteristic of and in the production of meaning (Stott 2005, 2; see also Terry Eagleton 2019; Kindt 2017, 2017 a).

›Tonality‹ refers to two aspects: On the one hand, it refers to the different forms that a humorous touch can take in the text. On the other hand, it refers to the different effects and affectivity that it unleashes. *Rhythmic* does not only refer to the different tones and forms that the humorous can produce. It also refers to another aspect: the sociopolitical context of the speaker/storyteller/narrator as well as the sensibilities of their audience(s) within historically determined signifying practices. This idea of the *rhythmic* in the tonality of humor is based on Herni Meschonnic's understanding of *rhythm*. Meschonnic draws from Émile Benveniste's work on rhythm as a *form in the process of formation* – not in the later meaning that Plato attached to it in the sense of ›the form of movement‹ (Benveniste 1971, 287, Michon 2021, Viehöver 2015). Meschonnic's understanding of rhythm refers not only to the text and narrative but also to language as a fluid, evolving material and to the shaping of a subject within an open historical process as well as the process of reading and writing (Meschonnic 1982, 15 ff., 71; Trabant 1990, 14 ff; Geisenhanslüke 2013, 87, 106, Viehöver 2015). Meschonnic places a text, its meaning and understanding within a dynamic historical process that includes its different readings. In this way, he also considers the central aspect of subjectivity and ›subjectification‹ within the performative quality of language-use. *Rhythm*, understood in these terms, also includes the *echo* that a text finds or that is silenced and erased from discourse. Meschonnic's understanding of rhythm corresponds to the understanding of subjectivity within feminist Black, Postcolonial, and Decolonial Studies, where the subjectivity of the speaking subject, subject-positions, as well as self-positionings and positionality within discourse are centralized and considered as part of any reading, writing, and analysis (Said 1983, 185 ff.; Lorde [1984] 2007, 114 ff.; Spivak [1993] 2009, 11, 58 ff.; Crenshaw 1989; Illmonen 2019). In the process, the question of *who* (which historically formed subjectivity) says *what* in which context can be examined, and whether and how the said and the speaking subject find an *echo*.

Humor, too, involves an utterance, a (con)text or an act that – to put it in general terms – comes from somewhere and occurs in a specific context. Not only its tonality, but also its subject-related unfolding, the *rhythm*, and *echo* of this tonality in this sense, is relevant for the analysis of the signification produced and can be considered further.

Understood in this overarching way as *rhythmic tonality*, humor can encompass different styles and forms and evoke different functions in order to signal different effects of and in meaning. Such an understanding is of particular interest in relation to novels,

since novels (like any longer text?) can indeed use and combine different forms of humor with different functions to evoke different sites and tones of meaning within language, as well as the historically determined sociopolitical context that they reflect and echo. This is the understanding in which humor as a *rhythmic tonality* is worked with in this study and which forms the basis for its further elaboration: Humor, then, is understood as an umbrella term, a tonality, that can encompass different forms of the humorous and is bound to the *rhythm* and *echo* of historically driven and autobiographical subject formations.

Theories of Humor – an Overview I

In dealing with the wide variety of ideas about humor, what it is and how it works, theorizations of humor are often categorized under four broad labels. Since these categorizations are regularly used and quite common, I will briefly introduce them here for pragmatic reasons – in this way, the main threads of understanding humor and the difficulties of coming to terms with it may also become more apparent. These are the *theories of superiority*, *relief*, *play* and *incongruity* (Morreal 2009, 2020, 2013; Critchley 2002; Carroll 2014). These umbrella terms are often used to subdivide classical, modern, and contemporary philosophical and theoretical approaches to humor, and also include influential contributions in literary theory.

The earliest Western texts in this context depict and classify humor as something morally viscous and are subsumed under the category of *superiority theory*. The *superiority theory* is considered to be the oldest theory of humor and can be traced back to Plato. For Plato, humor and ›laughter‹ represent negative aspects of behavior. Plato relates humor/laughter to the loss of control and the undermining of authority (in a negative sense), and thus to a moral danger of social order. Plato rejects humor even in poetic form, in literature, and claims that it should be censored for the good of all (Plato 1980, 388 e–389 a).[12] His rejection, though, includes an ambiguous aspect of care. Plato regards humor in this sense of ›laughter‹ as a form of ignorance (of ›immature men‹) (Plato 1980, 457 b), and his approach condemns the ›laughter‹ of others (women) who do not know better [sic!]. Interestingly, however, Plato's declassification and exclusion of humor from the realm of philosophy and (sociopolitical) morality is reasoned from the perspective of power and relegates humor to the other (the enslaved and ›ignorant‹ populace). The so-called *superiority theory* of humor is therefore misleading in this respect, as it also indicates a rejection of hierarchical mockery, whereby in Plato ›laughter‹ is also seen as ›low class‹, indicating a rejection of the underprivileged laughing at those in power (philosophers, for example ;-)) (Morreall 2020; Bett 2019; Destrée/Trivigno 2019; see also Weber 1987, 692 ff.). Humor is in this way relegated to the enslaved and others classified as ›ignorant‹, while ›laughter‹, as an effect of humor, becomes the antonym of ›knowledge‹.

However, a kind of ›civilized‹, *witty* humor – which characterizes the rhetoric of the *Dialogues* throughout – is apparently allowed (under Plato's auspices and control, as it

12 Here and throughout the work, Lane Coopers translation of Plato's *Dialogues* is used in the edition *The Collected Dialogues of Plato – Including the Letters* of Hamilton/Cairns ([1960] 1980).

were). Although Plato's critique thus seems too complex to be easily discerned, it does point to a desire for control and a fear of losing it, whether in sociopolitical terms or in terms of the self and the body. The *superiority theory* of humor is also embedded in configurations in which and through which the marginalized other is placed – based on the ratio that they may ridicule orders of power. This approach is also marked by a hierarchy: ›Knowledge‹ and a *knowing humor*, are opposed to ignorance, ›emotionality‹, and exuberance.

The Stoics, too, reject humor, linking it to the loss of control of a (coherent?) self. It does not get better in Christianity, where God's ›laughter‹ coincides with His [sic!] wrath (Morreall 2020)[13] (while They, He*, and She* may be laughing out loud with joy.[14] René Descartes in his *Passions of the Soul* and Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* also dismiss ›laughter‹ as a form of misbehavior and a sense of superiority over others or one's (former) self. It is not until Francis Hutcheson's 1750 critique of Hobbes's text that humor is dissociated from superiority as its sole possible meaning (Morreall 2020; Carroll 2014, 4 ff.). Nevertheless, theories of superiority remain a stable resource for theorizing humor.

The *release* – or *relief* – *theory* of humor is often attributed to an essay by Lord Shaftesbury (*An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, 1709). It emphasizes the effect of humor in releasing repressed, accumulated (nervous, ›animal‹) energies and ›affects‹, which find a way to be discharged from the system through humor. Aristotle's lost second volume of *Poetics*, thought to deal with comedy, may have included such an approach, with comedy acting as a catharsis for other sensations. Immanuel Kant, Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud are also often seen as proponents of the *release theory* of humor, according to which unpleasant ›affects‹ are released from the body and mind through ›laughter‹ (Carroll 2014, 38 ff.). While Kant speaks of expectations aroused by the incongruous or contradictory that are resolved through ›laughter‹ in ›nothingness‹ (Morreall 2009, 248), Spencer sees ›laughter‹ as a capacity that frees the mind of superfluous energy. Freud's approach to humor builds in multiple ways on *theories of relief*, with ›laughter‹ understood as a release of energy from the psyche (Morreall 2009, 244 ff.). Another contemporary theory of humor, proposed by Jerrold Levinson, also emphasizes the pleasurable, enabling character of humor. Levinson views humor as the »mirth« within a cognitive and »conscious« process involving »appropriate people« – those prepared for it – that manifests

13 Humor and religion is another interesting branch in the study of humor, opening up the possibilities of understanding it in relation to faith, religiosity, transcendence, the everyday, textuality, and ›identity‹ formation. The link between humor and religion is not a new phenomenon, appearing, for example, in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, but what may be new is that it is being taken up in a systematic way, inspired by approaches from cultural studies; cf. for instance, Gerald Hartung and Markus Kleinert (2017). Regarding a more fundamental discussion of ›identity‹, see the work of Stuart Hall, for example, Hall (1990).

14 See, in this regard, Alena Zupančič's insightful exploration of humor/comedy, religion, psychoanalysis, and Hegel's understanding of ›knowledge‹ and *the Absolute* within his depictions of the aesthetic in the epic, and in tragedy and comedy. According to Zupančič »Hegel's point […] is that in this very ›work of the negative‹ (through which comic subjectivity appears) comedy produces its own necessity, universality, and substantiality (it is itself the only ›absolute power‹), and it does so by revealing the figures of the ›universal in itself‹ as something that is, in the end, utterly empty and contingent.« Cf. Zupančič'2008, 23 ff., here 27.

through some form of ›laughter‹ (Levinson 1998, 565 ff.; Carroll 2014, 43 ff.). Theories of play are traced back to St. Thomas Aquinas, who linked humor to pleasure and the ›solace of the soul‹. Humor is considered part of leisure and as play with words or ideas. Other theories of play see humor as an ›evolutionary‹ property that helps to manage information and develop a »coherent world view«, omitting those that seem unwarranted. Here, humor is discussed as a playful exercise that prepares for emergencies (Boyd 2004; Gervais/Wilson 2005; Carroll 2014; Wirth 2017).

The most influential of these overarching theories of humor is the so-called *incongruity theory*. *Incongruity theories* emphasize the lack of overlap between meanings evoked in utterances, actions, or objects. The *incongruity theory* of humor is considered to be the most convincing understanding of humor since Romanticism. It is the most accepted and still dominant theory of humor on a broad interdisciplinary level (Carroll 2014; Kindt 2017; Wirth 2017; Eagleton 2019).[15] The incongruous effect of the humorous is also reflected in the understanding of ›irony‹, and to some extent of wit and pun, as saying one thing and meaning another.

Theories of Humor – an Overview II

Alongside these ongoing approaches to humor, which are also reflected in the interdisciplinary journal *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research*, there has also been a significant increase in studies of humor in literary theory.[16] This tendency is evident in many recent publications on humor as a site of and for literary theory (Kafalenos 1985; Stott 2005; Critchley 2005; Stott 2006; Farber 2007; Weitz 2009; Greenberg 2011; Connelly 2012; Carroll 2014; Ridanpää 2014; Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2017; Trousdale 2017; Wirth 2017; Roof 2018; Eagleton 2019; Menke 2021). I furthermore attribute this development to the ›affective turn‹, which perceives *affectivity* as a stimulus and form of ›knowledge‹ (Carroll 2014, 6, 55 ff.; Morreall 1983, 1983 a; Hogan 2016), but also to a (renewed) interest in humor as a device of literary writing with different aims beyond the ›merely‹ comic (Weber 1978, 1994; Wirth 1999, 2017; Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2017; Roof 2018; Francis/Giappone/Mackenzie 2018; Eagleton 2019; Menke 2021).

The renewed interest in humor may also reflect the effects of late capitalism and its entertainment industry, in which forms of critique – if we consider humor to be such

15 In his overview of theories of humor in literary theory, Uwe Wirth (2017, 130 ff.) notes that Victor Ruskin (1985), as well as a number of other authors (Kotthoff 1998, 2009; Gerigk 2008; Kindt 2011) draw on the incongruity theory of humor, but in contrast to more deconstructivist motivated authors, they attempt to come to terms with it by paying attention to its semantic and linguistic layers, and, in this way, try to develop a more comprehensive, general, and universal, ›anthropological‹ understanding of humor. There is thus also a kind of theoretical ›contestation‹ over the ›frame‹ and approach to humor, which is also reflected in the competing claims and ›schools‹ of the various theorizations of humor, with no ›truth‹ in sight. However, deconstructive and semantic appeals and characteristics of humor may not be exclusive, but can be viewed as complementing each other, as this study hopes to show in-between the lines. Rather, it may be a question of where along the way one stops to read the humor of and in the text.

16 See for an overview Uwe Wirth' »Literaturtheorie« (2017, 122–133) and John Morreall's *Philosophy of Humor* (2020).

a form of social critique (Niebylsky 2004; Dadlez 2011; Fendler 2016; Bonello/Giappone/Francis/MacKenzie 2018) – are fetichized and marketed, for example, in the satire of sociopolitical agendas. Along these lines, Sianne Ngai speaks of humor as ›zaniness‹ and as a contemporary *aesthetic category* that attempts to come to terms with a seemingly ungraspable aesthetic feeling (Ngai 2010; Berlant/Ngai 2017). Like Klaus Schwind, Ngai historicizes this trend and links it to German Romanticism and the aestheticization of humor. Schwind attributes this trend and the renewed interest in humor to the late eighteenth century, the emergence of a literate subject (*Bildungssubjekt*), and a positive *experience of perception* (*Wahrnehmungserfahrung*), in which humor (*Komik*) is distinguished from the negatively connotated ridiculous (*das Lächerliche*). According to Schwind, a shift in the meaning of humor is taking place in this time period, coming from the arts/comedy and entering the aestheticized everyday discourses around the experience of pleasure (*Genußerfahrung*) (Schwind 2001, 232). Schwind sees this shift as a form of legitimation of ›laughter‹ against the backdrop of conventionalized social and *Christian* understandings, which it resists; in this way, humorous pleasure is cultivated within what he calls a »civilizing process« (*Zivilisierungsprozess*). It does not seem far-fetched to reconsider understandings of humor in the late eighteenth-century discourses described here, in relation to colonialism and its structures of ›knowledge‹ production, against the backdrop of the emerging and centralized subjectivity of a *white*, male, ›able‹, cis-normative, middle-class subject of ›reason‹ replacing the subject of *Christianity* – an issue that has rarely been taken up in scholarly debates and that seems worthy of further attention.[17]

This valorization of the humorous blossoms in critical (poststructuralist) postmodern accounts that play with the sense of meaning, as well as in discourses that exploit these philosophical shifts in the wake and commercialization of a late capitalist taste for non-sense (Ngai 2010, 951 ff., 2012). The latter development may be an answer to the question of what it might have been that necessitated this form of excited and exhilarated non-sense – humor as our still present twofold (critical and subverting the critical) *aesthetic category* – and whether it is indeed an *aesthetic category* (whose subject is yet to be specified) or a readily available (linguistic, aesthetic) expression of an experience of discomfort with (the readily available acceleration of) ›time‹. This is a question that this study will not be able to answer, but that may linger in the margins of the analysis. ›Time‹, though, is a central category often linked to humor, especially ›the joke‹, but also the sitcom and other performative forms of humor, such as comedy itself (Bevis 2013, 58). Especially in these relations, ›time‹ is seen as an important factor that plays with a sense of suspension and aroused expectations, a topic that is often discussed within theories of release, and which, in terms of expectations, is an aspect of humor that was also emphasized by Kant. The basis of this logic is that as soon as ›the joke‹ or humorous display ends, expectations are fulfilled, leading to ›laughter‹; sometimes, however, ›time‹ itself is seen as the source and component of the play and the defects that organize humor (Carroll 2014, 33 ff.; Bevis 2013, 58 ff.).

17 Achim Geisenhanslüke's analysis of ›stupidity‹ and ›wit‹ and the formation of ›reason‹ in modernity can be taken as a starting point that explores this question more specifically (Geisenhanslüke 2011).

Points of Relevance and Departure

This schema for dealing with the variety of theories of humor can only be understood as a way of coming to terms with the multitude of approaches, which often have features that are subsumed under one theory, but which in fact can also be attributed to at least one of the others and thus cannot be seen as exhaustive.

In the following, I wish to outline some further reflections on humor that are important throughout the work and to which I will return. As a first step, I will introduce the modernist theorizations of humor by Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. Both thinkers remain influential, widely used, and instrumental to various other understandings of humor. Both approaches are seen as precursors of theorizations of humor that implicitly address humor's performative potential, its affective and rhetorical sides, and the question of subjectivity that will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Modernist Approaches – Freud and Bergson

Freud's theories of humor can be categorized under both the *relief theory* and the *incongruity theory* of humor, and the question is whether they can be reduced at all to one of these approaches, since they also encompass other aspects that are not included in either of them.

Freud's still influential approaches have (at least) three dimensions, which are already invoked in his terminology of the humorous. He distinguishes between ›the joke‹ (*Witz*), the comic (*das Komische*), and humor (*Humor*), which he attributes to different topoi of his first topographical model of the psyche.[18]

While ›the joke‹ emerges from the unconscious, the comic and humor – according to Freud – emerge from the preconscious, that is, from the transit place between consciousness and the unconscious, which is more directly accessible to consciousness. Freud understands the workings of ›the joke‹ as a way of releasing a repression through an unconscious *repression effort* (*Hemmungsaufwand*) and condensation that is set in play in language.

He also distinguishes between humor (*Witz*) – the ability to draw on witty metaphors and conflations – and humor (*Witz*) as ›the joke‹ in performance (Wirth 2003). While Freud links the comic (*Komik*) and ›laughter‹ to a *perceptual effort* (*Vorstellungsaufwand*), because an imagined expected perception does not occur (is incongruent with expectation), he associates humor (*Humor*) with an affective effort (*Gefühlsaufwand*), because a tension tied to an affective expectation is fulfilled in a different way (which also invokes incongruity) (Pietzkar 2006; Geisenhanslüke 2015; Morreal 2020; see also de Lauretis 2010).

In all three of these meanings of humor, the psychological energy summoned becomes superfluous and is released, but in different ways and with different functions, with the expected outcome each time being incongruent with the actual outcome.

18 For an explanation of Freud's topographical model of the psyche, see Carl Pietzer (2006) and Teresa de Lauretis (2010). Freud's tropographicalcal model distinguishes between three distinct and interrelated parts of the psyche: the unconscious, the pre-conscious and the conscious, the pre-conscious being a kind of repository where some of the unconscious finds its way into consciousness.

Freud's most elaborate work on humor, his theorizations of ›the joke‹, a work published in parallel with his works on hysteria and sexuality (*A Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*), builds on his dream theory. Concurrent with the dream-work, Freud also speaks of ›the joke‹-work. Freud, like the Greek philosophers, explicitly refers to language as an important aspect of the ›joke technique‹; like the dream-work, ›the joke‹-work is understood as a processual production of meaning through condensation and displacement, which, like dreams (and also like poetry), finds expression in metonymic and metaphoric ways through language (John 1996, 55 ff.; Coletta 2003; Geisenhanslüke 2011, 210 ff., 2015, 2016; Roof 2018; Menke 2021). Freud thus emphasizes the poetics of a signifying system of signs through metaphoric and metonymic shifts and condensations that play with and constantly frustrate conventionalized perceptions and expectations. Freud's understanding of humor is not only a play within a system of incongruous speculations, but also a process that opens up such expectations by exposing them as unavailable. It presupposes a process of unavailability, in the humorous play of language, as well as in conventionalized, sociopolitical normalcy. Unavailability is understand here in a more Derridean sense as temporal and spatial deferral, spectrality, and supplementarity, which makes it possible to think beyond any immediate meaning, reference, or ›representation‹ of signs in the process.[19]

Freud discovers a form of non-assignment that accompanies language and normativity, dreams and poetry. The humorous production of meaning seems exploratory. It is undoing rather than constitutive and binding. Freud's theory of humor thus goes beyond theories of incongruity. It is therefore difficult to fit Freud's theory of humor into one of the above schemes, because the relief produced in humor also has different functions. It can have a repressive, perceptual, or affective quality. Freud's approach may be better preserved in theories of the performative (to which we will come later), since displacement and condensation take place through an often language-related, performative *act*. The metaphorical, language-related play of humor that Freud discusses is also indicative of a performative understanding of humor. However, Freud emphasizes that it is not so much the allegorical or metaphorical comparison as such (*Gleichnis*, *Gleichniswitz*, *Vergleich; here: Gleichnis*) that causes humor (or incongruity), but its alienated, surprising use, its displaced and condensed deployment that deviates from (discursive and normalized) conventions and expectations (Freud 2024.8, 71 ff., 1999.6, 87), a trait that can also be found in the literality of poetic language. This may be why Freud compares ›the joke‹ (in the sense of wit and witticism) with poetry and the dream-work and uses the same terms to describe the workings of humor. Freud not only analyzes ›the joke‹ along the lines of the dream. In fact, he argues that dreams *use* ›jokes‹ through displacement and condensation to disguise meaning and circumvent super-ego censorship (Carey 2002, vii). The

19 Hartmut Rosa also uses the word ›unavailability‹ in conjunction with what he calls ›resonances‹, especially in the economy of ›desire‹ and ›availability‹ (Rosa 2019). Although there may be some overlap in terms of some of the phenomenological traits he mentions with what I attempt to consider as ›touch‹ and ›unavailability‹, my understanding of ›unavailability‹ differs from Rosa's in that it is seen as an inner space in its own right. It is related to Derrida's concept of *differance*, and also describes a space of withdrawal in the self as the basis for an untouchable, perhaps almost sacred, ›niche‹.

language of ›the joke‹, in this sense, is seen as a signifying technique, a rhetorical tool with poetological insight, which uses condensation and displacement within conscious and unconscious movements to express new forms of lose ›unification‹ between different meanings. Freud's understanding of humor is thus based, on the one hand, on linguistic representations that allude to a shift of familiar meanings to things that are unfamiliar and unconventional. At the same time, he links the effects of humor to something unknown, unknown to both the narrator and the listener (Geisenhanslüke 2017, 73). The humorous portrayal that Freud draws also considers subjectivity and the function of ›the joke‹ for the emergence of the subject. Humor allows the subject to talk about unpleasant or tabooed experiences, while providing a shelter from destructive counter-attacks (Carey 2002, xiii; Freud 2024.8, 79 (90)). Although Freud speaks of ›the joke‹-technique and its rhetoric, he links ›joke‹-making to the unconscious and an unconscious subjectivity: »[I]n forming a joke one lets go of a train of thought for a moment, and then it suddenly surfaces from the unconscious as a joke« (Freud 2024.8, 146 (168)).

With regard to the subjectivity of the narrator, it is interesting to note that Freud, like Kant, links humor in the sense of wit to an elite group of people who are considered capable of it. He does not regard ›the joke‹ as a ›natural‹ and general ability to form language. This contrasts with his placement of humor in the unconscious and pre-conscious, and with other theories that relate humor to ›lowness‹, to social class, and to the body, sexuality, and defecation.

Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche, for example, relate humor in different ways to underprivileged classes (Bevis 2013, 63 ff.). Reading against the grain, this also means that humor can be codified as a means of empowerment and a strategy for speaking out against various power nexuses – allowing for the emergence of empowered subject-formations. This understanding also reflects Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to and reading of humor and the carnivalesque as (performed) forms of relief and redemption from oppression. As will be discussed later in his much subsequent work on humor, Freud also links it to strategies of empowerment that emanate from the unconscious.

Henri Bergson's *Laughter – An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900) – like Freud's work on humor – is another influential modernist theory of humor, not least because he writes about humor by looking at the current events and ways of life of the time in which he lives. Accordingly, the language he uses sometimes contains offensive, racist vocabulary. While Freud argues for the traces of the psyche in the bewildering phenomenon of humor (although he also refers to the body), Bergson's central point focuses on humor and its effects on the body (although he also refers to the ›unconscious‹) and the way it is displaced and alienated by machine-like, automated movements. Consequently, Bergson views the performing subject as a thing-like entity (Bergson 1911, 16 b).

Although Bergson emphasizes the appeal to ›intelligence‹ in the work of humor, he expands the meaning of ›intelligence‹ in his understanding of humor to include what he calls the ›touch‹ (*contact*) of ›other forms of intelligence‹ (Bergson 1991, 4). This movement of humor thus involves other sensibilities, suggesting a network of different relational ties that are important for its functioning. These other aspects are subjectivity, sociality, and feelings of belonging. Bergson calls these the ›reverberations‹ (*répercussions*) of humor. He also emphasizes that humor always involves a group of people and that it is not infinite (Bergson 1991, 4 ff.). In this way, not unlike Freud, Bergson links humor to a

social sphere and also confines it to a specific space-time, ultimately making it a part of signifying practices and symbolic orders.

Bergson's work was written in what Critchley calls »the dawn of cinema« (Critchley 2005, 57). In this work, Bergson depicts an aspect of the ›falling‹ and ›failing man‹ and, starting from the humorous portrayal of the mechanization of everyday life, examines the comical site of mechanized, industrialized life, which is perhaps best symbolized and summarized in silent, panchromatic films, especially those by Charlie Chaplin (Bevis 2013, 29 ff.). Bergson's theory of ›laughter‹ can be read as a reflection on the art of (silent) cinema and its significance for the mimetic comedy of (everyday) life and the subjectivity it forms. A person, a living human being, appears in this way as a machine (to which we can add experiences with AI) through the performance, the act, and the representation of rigidity and repetition.

Another characteristic that Bergson mentions is ›absentmindedness‹ in the act of performance and a state of unconsciousness (Bergson 1991, 13). ›Laughter‹ is presented as unconsciousness and as a condition that can be observed; it is subjectivity itself, it seems, that is both mocked and regarded with wonder here. Bergson's approach implicitly suggests that the meanings of subjectivity and subject-formation can be read (differently) in the performative acts of a subject when it appears absent-minded. Subjectivity appears in this way as a mental emergence, mirrored in the acts of the body, which cannot be fully controlled by the mind. Bergson's unconscious subject is not to be seen in a negative way, but rather understood as ›natural‹ in its clumsiness.

Furthermore, Bergson's analysis of humor divides subjectivity into an unconscious performing subject and a subject in a (mental) state of insightful wonder. This provokes ›laughter‹ in a third, observing subject – who laughs at the auto-divided self (recognizing itself) – rather than at the performing other subject they observe. The subject of humor in Bergson's reflections is thus split by seemingly incongruous bodily and psychic acts of performing and reflecting. Although Bergson's understanding of the subject entails a dualistic element, in contrast to the Cartesian understanding of the subject at the time, his image of the subject contains a divided, split and yet interconnected understanding of subjectivity, in which the body and the mind appear as reconciled and yet also incongruous. Humor here arises from an insight into the unfulfilled desire for sovereignty, which can be both disturbing and comforting.

What we find in Bergson's theory of humor is an acknowledgment of the self's resemblance to a machine, of the self's limitations, and of its constant struggle to perform adequately at the edge of failure. Humor functions as a form of self-reflexivity here, as an indirect, meta-descriptive (philosophical, aesthetically produced) insight that questions and blurs the distinction between machine and human and the meaning of subjectivity in late capitalist culture. With regard to discourses on algorithms, (in)animacy, cyborgs, and (a new) humanity, Bergson's theories remain relevant and meaningful. His theory of humor can be understood as a self-reflexive approach to release-theories of humor that laugh at the self and the modern subject. It can also be understood as a theory of incongruity, but also as a theory of (the failure of) performativity and its (philosophical and metatheoretical) implications.

Both approaches, Freud's and Bergson's, also consider the social dimensions of humor and its community-building and (dis)socializing aspects. They play with the liminal-

ity of conscious and unconscious features of human behavior, which is revealed in humor as a threshold process of internal and external relations and entanglements.

Ethical and Performative Dimensions of Humor

Bergson's analysis of the unconscious subject and Freud's connection of humor to the unconscious also reflect an ethical site of humor. It can be understood in relation to the idea of the ›fool‹ and the ›naïve‹. In the theories of Freud and Bergson discussed above, this ethical trait arises from the oscillating gaze/reading of a knowing observer/reader and the unknowing, unconscious, and ›innocent‹ actions of an agent/character, as well as the *response*-ability of a subject who is not always aware of what they are doing. The space of the ethical appears as the liminal space of an encounter construed on unequal grounds – on the one hand, there is an observed and objectified subject in a state of unawareness; on the other, there is a subject that seems fully aware of its actions (observing another) (and who may still be observed by another). In this way, the observing subject is reminded of their own vulnerability in the act of observing. Humor is thus charged with a tragic, or at least meditative, insight – which can be expanded, more generally, to the ethical dimension of the process of reading (the world as well as a text) per se. The reading subject is a subject in a relation of power that can be reversed; in observing and questioning the act of another, they can also observe and question themselves. Thus, in the act of reading/acting, the subject is exposed to vulnerability and reminded of it. This may be one of the reasons why literature and humor are distinguished from philosophical thought or *Wissenschaftlichkeit*, because in this way the latter realms retain a more authoritative validity.

Kant, too, posits an aesthetically produced characteristic of humor in connection with its ethical dimension, with Geisenhanslüke warning against Kant's premise of wit and the disparaging of humor that he grants to simplicity (*Einfalt*), albeit within the aesthetics of (refined) literature, as the (good) other of ›reason‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 50 ff., 2017, 71). However, Kant undermines the idea of the sublime by presenting the naïve side of humor as a quasi-wonder. At the same time, and as a consequence, the naïve, the fool, also appears as a figure who questions and opens up the rigid limits of the definition of ›reason‹. The naïve *de*hierarchizes the order of knowing and not-knowing – and its representations. The unconscious, awkward, clumsy subject of naivety evokes feelings of empathy rather than disgust (or so it can be hoped at least). According to these approaches, the fool, the naïve subject – while being laughed at – also obtains a form of superiority that arises precisely from their unawareness and is only revealed to the reader/spectator in the utterances or actions that their figure performs (Geisenhanslüke 2011). The figure of the fool acts in a doubly incongruous way. On the one hand, it represents someone that it is (not) foolish, and on the other, it represents a performance that, in its foolishness, is questioning and critical (and, thus, not foolish). In this way, it questions both normalcy and incongruity as aspects to understand humor or distinguish it from ›knowledge‹. This amounts to a questioning of a straightforward conception of humor and a destabilization of such distinctions. In this sense, the figure of the fool also illuminates the elusiveness of the difference between a ›real‹ performance and the performance of everyday acts as

well as the perceived ›truth‹ of the serious and the non-serious. All acts appear to be wise and foolish at the same time.

Schwind draws attention to another ethical side of the humorous that is worth thinking about. In his insightful, treatise-like essay *Komisch* (2001) – which unfortunately gets lost in the thick volume on aesthetic terms – he points to the ethical dimension that arises from the (post-)modernist culture of nonsense. Whoever laughs at another, for whatever reason, also positions themselves and remains responsible for their ›laughter‹ as well as for being a witness to such ›laughter‹ (Schwind 2001, 334). In this way, the (political) question of subjectivity and positionality with regard to humor is emphasized, as is the question of responsibility in relation to the subject of humor/›laughter‹. This, one could say, is another ethical positioning of humor that does not refer to the narrator and narratee of a text but speaks directly to its ›(implied) audience‹, and that also comes down to questions of subjectivity and humor. It is also bound to a *space* that emerges from this relationality: a text and its social context, which offers the possibility of a counter-signature (either through ›laughter‹ or through a critical distancing from what the scene/text wants to evoke with its specific humorous tonality). Moreover, in this way humor always already positions its own progressive or regressive realm and space of speaking. This ethical aspect of humor raised by Schwind also shows the limits of humor with regard to offensive, sexist, and racist content and allusions, something that could be called *false humor*[20] and that cannot be separated from questions of subjectivity. Thus, humor has a limit where it can turn into *false humor* and become an insult and a political weapon of degradation in the economy of power.

Within the above theorizations of humor, humor not only has a visionary dimension but must also be considered within a broader performance-related landscape and language, which will be discussed in the next chapter. This trait of humor, and comedy, is a

20 Sigmund Freud speaks in this regard in a more general sense of ›hostile jokes‹ as a ›new technique of insult‹ parallel to ›sexual aggression‹: »Since our individual childhood, and, similarly, since the childhood of human civilization, hostile impulses against our fellow men have been subject to the same restrictions, the same progressive repression, as our sexual urges. We have not yet got so far as to be able to love our enemies or to offer our left cheek after being struck on the right. […] Insofar as we are all able to feel that we are members of one people, we allow ourselves to disregard most of these restrictions in relation to a foreign people« (Freud 2024.8, 90). Freud also emphasizes the social function of such offensive humor. According to him, its purpose is not solely to insult as such, but, at the same time, to ally with a third person »against our enemy. By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him, […] which the third person – who has made no efforts« – endorses with their ›laughter‹ (Freud 2024.8, 90). In his book *On Humor*, Simon Critchley calls this form of humor reactionary or »untruth humor« that »tells us important truths about who we are«. I prefer, though, to speak of *false humor* instead, as in the expression ›un-truth humor‹ ›truth‹ remains as a problematic residue because it unwittingly centralizes dominant subject-positions from where this sense of humor may be deployed. Cf. Critchley (2005, 12). While I think that it is relevant to keep in mind that humor indeed can become ›hostile‹ at any time, its use as a tool of power, and thus subject-related contexts, should also be considered. This includes the subjectivity and subject-position that determine and name what ›truth‹ and ›untruth‹ are, which I regard as an important aspect of any critique. I think this is more strongly expressed in the narrower term *false humor*. I therefore, use the term *false humor* to define this form of insult disguised as humor. See also here, p.78 ff. and annotation 21, p. 84.

property that has been discussed in both literary and cultural theory, and is, in fact, one of the most recent and still influential (literary) theories of humor (Wirth 2017), alongside Bakthin's theory of the carnivalesque, which can also be understood as a performativity theory of humor as will be argued. While ancient accounts of comedy in literary studies, beginning with Aristotle's approach to comedy, can be seen as earlier theories of humor related to performativity in the enactment and staging of a play and its effectiveness, John L. Austin's speech act theory (Austin 1975) has been influential in contemporary understandings of the performative as conventionalized and institutionalized linguistic acts of speech by authorized ›people‹ who also produce »a certain conventional effect« (Austin 1975, 14) within an accepted conventional procedure of acts of speech.

Performativity thus draws on the linguistic and philosophical understanding of performativity/performance as acts of speech that simultaneously perform »the act« they denote (Culler 2000, 503).

Shoshana Felman (1983, 2003) in particular developed a humorous reading of Austin's theory of performativity, understanding it as a performative theory of humor. Felman's main claim is that there is an inconsistency in Austin's theory: Austin's theory contradicts itself as it also reveals the pitfalls of speech acts (Felman 2003, 73). Felman reflects the »referential excess of utterance over the statement«, which, according to her, is also conceivable in Austin's demonstration and which relies on *misfires* and *failures* of speech acts to define and express their validity. Felman's argument develops in three ways: Firstly, she argues that the »excess of utterance« fulfils something beyond what it proposes, its own self-referentiality; secondly, speech acts mark a trace of possible utterances beyond themselves (their illocutionary meaning); and thirdly, in this way speech acts leave their mark as a trace of possible meanings ›in the realm of reality‹ (Felman 2003, 52 ff.). Felman's reading of Austin's theory of performativity as a theory of humor is thus based on its playful and affective side and the evocation of pleasure. Because of this, and the links between philosophy and literature that Felman seeks to demonstrate in her psychoanalytic Lacanian reading, she asserts that Austin's performativity theory is ›full of promises‹ and therefore ›seductive‹ (Felman 2003, 73). The link between humor and the erotic that is thereby constituted is not new (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 2016); the same is true of the link between humor and the body, as can also be seen in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. Felman's particular merit, however, lies in linking Austin's linguistic theory of performativity to a theorization of humor and the pleasure in theory-building and ›knowledge‹ production, as well as the pleasure in finding (or promising) satisfaction in this way – (and always failing to achieve it …?) (Felman 2003, 71 ff.) – a possibility that is usually separated from, not seen or even denied in (serious) philosophy and/or scholarly texts (and *Wissenschaftlichkeit* in general). In this way, Austin's theory of performativity can itself be seen as the performative pleasure of constituting ›knowledge‹. Furthermore, Felman argues that the libidinal act of Austin's speech refers not so much to eroticism in languages, but to eroticism *as* language. The body – and this is another point that Felman links to the performativity theory of humor – is where this pleasurable economy of language occurs, where its pleasure resides and is exercised: »Thus the act of provoking laughter (of provoking pleasure), by causing a slip (by tripping) leads to the act of exploding. If laughter is, literally, a sort of explosion of the speaking body, the act of exploding – with laughter – becomes an explosive performance in every sense of the word« (Felman 2003, 87). In

this theory, then, language, eroticism, and pleasure all amount to other names for humor and, positively speaking, may be understood as pointing to a *loving entrenchment of epistemology*, an entanglement between (eroticized) language, (eroticized) body, and (in this performative way, eroticized) humor. Felman reads Austin's theory as a form of ›comedy‹ that laughs at its own bargains and thereby *linguistically* produces humor in the sense of bodily (felt) pleasure; humor, thus conceived, is not only an ›affect‹ but arouses a different spectrum of affectivity (of ›love‹, pleasure, eroticism, surrender) *through language* and *in language*.

The (critical) almost defiant reference to seduction, sexuality, and eroticism that is read and attached to the theorization of humor (and language), or rather the erotization of a specter of possibilities that something called ›love‹ (and its pleasure/pain) raises, might have its own history and may lay in (Western?) deprecation of the body and eroticism and in the exclusion of pleasure and desire from philosophy, a point that Felman herself raises.[21] Felman's work, read this way, confirms the *affective* side of (humorous) epistemology and the (im/possible) promises that it raises. It might therefore be fruitful and revealing to speak of the *affectivity* of (humorous) texts per se, the spectrum of different ›affects‹ that are elicited in humor (and in epistemology). This is also the direction taken by Judith Roof in her analysis of humor (2018). Roof uses the idea of the performance of humor to argue for its explosive effect. Without referring specifically to any of the theories mentioned above, she speaks of the ›comic event‹ – which can also be understood as a performative act – and relates it more to Sigmund Freud's approach and Henri Bergson's analysis of humor. Roof thus uses the idea of the performance of ›a joke‹ and its displacement in relation to the social space. Based on Bergson, for example, she examines how values are transposed to another social space and in this way can highlight a specific void of meaning and the void of meaning of these values. In this manner, specific social behaviors or utterances that implement the social order and privilege a specific (dominant) class are (critically) highlighted through humor. Roof refers to Bergson's understanding of humor in this sense as a »transposition downwards« (*la transposition de bas en haut*) (Bergson 1991, 96), a critical, mimetic staging of dominant-class behavior understood as »respectability«[22]:

> »Far more artificial, but also far more refined, is the transposition upwards, from below when applied to the moral value of things, not to their physical dimensions. To express in reputable language some disreputable idea, to take some scandalous situa-

21 However, it is interesting how central sexuality becomes in the reading of humor, especially against the background of Freud's notion of ›sexuality‹. Freud speaks of ›sexuality‹ rather in order to sound as ›scientific‹ as possible in accordance with the fashions and paradigms of his time (Austin's performative theory), but he understands the term ›sexuality‹ in a comprehensive sense as ›love‹. Thus, Freud's understanding of ›sexuality‹ does not mean ›eroticism‹ in a narrow sense. ›Eroticism‹ may rather be seen as an aspect and form of ›love‹ that can be produced and experienced.

22 Bergson indeed uses the English word *respectability* and defines this form of humor as one that is often used in the literary works of English-speaking (or ought one rather say, finally, anglophone: »dans la littérature anglaise en générale«) novelists like Dickens and Thackeray. See Bergson (1991, 96).

> tion, some low-class calling or disgraceful behavior, and describe them in terms of the utmost respectability, is generally comic.« (Bergson 1991, 142)

Bergson thus undoes the theory of superiority that Plato associates with humor by reading humor as a political act of rebellion within the sanctuary of everyday social grammar. Roof calls this »the performance of a joke manqué« (Roof 2018, 165). However, Bergson's understanding of this »transposition upwards« contains a critical, sociopolitical stance at the edge of an ethical question – which Roof does not reflect upon further – when he emphasizes the mirroring and revealing nature of this kind of humor by saying: »A word is sometimes sufficient, provided it gives us a glimpse of an entire system of transposition accepted in certain social circles and reveals, as it were, a moral organisation of immorality« (Bergson 1991, 40 a).

The transposition of humor is not ›manqué‹, as Roof claims. It is full of subtle critique that parodies the performance, the ›respectability‹, of a dominant class's self-construction and self-celebration. This feature of humor, which Bergson identifies in the ›transposition downward‹, centralizes the place and, again, the subject of the humorous utterance. The ›transposition downward‹, like Freud's *Jewish jokes* and African American humor, is also, from the perspective of the narrating subject, a ›transposition upward‹ in as much as it is a form of empowerment that is unleashed in humor. It thus opens up a space from which it can touch upon various sociopolitical dilemmas and prohibitions. In doing so, it also illuminates and questions the hierarchy and limits of the space of the un/speakable.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's rather neglected work on performativity extends these approaches by emphasizing other aspects of the performative. These are essential for (re)theorizing humor and how it works in different (con-)texts. Therefore, Sedgwick's theory of performativity will be discussed in more detail here. In particular, I will consider three of her concepts that shed light on humor in the (literary) text, but also on the relationship between discourse and the materiality of life, and how these are addressed in literature.

Periperformatives, Reparative Readings – and *Besides*

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick centralizes, on the one hand, the spatial aspect of performativity and, on the other hand, she emphasizes the affective side of performativity in language. Sedgwick's approach also allows different aspects of the performative and its performance to be considered and analyzed simultaneously. Moreover, she bases much of her work (and sociopolitical critique) on the reading of literature, of novels, complementing philosophical theorizing with literary philosophizing. In doing so, Sedgwick develops a theory of the performative that is concerned with the *spatial* mechanisms of power and resistance. While emphasizing the centrality of sanctioned, dominant performatives, she also points to their limits and to their transient, cellular connections with other performatives. Sedgwick calls this effect of the performative *periperformatives*: »Periperformative utterances aren't just about performative utterances in a referential sense: They cluster around them; they are in the neighborhood of the performative« (Sedgewick 2003, 68). She also considers the formation of subjects as well as what she

calls »performative affectivity« within the performative speech/act (Sedgewick 2003, 68). *Periperformatives* draw attention to utterances around conventionalized performatives that accompany, challenge, or resist a particular ›intended‹ centralized meaning (Sedgewick 2003, 68 ff.). Sedgewick contends that these utterances around more or less institutionalized performatives may be by far the more prevalent mode of performatives than those sanctioned, centralized utterances (authorized by the state or discursive practice). These spaces around authorized performatives allow those excluded from them or objectified by them to look back at the sanctioned performative scenes. It is also the space of the potentiality of humor, of the performative that comes from the other who reads performative exclusions and their constructions, coming from the other side of the dialogue that a performative utterance sets into work. Humor in such a chain of periperformatives also alludes to an (ethical) space of the other and to the relations that are evoked in it. In Sedgwick's reading, the periperformative – as a(n) un/structure that gives structure to the performative – can be read as queerness in all its infinite forms. Queerness occupies the space of the ethical relationship between the (sanctioned) performative and everything excluded from it, a trait that is also found in humor. Humor, then, can also be understood as a form of queering that raises questions regarding the ethical implications of performative utterances and acts.

Sedgwick develops these theorizations around performatives, not only by psychologically and phenomenologically inspired readings, but also by a close reading of literary texts, on the one hand, and a critical engagement with and critical distance from what she calls the ›paranoia‹ of the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, on the other hand. Her spatial theory of the performative also has a temporal aspect in its double meaning: It opens up the past and the present/ation of discourse towards an unknown other. Sedgwick links language to the machinery of affectivity that is used and set in play in the performative utterance/act, suggesting that performative utterances/acts function not only as abstractions, but also by producing and enabling bodily felt, affective effects that can be motivators, or, to put it more strongly, *touching phenomena*, for processes of unlearning that unfold from the performative proscenium. Such affective characteristics of the performative throw notions and positions of normativity into crisis by revealing their internal discrepancies, as they can generate authority and subjugation, but also imply resistance and subversion (Sedgwick 2003, 97 ff.).

Sedgwick illustrates this with great care in her discussions of ›shame‹ and the subject position it entails (1993, 2003). She argues that as authoritative speech acts, phrases such as »Shame on you!« are not only imbued with the enforcement of a normative value, but also with the affective production and use of ›shame‹. In Sedgwick's reading, however, ›shame‹ is not perceived as a ›negative‹ affective sense, but as one that gives form to the possibility of a sovereign subject-formation (Sedgwick 1993, 4 ff.). In her reading of Henry James's works and the way he inserts ›shame‹ in his autobiographical allusions, Sedgwick discusses it not (only) as a ›bad feeling‹, as ego-psychology does, but along the lines of the psychology of the self, as a form of affectivity that gives the self interiority, a space for reflection (Sedgwick 2003, 98), from which the (writing) subject emerges and can orient themselves toward empowerment (Sedgwick 1993, 8 ff.). In this process, Sedgwick separates ›shame‹ from the object to which it is linked in the performative utterance, suggesting that ›shame‹ (discernible in bodily reactions such as averted eyes and

a hanging head) can be understood as a capacity, a force, that dissects the signifying process of a *shaming* performative utterance. In this way, Sedgwick distances ›shame‹ from where it has traditionally been located, both in psychology and in (Foucault's) critical theory, namely in the vicinity of guilt and repression. Sedgwick attempts to separate thinking about ›shame‹ (and consequently empowerment) from Foucault's *repressive hypothesis*, which critically examines discourses of (sexual) confession as in the hands of power, as a product of social control, produced in relations of power, rather than as a reflective and subversive facet *against* power. According to Sedgwick, a *repressive hypothesis* as a reading angle in this sense is too strong and overlooks the possibility of other meanings that are not in the fold of the machinery of Foucauldian thought (Sedgwick 1993, 8, 2003, 9 ff.). She contends that ›shame‹ does not remain a ›negative feeling‹ of experiencing humiliation, nor a ›hip‹ discursive topic, but that it marks a redefinition of a self-empowering subject, that ›shame‹ is, can be, for example, reintroduced into the *becoming* of a (writing) subjectivity as a *productive site of pleasure*. In her illustration of how this affective process is operationalized in the works of Henry James, a humorous angle can be discerned in both James's and Sedgwick's texts, which transforms the humiliating experience into a humorous tone and provides it with a further self-affirming, self-assuring, empowering twist. James's text reevaluates the *re*appraisal of sociopolitical norms that manifest within the self. The shift from humiliating ›shame‹ to self-sustaining pleasure is produced through humor, and it is this humor that seems to lead Sedgwick towards a theorization of ›shame‹ that is different from previous understandings. Sedgwick writes:

> »Note in this passage (from the [*The*] *Ambassadors* [1903] preface) that ›impudence‹ is the glamorizing trait James attributes to his stories – impudence that bespeaks not the absence of shame from this scene of flirtation, but rather its pleasurably recirculated afterglow:
> ›[the story] rejoices … to seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it's about–liable as it yet is at moments to be caught by us with its tongue in its cheek and absolutely no warrant but its splendid impudence. Let us grant then that the impudence is always there – there, so to speak, for grace and effect and allure; there, above all, because the Story is just the spoiled child of art, and because, as we are always disappointed when the pampered don't »play up«, we like it, to that extent, to look all its character. It probably does so, in truth, even when we most flatter ourselves that we negotiate with it by treaty‹. To dramatize the story as impudent in relation to its creator is also to dramatize the luxurious distance between this scene and one of repudiation: the conceivable shame of a past self, a past production, is being caught up and recirculated through a lambent interpersonal figuration of the intimate, indulged mutual pressure of light differentials of power and knowledge.« (Sedgwick 1993, 10)

With the first sentence »[i]ts pleasurably recirculated afterglow«, Sedgwick already mimics James's humorous tone. This tone in James's text is aptly organized around the word ›impudence‹. The use of ›impudence‹ signals bravery and courage, on the one hand, and a playful, self-constructive awareness, on the other. *Impudence* is celebrated here, turning the heavy and ›identity‹-fracturing effect of ›shame‹ into the audacity of a refracted humorous tone that gives a new structure to the subject of writing as the one ›flatter-

ing themselves‹, albeit in the protective phrase ›the spoilt child of art‹ from which it also derives its humorous tone. Humor dwells in this space of memory as well as of writing, materializing there by giving new meaning to shaming, which marks a past time whose tragic, or as Sedgwick calls it, *dramatic effect* is still felt, but humorized and in this way embellished and softened in a self-caring and self-reassuring way by a ›child‹ within that does not ›play‹. The joyously humorous tone in the use of ›impudence‹ also empowers the (finally) speaking subject who seems unbreakable and always there to ›speak, for grace and effect and allure‹; the impudence of ›shame‹ is thus relegated to the impudence of a speaking subject who raises their eyes and looks back.

Sedgwick calls this ›reparenting‹ or ›reissuing‹ and a ›strategy‹ for »dramatizing and integrating ›shame‹, in the sense of rendering this potentially paralyzing affect narratively, emotionally and performatively productive« (Sedgwick 1993, 11). In this way, the affective bodily response can be perceived as a signpost to empowerment, rather than as the fulfilment of a humiliating act or within an omnipotent hypothesis of repression. Sedgwick addresses the place of the (othered) other here, preparing the ground for the possibility of reading subversive *re*significations that have *healing* rather than destructive bodily and mental effects, and that empower rather than cost power. Sedgwick's subversive strategy is itself an empowering theory based on both an analysis and an evocation of affectivity. It describes and performs a transformation of dramatic into joyful ›affects‹. It is thus an affective strategy of doubling, involving a specter of different ›affects‹ with different trajectories, the subtlety of which triggers a silent (smiling) humorous tone.

Sedgwick's humor thus lays the foundation for what she calls *weak theory* and for theorizations of ›knowledge‹ that go beyond what is celebrated *as* ›knowledge‹. She vehemently engages with the ›paranoia‹ of the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, one of her best-known critiques of poststructuralist thought – the problem she identifies there being a dogmatic deployment (Sedgwick 2003, 124 ff.). The crux of her critique suggests that, while a *hermeneutics of suspicion* is essential for dismantling significations (of power), it is also overly focused on finding ›truths‹ and fixing meaning, that it is paranoid – in positive but also self-damaging ways – and that it neglects and excludes bodily aspects (Sedgwick 2003, 125 ff.). Instead of these ›strong theories‹, which subsume many relational but different phenomena under the title of a suspicious, unmasking, *paranoid reading*, Sedgwick proposes to consider *weak theory* as a critical reading possibility, which she calls *reparative reading*. *Reparative reading* allows to »experience surprise«, the density of a moment, and its affective effect:

> »[T]o a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.« (Sedgwick 2003, 146)

Reparative reading is thus also an ethical reading and a form of agency, a creative as well as indulgent transformative power of *de*designating. Sedgwick illustrates of *reparative reading* in the sphere of literature and the works of Henry James in the autobiographical space, as a space of experience in which affectivity – in this case, ›shame‹ – is belatedly addressed in the literary text. Sedgwick thus constitutes a link between sociopolitical discourses, affectivity, and literary practice, or rather the practice of writing (for a wider public). Consequently, it can be argued that the humorous performativity of a literary text has an affective side, and that it queers signification in a way that alters the meaning of an event as well as a subject position altogether, that queering is in fact deconstruction, a reading that is produced by the other, who would otherwise fall within the proscenium of the witness circle or stand beside it, in a process of invisibilizing.

Beside is an important term for how Sedgwick arranges her theory of performativity spatially. In place of dualisms, *beside* indicates

> »[…] a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction of the law of the excluded middle […] Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations […] *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping and other relations.« (Sedgwick 2003, 8)

A *beside* can thus even be seen as a corrective to a ›pure‹ deferral or metonymic understanding of language and discourse, as it reveals the workings of power and value that are also part of terms and terminologies. It shows that deconstruction is not always the same and that it remains tied to processes of subject formation – and that humor can be conceived as a *beside-effect* within the performative faculty of language. Humor shifts the meaning of meta-discourses in literary narratives – and (con-)texts. In addition, *besides* include not only the aspect of time in humor, but also the aspect of space and that which humor also touches upon metaphorically and metonymically.

It can be concluded, moreover, that this bodily-felt affective side of the performative is part of and enmeshed in the epistemological and cognitive processes set in motion by performative acts and utterances per se, explicitly discussed throughout the study. The affective attribution of the performative can also be seen as creating space for *re*orientations, transformations, and changes, not only of meaning, but also of the perception of the self and the O/other.

It is here that an *affective* side of humor as a performative function can be anchored. In her discussion of queer performativity, Sedgwick, in a side-remark, brings up humor and ›humorlessness‹ as phenomena that could be understood more fully within an analysis of affectivity (Sedgwick 1993, 14). Humor, from a position of dominance or in order to legitimize, restore, or stabilize supremacy, thus *false humor*[23], follows on first sight a signification of humiliation; but it can still be *reissued*, to use Sedgwick's word: ›negative feelings‹ can be *re*used to enable a space in which violent speech acts and experiences are opened up in surprising ways that can trigger transformation (of dominant, abusive)

23 See regarding *false humor* also annotations 20, p. 49, and 21, p. 84, as well as page 78.

meaning production. Often the citational, conventionalized character of speech/acts are set into work to perform and parody such meanings. What humor produces in this way may not be ›knowledge‹ in a traditional sense, but, nevertheless, may comprise a space for *re*learning, a space *beside* the norm, one in which different subjectivities, the writing one, the narrating ones, as well as a possible (diverse) readership or audience, are addressed and can follow the transformative process (and be transformed by it, if they so wish).

But even an empowering humor can be humiliating for those subjectivities that are confronted by it and whose identities are questioned.[24] The performance of humor thus depends not only on the form of the performative speech/act and its periperformatives but also on the subjectivity of the speaking/acting figure, and on *how* they perform it. However, the performativity of humor, as long as it is not *false humor*, can be considered as a *reparative reading (and writing)*. Humor, in this sense, not only *re*reads social norms and significations but recycles them within another frame of signification. Its reparative trait lies, on the one hand, in arousing a specter of affectivity like joy, amusement, relief, pensiveness, or even melancholy, however intensely felt. On the other hand, humor is *reparative* as it does not enforce a ›truth‹, but rather alludes to the possibility of other understandings.

The Bakhtinian Approach and the Dialogic

Although Bakhtin's work was much celebrated in the wake of poststructuralist theory and can be seen to be a profound push in the theorizations of humor, the hype around his work has given way to other approaches which either stress the performative site of humor or its purely linguistic-semantic elements (Wirth 2017). But Bakhtin has also been seen as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century (Holquist [1981] 2014; Todorov 1981), and there is, in fact, an abiding interest in Bakhtin's works and his importance with regard, for example, to questions of postcoloniality and postsocialism as well as ethics (Friedman 2001; Montesi 2005; Gratskova/Chakrabarty 2017; Hirschkop 2021). Bakhtin's work offers a rich field of research and remains relevant for this study for several reasons. Apart from the obvious political reasons as a reminder of the importance not to exclude (non-Western) thinkers from theory and discourse, and not to conceive theoretical approaches as successive and alternate edifices of thought and *turns*, and beyond the (remaining residues of) poststructuralist theoretical implications that the structure of and impulse to categorize and order as to *who* and *what belongs* (*where*), is also (politically) constructed and heteronomous and should, therefore, always be questioned – a site for further reflection – two other aspects remain central to this study. Firstly, Bakhtin explicitly considers the ways in which humor is installed *in the novel* through the carnivalesque[25], and also refers to the ›referential‹ side of literary texts, that is the ways in which

24 Regarding ›hostile jokes‹ and *false humor* see annotation 20, p. 49, annotation 21, p. 84, see also p. 78 ff., p. 140 ff., p. 86 ff., and 140 ff.

25 Bakhtin traces the trajectory of a culturally informed sociopolitical phenomenon, the carnival, and how and in which ways it finds a new home in the novelistic text. He claims a direct connection between the carnival of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and its afterlife in literature: »From the second half of the seventeenth century on, carnival almost completely ceases to be a direct source

discourses and their materializations are taken up and negotiated in the novel. The trails and links between the sociopolitical and the literary text are also explored in this work. Secondly, dialogicity is a major concern for Bakhtin's theory and analysis of the novel. The significance of the dialogic in the novelistic encounter and its implications for humor are also explored in this study. Bakhtin examines the function of the text's humorous tonality in challenging dogmatisms and conventionalized beliefs. It is an approach that combines humor and performance in the concept of the carnivalesque, a disguised but deliberate staging in which the performative site is enmeshed in that moment of surprise within the humorous shift in the text. According to Bakhtin the very structure of the novel per se exposes itself to its own rapturous humor. In this way the carnivalesque humor of the novel ends in an opening, a void, which can be considered as the space of the dialogic. The humorous tonality of the carnivalesque in the novel thus touches upon different facets of meaning and opens up a space for unlearning and (*re*)thinking.

Bakhtin sees two forms of power at work in the novel: those that carry the discursive power of dominant discourses, which Bakhtin calls ›centripetal forces‹, and those that seek to unfix meanings, which Bakhtin calls ›centrifugal forces‹ and that challenge these dominant utterances and participate in their unmaking[26] (Bakhtin 1999, 161). The humorous features of language and construction of meaning that Bakhtin sees at work in the novel have social as well as epistemological elements (Eagleton 2019, 31).

Bakhtin's theory thus allows for a sociopolitically informed reading of humor that considers the use – and abuse – of language and the entanglement and exchange between different discourses and languages – those of the novel and those of the sociopolitical.

Bakhtin characterizes this humorous tone *of* and *in* literature as a ›multi-styled‹, ›heterovoiced‹, and ›multi-toned‹ narrative that mixes ›high and low‹, ›serious and

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of carnivalization, ceding its place to the influence of already carnivalized literature; in this way carnivalization becomes a purely literary tradition« (Bakhtin 1984 a, 131). Bakhtin thus implicitly emphasizes not only the historical development of the ›carnivalesque writing‹ and also the historical relevance of the meaning of carnivalized literature. This literature does not simply rely on convention: it engages with it and questions it: »[T]he historical figures of the past are deliberately and emphatically contemporized; they act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present« Bakhtin (1984 a, 108). The carnivalesque is the institutionalization of humor as a sociopolitically legalized and limited space of critique that is (*re)*created in the literary text. The concept of ›the carnival‹ does not only show the conjunction of cultural practice, material world, and the literary text. In particular, in *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin examines the function of the carnivalesque humor as a sociopolitical feature in the literary text. He discusses the ways in which the carnival as an event is taken up as a strategy of the novel to say the unsayable and to open up the (performative) space of the sayable by including the marginalized and abject in the page theater of the novel. In *Problems of Dostojewsky's Poetics* (1984 a), Bakhtin discusses ambivalences and dilemmas and the multiple meanings evoked by the rhetoric of the carnivalesque humorous text. He argues that all utterances have multiple and ambiguous meanings without ever coming to an end, which he regards, not unlike Derrida, as the self-subverting excess of meaning.

26 In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1999, 160 ff.), by considering selected passages in the later works of Dostoevsky and other, English, novels, Bakhtin also pays attention to the ways the novel sets these carnivalization into being and looks at its functions. Bakhtin, thereby, pays tribute to the sociopolitical aspects that are picked up and mirrored in the novelistic text and which elucidate the subversive mechanisms of the carnivalesque humorous tonality.

comic‹ and that contains bits of different ›genres‹, comprising *representing* as well as *represented* meanings: »[W]hat appears here, as a result, is a radically new relationship to the word as the material of literature« (Bakthin 1999, 108). With these different shades of meanings in *words*, the novel constructs ever new ›images‹, as Bakhtin calls them, which are anchored in the text, like a prism. Bakhtin characterizes the novel, in this sense, as literature that is *per se* carnivalized (Bakhtin 1999, 109).

In Bakthin's understanding of the carnivalesque, humor encompasses different approaches and tonalities. These different modes, however, belong together and enrich and emphasize each other, rather than being exclusive. In *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1984), Bakhtin speaks of ›grotesque realism‹ and ›grotesque imagery‹. In contrast to ancient literature in which »all orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade« (Bakhtin 1984, 320), and instead of modern literature where »the individual body, sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation […] have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific« (Bakhtin 1984, 321), Rabelais' writing evokes *grotesque realism* and *imagery* that are bound to abject images of the body. For Bakhtin, *grotesque imagery* is a kind of universal ›natural‹ part of any language:

> »This boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery within time and space extends to all languages, all literatures, and the entire system of gesticulation; in the midst of it the bodily canon of art, belles lettres, and polite conversation of modern times is a tiny island. This limited canon never prevailed in antique literature. In the official literature of European peoples it has existed only for the last four hundred years.« (Bakhtin 1984, 319)

Bakhtin establishes a link between the arts, folklore, and the ›extra-official life‹ of people, in which the body describes a wholeness, a symbolic cycle. The body is an entity that »fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying« (Bakhtin 1984, 319). The body and the abdominal body parts are celebrated in a cosmic way. They signify the wholeness of life to which death forms a part. For Bakthin, such meanings are abjured in conventionalized meta-discourses and what he calls ›official‹ languages. Part of this humor are the joyful as well as the tragic sites of ›coming into the world – being in the world – leaving the world‹ that indicate pleasure and pain, as parts of the same, rather than as opposites.

›Grotesque imagery‹, it could be stated, is not just ›grotesquery‹ for its own sake or to evoke humor and ›laughter‹; it does not just have the function of relief and criticism. It is a form of ›wisdom‹, a philosophical act and performance that marvels at, celebrates, and mourns the nonsense of being.

Bakhtin also uses the term *serio-comical* to further indicate to this inclusive form of humor. He describes this »carnival sense of the world« as a changing and transformative rhetorical element that has a ›special relationship to reality‹ (Bakhthin 1984a, 107). He links the *serio-comical* to political and incongruous movements in meaning[27] (1984 a, 108).

27 Bakhtin speaks of the *Socratic Dialogue* and *Menippean Satire* with pastiches of *carnivalist folklore*, all of which found their way into the novel. Sce Bakhtin (1984 a, 161 ff.).

Here, he evokes the idea of ›experience‹ as part of life and literature, which he makes out in the assemblage of the different *forms* of the dialogic, such as the diatribe, the soliloquy, and the symposium (Bakhtin 1984 a, 116; 119 ff.).

Moreover, in Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, the bodily language of ›laughter‹ with its different meanings is also centralized and discussed. In ›laughter‹ – as a practice of bodily politics – humor, performativity, singularity, and the production of meaning are intertwined against the backdrop of a historically driven discursive context in crisis. ›Laughter‹ is the bodily echo and effect of this process. Like humor in general, ›laughter‹ in its non-serious allusions thus questions the self as well as itself and the moment and act in which it occurs. In this, it goes beyond ›mere‹ sociopolitical critique. It also laughs out the tragic humor that the supposedly cosmic cycle of life and death seems to represent. Its ›laughter‹ is one of recognition and incomprehension. It is both dramatic, mournful, and joyful for it knows something it does not know, and that empowers and renders one powerless as the basis of life (and death): The carnivalizing humor of literary texts »is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. ›Laughter‹ embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with *crisis* itself« (Bakhtin 1984 a, 127). This crisis is a liminal place of negation and affirmation, of »death« and »renewal« (Bakhtin 1984 a, 127). Bakhtin's understanding of humor thus is not only linked to ›celebration‹ and joy,[28] but includes what Simon Critchley in citing Samuel Beckett's *Watt* ([1953] 2009) – a literary text – understands as a *risus purus*, a mirthless ›laughter‹: »[T]he laugh laughing at the laugh, beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy« (Beckett 2009, 40). For Critchley this, in effect, is the ›essence of humor‹. Critchley does not connote it to unhappiness, but to ›liberation‹ and ›consolation‹: »This is why, melancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness« (Critchley 2005, 111).

Risus purus seems to describe a web of different fused and yet distinguishable affective responses that come with insight. What Bakhtin pursues in the novel seems to be such a risus purus. He not only analyzes it for its philosophical merits, but also points to and examines the web of discourses and sociopolitical aspects of ›life‹. He shows how these practices are negotiated in the novel and quasi turned inside out through humor as a writing technique, as ›experience‹, and insight that wonders at the liminal space of ›knowing‹ and not-knowing, power and power-lessness.

28 I think Simon Critchley misreads Bakhtin here when he claims that he pays too much attention to the (joyous) body. It seems to me that Critchley overlooks the tragedy inscribed in Bakhtin's theory, which makes the body a site of transience but which, in its weakness and flaws, also provides an empowering site of critique; no other space remains from which to speak. Cf. Critchley (2005, 50 ff.),

Bakhtin also conceives of ›laughter‹ as a form of textual rhetoric and formalism that evokes an amalgamation of different aporetic meanings in the literary text. He calls these ambiguities[29] and the interweaving of dualities ›Socratic irony‹ and ›reduced laughter‹, traces them back to classical (Greek) literature and thus to an other form of knowing that also includes not-knowing and that remains power-less. For Bakhtin, ›Socratic irony‹ and ›reduced laughter‹ signal a form of humor that stands for change. He sees it generally at work in the sociopolitical ›reality‹ and in literary works (Bakhtin 1999, 131 ff., 164). He calls this process the »unrestrained mésalliances of thoughts and images« (Bakhtin 1999, 132), which refers to »the track left by ›laughter‹ in the structure of represented reality«, even though its ›laughter‹ may not be »heard« (Bakhtin 1999, 164). *Reduced ›laughter‹* constitutes a form of humor in the narrative of the novel that is silent and not necessarily ›entertaining‹, but which may cause us to smile. Shown and evoked are the paradoxes and oddities of common, unconscious ›knowledge‹, of which one is not always aware, and of which the literary text reminds us. This is a form of humor that does not exhaust itself in ›laughter‹ but remains as a residue, leaving a trace or *laugh-effect*, as it were, within a longer timeframe of wonder. It is a humorous tonality that is sought and achieved in the literary text, where »the one-sided seriousness of life and thought« gives way to the dialogic form of the novel which, instead of definitive statements, leaves »no finalizing period at the end« (Bakhtin 1999, 164 ff.) but marvels at the ›world‹. What the novel thus captures through this silent humor is a wondering stance. This humor must not be obvious, but one that has to be discerned in the folds of the novelistic text »without any conclusive conclusions« (Bakhtin 1999, 165), and that, in this way, invites to rethink the conventionalized ›obvious‹ of our ›knowledge‹ and of power. It is an »artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things« (Bakhtin 1999, 166).

The novel as *the* site of the humorous is also the realm of dialogicity for Bakhtin. According to him, the humorous, the carnivalesque, undoes (sanctioned) conventionalized, centripetal meanings and opens up a multiplicity of other meanings. Thus, Bakhtin perceives the carnivalesque humorous tonality of the novel as an angle towards the dialogic (Bhakhin 1999, 115). Dialogicity is considered to be one of his most important concepts – a complex concept that Bakhtin sees at work, on the one hand, in the various unfinished

29 In *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1985), Bakhtin refers to the ambivalence of humor, even when it depicts the ›ugly‹ side of the carnivalesque, including the implications of bodily excrement and waste representing the ›lower stratum‹ of the body. Bakhtin argues that this ›loud‹ carnivalesque humor also not only refers to the abject side of the body and its functionalities, but at the same time also to its renewing, loving, birth-giving, and (pro-)creative sides (146 ff.). Bakhtin links this ›grotesque realism‹, the grotesquery of bodily functionality that he defines as »the wrong side, or rather the right side of abuse«, to the ›ugly‹ side of the body and its ›uselessness‹ and pleasure resulting from »overindulgence of food, drink and sexual intercourse« (161). This implies what he calls »a gay funeral« (152).

positions of speaking that are unfolded in the novel.[30] On the other hand, Bakhtin finds it in the ›word‹ per se. For him, *words* are already composed of many different meanings.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogicity, which he regards as characteristic of the novel, is not to be understood in the sense of the dialogue. For Bakhtin, dialogicity is a characteristic of language in the sense that every word inherits infinite layers of meaning. Language, the word, is thus dialogic to itself. Its otherness is inherent in it. However, he differentiates between dialogicity and ›monologism‹, not as two opposing binary systems of language and discourse, but as two *ways of dealing* with the dialogist ›nature‹ of the word and discourse (in the struggle over representation and power). In line with this, Bakhtin sees diversity and rapture in the evoked polyphonic ›voices‹ of the novel. He regards these ›voices‹ as interacting and as correlative with other voices and words and as dynamic entities that can change any dialogic interplay (Sasse 2010, 91). Bakhtin also sees a struggle for power at play in dialogicity, a struggle to determine what ›truth‹ is. But it is also the reference to ›truth‹ itself that engenders dialogicity, which is suppressed within monologist, unifying theorizations and discourses.[31] This multidimensionality of meaning or dialogical language can only be temporarily arrested in an ›utterance‹ within a specific, situational context. Bakhtin understands language not as a unified abstract system but as discourse, »as utterances that are shot through with competing social, ideological, and cultural perceptions, as speech acts that have effects on the social, cultural and ideological world within which they are produced« (Jefferson 1986, 171).

30 De Man finds fault with Bakhtin's concept in a rather polemic and authoritative gesture. He criticizes the term as contradictory. According to de Man, Bakhtin does not link dialogicity to the figures of speech (de Man's ›tropes‹). He regards Bakhtin as a ›metaphysical thinker‹ and as a ›formalist‹; however, de Man's own critique is also contradictory, since it must invoke the names of Edmund Husserl, Walter Benjamin, and Immanuel Levinas along with Bakhtin's, without discussing them further. As these names indicate, there is an ethical dimension tied to Bakhtin's understanding of dialogicity, with the concept split between a formalist (which here implies text-bound) approach and a broader insight beyond the text. Instead of acknowledging this, de Man places hermeneutics and poetics into a binary relationship, with ›dialogicity‹ in-between them, pushing it further towards the unchic end of hermeneutics. De Man construes this binarism without questioning or revealing his own premises, which are to centralize thinking along tropes and maybe also the possibility of a subject-free form of speaking, while randomly referring to radical alterity, (which he never *says* he asserts, but only that *others*, like Husserl, do). In this way, de Man argues and wants to claim that ›dialogicity‹ is incompatible with deconstruction. De Man's article reads at times like a sabotage of Bakhtin's sudden fame; he speaks, for example, of ›the dialogical ideology‹ and even of ›dialectical imperialism‹ (1983a, 105), which sound rather odd, since the terms can stand for de Man's own approach, and this is particularly remarkable against the backdrop of the concealment of his past, antisemitic texts. Maybe there is also something that can be called *the structure of dialogic erasure* in texts that we must always keep in mind? Cf. de Man (1983a, 103 ff.).

31 Eva Kimminich speaks in this sense of ›truth‹ and ›knowledge‹ as ›blank spaces‹ that drive literary as well as scientific ›imaginations‹, and that amount to the question of *form*, and thus to the question of ›representation‹ as *visions*. Cf. Kimminich (1998, 15).

By focusing on Bakhtin's concept of dialogicity[32] and heteroglossia[33], Ann Jefferson emphasizes the socio-cultural texture of texts in Bakhtin's theorizations of the novel. Jefferson brings together Bakhtin's idea of the dialogic and heteroglossia with Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse as a (sociopolitical) nexus of ›knowledge‹ and power. In this way, Jefferson sheds light on a broader understanding and deployment of the evocation of realism and fictionality. Realism is thereby understood in the sense of a *realist impulse* (Earnshaw 2010) and the *reality effect* or *referential illusion* (Barthes 1989) or »a construct of reference« (Culler 2002, 134).

Jefferson further problematizes the concept of referentiality in the use of stereotypes and ›character-types‹. Reading Bakhtin alongside Foucault, she demonstrates that the referentiality Bakhtin describes is split; it is always linked to language, discourse, power, and the attempt to establish a unified meaning. In this sense, it is linked to the concept of ›truth‹ rather than to a given ›reality‹.[34] Meaning remains constantly charged and changed, and never ›fixable‹. In this struggle, however, Jefferson identifies a ›will to reference‹ that also ›generates the notion of heteroglossia‹ (Jefferson 1986, 177, 180). This ›representational intent of discourse‹, an ›impulse towards‹ this referentiality, also generates dialogicity *as* a ›referentiality‹ that encompasses the polyphonic liveliness of language and the centrifugal force of dialogicity (Jefferson 1986, 177).

The novel evokes these different forces inherent in discourse and language through different speech acts, thus bringing the dialogic site of discourse and language to the fore. In this way, it also implicates a *reality effect* between discourse, language, and different sociopolitical, and ideological struggles that are always inherent in the dialogic character of language and discourse. The novelistic text alludes to the ›reality‹ of such dialogic forces by introducing characters as ›speaking human beings‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 332)

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32 For an introduction to Michael Bakhtin's main concepts in literary studies, see Todorov (1984), Holquist (2014), and Hirschkop (2021). For a further examination of his thoughts within a wider historical and intellectual context, see Sylvia Sasse (2010).

33 Bakhtin's term ›heteroglossia‹ has its own ›heteroglossic‹ history and point of entry into literary theory. Julia Kristeva introduced some aspects of Bakhtin's theory in France but redefined it as ›plenitude of speech‹ – probably to align with the (post-) structuralist theory of subjectivity of the time, which viewed it as a ›mosaic of quotations‹ and thus as ›intertextuality‹. While this concept has its merits, it does not reflect Bakhtin's idea of the plurality of forms of speech in language or with regard to characters. In the ›plenitude of speech‹, paradoxes are not and must not be reconcilable. They remain conflicting and contradictory – which Bakhtin considers dialogic and valuable. Roland Barthes, though, views this as something to be overcome by *écriture* in his own theory of the ›war of languages‹. The term has also been discussed in narratology, particularly as a linguistic phenomenon in creating ›voice‹ and ›point of view‹. However, broader theoretical applications of the concept in relation to plurality, agency, subjectivity, and performativity are still lacking. For a discussion of the term in narratology, see Tjupa (2013), Kristeva (1982 b), and Barthes (1986). For a historical overview of the term and its development in the thought of Julia Kristeva, see Martínez Alfaro (1996).

34 This understanding of referentiality is not incompatible with some constructivist approaches in narratology. Not only because narratology as a discourse itself stresses different approaches and terminologies to identify structures, but also because the question of ›experience‹, verisimilitude, ›identity‹, and ideology are part of the debate. Cf. Herman/Vervaeck (2005, 95 ff.), see also Fludernik (1996). This is also intriguing for further reflection in relation to what James Phelan calls the rhetorical approach to narrative theory. See Phelan (2017).

who represent different ›types‹ inscribed in discourse (Jefferson 1986, 173) in the struggle for establishing (albeit fleeting) meanings in a dialogic and processual manner. Thus, as Jefferson also notes, there must be a writing-against – or *speaking to* – a unified, authoritarian, and centripetal force of discourse inherent in language, and, according to Bakhtin, in the novel, which is addressed and also parodied in the the novel's dialogic structure.

Bakhtin's characterization of humor in the novel as such an endeavor suggests that there is a form of not-knowing and power-lessness involved, since the dialogic form of humor is unfinished as a dialogic phenomenon.

This process of negotiation and dialogicity that accompanies the novel is, according to Bakhtin, a form of ›truth‹-seeking in the literary work, as opposed to the ›finished truth‹ of »official monolingualism«. Bakhtin defines ›truth‹ as a process that is always in dialogue: »Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between* people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction« (Bakhtin 1984 a, 110; emphasize mine). In this description of the dialogic as a search, there is also an ethical angle that presumes and considers the utterance of an other and a relational space in which dialogicity takes place; Bakhtin refers to the ›market-place‹ as the place for such negotiations (Bakhtin 1999, 128). His theory of humor thus also has a strong spatial inclination in which its dialogic character is embedded and from which it emerges (Bakhtin 1984, 145 ff.). This *space* of dialogicity is required for it to appear at all, and from where it can develop its further, manifold trajectories, as well as to retain its unfinished potential. To be dialogical, the dialogic, must remain open to future responses. Whereas, according to Bakhtin, in (sanctioned) centripetal texts the dialogic trait of discourse is regularly repressed and monologized within a united form, in centrifugal humorous texts this unfinished and open dialogic character of discourse reappears (Bakhtin 1984 a, 110 ff.). It is this ›market-place‹ of the many voices that is enacted in the humorous pages of the novel.

Jefferson's reading of Bakhtin's approach to the novel allows us to relate questions of subjectivity and subject-position to the novel and to interlink the narratological tools that determine these positions in the (literary) text (›real author‹, ›implied author‹, ›implied audience‹). It can be asked *how* sociopolitical discourse enters and is negotiated in the novel. Secondly, the question of *who* is writing/speaking and *who* is being addressed in the (different narrative levels of the) novel can be explored in more text-related detail. Thirdly, it sheds light on *what* is negotiated in the novel, in *what ways*, and in what ways this matters in terms of the subject who writes and the subject who is addressed in the text. These questions are seen as interrelated and relevant to the referential textuality of a text. In sum, then, the dialogic tone of humor is understood as a form of insightful, epistemological engagement that operates at the seam of literary, philosophical, discursive, and reality-evoking demarcations. Within this seam of different performed discourses and speech acts, humor questions and dialogues the normativity of dominance and what is perceived as ›truth‹ or ›common sense‹, or ›knowledge‹.

As Culler notes, following Austin and Derrida, in order for language (and any sign system) to be discerned and ›understood‹, it must follow certain iterations, it must be »identifiable as conforming to an iterable model« (Culler 2011, 99). Derrida calls this iterable model of language the ›general iterability‹ of language, »chains of iterable marks«

(Derrida, quoted in Culler 2000, 509). Iterability in language/discourse thus refers to such established referential configurations of meanings in specific sociopolitical contexts. The dialogic character of language and discourse, which is inevitably evoked in the novel, resignifies such iterable signs by its heteroglossic design and can destabilize conventionalized norms. It is therefore also compatible with Butler's and Sedgewick's understanding of performativity. Since this performative quality of the iterable is not pursued in the same way as is normatively expected, it acquires a performative structure. In this gap that opens up between the expected and their different unexpected contextual evocations, the possibility of change, subversion, and resistance emerges *in a humorous tonality* (see Bakhtin 1984 a). The conventional use of language and meaning in narratives, although ›quoted‹, repeated, can acquire another meaning through the performative humorous process in the dialogic encounter of and within the narrative discourse – and can help to renegotiate hitherto taken-for-granted imageries.

The unstable questioning and dialogic traits that humor seems to evoke also produce a diverse, often aporetic specter of affectivity, such as mourning and contemplation, as well as joy. The next section will explore the affective side of humor and the connotation of an affective economy lying within and accompanying it. Since I understand this study as a contribution to a constructivist approach within literary theory to what is called the affective turn, the question for me is not so much an ontological one (of what ›affects‹ are), or the presumption of fixed and distinctive ›affects‹, that are to be explored further, but rather, *how to relate to* this process in the production of texts and in the sociopolitical texture in such a way that they are not presumed and essentialized as ›given‹, or understood on the basis of ›scientific results‹ as a solid basis of investigation. Furthermore, the study is informed by two other points concerning ›affects‹, which are seen as interrelated. Firstly, in following Micha Hilgers' psychological approach, ›affects‹ are seen as describing a *mechanism of self-regulation* (Hilgers 2012, 17). As such, ›affects‹ can be understood as nodal cross-points of psychic traces that are triggered by actual discourses and/or sensual experiences – albeit with an indeterminate trajectory as to what they mean and how they may develop in their regulatory functionality and effect. This in fact – the infinite traces of these trajectories – is, it is argued, what is inscribed and spilled out in literary texts (and maybe in other texts as well, in a much more hidden, masked, and subtle way). Secondly, following the approaches of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1993, 8, 2003, 9) and Achim Geisenhanslüke (2019, 16 ff.), literary texts are considered as sites and archives of these manifold, affective traces, and, in this respect, as an antidote to Foucault's all-encompassing depiction of the mechanisms of power/›knowledge‹.[35] Finally, in view of these points and based on a Spinozian understanding, I speak of *affectivity* rather than of ›affects‹. In *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza links *affectus* not only to the processes in and of the body, but also to thought. In this way, he points to an incalculable, infinite, textured, and interlinked structure of internal and external, material and immaterial processes, in which ›affects‹, like thoughts, can transform constantly. Spinoza writes: »By emotion

35 Interestingly, both – Sedgwick as well as Geisenhanslüke – draw on ›shame‹ to develop their literary-informed counter-renderings, which may have to do with the sociopolitically precarious and prohibitive regulatory functions associated with it.

[*affectus*] I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections« (Spinoza [1677] 2018, 95).[36] I understand affectivity as this faculty of perception and expression, as a correlation of internal and external material and immaterial nodes of psychological, bodily, and thought-related processing. These metamorphosing structures are influenced by (historically conditioned) sociopolitical relations inscribed in subjects in infinite ways. Articulated performatively in actions and language these relational structures intervene in discourse, the material and corporeal worlds, and the sociopolitical realm.

Humor and – ›Affect‹

Most theories subsume humor explicitly or implicitly under ›feeling‹, ›sense‹, ›sensation‹, or ›emotion‹ (see also Noel Carroll 2014, 55 ff.). Often humor is associated with ›affects‹ linked to superiority, repression, or relief, with ›laughter‹ often seen as the release of emotional energy. Humor is often also characterized by the simultaneous induction of ambivalent ›affects‹ such as fear, anxiety, and amusement. It also is often linked to a mixture of different ›affects‹ like ›pain and pleasure‹ (Bergson 1911, 22 b; Barbero 2014); Kant explicitly speaks of humor as an ›affect‹ and as the changing free play of sensation (Morreall 2009, 248). Furthermore, in all these theories, humor is linked not only to a change in cognitive state, resulting from suddenness and surprise, but also to pleasure and lust (Morreall 2009; Roof 2018; Freud 2024.8, 88, 185 ff.). Other accounts also stress this dimension, proposing that humor should be perceived as *amusement* in relation to a cognitive process of awareness (Levinson 2006; Dadlez 2011).

While many theories of humor thus discuss humor as an ›affect‹, its affective side has not yet been considered for itself. Besides the tragic-humorous that carries an affective weight, especially triggered by the allusion to tragedy, and besides the often-claimed emotive character of literature per se, which also indicates an affective effect of humor, its explicit relation to affectivity remains unclear. However, as Freud's allusion to humor as an ›affect‹ suggests, and theories of humor discuss, humor also has an affective side that might be worth considering, especially in the context of its understanding as a cognitive faculty in the Kantian sense of ›knowledge‹ (*Erkenntnisvermögen*).[37] In order to deal with the affective structure of humor, and in particular with the so-called ›affective turn‹, it seems necessary to first look at the meanings of ›affects‹ and what is evoked as the affective turn and where this study fits in. A further chapter examines theories of humor that link humor in one way or another to specific ›affects‹, as well as the limits of affectivity and humor.

36 Edwin Curley translates *affectus* not as ›emotion‹, but as ›affect‹; cf. Spinoza (1994, 154).

37 This is also what Simon Critchley might mean in an interview with *Cabinet* when he says: »I'm convinced that there are deep philosophical insights yielded through the practice of humor« (17/2005), a point Critchley tries to pursue in *On Humor* (2005), as well as when he follows the meanings and unmeanings of the Greek tragedy for the contemporary »us« (2020).