Laughter and Japan in Transition : Towards an Understanding through a Time-based Incongruity Theory

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Although Japan's owarai or comedy boom [お笑いブーム] as such is considered to be a phenomenon of just the past few years, there is something to be gained by placing it in a broader context. Defining the historical borders of any cultural movement is exceedingly difficult and at best imprecise, but there is credible evidence that an emergence of laughter was actually underway by the time of the *manzai boom* [漫才ブーム] in the nineteen eighties (Ishii, pp. 31–6). In fact, a difference has even been observed between the status of laughter in Japan before and after World War II; while a certain foreign notion of the Japanese as somewhat lacking in humour was always a misperception (Ui, pp. 9–11; Oshima, pp. 207–8), laughter was something that used to be more socially restrained and less positively valued than it is today in Japan: "Today the social practice of restraining smiling and laughter is disappearing, and Japanese youth laugh more freely than ever before" (Oda, p. 24).

Today, it appears that laughter is not simply more liberally tolerated but is being enthusiastically sought after and actively disseminated through the media. As well as the commercially successful TV programs dedicated to comedy performances such as *Red Carpet* [レッドカーペット], *Enta no Kamisama* [エンタの神様] and comic *monomane* [ものまね] contests there are numerous variety and talk shows which revolve around comedy. Comedians turned hosts Takeshi Kitano [北野たけし], Shinsuke Shimada [島田紳助], Akashiya Sanma [明石家さんま] and the manzai team Downtown [ダウンタウン] are not only successful but highly respected for their craft and commonly identified as among the top TV entertainers in the country. The annual "M-1 Grand Prix" competition held since 2001 has quickly become a prestigious national event for professional and aspiring comedy acts, and young people today are more likely than ever before to want to become professional comedians themselves (Yamanaka, pp. 1–17). Together, all of this indicates that the way laughter and humour are viewed in Japan has undergone a significant change. It should also be noted that the comedy is perhaps like never before being directed towards and even assessed specifically in terms of eliciting the laughter response, most conspicuously in *Red Carpet* and the *monomane* contests, but to some extent in most comedy and variety shows.

The apparent appreciation in the cultural currency of laughter and humour in recent decades is commonly associated with two main benefits it is perceived to accord: the first is social, the supposed contribution humour makes to smooth communication (Oshima, pp. 31–4); the second is personal, the relief of stress through the laughter response (Ueno, pp. 81–90; Oshima, p. 65; Yamanaka, pp. 206–7),

considered a particularly valuable function in the context of what is referred to sometimes as the era of stress [ストレス時代]. In other words, humour is popularly regarded as a social lubricant (serving to smooth relations) and the laughter response in particular as a personal coolant (providing stress relief), both functions which facilitate the effective operations of the cultural machinery and the individual within it. This is a big and complex subject, so in the present essay I will examine only the issue of the laughter response viewed as a stress relief, with the hope of taking up the issue of humour as a social lubricant at a later time.

The popular notion that laughter reduces stress is completely credible, so my aim here is not to challenge the idea. Rather, I would like to extend it in two directions. Firstly, I wish to go deeper into the *reasons* that laughter is perceived to have this benefit, which is largely taken for granted without much reference to the underlying causal mechanisms. For example, we know that neural chemistry is quite dramatically and positively affected by laughter, but how is this achieved and what is the state of mind attending it? Secondly, I want to tentatively explore the possibility that laughter not only contributes to the efficient operations of the cultural and psychic machinery; when it becomes increasingly pervasive and more highly valued it cannot help but *change* that machinery. While it is difficult to describe in concrete terms, society is a different kind of society (a different kind of machine) in some way when it is laughing more freely or valuing laughter more highly, and the same can be said of the individual self within any society: it is a different ontology, a different way of being in time.

Theoretical Contexts: Temporalised Incongruity Theory and the Economics of *Empire*

Since various academic disciplines and theoretical models are employed in the study of laughter, before entering into the analysis, I should first outline the theoretical underpinnings of my discussion. My approach here utilizes a theoretical model of laughter that has not, as far as I have been able to discern, been applied to the Japanese context. It is important to emphasize that this approach is not primarily concerned with the communicative functions of laughter: for instance, laughter as a signifier of ridicule (Bergson, Billig). Nor is it concerned with studying the content or meaning (or absence of meaning) in the humour which might generate laughter, or in drawing comparisons across cultures or categories of humour, in the manner of Christie Davies's work, for example. These approaches are useful and important, so again my aim here is not at all to attempt to critique but rather to accompany them, examining how the experience of laughter as an eruption within the mind, often associated with stress relief, may be related to broader cultural conditions within modern Japan. In short, while I understand it will be frustrating to scholars used to applied textual explication, discourse analysis and comparison, my concern here is not with the culture of comedy, but with the cultural currency of the laughter response in general. The intention is not at all to describe individual instances or variations in humour or even laughter across contexts in Japan, which some of the authors I cite here have already done much better than I am capable of doing. In the context of the present question, discourse analysis of specific instances of humour, for example, would be largely a distraction, albeit an interesting one. As to whether this question of the apparent "freeing" of laughter *in general*, at least in historically relative terms, is a useful avenue of inquiry, I'll leave that to the reader to decide. Personally, I think it could be a very significant cultural shift, and I will attempt to give some sense of why.

The present work draws on "incongruity theory," based on a concept which is used across disciplines today. The idea that a sudden perception of incongruity (referred to as "competing scripts" by the linguist Raskin, "bisociation of matrices" by the cultural philosopher Koestler) can produce what the mathematician Paulos calls a "cognitive catastrophe" (expressed in laughter) is not controversial across the various academic disciplines studying the subject. According to what is sometimes termed the "incongruity-relief" approach, it is the pleasure associated with the disjunction of discourse or thought that is of primary importance, not some message that may or may not be discerned in the discourse (often well after the event and the laughter response). When there is argument concerning the incongruity model it commonly revolves around the question as to whether incongruity alone can generate laughter; that is, it appears that incongruity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for comic laughter. The approach I will be taking here, which might be called a "temporalised incongruity theory," stresses the importance of the *suddenness* of that perception of incongruity in producing pleasure, as well as the effect this may have, with repetition over the long term, on the laughing subject's general experience of time.

It is only in the past two decades that the temporal effect has emerged overtly in the writing of scholars, beginning perhaps with Samuel Weber's psychoanalytic essay *Laughing in the Meanwhile*, which examines the intuitive sense of a rupture in one's sense of time, something akin to a falling out of subjective temporality, in laughter. I attempted to elaborate on Weber's work in an article for *Humor* in 2002, and the quiet ubiquity of the temporal effect has been noted more recently by the social psychologist Billig ("a constant but barely discussed element in previous theories: the assumption of a sudden break in time," p. 116). The philosopher Critchley remarks the "peculiar *temporal* dimension of jokes," that "humorous pleasure would seem to be produced by the disjunction between duration and the instant" (p. 7). Like Weber, Lawrence Kimmel explains that while this explosive "time out" is both existentially significant and central to the pleasure experienced in laughter, discussing it concretely is difficult, given our lack of a precise, shared vocabulary for articulating the subjective human experience of time in general, let alone the sudden *dropping out* of time. This is a problem I face myself here.

In pragmatic terms, even if we agree (through reference to the literature on the subject and/or through an intuitive understanding) that something like a pleasurable rupture in our consciousness and our experience of time occurs in the eruption into laughter, what benefit is to be obtained by delving into such an apparently ephemeral and esoteric phenomenon? In attempting to answer that question, we should firstly note that even if laughter passes quickly, it leaves us changed to a more or less degree in a phenomenological sense, that is, in our relationship with the world, especially in temporal terms. As mentioned, Critchley refers to laughter's effect of moving us from durational temporality (in which past, present and future are merged into a kind of psychic continuity) into the instant, the "now." This is short-lived, but psychic, ontological traces remain: most importantly, our sense of the future and past may be diminished to some degree, our experience of the present somewhat intensified with laughter, especially if we are laughing more often or even just thinking about laughter in more positive terms. As for the supposed esoteric quality of the temporal effect, it may be psychological but it is not something that exists in isolation from the world around it.

In fact, this question of time brings us back to the context at hand, contemporary Japan, and to Japan in relation to the broader context of a globalization propelled and accelerated by economics. When the economist Alfred Marshall claimed that in economics the effect of "time is more fundamental than that of space" (quoted in Harvey, p. 265) he was in a sense giving academic credence to Benjamin Franklin's famous remark that "time is money." Under the economic imperative of deriving competitive advantage and profit through improved productivity (production over time), time is being compressed, which is felt by citizens as a seemingly relentless acceleration of daily life without a clear teleological rationale: "accelerating in a void," as the cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (p. 4) put it. Under these conditions of temporal pressure, laughter, as a pleasurable disruption and adaptive reorientation of our experience of time, may take on a greater role, and for historical reasons that might be especially the case in modern Japan.

In the book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri argue that since the nineteen sixties capitalism has been undergoing a rapid transformation, moving from a disciplinary or "top down" model of power to one where the active participation of citizens is garnered through the fostering of pleasures and a sense of individual freedom. This is offered through (but also serves reciprocally to promote) consumption (buying power) as well as a model of the worker as a more autonomous being, a "self-employed" person, in a sense, who sells his labour and considers work in terms of existential as well as material benefits. According to the authors, however, the transition may be more painful for certain cultures than for others, and they refer specifically to the post-War "economic miracle" of Japan: "At this point the disciplinary model has become completely obsolete and must be left behind. For this reason, we believe that the countries that have achieved extreme modernization through the disciplinary model, such as Japan and other East Asian countries, are the ones that will suffer most severely in the change" (p. 276). This is a debatable supposition, but it is not necessary for us to enter the fray of that debate here. My interest is the extent to which, among other functions, laughter's pleasurable dislocation of time, commonly associated with release of stress, may have been serving a special (non-disciplinary and far from painful) role in Japan in negotiating the transition towards uniquely Japanese forms of late capitalist society and selfhood, this being manifested in the boom in comedy. In the following sections I will examine laughter's role in reorienting relationships with the future, the present and the past in turn.

Future Tense and Present Tension: Free Market Uncertainty and Laughter's Time Out

In discussions of Japanese humour, Osaka is almost invariably referred to, partly in contrasts drawn between the comic styles of Kansai and Tokyo, but also in studying a culture where comedy is both institutionally powerful (Yoshimoto Kougyou [吉本興業]) and pervasive in the streets (Inoue, pp. 27-33). The common line of thought is that comedy is an especially integral part of life in Osaka compared to other cities. Moreover, Osaka's humour–through television, the influence of Yoshimoto and the conspicuousness of graduates such as Shinsuke, Sanma and Downtown, in prime national TV spots–has spread across the nation in recent years. Yet the historical source of that humour is typically regarded to be the streets of Osaka and specifically the function of humour and laughter in the city's merchant culture since the Edo Period, which raises the interesting possibility that the increased conspicuousness of comedy and laughter nationally is due *in part* to Japan itself, in a period of global economically-driven

commercialization, taking on more of the character of merchant Osaka. Japanese are still uniquely Japanese, but the species of which they are members is morphing into what has been described as *homo economicus* (Schor, p. 136), which is to say, everyone is buying, selling and investing almost all the time: economics and exchange are no longer felt to be adjuncts or mechanisms supporting life, they are increasingly identified with "being" itself.

In that case, it would be useful to go deeper into the reasons that humour has been associated with Osaka's traditional merchant culture. This will return us eventually to the temporal effect of laughter. Along with the communicative function of humour (which, I should stress again, is outside the scope of my present essay) Inoue sees a special survival function of laughter for the business person: "Movements in the economy exert a great influence on the lives of merchants. When business is in a slump, it will cause many troubles, but even if their company goes bankrupt, merchants have no option but to struggle to stand up again. In order to do so, they know very well that laughing is invaluable in cheering themselves up" (p. 29). The conditions of intensified uncertainty and risk described here would seem to fit not just the traditional merchant culture of Osaka. To some extent, they fit contemporary Japan more broadly, where, even when the economy is strong (as it was in the 1980s, at which time, it is important to note, laughter was already on the rise), business returns are increasingly volatile and employees are themselves in increasingly insecure situations regarding their future in work and thus their income. Yamanaka places this function of laughter in a broader historical perspective.

身分制社会がカッチリとしていた江戸時代であれば、武士も庶民も真面目に自分のポジションさえ守っていれば、波風は立ったなかった。場の「空気」を読む必要もないし、笑いでストレスを解消しなくても、さほどストレスは溜まらない。終身雇用、年功序列のサラリーマンも、それに近かった。

ところが、現在社会は波風がたちまくりだ。情報、通信分野では目まぐるしいほどの進化が進んでいるし、いつなんどきリストラでクビを切られるかもわからない。実績主義が導入されて、成果が上がらなければ、後輩に地位でも収入でも簡単に抜かれてしまう。

真面目なコツコツ型こそ、ストレスが溜まりまくる、行き止まり状態に陥ってしまう。ときには、うつ病になったりする。(Yamanaka, p. 207)

[For example, in the robust class system of the Edo period, so long as both samurai and commoners faithfully maintained their social position there was no discord. It wasn't necessary to read the social atmosphere, and even if one didn't relieve stress through laughter, it didn't build up so much.The salaryman living under the system of lifetime employment and age-determined seniority was similar in this regard.

However, today's society is unstable. Through information and communication networks we are immersed in a dizzying transitoriness;we don't know if we're going to lose our job at a moment's notice in"restructuring."In a performance-based system, if results don't improve you can readily be demoted or lose income.

If we just earnestly labour away, stress builds up and we hit a dead end. On occasions, people fall into depression.]

So here we see that commonly cited function of laughter I mentioned at the beginning of this essay: laughter as a stress-reliever or coolant. If we read closely, we can see that the various stresses of the contemporary Japanese citizen (male and female) are all related in one way or another to time, and the first of these is the stress related to specific, identifiable sources of anxiety residing in the future, which laughter would seem to diminish.

In order to go more deeply into this phenomenon in the Japanese context we first need to ask *why* or *how* laughter has its perceived stress-relieving function. Long before Critchley's observations on laughter's subversion of duration by the instant, the German philosopher Schopenhauer, drawing on incongruity theories of humour, was the earliest and most articulate in identifying this effect of laughter and explaining why it is experienced so positively. Schopenhauer observes that the eruption of laughter, by shifting thought out of a habitual mode of thinking bound to past and future, brings a pleasurable release from time and the stresses that are a product of our temporal being. When we laugh, he writes, we overcome those time-bound thought processes that are "the vehicle of our fears, our repentance, and all our cares" (p. 280). In other words, we reduce stress by removing ourselves suddenly from our connection with time outside the present, meaning the past and especially our fears for the future, which are the source of that stress: in the contemporary Japanese context referred to by Yamanaka, this includes worries about business results, staff restructuring with layoffs [リストラ] and retirement pensions [年金]. The real or potential problems are still there, of course, but we have weakened our mental connection with them by severing temporal, durational continuity. That function would naturally be more highly sought after when the level of economic uncertainty has increased, and it would be fair to guess that this may have had some role in generating the owarai boom.

Describing this function as "stress relief" is not mistaken, but it understates laughter's effect, which may in fact be deeper and more lasting. Constantly or often severing one's relationship with the future tense eventually diminishes the degree to which one feels bound to the long-term future. This represents an important ontological shift, especially in a culture which has placed so much emphasis on future security as an element in maintaining peace of mind [安心]. From a broader perspective, of course, it suits an economy in which the typically long-range business plans and employment contracts of the past are becoming less tenable due to market unpredictability. Almost everyone is living with a greater sense of economic risk.

The Intensified Present: Laughter as a Management Tool

It should be understood that the difference between the samurai and Osaka merchants, as noted by Inoue (p. 28), or between the older salarymen and the present-day workers Yamanaka refers to, is not simply one of differing times or places, but one of differing temporalities. Japan, in line with global economically-defined imperatives, is not in transition from one state or period to another, it is in transition to a conceivably endless experience of high speed transitoriness, referred to as "fast capitalism" (Agger) or "turbo-capitalism" (Luttwak). This relates to the second time-related source of stress I mentioned with regard to Yamanaka's appraisal of the contemporary worker's situation. Stress may be caused not just by anxiety concerning specific prospects in the future, such as unemployment or insuf-

ficient retirement funds, but also by the compression of time itself: that is, cultural speed and acceleration. Again, by producing a momentary time-out, laughter provides a momentary cognitive exit from that oppressive temporality in which people feel they are constantly racing the clock in an intensified present. The fact that many workers today are experiencing this acceleration, under the influence of intensified competition and the imperative of ever-improving productivity, perhaps renders laughter particularly important not just as stress relief but as a way of "modulating" and redirecting movement and so as a significant tool of labour time management.

Oshima's study of humour in Japan is principally concerned with humour in terms of communication. However, that part of her study related to humour in the workplace actually begins by examining this function of laughter in workplace management. Oshima's book is an especially interesting cultural artifact in itself in this respect because it contains not simply description and cross-cultural analysis of the phenomenon but a certain amount of advocacy. Oshima, who was educated in both Japan and the United States and has performed rakugo [落語] in English internationally, provides examples of how laughter has for quite a long time been used by managers in some European and American businesses. She cites the book *Humor Works* by a preeminent American humour theorist, John Morreall, and writes that she would like to provide a "hint" as to what Japanese companies and other institutions might learn from this: 多くの大人が一日の大半を過ごすのが職場であるのならば、その職場に笑顔と笑いがあることは間違いなく精神的にプラスである。一般に人は笑うことによってリラックスし (Oshima, p. 65). *[With many adults spending most of each day at work, smiling and laughter are without doubt psychological pluses. Normally, from laughing we are able to relax…]*This has obvious benefits for the individual, as noted too by Yamanaka (above) and Ueno (pp.81–90), but Oshima is also concerned with the significance of this relaxation for the companies that employ them: 欧米ではユーモアのある人や日常的によく笑う人は病気になりにくいので、雇う側からすれば健康を維持する能力が備わっているとみなす傾向がある。社員が健康であるということは企業にとっても重要なことである。病気がちな社員を抱えることはコストがかかるからである (Oshima, p. 65). *[In Europe and North America, because people with a sense of humour or those who laugh readily are less likely to get sick, there is a tendency for employers to equate these behaviours with (the ability to maintain) good health. The health of employees is important for business. Employees prone to sickness can be costly.]*

Laughter, then, by relieving stress and tension, can be regarded as a tool of management, maintaining or even improving labour performance and thus productivity and profits. This notion is indeed something that has become increasingly prevalent in businesses internationally over the past two decades. Conspicuous in this regard is the international Laughter Club movement led by Martin Kataria, more recently associated with so called "Laughter Yoga." It is no accident that this movement began its own rapid ascendancy as a health and wellbeing phenomenon from late last century, as Japan itself was entering or in its comedy boom. As in Japan, there are identifiable reasons why the global rise of laughter therapy has attended the globalization of economics. Here is a quote from the movement's webpage:

> Scientific research shows that laughter can help resolve many major workplace issues. It reduces stress[,] resulting in improved physical and mental health and quality of work, better communi-

> cation, team building skills and interpersonal relationships. Results of Laughter Yoga programs introduced by many Companies and Corporations around the world indicate that employees become more committed and efficient and learn more easily. This is often reflected in increased sales, productivity and a more harmonious workplace. (http://www.laughteryoga.org/)

In short, laughter's reduction of stress is viewed as a fundamental benefit, keeping workers healthy and thereby improving business performance. In her study of the Japanese context, Oshima remarks that Japanese companies have been slower to adopt such ideas, although her survey of Sony managers revealed some acceptance of humour in the workplace there (correlated with positive business results), and she sees the greater presence of foreigners in the Japanese workplace as perhaps stimulating change. What is most significant here is that the workers' health is conceived as important less as an end in itself than as a means of improving business performance. This is not to say that personal health benefits are being ignored, but that laughter is being promoted in recent times as a psychophysiological regulatory device, which again goes deeper and wider than mere stress relief.

In discussing the temporal effect of laughter, Weber describes it as a sudden disengaging of the psychic gears that transmit power and motion. We consider laughter to be a "letting out," he observes, but it is more like a "letting up," a momentary loss of power transmission (p. 703). In fact, laughter as a clutch or gear-changing device is how it is being employed in some workplaces; it is a regulating tool, preventing the accelerating business machinery—within which (like Chaplin's production line employee in *Modern Times*) the "human resource" may be the weak or slow link—from spinning out of control, thus allowing the machinery to move faster and also to change speed and course abruptly to suit immediate and ever-changing business needs. This is not just desirable but necessary under recent economic conditions that require improved mental "gear-changing" capacities in citizens for enhanced motility and flexibility. However, under traditional top-down "disciplinary" workplace regimes in any country (they still exist even in the US or Europe), the time-out or letting up of laughter tends to be seen as interrupting work, wasting time, undermining productivity (as well as suggesting disrespect and lack of seriousness), so fostering it in the workplace seems from that point of view at least unproductive and possibly dangerous.

In fact, it is conceivable that this is one of the reasons humour *outside* of the workplace, in the context of leisure, the mass media and the home, has been playing an especially important role in Japan. Because laughter may still be frowned upon, or at least regarded with suspicion in many workplaces as being a disruptive waste of time, the broadcast media have assumed a greater role (mostly responding to popular demand) in the after-work hours: reducing stress, yes, but also helping citizens to adapt themselves to a lifestyle of ongoing temporal discordance, honing the ability to use laughter as a temporal regulating mechanism within the erratically speeding machinery of contemporary economics. Not just the laughter response, but the valorization of "reading the atmosphere" [空気を読む] and the recently popular comic style of extemporaneous humour associated with Downtown would support the greater emphasis upon an intensified and dynamic present. This is worthy of further investigation, I believe.

The Weakened Past: Laughter and Forgetting

Functioning as a psychic regulatory device as it often does today, laughter assumes the role of not just a business management tool but a personal self-management tool, which fits with what Foucault described as a "technologizing" of the self. The mind/body is viewed as an organic machine, the self as a manager within that machine constantly monitoring and adjusting flows to suit the needs of its environment. The popular "self-help" and therapeutic discourses that have emerged internationally in recent decades support this function in redefining selfhood (Miller, pp. 90–133). Laughter Clubs certainly, and the rise of comic culture in Japan perhaps, would seem to fit here. That raises an important question in the context of the emergence in so-called late capitalist cultures of the neo-liberal individual referred to by Hardt and Negri: If laughter has, under the influences of "outside" economic forces, become a personal technology, who owns that technology? If laughter is deployed indirectly in order to accommodate the worker to current demands of productivity, then is it simply drawing citizens pleasurably (rather than through older disciplinary strategies) deeper into compliance with the economic order? Or does laughter's time-out, especially from an oppressively accelerated "work time," have liberating implications for the selves and communities conceived and developed outside work? We might adapt Foucault's answer to similar questions he raised regarding the "liberating" potential of discourses around sex since the 1960s to the present subject of laughter: that is, the answer might be *both*, and there may be no ultimate winner: "One has to recognize the indefiniteness of the struggle" (Foucault, p. 57).

It should be noted that recommendations that humour and laughter be used as tools of business in and outside Japan tend to understate the extent to which laughter in the workplace needs to be harnessed, monitored, regulated. In other words, laughter is condoned, even encouraged when it is perceived to be serving the interests of business; if not, it may be perceived as destructive of the motivation and forward momentum that businesses and the broader global economy consider indispensable. Equally importantly, laughter's temporal collapse, by reorienting people in relation to time may pose a threat to existing orders of power, those which require a strong sense of continuity with the past. Yamanaka alludes to this in contrasting the samurai or salaryman with the contemporary Japanese citizen. The feudal and seniority systems are obviously different, but they both lay stress on continuity and a certain privileging of the past tense, which is to say precedents and precedence. But contemporary market-oriented economics and competitive merit-based promotion create a different climate, one that Japan has been negotiating, perhaps, with the help of laughter.

Inoue writes of the Osaka merchants and their marketplace that their social context may be characterized as favouring "horizontal" over "vertical" relations (p. 28), a vocabulary redolent of Bakhtin's model of laughter's social functioning. Horizontal relations imply a tendency towards egalitarianism, vertical relations towards compliance with conventional hierarchical, disciplinary power structures. It should be noted that although the horizontal/vertical dichotomy is an overtly spatial representation, for Bakhtin it had temporal implications. Vertical relations are fixed and enduring and coerce citizens to accommodate themselves to the preexisting sociopolitical order. This is most obviously the case with a feudal system, but it is also true to some degree of old-style capitalism. Bakhtin contrasts inten-

sified "carnival" or "marketplace" time with "the slow sticky time of the bourgeoisie," which is not the same as but is somewhat akin to the time of the conventional salaryman. The vertical system depends upon an adherence to the past, the horizontal upon constantly negotiated relations in the present. Contemporary Japanese institutions, like institutions anywhere to a more or less degree, are increasingly forced to negotiate between the vertical relations continuing from the past and these immediate horizontal relations supported by laughter. While laughter's subversion of duration can actually benefit institutions by weakening attachments to fixed and redundant systems or practices, allowing "real time" adaptation, creativity and innovation (Oshima, p. 75; Ueno, pp. 133–5), it may also undermine the enduring power relations of the institutions themselves.

This raises another question. Could laughter's subversion of durational subjective time be what English speakers call "a spanner in the works," which is to say a subversive element thrown into the socio-economic machinery? This is not a question asked much in Japan, and it may not even be appropriate to think in such terms here, but a study by Ueno found a correlation between comedy viewing and a desire to break from social convention even among Japanese (pp. 165–70). In European cultures there has been considerable debate for over a century over laughter's capacity to seriously impact upon a culture. Even before Bakhtin, a radical liberating function for laughter was claimed in Modernist Europe by Nietzsche, by Russian Futurists and by Surrealists such as Georges Bataille. Later, the icon of deconstructive philosophy of language Jacques Derrida, following Nietzsche and Bataille, extolled a radical laughter. On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre, with explicit reference to Bataille, noted of laughter that "conservatives excel in it" (p. 170). Suffice it to say, then, laughter is not innately radical or conservative; it is a potentially powerful force that is constantly under contention, "up for grabs." The same might be said of comedy in contemporary Japan. Laughter is a complex issue when viewed ideologically precisely because of its temporal effect, which may release our minds from conditions beholden to the past, but by freeing us from time, especially the future, may also release us from the motivation to effectively *change* those conditions. Understanding the situation is complicated further by the fact that the political-economic status quo of the competitive global economy is not, like the feudal background of Bakhtin's medieval carnivals, basically static, but extremely dynamic, ever-changing.

Since I have mostly focused on the ways in which the new global market economy might be served by an appreciated value being granted laughter, let me briefly mention how even that economic power itself may be under challenge by laughter in the Japanese context. Yamanaka's discussion of Japanese comedy performers notes that some unemployed and part-time workers, living on the edge of the socio-economic mainstream, are drawn to comedy (pp. 169–76). Among some of these there is a sense of wanting to be separated from a particular economic hegemony, to become owners of their own time, and laughter's temporal subversion may serve that end to some degree: freeing people from fears for the future (e.g. Will I have enough money in retirement?); freeing them from the past (in which lifetime full-time employment was regarded as an unquestionable prize, justifying extraordinary allegiance to one's employer); intensifying their sense of being dynamically in the moment. Many young comedy performers are themselves living on less than full salaries and in difficult economic

conditions, and yet they remain role models for other young people, in part because their lives, revolving around laughter, appear to at least suggest something outside the economic mainstream. As Yamanaka argues, comedy may be most subversive and important in the contemporary Japanese context when it flirts with nonsense and the pleasurable dead-end of laughter—laughter for its own sake. It is then, when the forward momentum through time (whether towards some greater teleological purpose or just "productive activity") is disrupted by laughter, generated by the inherent incongruity of a comic performance, that it opens up a space/time of alterity and may implicitly interrogate the "serious" aims of the culture : 実は、こうしたシャレなのか本気なのかわからない芸人同士のぶつかり合いの中にこそ、お笑いを形作るエキスがある。日常の延長線上でありつつ、どこか日常とは離れた世界。世間一般の、真面目な社会人にとっては、ただふざけているとしか見えないようなところ、良識派のマスコミからすると「存在するだけムダ」の中にこそ「お笑い人」の存在意義がある (Yamanaka, p. 150). [Actually, this kind of banter between comedians, where we can't be sure whether they are in jest or in earnest, is the essence of the comic form. It represents both an extension of the everyday and some kind of world separate from the everyday. The serious members of everyday society can only see frivolity in the speech and behaviour of the comedians, and the sensible conservatives of the media take their existence for just a waste. Here lies their *raison d'être*.] When so much emphasis is being placed on being seriously productive in one way or another, to be conspicuously unproductive (although still perhaps creative) is a potentially challenging position.

We don't have the historical distance to be able to clearly discern the implications of the apparently heightened currency of laughter in Japan at this point in the way we have now in relation to the sixties counterculture and its impact, but it is not inconceivable that some of these younger comedy professionals and those who lionize or follow them may function to some degree, and in a peculiarly Japanese style, just a little like Hardt and Negri view the hippies of the sixties, representing the urge to find a different way of being in time: not overtly political but in their lived temporality marking an important ideological shift. The countercultural forces didn't "win" the culture war of the sixties, but they left a legacy in terms of the way people viewed themselves, life, work and play. Such a shift need not be felt as a revolution from *outside*; in fact, even the presently institutionalized figures of comedy—Takeshi, Shinsuke, Sanma, Downtown and so on—may themselves be contentious. They are mainstream culture, but because they deal in laughter they are necessarily consorting with the cultural edges. If the comic edge has become the mainstream, then the mainstream has become more "edgy," which is to say less comfortable and self-assured, less beholden to the past tense, and so potentially more prone to influence and change by new and unusual forces within. Thus the transformation in the Japanese political landscape very recently, its becoming an environment which may be more deeply accessible to change, *could* have more to do with Japanese comedy (regardless of whether the humour is politically satirical or not) than is commonly imagined.

Conclusion

As I emphasized at the outset, this has been a preliminary exploration of the cultural reevaluation of laughter in recent Japanese culture, using a model of laughter which stresses its subjective temporal effect with reference to Japan's changing situation within a broader global economic movement. Within those frames of reference there is much more that can be said and much work that could be done. I would like to examine, for instance, the relationship between laughter's dislocation of time and attitudes to *consumption*, the other side of the Osaka merchant equation. I must stress again that outside of my limited frames of reference, the combinations of themes and approaches that might be applied are numerous, including, for example, the possibility that laughter's apparent capacity to aid smooth communication (best approached through sociolinguistics, I would suggest) may take on greater importance when the culture is increasingly concerned, like the Osaka marketplace, with customer relations, and when the society is an increasingly competitive environment which *requires* more "smoothing."

My main and very limited aim has been to begin to look both beneath and beyond the common notion of laughter in Japan as serving to reduce stress in the "era of stress." Life in modern economies entails living with a faster and more erratic kind of temporality and in that context we should expect that laughter's capacity to disrupt and reorientate the subjective experience of time would assume a heightened significance. Laughter may have been functioning in Japan to bring citizens through pleasure (as opposed to discipline) into the context of endless transition, adjusting the individual's functioning—through time—both in the workplace and in lives conceived as existing beyond work, with varying degrees of autonomy. While no conclusive statements can be made on the subject at this stage (and perhaps at any stage, if we hold with Foucault) I will be satisfied if the present work has at least suggested that examining laughter in Japan in terms of the experience of time, however maddeningly abstract that might seem, can make a useful contribution to cultural and cross-cultural understanding.

Notes

Since Bergson's book on laughter (*Le rire*) has been important in the history of humour theory and he was regarded once as "the philosopher of time," this would seem to make his ideas particularly relevant to the present work. However, to delve into a discussion of the considerable complexities of the relationship between Bergson's philosophy of time and his theory of laughter is well beyond the scope of the present essay. I discuss the subject in some detail in my essay on Nietzsche, "Beyond a Joke: Nietzsche and the Birth of Super-laughter."

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