

Comic Grace

Comic Grace:
We Mortal Fools in Movie Comedy

By

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CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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by James Combs

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In memory of, and in tribute to,
Ernest Callenbach,
our guide to Cinetopia and founder of Ecotopia

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INTRODUCTION

COMIC GRACE

It is tempting to trace the origins of comedy to the brewing of beer. This assertion might seem fanciful, but it is the case that we know something of the connection between the discovery of beer and the establishment of civilization. Those archaeologists and historians interested in imaginative retrospection of the transition from Neolithic cultures of nomadic bands to agricultural settlements and recognizable social habits and beliefs have long thought that the discovery of beer was crucial. At first, however, beer seems not to have been a staple of people's diet, since the process of beer making was lengthy and difficult. Since beer was in a sense a luxury item and produced a euphoric effect, it was reserved for special occasions involving socially important persons and events. In the Natufian culture which flourished in southwest Asia some 12,000 years ago, there is evidence that beer was made and consumed for feast days hosted by the leadership of a tribe for invited guests. The Natufians are of particular interest because they appear to be an intermediate culture bridging the hunting-and-gathering bands of the Neolithic with the newer forms of social organization we associate with settled agricultural life, eventually evolving into the early civilizations such as the Sumerians. The Natufians became adept in the gathering of wild cereals, and eventually learned the arts of domestication, farming, and bread making.

At first, then, beer was a scarce resource of such value that it was only consumed in settings of symbolic significance for people who mattered. Those significant occasions were feasts, festive gatherings of eating, drinking, and gift-giving. Beer contributed to the festivity in the physical sense of arousing euphoria, and in the social sense of impressing upon guests as to the care and concern the host had given the occasion, thus "lubricating" the gestures and arrangements which characterized the event and helped perpetuate cultural hierarchies and practices. Beer served the purpose of underscoring the good cheer that such a festive ritual should be imbued with, aiding the conduct of a happy event in the service of salubrious social peace. We might call this process "festive reciprocity," in that the structured occasion of enjoyment encourages both mirth and

contentment, propagating good feelings at the moment, good tidings in the reciprocal agreements, and good hopes for the future. The festive coupling of a social group is both ancient and widespread as a ritual format, and demonstrates the uses of designated occasions of fun and fellowship in a sanctioned place and time. In other words, the injunction is simple: let's party, let's deal, and let's get along. A feast of social bonding is only one kind of ritual celebration. We know that the Natufians held elaborate wakes that included mortuary feasts. About 12,000 years ago in a small cave in what is now Israel, the Natufians buried a woman in her mid-forties who was clearly a person of importance deserving a significant observation of her death. Their celebration seems to have combined the solemnity of mourning with the festivity of a celebration. The ritual burial included eating roasted tortoise meat by her open grave, then putting the tortoise shells under her head and hips and on top and around her. They buried her with objects of magical powers, such as the wings of an eagle, the pelvis of a leopard, and the severed feet of a human. The archaeologists who unearthed this burial site found that this particular woman had a deformed pelvis, giving her a clearly different appearance and likely a limp. They surmise that the attention paid to her death suggests that she was a shaman, a special person thought to be in touch with the spirit world.

It is common in ancient societies and tribal cultures to accord supernatural powers and special status to people who have a visible disability or who exhibit unusual behavior. Such a social conception can have positive consequences, such as the toleration and honor accorded people who are homosexuals, or negative outcomes, such as the persecution of old women thought to be witches. The Natufians returned to the shaman's cave (located on a virtually inaccessible escarpment) for other funerary rituals, with the same festive air of feasting and communing with the spirit world. They interred the bodies of other people in communal burial pots, and later opened the graves to remove bones for display in ceremonies. Like the beer fest, they brought ritually important food, such as the difficult to kill wild oxen called the auroch. The auroch was a sacred animal, so consuming auroch meat at a special time and place was likely a festive ritual of fertility. During this liminal period of social transition, ritual festivities were a widespread characteristic of the rhythms of cultural observance. In the movement from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, we see festive rituals dating to 12,000 years ago. The mortuary feasting at the Gobekli Tepe ritual site in Turkey, and indeed near England's Stonehenge, where over 5000 years ago, farmers cooked pigs for a winter solstice festival are but two examples. Thus communal parties, even in the

presence of sacral places and solemn observances, included more than just a religious service or a funeral observance; while they had a larger purpose, they also included something else these incipient societies found valuable. It was fun.

With these early rituals, then, we are taking a long look back at humans much like ourselves who were engaging in activities to which we can all relate. The Natufians and others were gathering to conduct a celebration, an event of both social importance and cultural play. A communal celebration often combines the solemn and sacred with the playful and profane. From what we can tell, the Natufian ritual evidence indicates that they included in their ceremonial life all the dimensions of a full-fledged celebration: a sense of temporal occasion, as in the commemoration of a person's life; an appreciation of social role-playing, emerging in the structured dramatization of social relations during the feast; and the ludenic quality of festivity, furthering human bonds through sharing pleasures and producing the effect of pleasant exhilaration. Themes of temporality, theatricality, and festivity would characterize the ritual life of humankind since. The celebratory capacity of our emergent species is now one of our distinguishing marks. We have long buried our dead and observed seasonal changes with solemn and devout ceremonials. We have given thanks for life, food, and fertility.

If that were all there is to humans, however, we would be remembered as a rather grave and dull bunch. We begin to see in these early civilizations, and indeed in Paleolithic art and craft, something truly remarkable: an ability to have fun and participate in festivity. These ancient ancestors of ours display a festive spirit, seeing life as more than a desperate struggle for existence and society as more than a functional unit of divided labor and determinate hierarchy. It is true that these early rituals served vital social purposes and cultural meanings. However, the humans who arranged and conducted them gave them a festive quality, imbuing social occasions with a complex combination of seriousness and frivolity. The human "sense of occasion" allows a social ritual to acquire an aura of play, interweaving the overtone of an important juncture worthy of observation with a concurrent undertone of festal "effervescence." As symbolic play, an event weighty with grave meaning becomes a time of celebration leavened by the festive air of shared vivacity regardless of the immediate event that prompts the ritual occasion—a harvest, a wedding, or a funeral. People sense they are in the especial province of a time out of time and a place out of place, participating in an extraordinary and in some sense magical engagement. The identity of the celebrants moves from the rational constraints of *Homo sapiens* and the functional disciplines of

Homo faber into the playful delights of Homo ludens. In such a way, festive rituals mediate change, offsetting the solemnity and gloom of unwelcome change such as death, and underscoring welcome change such as marriage with glad felicity. In any case, such events are celebrations of social “life-symbols”: we the celebrants live and participate; our society is alive symbolically, so our way of life will live historically.

Looking back at the rudiments of these long-ago festive events, we may infer that their lasting importance is that people were learning how to take time and reserve space in order to play. Social occasions have been suffused with conviviality and festivity and mirth, communicating and legitimating the idea that play is an activity worth doing, something valuable in itself. Having fun can be traced to the smile of a baby or to children at play, but as an adult social pursuit, it acquired over time a more elaborate social sensibility. The baby senses that there is something funny about this brave new world into which she or he has been born, and children sense that playing is fun. A primal sense that delight is a pleasurable sensation and that play is an enjoyable pastime gives experiential precedence to those memorable moments in every life and every society. Since play is fun, and makes most of us feel good, it must be good; therefore, let us play! An adult event such as the Natufian festival provides ancient evidence suggesting that people understood quite well the logic and pragmatics of play. For the Natufians, a funeral could be an occasion for a festive celebration; feasts could be occasions for festive reciprocity serving important social purposes.

The Natufians also learned, as students of play have long stressed, that play is an aesthetic experience that we enjoy in and of itself. It cannot be reduced to or explained by psychological factors (the baby's curiosity) or sociological forces (the reassertion of hierarchy and obligations). The infant's smile is a vital feeling stimulated by a delightful object in the immediate environment; and, the social feast is a happy time, at best full of good fun and convivial relaxation. Aesthetic play is truly a thing in itself, a privileged moment of euphoric pleasure that can range from a baby's smile at a nursery toy to the sophisticated and good-natured banter of High Table at a British university. The infant and the professoriate share a capacity for enjoyment of their extant world of experiential sensation, evoking a happy smiling response in the child's toys and the Dean's jokes. Such interludes of playfulness interrupt the flow of conscious being and enliven normal human unhappiness with a temporary condition of euphoria, that often groundless but nevertheless cheering elation that emerges in a festive mood and convivial spirit. The Greek term *euphoros* means “bearing well” and “good ability to endure.” In those

moments of euphoric sensibility, we experience the “rapture of being alive” through simple diversions and cordial relaxations. These fulgent and lighthearted times rouse our aesthetic appreciation of things, and let us indulge a “positive capability” that life is not only bearable but also fun. As humans learn of these exultant benefits, the impulse “let’s play” is supplemented by the pragmatic rule of play: “Let’s relax and enjoy ourselves for the good of it.” Play proceeds under the sign of relaxation. It may have an earnest context and complex circumstances, but as an activity it is just fun. An intrusion that spoils an atmosphere of euphoric pleasantry is usually unwelcome unless it has ceased to be fun.

At its most rewarding and lasting level, then, play is an anagogical experience, an event and activity worth doing and remembering because it “lifts up” our lives beyond the literal and moral routines of mundane existence towards heightened and even ecstatic heartiness. Our immediate enjoyment of play lets a baby laugh at a rattle, or allows the Natufians and the university faculty to socialize in the hedonic aura of beer or sherry. Moments of playful fascination with the objects of our environment, the outer world of our sensory experience, from a rattle to storm clouds to a lover’s touch, can expand our interest in sensory things to a ludenic enjoyment of amusement and laughter. This is a remarkable ability: humans are able to respond to the world and the things in it as something that strikes them as funny. More than any other species we know, we are able to exercise the capacity to think the world is a funny place, and even more so, that our fellow humans and ourselves are sometimes pretty damn funny. Not only can we learn how to make fun of other people, amazingly, we are able and even willing to make fun of ourselves. It is an enormous step in primate evolution when members of a species acquire the ability not to take themselves too seriously. Our aesthetic “sixth sense” of playfulness lifts us beyond earnest literalism and moral aphorism towards qualitative and self-deprecating mirth. For humans in this comic mode, hell is the impossibility of fun.

Since “making fun” is a characteristic human experience, it is also useful to think of funning as anagogical, something done by humankind the player that is outside the conventional and that is in some sense fictional, “make-believe” that is “not really happening.” The “anagogic” of a daydream, a play-toy, or a festive dinner encompasses activities which are metaphorical, shared abstractions from quotidian reality with a logic and proportion all their own. Such experiences occur in a present wherein the logic is ludenic and the action is aesthetic. People actively engaged in an anagogical play-world or play-form are making fun. The infant’s individual sense of fun is activated by the fascinating presence of the toy

dangling over the crib. (It has even been opined that humans have a “play gene,” giving us a built-in sense of the funny and an appreciation of the anagogic of play.) The individual discovery of funning becomes a social actuality with the invention of the play-forms of fun, with celebrations, holidays, games, and processions. Individuals are quite capable of entertaining themselves with their own aesthetic creations, as in the vast realm of daydreaming. Societies are adept at entertaining groups and populaces with socially sanctioned times and places for play, as well as conventions and communicative rules as to what is funny and what is not. The anagogical thus has its own logic and ethos, but is valued and practiced because of its aesthetic euphoria and memorabilia.

The anagogical quality of play exalts our existence to a higher plane of being, rewarding us with an ontological element which makes our lives “lighter,” more fun, varied, and vivacious. The emergence of this capacity allows us to recognize and repeat play experiences as something we want to do again and again. Taking part in play gives us the chance to cross a threshold of experience into a variety of delightful anagogical worlds which exist as an alternative or respite from the mundane and serious, to be sure, and functions as frivolity and novelty in a play-world freed of care and even propriety. For many individuals, and in a larger sense for social orders, there may come a moment of self-recognition or social learning that makes life not only lighter and different, but also more knowledgeable. In the dramas of our individual and group lives, there are revelatory “recognition scenes,” similar to the dramatic junction of *anagnorisis* in the Greek theater, the moment of discovery that moves someone from ignorance to knowledge. A cycle of plays with weighty import, such as *The Oresteia*, involved tragic recognition and agonizing self-knowledge, but nevertheless evoked playful enjoyment. Their purpose was not only to dramatize the human condition but also to re-enact tribal myths. Their point was to remind us of how passions and plots lead to self-destruction. But their fun, no matter how dreadful, was in the process of watching madness and gloom unfold in highly entertaining theatrical enactment. If these cumulative experiences of playful heights, different and magical realms, and recognitions of ourselves as players and creators of socially joyous playtimes and places add together, with the right circumstances and freedoms, we can discover and enjoy all the wonders of aesthetic gaiety.

Both the evolutionary biologists and historians of early human life have reconstructed and speculated about what happened to humans when they moved from scarcity to abundance, from wandering to settling, and from the incessant pain of labor and orderliness to periods of relaxed pleasure and shared funning and relaxing. At the point when some basic

human needs are met at some minimal level (safety, food, sex and procreation, division of labor), the “higher” needs, actually wants, can be exercised. Studies of birds and humans note that with some peace and plenty comes “relaxed selection” and playfulness, such as in the development of bright plumage and elaborate songs in birds and colorful if non-functional clothes and festive singing and storytelling in humans. Given the individual opportunity and social flexibility to be able to do as you wish, people choose objects of play and converge onto playful occasions. With great cultural variation, people gradually developed not only places to abide and to work but also places to play. Whether genetic or social, human life has been enriched and enlivened by the influx of geniality and frivolity as values and practices, and the legitimation of activities which are expressive and superfluous. Whatever this implies about human nature, we may safely say that a primal and social tension that is old and complex endures, with the forces of serious concern and noble mission aligned with sober purpose and restrained discipline and the forces of lighthearted fun oriented toward relaxed frivolity and joyous euphoria. But if it is correct to assert that people are at their best—happiest, most self-aware, and convivial—in the pleasurable diversions of play, then at least it would be wise for people to pursue ludenic mirth and festive spirit as the attitudinal and behavioral choice of a being who can live in the good graces of happy elation and enjoyment, “bearing well” with a good ability to endure. A merry heart rather than a heavy heart makes for a bearable lightness of being. Montaigne long ago compared the sad Heraclitus, who cried with pity over the condition of humankind, with the happy Democritus, who laughed at our “vain and ridiculous” humanity. He argued that as part of the human estate we should be happy, since our “own peculiar condition is that we are as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh.” The well-borne understand something more than they know: our plight is comic, and the comic sense sustains us through the vicissitudes and ineptitudes of living in a barely comprehensible world and uncertain fate by cheerfully and laughingly make the best of a bad show.

The Dramatic Sense of Life

We can only imagine what it was like in the centuries before the Golden Age of Athens when Greek villagers in the countryside were exposed to the spectacle of processions of celebrants in a festive mood. They were accustomed to festivals with religious significance, but the Dionysian celebrants were outrageous and irreverent, hardly supplicants or pilgrims in a pietistic mood or humbled before a holy site. They carried or

sported enormous dildos of the phallus that symbolized their god's commitment to fertility and festivity, and enjoyed themselves much as the revelers rather than the reverential. While the earliest rites may have included human sacrifice, the bloody sacrifice of animals such as goats was certainly part of their orgiastic celebrations. Even more astonishing to local peasants may have been the sight of the maenads, Dionysian women adherents who left home at key times of the year for sacred rites of naked abandon and inebriation. By the time of the maturity of Greek culture, the *comus*, or processional entertainment in the country, was familiar as a boisterous and bibulous feature of pastoral life, including processions that included invective and insults flung at the likely awestruck and mystified peasantry. The spiritual and physical "enthusiasm" the Dionysians felt, with the god somehow entering and inspiring the believer was both entrancing and enjoyable. They entered a shared state of mystic fire and cathartic passion that intoxicated them with fervent and esoteric assurances and lusty and ecstatic pleasures. In the midst of Apollonian self-regard and ethical moderation was this passion for the primitive, the unbridled, and the anarchic associated with the natural and the physical.

Exactly how the boisterous antics of drunken Dionysian revelers in Greek villages and the orgiastic revels of the maenads devouring raw meat and sexing peasant boys evolved into the glories of the Athenian theater at Dionysia is still much disputed and probably irresolvable. Our effort here is comprehension rather than disputation. In the fullness of time, something new and important emerged from the congeries of historical forces and practices, including the introduction of a new and earthy religious movement, the amalgamation of national myth and rite as celebrated in sanctified places and times, and the freedom and honor accorded intellectual talent such as poets and playwrights. What began as a religious festival and earthy "country" festivity became the ritualized occasion and social process of dramatic observance and enactment resulting in the highly consequential invention of theater. What happened in the Athenian festivals of Dionysus combined cultural solemnity with sensual vitality through stories presented in dramatic form for both the edification of cultural memory and the enjoyment of human activity.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the advent and development of theater was and is the dramatic representation of human life and what we may call "senses of life." For theater gave public shape to the feelings we all have of life and meaning to important things as we experience and reflect upon them. When we are faced with apparent inevitabilities which seem to be out of human control—weather, death, war, pestilence—we may feel that such misfortunes can be attributed to some mysterious power

such as fate, destiny, kismet, or divine justice. When something untoward or inexplicable occurs, we may question whether such an event—the death of a child, the loss of a fortune, a betrayal by a lover—should be deemed “tragic,” to the point that every mass-mediated event of a terrible occurrence is labeled a “tragedy.” Greek theater placed tragedy in the context of myth and history, which were in some ways inseparable. Tragedy wasn’t just a horrible event, it was an important story that instructed as to what had to happen for the Athenian society and state to come to pass and prosper, while at the same time delighting audiences with the unfolding dramatic process of complicated actors and actions. What unfolds in *The Oresteia* celebrates the historical and social procession of moving from dark to light, from savagery to civilization, from raw flesh-eating nature to democratic order. The dramatis personae of *The Oresteia*, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes and Cassandra, represent the burden of the mythic past as it prefaces and creates the return to the Apollonian Mean by “suffering into truth” as a blood sacrifice which brings symbolic healing. The Dionysian festival was a rite of spring celebrating the return of fertility and the recreation of our social destination as a force of life and the blessing of Athena. The trilogy ends in triumphant and joyous dancing. Out of the tragic discord comes pacific harmony. In this conception, the tragic sense of life is not a descent into despair and gloom without hope, but rather a procession from nightmare into the dawn of hopeful springtime and divine justice, moving society out of shame and wrong and intrigue and death towards moral life and the advent of peace.

Tragedy would subsequently take on many forms and variations, but the larger tragic sense would continue to convey the idea that humankind has to deal with a cosmic mystery, not only forces beyond our understanding and control, but also with a kind of metaphysical logic that dictates the imperatives and inevitabilities of human life in time and society. The Greek experience inspired them to construct imaginative narratives and a sanctified place for their presentation, imbuing theater with both an aura of sacral festivity and secular magic. As their theater developed, new vistas emerged which conveyed many of the elements of what would eventually be termed melodrama., plays of interest because of their treatment of social mystery as it unfolds in the contingencies and negotiations of human social relations. By the time of Euripides, many of the conventions of melodrama were evident, such as the focus on the tangle of personal relations, the perilous uncertainty of outcomes which would be just and right, and good and evil as a property of social resources such as wealth and power as embodied in the personal struggle of

individuals for such things. If tragedy is imaginative play in which gods and humans embody the pathos of tragic necessity, then melodrama is social play with the ethos of fortuity, fortune rather than fate. While classical tragedy unfolds a cultural tale of agonizing movement from chaos to order, by contrast melodrama presents an open-ended social story of complications devoid of logical destination towards a just world. For the tragedian, the world is fated; in melodramatics, the world is fickle. The tragic world is populated by *Homo sapiens*, beings imbued and moved by the fallacy of human logos, the delusion of knowledgeable mastery of every nemesis through rational ability. The melodramatic world is peopled by *homo faber*, social actors who enact the folly of human ethos, the illusion of social effort as the key to social mastery over recalcitrant and perplexing realities. While the denizens of tragedy are creatures of the temporal unfolding of culturologic, the creatures of melodrama are the historical workings of sociologic. Tragic protagonists and antagonists are representative figures in a destinarian drama for reasons and purposes beyond their comprehension or control. Melodramatic figures are typical of a sociodrama which plays out through the conventions and accidents of history and submits them to the whims of time and circumstance. In the former, things have to happen through the logic of dramatic inexorability; in the latter, things do happen in the ethos of social narrative. In both cases, what is important is not so much the kind of story itself but what the stories tell us about the logical and ethical beliefs and practices of the people who tell and watch them.

It was the Greek experience, then, that gestated and matured not only into theater but also theatricality, the dramatic senses of life which have so enriched not only cultural life but also has characterized social life. For theater gave us not only mimesis of mythic and realistic life, it also taught people how the dramatic arts apply to actual life. In addition, we learned the aesthetics of histrionic sensibility, which meant not only the imitation of life but also the incorporation of the dramatic into life. We can trace the awareness and performance of histrionics at least to the shamanic rituals of the Paleolithic cave shrines and certainly in the wider context of various religious and political rituals and ceremonials. The earliest clear record we have of such sanctioned events evolving into theater are the Egyptian "Pyramid Texts," dramas of the dead pharaoh's journey to the underworld, and the Memphite Drama retelling the sacral story of the death and resurrection of the god Osiris, which was also celebrated in the Abydos passion play. The Egyptians are also credited with recording the first joke, inscribed on a roll of papyrus: "How do you entertain a bored pharaoh? You sail a boatload of young women dressed only in fishnets down the

Nile and urge the pharaoh to go catch a fish.” But the Greeks gave theater and theatricality not only sacral but also secular status as a mode of expression in the setting and presentation of theatrical plays, and also as a norm for philosophical and rhetorical statement, as with the dialogues of Plato and the rhetoric of Demosthenes. For the Greeks, histrionic sensibility included an element of playfulness: the solemnity of ritual theater was complemented and even superseded by the exercise of enjoyment. A tragedy may present momentous dramas of mythic import, and a melodrama serious themes of social significance, but they were still plays which the auditors were allowed and expected to enjoy. Perhaps it is fair to say that the Greeks not only understood the logos of tragic expression and the ethos of social action, but also further advanced humane perceptivity through the expanded feeling of pathos communal participation in theater aroused.

By this time, humans had become capable of public expression of pathos. The burial of the dead with artifacts useful in the next life indicates care for someone whose life the survivors deemed worthy of celebration and indeed future reunion. With the advent of Greek theater, new vistas of pathetic expression are evident in the histrionic representation of feelings and emotions. The experience of suffering in tragedy and melodrama evokes pathos in the depiction of emotions—guilt and shame, love and hate, patriotism and treason—and arouses feelings of compassion and condemnation. But if we identify tragedy as the agonizing playing out of divine and human logic towards an important and inexorable destination, and melodrama as the province of the complex and indeterminate social relations, then the true home for the theatrical celebration of pathos is comedy.

Comedy was a later addition to the repertoire of ritual theater at the Dionysian festivals, but rustic comedic celebrations had been around for a long time as the worship of Dionysus spread through the Greek countryside. We can trace the mythic roots of tragedy in the Apollonian representation of an ordered cosmos that always returns to restraint and reason, and the social interest in melodrama in the recurrence of Faustian forces and personages who bring conflict and change to the social ethos. These dramatic habits are characterized by a dimension of human aesthesis, appealing to different dimensions and concerns of the human aesthetic imagination. But they are incomplete: comedy had to be included in the dramatic cycle in order to address the appeal of euphoric sensibility, an aesthetic derived from the impulse to play, the urge to have fun, and the desire to see fun depicted and celebrated in a play. Dionysus was, after all, the god of joy, of high spirits and natural feelings, so he complemented

reasonability and sociality with festivity, offering a mode of expression which allows ecstasy and excess, the joy of the life force which is creative and fertile, very much of the chthonian earth. The sobriety of *Homo sapiens* and the seriousness of *Homo faber* highlighted the need for the instinctive and extra-rational exuberance and cheer of *Homo ludens*. Comedy completes the dramatic picture: tragedy presents the unfolding logic in the play as revealing eternal and ordained sense; melodrama depicts the ethos, or character, of plots and complications as untangling the subject of social sense; and comedy celebrates the pathos of human passions and desires which constitute the play of nonsense. If tragedy is close to ultimate things, and melodrama to social things, comedy is close to human things, the raw, essential nature of human life termed *zoe*. Metaphysical considerations and social entanglements are complemented with comic celebration, the lighthearted and ludicrous enjoyment of “the human thing,” what ordinary mortals do that is so very funny. Tragedy may deal with ultimate things in the discontinuity of justice, and melodrama with social things in the discontinuity of concord; but comedy leavens our view of things by reveling in our mortal reality and natural continuity.

The Greek theater was a festival with both religious and civic significance, but for its posterity it remains important as a festival of learning. For the Athenians accorded spectacular legitimacy to the play-learning of dramatic make-believe, wherein people could watch and observe the human play-acting of what we are and what we might be, that it is no wonder that theatrical experience was so popular and institutionalized. The plays which were performed gave their auditors a dramatic context to address the great questions that interested the vibrant and inquisitive society: what is the nature of things? what is the place of humans in the universe? The tragedians examined the question as to whether we are the playthings of sporting gods or bearers of a divine destiny. Melodramatics explored whether we are equal to the forces and antagonisms of society or able to make rough social peace. And the comedians inquired, why are we mortals such damn fools yet able to play things out to happy endings? Tragedy plays with fate, melodrama with folly, but comedy plays with foolery. The auspicious delights of theatricality were complemented with instructions from what the play tells us: we may well be pawns in the mysterious game of the gods, and knights and knaves in the mystifying smoke-and-mirrors of society, but we are also comic creatures of our own earthly cosmos. We may be placed by the gods in cultural destiny, and controlled by social powers for their own interests, but we also enjoy moments of freedom and happiness playing

out for ordinary mortals in their earthly and temporary existence. If we be mortals, let us rejoice and be of good cheer, enjoying that moment! And if we be fools, let us celebrate our foolishness by laughing at ourselves!

Theater since Athens has had a long and varied history, but the fundamental humane relationship between the play enacted and the play attended to has remained largely the same. Theatrical attention involves a kind of vital contact in which actors and audiences transact in a predictable manner, watching the “sight seen” and observing the meanings derived from the theatrical experience. The consequence of this attentive habit and ludenic enlightenment is not only cultural and topical but also mimetic. People who learn from dramatic engagement cultivate and propagate a feel for histrionics and an appreciation of dramatic expression. Like all technologies of communication, dramaturgy and theatricality invoke a “noetic economy,” a way thinking and doing in the world with its own comprehensive logics and active characteristics. Drama patterns things for us so powerfully that it influences not only the structures of our thought but also our actions, to the extent that we find ourselves simulating the responses we have seen and learned from our theatrical experience. This kind of ludenic role taking can extend to an admired relative, a great teacher, a dynamic administrator, and obviously to symbolic leaders in the make-believe world of theater and by extension to popular media such as the motion picture. It seems that people cannot figure things out adequately for themselves in private; they have to see them acted out by actors in histrionic contexts which convey in dramatic form what things to do and the way to do things. In that sense, humans are aesthetic pragmatists, combining the frivolous aesthete who displays a sense of vitalizing fun with the methodical searcher who is both inquisitive and sociable. We all want to inquire about the truths inherent in the tragic sense of life and the social goods possible in the melodramatic sense of life, holding out the possibility of logically arrived at knowledge and the potentiality of ethically realized social achievements. That is not enough: we also want the joy we might feel when we cheer ourselves with the felicity of comic grace.

Comic Grace

In the profound and increasingly metaphysical study of physics, scientists seem to have come to the conclusion that time is so illusory that it is non-existent, and thus despite our common-sense daily expectations, there is no next. It may be the case that temporality as we know it is our ultimate fallacy, and that much of nature lives in an eternal now, but as the

oddball curiosities of the natural order, humans live in a now but somehow remember a then and expect a next. Even with great cultural variation, each of us adheres roughly to a kind of pragmatic rule: if we feel, think, or do things in a certain way, what will be the consequences of our actions? In both the ways we do things and the stories we construct to explain things, we are all dealing with the question of what's next? For the logos of our activities and the mythos of our narratives depend upon our anticipation of "nexts," how we in fact do things and also how we imagine what it is that we do. Our human experience with time gives us some insight into the various ways that things can play out, and how these alternatives can be storied. It is true that we always live in a present, but that present is mediated by our present memory and use of a past and our unrealized future imagined and shaped by our projection of a future. The uncertainty that our temporal existence burdens us with is surely a motive for both festivals to celebrate the moment and "seize the time" (*carpe diem*) for our understanding and use, and for dramatic presentations about local and eternal human experience. Drama is after all a medium of expression, and as such allows people to mediate their temporal experience for what it was, what it is, and what it will or could be. Our familiar forms of drama embody and enact these concerns. Tragedy relates what has to be with our sense of justice and time that went into the making of the present. Melodrama confronts us not with what must happen but with what can happen in an unjust and unresolved world. And, comedy gladdens us with what could happen in a world where human possibilities are realized in creating a world of happy potential. Dramatic art can thus deal first with our sense of necessity, then for our sense of contingency, and lastly and most happily with our sense of possibility. In the long history and legacy of human imaginative expression, humans have not been content with the cry of wrong or the sob of despair, but have been made buoyant by the smile of hope.

Both scholarship and legend place the Greek comic festival in the rude countryside of Greece as the occasion for uninhibited revels of merrymaking, with singing, dancing, fornicating, and joshing. Comedy apparently flourished in the countryside, always associated with anarchic and erotic excesses, but it probably always existed everywhere in the country of the mind, the primal impulses associated with dreams (both night and day), the times of social release and individual display when festivity has no motive or reason beyond having fun, and the playful exercise of comedic expression such as bantering and partying and flirting. The impulse for funning in human ontology and history stems from the desire to express the "joy of the heart," both the vital energy of happiness

and the natural hope for continued good things. Dramatic play becomes one of the prime ways for such animated gaiety to be expressed, so that humane enthusiasm and aspiration becomes the motive force behind the enduring popular appeal of comedy. Tragedy offers ordinary mortals the cold comforts of divine justice, and melodrama the tangled knots of social mysteries, but comedy suggests something more profound and buoyant, the hope for human grace among the ordinary and undeserving.

In the extensive pantheon the ancient Greeks imagined and utilized, we now tend to associate the Fates, spinning and weaving the course of human destiny, with tragedy, and the Olympians with melodrama, since their intrigues and schemes are the stuff of social struggles. But we associate the Graces with festive good tidings. They varied in number and had their own sacrifices and mysteries, but were three in number before the entrance to the Acropolis: Euphrosyne, the goddess of good cheer, mirth, and joyful merriment; Aglaia, of beauty, splendor, and charm; and Thalia, of festivity, rich banquet, and the fertile bloom of spring. In later mythology, Thalia became the Muse of comedy, associated with the Dionysian rites and pictured with the comic mask and shepherd's crook, her hair garlanded by flowers, befitting her graceful name meaning "she who brings flowers." The term "grace" came to be associated with the attributes of the Graces, denoting those things which bring joy, pleasure, and loveliness into the world, including the "blooming life" and good cheer we associate with comedy. In the complicated world of Greek mythology, there were lesser Graces who presided over activities such as play, and indeed, "humbler graces." The Greeks thought enjoyment and celebration so important that grace was not limited in agency, but rather extended to mortal and animal beings that were not godly or perfect in beauty but rather embodied the diffusion of gracefulness across nature. They included those who embody comic grace, such as children at play, reveling bacchantes with their lusty and full-bodied laughter, and romping fauns.

Perhaps it is this "humbler grace" that found its true location in dramatic comedy. For all of the festive occasions and events and ritual forums of civilization's early history, the performance of comedy for popular audiences has been the most enduring and widespread medium that communicates the abiding desire for poetic fare which conveys our sense of the human comedy and the comic hope for happy endings. In many ways, the development of Greek drama reflects Vico's vision of the mythological origins of "poetic wisdom." The age of the gods wherein law and society are of divine origin and purpose and appointed human actors enact the epic destiny is appropriately the setting of tragedy; the age of

heroes is the proper setting for social actors to confront and best villainy and treachery in melodramas; and the age of the people, full of vernacular language and popular experience, is the appropriate placing for the “democratic” dramatics of comedy. It is no accident, then, that the first great comic dramatist was Aristophanes, who wrote at the height of the Athenian democracy and in the context of the Dionysian festivals, exhibiting the freedom of raucous banter and invective which characterized the ancient *komos* and was ritualized in the carnivalesque holiday atmosphere of the dramatic competition. Aristophanes (and apparently others in the era of “Old Comedy”) gave voice to several of the great conventions of comedy, not the least of which was critical insult, attacking important figures and political innovations, and even more boldly savaging the endless and fruitless war with Sparta, which was indeed prophetic. Satire, buffoonery, burlesque, farce and virtually all the comic techniques of stage and speech were employed to attack politicians, philosophers, widespread infidelity and lechery, with few limits about who could be a target for comedic “roasting.” There is much peripety in Aristophanic democratic comedy: in one play, women, virtually excluded from social and political participation, occupy the Acropolis, the male seat of power, and collaborate with their Spartan enemy by enlisting their equally irate wives with the Athenian women in a sex strike in order to stop the idiotic (and sexually and domestically disruptive) war. The typical Aristophanic “anti-hero” is anything but aristocratic or heroic, in no way resembling the godlike marble ideal. Rather, he is a democratic fellow, a farmer or artisan who is humble but feisty, earning an honest living but always ready for sex, food, drink, and even pilfering, a *poneria* or comic rogue. Like ordinary folks in all ages and places, he is mad about something the powerful and haughty are doing, here the endless war, the corrupt politicians, the sophistic teachers, and so on. Virtually no one is spared in Old Comedy: a contemporary comic playwright, Pherecrates, used the sexual metaphor of eating to make sport of Athenian wives’ infidelity, in among other things, cunnilingus: “The enjoyment of someone else’s wife is just like an hors d’oeuvre—tasty, but a single swallow is enough.” They were bold enough to make fun of the gods and the great myths, including the tragic founding myth of the House of Atreus. A fragment survives of an Aristophanic play which makes outrageous sport of the infanticide and cannibalism in that mythic tale, with a father bemoaning that “I’ve dined on my own children’s giblets— how can I ever eat roasted pig again?” Even though topical, the Old Comics invent virtually every comic type that survives to this day, including the pompous and boastful general and the lecherous old man. The demystifying and

irreverent spirit which makes comedy both eternally delightful and relevant is fleshed out in Old Comedy. Even though Old Comedy is superseded by New Comedy, and eventually by all kinds of comedy, the incredulous and liberating philosophy still informs the smiles and laughter that express the human love of comedy and the incipient hope for comic grace, the good and happy next.

In the festivity of comedy, the next is now. The immediate experience of comic grace orients the celebrants towards euphoric enchantment through the feast of the senses. The dramatic arts of comedy entrance us with their projection of our enjoyments, allowing us to immerse ourselves and share enactments of funny things which interest and command our attention. At its most immediate and palpable, comedy relates us to our primal passions and deepest desires. Mortal gods may tempt the Fates with their plans and actions, but we know that they are the stuff of myth and the agonistic agents of political destiny, figures of our solemn enjoyment of mythic fulfillment. There is no next for them, for they occupy a world that is timeless, outside of time, as we know it, and act out a folktale that becomes a founding myth. The now of melodrama is the stuff of history, or at least journalism, and the action of the story occurs in a world mired in time, in the onrush of now in an effort to control or understand the unraveling of what might be next. Tragic grace is outside of human control, since the next is preordained by their role in the drama as key players in the procession of mythic narrative. Melodramatic grace is inside the constraints of social control, since the next is always a context of unraveling involving victories and defeats in the mercurial quick of sociologic, stories about the strife of mortal roles— heroes, villains, and fools. The mortal fools of comedy are aware of the inevitability of mythologic and the inconstancy of sociologic, but since they are the stuff of festivity, they revel in a world that is “time out” and beyond mythic fulfillment or social resolution. Comic festivity occurs outside the agency of mythic time. The roles of social time, enacted in a world of mortal fools who celebrate the humbler grace given the graceless in the comic moment, lets us share the gift of enjoying the fact that the world and its people are funny in all the complex senses of the word. The gift of grace comes with learning what the world we conceive means. Tragic grace involves accepting the power of fate; it also includes learning, and sometimes shaping, one's own fate. Melodramatic grace suggests learning something of the social puzzlements which go into the endlessly unfolding array of situations, and of one's role and strategy in weaving one's way through them. Comic grace emerges by embracing the vital principle of living. Comedy enjoins being debonair with good cheer and good hope and merry

heart, in the spirit of the Graces who embodied love of beauty, charm, and elegance in the celebration of life lived well and heartily in aesthetic gusto.

Comic grace, then, differs from tragedy and melodrama in its philosophy of life. The tragic sense of life conceives living as an epic burden born of necessity; the melodramatic mind sees knights and pawns in an interminable contestation; but, the comic perspective views the world as a wondrous place for a song of musement, a delightful carnival of fools in an anarchic but not totally inhospitable world. In the midst of such wondrous foolishness, comedy and comedics counsel us to enjoy the natural grace of those things which make ordinary life worthwhile, seek social grace with good cheer, and entertain good hope that cosmic grace in some sense envelops our lives. Comedy cheers because in that world the impossible becomes possible, the ineluctable becomes eluctable, and in some way, the mortal becomes immortal. Comedy never ceases to please and charm by directing and reminding us of the bearable lightness of being, that the vital principle which comic drama exhibits never fails to stimulate and inspire. Grace is not only a gift, it is also a disposition, the self-aware realization that we are only mortals capable of all the foolery that goes with mortality, beings characterized by ignorance, incapacity, and insensitivity. We are fortunately and happily graced with the acquirable capacity for bemused self-recognition as a comic creature that can view the world with astute capacity, act in the world with generosity and prudence, and wish the world and our species well when we depart. As the term *debonair* suggests, comic grace enjoins graciousness of attitude and manner, expression and action that is demystifying but understanding, and passions which sustain good will and enjoin good times. Above all, comic grace underscores the merit of a spirit of playfulness, the concept that life can be a grand festival of discoveries and enjoyments if we cultivate the arts of benign happiness and common courtesy.

The comic sense of life is then a ludenic posture favoring playful observation of the human comedy and gracious participation in human affairs. Comedy shows us that most people live in the bubble of consoling delusion, and that one must deal with the delusionary with tactful good grace. Being graceful is complemented by the social skill of being humorous, recognizing that many fellow members of society proceed in the solemn grip of illusions learned through socialization, and that such mystification can only be countered by humble and oblique comic deflating. Being graceful and being funny is in the long run complemented by bemused sagacity, living well and free by being blithe. A “blithe spirit” who is both caring and carefree, exercising sympathy for the common

human plight and love of nature but whose concern is complemented by demystified *lusion*, seeing things as clearly as possible and hoping to enjoy good things as long as possible and exit laughing. Moreover, since comedy tends to feature increase in happiness and usually happy endings, the comic sensibility counsels that the people who live in accord with the comic philosophy hope for the ascendance of personal and social happiness. Comedy in the theater climaxes with an anastrophe, a turning upwards towards comic harmony signaled by a festive celebration. Comedy in life is less structured and predictable, and not everything is funny. But an attitude of sympathetic risibility allows us to view our fellow mortals as more inane and foolish than vicious and villainous, so even though a comic attitude differentiates one from the earnest and driven, it remains that everyone shares the humbling reality that we are all crooked timbers which cannot be made wholly straight. Comic grace in life does not imply arrogance or contempt, but rather an injunction to be gracious to everyone and graceful in one's actions although exercising prudent wisdom to address and examine things, including, one's self. A stance of shrewd nonchalance is wisely accompanied by illuminating and worldly-wise observation as a participant-observer of the human comedy.

The appeal of comic grace as a philosophy of life has been given great impetus by the now old and rich corpus of movie comedy. When we enter the world of movie comedy, we are entering an experience of mutual projection: as the movie unreels, we look for and see the kinetic movement of illuminated things, including humans, on the screen. If what we see appeals to us, our attention persists, we allow ourselves to continue watching, and wanting to know, what is next? Not only does our interest persist, so does our imaginative playfulness. We are enchanted by the spectacle of the moving picture show to the extent that we are often enraptured, forgetting ourselves and the outside world and absorbing ourselves in ludenic and vicarious participation of the unfolding photoplay and later with the imaginative significations which we retain and learn from our movie experience. In the movies, comic grace is represented for us in both the immediate euphoric experience of film comedy and in our cumulative learning of comedic appreciation. Laughter is a song of pleasurable amusement, immediate from viewing the movie and reflective from incorporation into our ludenic and pragmatic learning. Comic grace is then a "state" when we let ourselves loose in the comic mode of enjoyment, but something of a country of the mind when we grasp and utilize the memory of comic education. Perhaps the greatest lesson we learn is that comedy is unlike tragedy, since we are not mortal gods, and

unlike melodrama we are not mortal heroes or villains, but like comedy we are indeed mortal fools.

Comic grace is both humbling and ennobling, for we learn something important about the common human condition of our modest and ignorant state which makes us so funny, but also of our common estate of earthly continuity that makes comedy so much a dramatic affirmation of hope. Comedy more than about anything else reminds us that we all share a common fate and endure a common forbearance, but the something more we seek is a common grace. In the comic world, a life acquires a destiny only after it has been lived, and becomes a social fact only after the world has been traversed in real experience. In comedy, the gods are demystified and society is vanquished in the wake of the creative coherence of people at play, affirming human life and liveliness and achieving humane and felicitous grace. In contradistinction to the entropy of tragic fatalism and the inertia of social conformism, comedy recreates the world. As comic play progresses in its dramatic celebration, it invokes the creativity of nature, the sociability of human actors, and the continuity of humankind at its hopeful best. Philosophers and theologians have long thought that the central problem and quest for humanity is the desire and hope for some kind of grace, which helps explain why we imagine grace in godly form and seek depictions of it in human form. Since comic grace offers a special rendition of this deep and abiding desire, we find powerful art forms that exhibit the “laughing animal” in concrete sensuous dramatizations fun to look at and grasp in prehensile wonderment how a happy grace might be realized in our lives.

Perhaps no other artistic form of popular enactment can better express the amity of personal grace, the comity of social grace, and the harmony of continuing, and even cosmic, grace than the movies. It has fallen to the medium of motion pictures to perpetuate and propagate this most auspicious and sanguine possibility so deeply and consistently embedded in human aspiration and imagination. For that reason, we have chosen movie comedy as the “data base” for our inquiry, as the most widespread and accessible venue for comedy and the pleasing depiction of comic grace.

The Pragmatics of Movie Comedy

Our inquiry has tried to distinguish comedy as something both different and preferable to other dramatic and humanistic forms of thought and action. We saw tragedy as a solemn procession, the aristocratic enactment of metaphysical destinies played out inexorably and in some

ways incomprehensibly over time. Melodrama involves the working out of a procedure, a problematic set of inductions, usually enacted in “bourgeois theater,” the setting of problems and solutions in the miasma of social puzzles. Comedy is a progression played out through practical wisdom and action by ordinary people and in that sense is “democratic.” With this exercise of “abduction,” operational “logics-in-use” and active hypotheses to guide prudential action towards a favored and graceful teleology, the imagined light of comedic summer, such as a great good place and pastoral respite resembling the banks of Green Willow. The comic hope is for people to overcome being driven or constrained so they are able to choose and free to imagine a carefree and unprecedented world of light. If tragedy is a heavy world of wintry weight, and melodrama a fervent world of autumnal heat, then comedy is a light world of summery warmth. The comedic progression draws us toward the possibility of a heavy heart lifted by the lighthearted luminescence of lovely graciousness, seeing the light of good graces as a worthy delight to seek, and lets us enjoy a state of grace as we enter the light. Rather than working through the painful delusions of tragedy or straining with the topical illusions of melodrama, comedy brings us into the play world of *lusion*, the ludenic logic of comic fruition and continuation as people discover and move toward a desirable ending imagined as their own creation, a time and place of luminous clarity. And that “luminocracy” is a brave new world that is decidedly not a foretold destiny brought about as a ritual of force nor a determinate social role-set immersed in fraud, but rather an enlightened ritual of freedom, an imaginary fantasy of personable beauty, social good, and cultural truth.

The distinction of comedy as both a model for personal and social value and also philosophical inquiry has long been noted and utilized. Comedy, Meredith said, is the most civilized form of art. In that spirit, the critic Kenneth Burke saw comedy as demanding “the maximum of forensic complexity” since it cannot rely upon the “astronomical marvels” of tragedy but instead must shape the plot “from the premises of the informing situation,” dealing with “men in society” rather than “the cosmic man.” Rather than the “superhuman” forces of classical tragedy and the “inhuman” contingencies of “romantic-natural” tales, comedy is “essentially humane.” The “comic corrective” makes people into “observers of themselves, while acting,” offering us the wise grace of humbling self-knowledge, mocking the pretensions and ridiculing the ambitions of us comic creatures. We may, as Santayana noted, imagine ourselves as lyrical beings in an ideal essence that perhaps urges the hopeful desire of romantic resolution, and in temporal finitude tragic

beings with a common fate we try to defeat, but in our earthly existence we are plainly comic, and in our more lucid moments we will admit it. For it is in such moments of lucid playfulness and radiant observation that we are free enough and festive enough to see the logic of absurdity, the beauty of nonsense, and the good of foolishness.

In this topsy-turvy way, then, the comic mythos and philosophy is an important form of humane perspective and knowledge. We may better grasp the power of comedic thinking and doing if we understand it as pragmatic learning. For “pragmatics” (from the root *pragma*, referring to “act, deed,” “to do”) as both a narrative of human activity and philosophy of human ontology and sociology is very much oriented towards inquiring and acting upon what human beings in their finite empirical existence in fact do and could do. Even with its many variations and permutations, the thrust of comedy is toward humans acting in such a way that they create something new and hopeful and fun. Pragmatism is interested in the objective detachment of scientific method as a mode of inquiry to solve human problems. Those who see the value of the comic perspective recommend “comic detachment” as an amended and humanistic pragmatic mode of inquiry termed “perspectival realism,” uniting the realistic premise of natural and social sciences with awareness of the humane and historical contextualism of the humanities. If we amend the famous “pragmatic rule” of Charles Sanders Peirce to the viewpoint of comic detachment and playful inquiry, what does it tell us about the conduct of human life? Since the “comic corrective” to finding out things and fixing things involves a playful and unpremiered approach to inquiry, it begins by undermining the narcissistic delusions of grandiosity and the social illusions of vainglorious seriousness. However, it also accords every kind of inquiry and activity with pragmatic playfulness in the conduct of investigating and changing the things which are the objects of interest. Like any good inquiry, comic pragmatism envisions an earthbound “teleologic,” that the outcome of what is examined and interceded will be good. The truly singular advantage of the comedic perspective is the vital principle that inspires it by understanding the rhythms of natural and social life, the absurdity of “sociologic,” the splendid symmetry of the nonsensical, and the meritorious benefit of foolery. The dialectical combination of practical and crazy wisdom enlivens the rapturous sense of being alive in the interplay of the comic and the cosmic. Comedies expand Vico's premise of *verum factum* to include not only that the truth is what we make, but also the beautiful is what we create, and the good is what we confer as valuable consequently.