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Laughter and collective awareness: The cinema auditorium as public space

Julian Hanich

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Abstract

This article looks at how the collective experience of laughter in the movie theater is related to the idea of the cinema as a public space. Through the non-verbal expression of laughter the audience ‘constructs’ a public space the viewers may not have been aware of to the same degree prior to the collective public expression. Moreover, the public space created through laughter allows for an expedient type of monitoring: inappropriate laughter may be exposed in front of others. With viewers who laugh approvingly about racist violence or misogynist jokes, we can easily lay bare the ethical implications.

Keywords: laughter, cinema, collective experience, Charles Taylor, Walter Benjamin

1 Introduction

‘[L]aughter allows the audience to become aware of itself.’ This brief statement by André Bazin uttered in passing in his second article on ‘Theater and Cinema’ harbors a number of thought-provoking ideas.¹ The main goal of my article will be to examine what Bazin’s sentence may imply for the *collective experience* of laughter in the cinema. A second and more far-reaching goal is to expand arguments I put forth previously in favor of a systematic phenomenology of the collective experience of the movie theater.² The co-presence of (predominantly) anonymous others often has a strong effect on our film experience – particularly once emotions and emotional expressions come into play. Astonishingly, this *audience effect* has not yet undergone systematic scrutiny in the history of film theory.

Taking *collective laughter about an apparently funny scene* as an obvious starting point, I want to put forward two arguments.

First, drawing on an idea by the philosopher Charles Taylor, I will claim that certain kinds of non-verbal expression – most importantly laughter, but also screaming, moaning, booing, hissing, and other emotional responses – have an important function in the cinema. They ‘construct’ a public space the viewers may not have been aware of to the same degree prior to the collective public expression. Although we, as viewers, might tacitly assume that we all find a particular scene funny, laughter makes this common emotional response *openly available* and thus turns the cinema into a public space in a more emphatic sense. Laughter allows the audience to become aware of itself *as a social group* with shared emotions. We could call this the ‘collective awareness function’ of cinematic laughter.

Second, by reinterpreting an enigmatic passage from Walter Benjamin’s famous artwork essay I will claim that the public space created through laughter allows for an expedient type of monitoring or control. It is only because laughter as an expressive response makes an emotional judgment of a particular scene publically available that we have knowledge about what people find worthy of laughter in the first place. Cinematic laughter thus literally becomes revelatory: only in a *public* space like the movie theater will inappropriate or even ethically-questionable laughter be exposed in front of others. With viewers who approvingly laugh about racist violence or misogynist jokes in mind we can easily lay bare the ethical implications. Public spaces like the cinema may spark an open debate about (and thus a *monitoring* of) dubious kinds of laughter. In this case laughter allows the other audience members to become aware of what they want to admit as acceptable and what they prefer to avoid as inappropriate laughter.³ We may dub this the ‘control function’ of cinematic laughter.

2 The collective awareness function of laughter: Charles Taylor’s *Entre Nous*

Following Charles Taylor I want to draw attention to an important social phenomenon that he reserves a French name for: *entre nous*. The term refers to a common awareness that a certain fact is now between-us or amongst-us. In this section I will show that this type of intersubjectivity has interesting ramifications for laughter in the cinema as well as for a theory and phenomenology of collective spectatorship at the movies.

Taylor's primary aim is to challenge representational theories of language. Following Herder, Humboldt, and Heidegger he stresses the *activity of speaking* rather than the *designative function* of language. For Taylor the *expressive* aspect of speech is more fundamental than the *descriptive* dimension. However, for our context something else is more important. Taylor gives us the example of two strangers on a train travelling on a hot day. The two men look at each other and one of them says: 'Whew, it's hot'! This act of communication most probably does not convey information both did not already know. Both of them knew it was hot and both knew that the other must have known it was hot. So what should be the point in communicating? Taylor argues that by making this common knowledge *public* the act of communication *transforms* the situation. The sentence 'Whew, it's hot!' establishes what has *not* been there before: a public space, a common vantage point, something that is for *us*, or as Taylor puts it, *entre nous*. Taylor writes:

human communication doesn't just transmit information. It doesn't just produce, e.g., some belief in the hearer. It brings about the acknowledgement that some matter is *entre nous*. ... to grasp that something is *entre nous* involves more than grasping that thing; it involves seeing that it is present to us in a certain way, that is, in public space; or to take it from a different angle, that the subject(s) to whom this is present is the two of us together, and no longer just you and I individually.⁴

Taylor explicitly rejects *monological* models of the subject that take all states of awareness, knowledge, belief, attending to as mere states of individuals – as if *our* awareness that something is *between us* could be analyzed as your being aware of *plus* my being aware of. Instead, Taylor argues that once something is expressed it is lifted, as it were, to a higher level. It creates a public space.

I think that the kind of communication Taylor has in mind could also occur through other means than language (for instance through *laughter*) and in a different setting (for instance in the *movie theater*). As social philosopher Margaret Gilbert specifies:

Taylor focuses on the power of language to 'found public space' or to 'place certain matters before us'. And, clearly, a linguistic act may perform the transformation He allows, however, that this transformation may occur through any mode of 'expression' – where expression need not be linguistic.⁵

Even though Taylor uses a linguistic example all kinds of non-verbal expressions can work for establishing something *entre nous*. By enumerating some of these non-verbal expressions we can see how Taylor's argu-

ment may become pertinent for the collective experience of the movie theater. Just think of a screaming, applauding, or booing audience; or consider people who express their disgust by moaning. As we shall see, laughter can also function in a similar way as the 'Whew, it's hot' sentence.

Laughter conveys information; the laughing person signals that he or she finds a scene funny. However, this information is sometimes not the crucial point, because its content may have been tacitly presupposed anyway. Even without laughter I might have *surmised* that my partner finds the film funny, because I saw her smile about the gag in the Woody Allen film from the corner of my eyes; I might have been *quite sure* because she likes all Jacques Tati or Will Ferrell comedies; and, I might have even been *fully certain* that she loves *What's Up, Doc?*, because I know it is one of her favorite films. What seems at least equally important is that laughter *transforms* the situation between those laughing out loud. When two or more people laugh it establishes a common vantage point, a public space between them, an *entre nous*. It raises an awareness of something that the viewers are now, to a certain extent, aware of *together*. Laughter thus not only has a communicative function ('we share the information that we find this scene funny') but also a collective-awareness function ('we are now aware that in this public space we find this funny together'). What may have been knowledge of you and me separately and individually is now in the open and *entre nous*. It is something for us and for us *together*. Taylor writes:

I want to claim that what we recognize as full communication always has this feature of our coming together in that something is made an object for *us*, where this is something stronger than its being just an object severally for me and for you, and my knowing that you know, and your knowing that I know, and my knowing that you know that I know, etc., up to any level that we can cope with. For in this type of case, no matter how refined by looped knowledge about the other's knowledge about my knowledge, we have something quite different from communication.⁶

Taylor does not argue that this implies we have to *ponder* the matter. To argue that grasping what is *entre nous* involves a fully 'reflective' stance could be misleading; 'reflection' in a strong sense of the word is not required in most of our communications. He writes:

to be capable of human communication requires that we be sensitive to not just the things communicated about, but the way in which they are present or evident to us, and particularly to the subject(s) to whom they are present. This sensitivity has a reflexive dimension, therefore, whereby we are not just aware of some matter, but also responding to how we are

aware and who is aware. There is a second-order component which is irreducibly present, however little we reflect on it, in the sense of taking it for our focus⁷

Laughing together raises our *mutual awareness* that we find this or that funny, even if we don't fully *reflect* on it in the sense of, 'Wow, isn't it amazing that we all find this funny!' In the cinema there are good reasons why non-linguistic communication like laughter predominates over speech. It has at least two advantages when compared to linguistic communication. First, it does not make highly demanding calls on one's consciousness; making a verbal comment on the film *grosso modo* means more distraction. Laughter, instead, allows the viewer to follow the ongoing narrative more smoothly. Laughing is therefore an effective way of communicating and *simultaneously* pursuing other interests such as watching a film.⁸ Second, language can become a barrier in the act of communal communication. Laughter here offers a nice solution as it helps to integrate anonymous others more easily. As sociologist Jack Katz tells us:

[j]ust because words are so effective in conveying finely differentiated import, if too many people speak at the same time, no one knows what anyone is saying. With laughter, any number can play and all can be assured from moment to moment that they are nevertheless in the same game.⁹

When six or 60 or even 600 persons scream a sentence this creates cacophonic noise, but it raises little mutual awareness. In contrast, when in the darkness of the cinema everybody looks directly at the screen, laughing out loud is a highly efficient way to establish something *entre nous*. This is, of course, not to deny that there are varieties of amused laughter that come in different shades of intensity, duration, and even prosody. While one viewer might find a scene intensely funny and thus displays his or her passionate involvement, another viewer may consider it only mildly funny and therefore laughs somewhat distantly. Hence we can expect 'differences in sameness' even amongst a group of people who are amused and share their emotional judgment *by and large*.

By establishing a public space in the theater the laughing viewers partly and momentarily withdraw from their immersive *film* experience. Instead they become (to a somewhat higher degree than before) aware of the *theatrical* experience they share with others. Even if laughter does not draw one's attention away from the film completely (its cognitive effort is, as I said, comparatively small), it still does so *to a certain degree*. In fact,

we may expect that the funnier a scene is the more withdrawn from the film the viewers may be. This is true for two reasons.

First, laughter provoked by a comedy is an eruptive, outward-moving bodily response. Since laughter puts the body in motion the more eruptive the laughter the more difficult to sustain immersion in the filmic world. As viewers we may even rock our torso, slap our knees, hold our stomach, and stomp our feet (the movement that comes with laughter is a point I will return to with regard to Benjamin). Second, the funnier the scene and the more communal the laughter the louder and the more conspicuous it will be. When 60 or even 600 people laugh we become all the more aware of the co-presence of others. This is a point also underscored by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik: ‘with comedy laughter “disrupts” the “passively consumed” dramatic illusionism and one is pulled away from the world represented on the screen and is united with other spectators as part of an audience’.¹⁰ This is why for theorists like Walter Benjamin or Julia Kristeva laughter has an important anti-ideological function; it prevents a powerful illusionary effect of the film *and* grounds the viewer in the here and now of the movie theater with co-present others.¹¹

With the example of laughter in mind I would like to refine Taylor’s points in two respects. First, I believe that this mutual awareness raised through laughter is not a question of either-or – it is a matter of degrees. When I am sitting in the cinema and share laughter with others this might be considered a *weak* form of mutual awareness; when we look at each other and exchange glances while laughing this might be a *medium* form of mutual awareness; and when we point to the screen, show two thumbs up, or even let our laughter be followed by a quick exchange of verbal comments, then we might talk of a *strong* form of mutual awareness. Hence there are gradations on a continuum in terms of our mutual awareness through laughter. Second, one may broadly claim that the degree of mutual awareness is inversely proportional to the range of people included. As Taylor notes:

[t]he *nous* among whom I make some matter an acknowledged common object can be everyone. I can declare things *urbi et orbi*.¹²

However, the degree of mutual awareness is not as strong between me and all the others out there in the *orbi* of the cinema auditorium as it is between me and the neighbors sitting next to me. All this is not to deny that the situation in the cinema is often more complicated than Taylor’s situation on the bus. As we have seen, Taylor gives us the example of the

two strangers to underline that communication is not necessarily a matter of *information*, because the facts seem obvious. However, in the cinema, due to the darkness, the unidirectional viewing position, and the back of the seats, I often do *not* presuppose that the others find the scene funny. The examples I have given above of viewers who surmise the responses of others or are even fully certain about them despite the fact that the reactions were not expressed acoustically referred to immediate neighbors and well-known persons (such as one's girlfriend). In the movie theater I usually do not know the majority of other viewers sitting in the dark. Neither can I properly see their facial expression responding to the film (for instance, their display of an amused smile); nor would I expect them to share my humor when it comes to this particular film (for instance, because I am a German watching a German comedy in Moscow).

In situations like this laughter certainly does *inform* me about something less-than-obvious. First, it can convey *deictic* information by referring to and acoustically pointing at an event or content: 'Look, this is funny!' This happens to me regularly when abroad. The nuances of a particular humor slip my attention and I gratefully accept the notification that this is funny so that I have something to laugh at myself. Second, since we do not laugh continuously and about everything, we can single something out by responding with laughter to just this scene: 'Look, this – and precisely this – is funny!' Third, laughter has a personal communicative function over and above the deictic one as it corresponds to something about the person laughing: 'Look, this – and precisely this – is funny *for me!*' Admitting that laughter is communicating important information does not do harm to the argument that it also establishes a collective awareness.

Due to the structural features of the movie theater the situation is more complicated than in Taylor's example for a second reason. Taylor points out that in order to establish collective awareness, and thus to create a public space, someone must take a first step. If the man on the bus had not exclaimed, 'Whew, it's hot!', the mutual awareness between him and the other passenger would have remained implicit at best. It would not have been raised to a higher level and brought out into the open between the two men. Likewise, in the cinema someone has to laugh in order to establish something *entre nous*. However, in the cinema it is not enough that a single person laughs out loud. Solitary laughter can create a peculiar imbalance or asymmetry. A second person in the auditorium, who finds the scene equally funny but remains silent, may now be aware that both he and the laughing person have something in common and share a feeling. Yet the laughing person herself may not know that the other viewers find

the scene funny – and may therefore feel uncomfortably *left alone*. While on the bus the exclamation ‘Whew, it’s hot!’ does not need approval because the facts are obvious, in the cinema the solitary laughter needs confirmation in order to raise a balanced, symmetrical kind of collective awareness. One reason is the uncertainty based on the aforementioned structural features of the movie theater. Therefore laughter also expresses a wish: ‘Look, this – and precisely this – is funny for me, *but hopefully also for you and hence for us!*’ Helmuth Plessner once noted that the laughing person becomes truly joyous only when he or she knows that the laughter rings out and is heard:

[t]he occasion of laughter ... has an effect which is all the more pronounced, the more ‘objective’ it seems. And it seems more objective to the degree that others are also struck by it. To that extent it requires endorsement by others and gains strength in community.¹³

We subjectively need confirmation by others that something is objectively funny in order to create the common vantage point of the *entre nous*. Laughter can therefore also be equivalent to an *invitation*: ‘Look, this – and precisely this – is funny for me, *but definitely also for you!*’ Sometimes one might even feel the need to issue a *license* to laugh. Think of a case when you feel the need to show others that it is allowed and appropriate to laugh. Watching a German comedy in the Netherlands, I once came to the conclusion that the Dutch viewers either do not understand the German humor (which does exist!) or that they do not find it funny enough to give it credit. Either way I found it necessary for both my own and their enjoyment to stimulate and invite them, to indicate that this is indeed ‘worth’ laughing about. I laughed forcefully and insistently, since I felt the need to ‘break through’ their ‘wall of silence’ – but this insistence can itself be risky. When the other viewers remain stubbornly silent the laughing person may begin to wonder whether the others consider his or her humor strange – a situation evoking embarrassment. It can also elicit anger about the others who do not laugh and thus refuse to participate in what, for the laughing person, seems to be an evident reason to respond expressively.¹⁴

Laughter in the cinema can fulfill a plethora of functions, and certainly not all of them have been mentioned here. For instance, one may object to my account by asking if laughter about something comical or funny is first and foremost a *bodily response* – an eruptive response to a crisis situation that seems contradictory and unanswerable and in which the body takes over from the person, as Helmuth Plessner would put it. It would be short-

sighted to overlook this bodily component.¹⁵ However, the bodily response of laughter is much more prominent in public. Robert Provine claims that people are 30 times more likely to laugh in the presence of others than when they are alone.¹⁶ Even if some people do laugh wholeheartedly alone, say in front of a television screen, this would not be a lethal objection to my argument, because *in the movie theater* laughter simply takes over both a communicative role and a collective awareness function as well.

One could also complain that my argument overlooks that establishing something *entre nous* does not necessarily imply everyone has to agree: there are persons who laugh along because of peer pressure (a point I will return to). There may always be persons who do not consider themselves part of this 'for us'. When a person on a bus suffering from influenza experiences a moment of rigor or chill he or she does certainly not feel included in the public space established by the exclamation 'Whew, it's hot!' Likewise, in the cinema someone who does not find the film funny at all may feel excluded and thus does not consider him or herself part of the laughing community. Laughter therefore sometimes has an *exclusionary* function: 'Look, this – and precisely this – is funny for us, but *not for others!*' The inclusion and exclusion function of laughter is a commonplace in sociological theories of laughter;¹⁷ even in biology this has been known for a long time. Some 50 years ago the biologist Konrad Lorenz pointed out that laughter 'produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders'.¹⁸ Again, this is not a fatal objection, because those who *are* included may still be collectively aware of their common laughter.

In turn, the experience of feeling excluded from a laughing community can itself be highly relevant and revelatory in moments of *inadequate* laughter. When viewers laugh about racist violence or a misogynist joke those who do not laugh may become aware of the social distance that separates them; they realise the gap between what they find unacceptable and what others consider as worthy of laughter. In this case laughter may create a public awareness of another kind. The public place of the movie theater thus allows for beneficial monitoring, which is not possible if the laughter is merely private. Interestingly, elements of this 'control function' of cinematic laughter can already be found in Benjamin's famous artwork essay – one of the few places in canonical film theory where the 'simultaneous collective experience' of the movie theater assumes a significant role. As should become clear in the following discussion, precisely because the viewer's film experience is a collective one in the movie theater it

enables public reactions whose very public-ness can turn out to be significant in an ethical sense.

3 The control function of laughter: Walter Benjamin on mutual monitoring

In section XII of the artwork essay Benjamin maintains that the technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation between the masses and art. In response to a traditional art like painting, which has lost its social impact, the response of the audience (*Publikum*) is *split* between critique and enjoyment; there are the experts, and there are the uncritical masses. For Benjamin this divergence is retrograde, but not so for a new art like film where the response becomes progressive because the critical attitude and the pleasure of watching and experiencing emotionally *coincide*: '[t]he progressive attitude is characterized by an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure – pleasure in seeing and experiencing with an attitude of expert appraisal.'¹⁹ For Benjamin this is particularly true in the case of Chaplin comedies and slapstick films. Why should watching *The Circus* (1928) be progressive and the reaction to paintings by Picasso be retrograde? For the moment let me hasten to say that for Benjamin it is key that film viewing is a *simultaneous collective* experience, whereas looking at a painting implies an *individual* encounter. Even in those cases when large amounts of beholders look at paintings in galleries and salons they do not do so simultaneously and collectively. Benjamin points out that, unlike the cinema, galleries and salons do not allow the masses to *organise* and *control* themselves in their response.²⁰ Although he remains vague at this point we might surmise that this lack of organisation and mutual monitoring derives from the structural differences between the two dispositifs: in the cinema a co-present group of people watches the uninterrupted unfolding of a 90-minute film collectively, whereas in the gallery and salon everyone decides for him or herself how long he or she remains in front of a painting. Consequently, there is a lack of *synchronisation* of responses and as a result the beholders cannot mutually *control* their reactions.

Why do critique and pleasure coincide at the movies? Benjamin answers:

[t]he decisive reason is that nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which add up to the massive reaction of the audience, from the onset determined by their imminent concentration and aggregation. By becoming public they control one another.²¹

Since this passage is just as convoluted as it is complex I will try to disentangle it step by step. First, it is important to note that the reactions of the individuals can, in sum, create a *massive* audience reaction. Of course this cannot be true for each and every response. It is hard to fathom how collective feelings of beauty or boredom should add up to a *massive* reaction, but the argument certainly goes for *expressive* responses like screaming or laughter, as we shall see.

Furthermore, from the very beginning these individual reactions are *shaped* by the fact that they will agglomerate and become part of an overarching response of the audience as a whole. Consciously or subconsciously, the viewers attend to the fact that others will presumably respond in a similarly expressive way. Knowing that their reactions will add up to a mass response the spectators calibrate for this expected outcome. Remaining with Benjamin's example of Chaplin, precisely because viewers *expect* that others will also respond with laughter do they express their amusement by laughing out loud. If they were to watch the film alone (as under today's solitary viewing conditions) they would not anticipate a collective response and therefore refrain from attuning their response to an 'immediate concentration and agglomeration'. They may be highly amused by and smile at Chaplin but ultimately they would remain mostly silent; laughing *alone* in the living room can be an awkward experience. Hence in this passage Benjamin seems to be astutely aware of what I call the *audience effect*: the effect co-present others can have on our viewing experience. This becomes all the more evident when we take into account a sentence Miriam Hansen refers to in which Benjamin claims 'words, gestures, events perceived by the masses are different from those perceived by individuals'.²² As part of a group of people individuals often register things differently than when they are alone – and they may also respond in a different way when they are amongst others.

Most important for our purposes in this section on the ethical implications of the audience effect is the final sentence 'indem sie sich kundgeben, kontrollieren sie sich / by becoming public they [the individual reactions] control one another'. What does Benjamin mean to say here? I doubt that he refers to a control of affects in the sense of a *suppression* of the emotional reaction. He is unlikely to aim at a leveling of affective responses on

the personal and social level in the way Norbert Elias does it in *The Civilizing Process*.²³ For one, the German verb ‘kundgeben’ implies ‘to make something known’ or, even more to the point, ‘to make something public’ (the noun ‘Kundgebung’ is a synonym for demonstration or rally).²⁴ Hence we could infer that Benjamin may have claimed that if (and only if) audience responses become public in the movie theater others can control them and judge them as misguided or even ethically problematic; the viewer reveals and makes publically available what he or she finds funny and deems worthy of laughter.²⁵ The reactions of the others, once they are out there, are in turn themselves subject to scrutiny. We could even argue that there may be instances when people become critical of their *own* response precisely because of its collective character. For instance, the viewer can despise the fact that he or she has laughed about something with the other viewers that he or she should not have laughed about – be it for reasons of peer pressure or due to involuntary emotional contagion. This is a point shared by philosopher Simon Critchley, who writes that

[p]erhaps one laughs at jokes one would rather *not* laugh at. Humour can provide information about oneself that one would rather *not* have.²⁶

The word ‘control’ today often used in conjunction with the ‘disciplinary societies’ (Foucault) or the ‘societies of control’ (Deleuze) – thus connoted negatively – to me has a much more positive ring in Benjamin’s text.²⁷ It is at this point that we can understand why Benjamin considered the cinema more progressive than a traditional art like painting. In the movie theater the viewer can enjoy the film and *at the same time* remain critical because he or she monitors the potentially questionable or ethically-dangerous responses of other viewers (and also his or her own reaction).²⁸ Again, Critchley is apposite here:

[t]he reactionary quality of much humour, in particular ethnic humour, must be analysed ... in its ‘untruth’, as it were, reactionary humour tells us important truths about who we are. Jokes can therefore be read as symptoms of societal repression and their study might be said to amount to a return of the repressed. In other words, humour can reveal us to be persons that, frankly, we would rather not be.²⁹

This is not possible in front of a painting because the reception of paintings does not take place collectively and simultaneously.

There is one more question that we have to address: *how* do these

audience reactions become public? What Benjamin does not mention explicitly is the fact that his idea of publicly available (and thus controllable) responses depends on *expressive reactions* and *conspicuous behavior*. After all, the aforementioned structural features of the movie theater (darkness, unidirectional seating position, backrest, etc.) make it difficult to judge the responses of other viewers. Even in Benjamin's time if a viewer was deeply moved or embarrassed by a film these emotions were not readily accessible to others – unless, of course, Benjamin would have thought of an audience that communicated during the film and commented verbally on what happened on the screen. In other words, Benjamin may have modeled his preferred mode of reception on early cinema. This is at least what Miriam Hansen suggests: 'the difference from traditional art that Benjamin ascribes to cinema's relations of *reception* is more characteristic of early cinema than of the classical paradigm that became hegemonic after World War I'.³⁰ The early cinema mode of reception is, among other things, characterised by distraction. As Hansen points out:

the artwork essay's valorization of distraction (as opposed to the contemplative reception of traditional works of art) presupposes a type of cinema experience still patterned on the variety format, that is, the programming of shorter films (interspersed with or framed by live performances) on the principle of maximum stylistic or thematic diversity.³¹

But is this necessarily the case? I want to suggest a different reading here. What Benjamin may have had 'in mind' is first and foremost an audience responding expressively and conspicuously. This audience may be a distracted early-cinema-like one, but it can just as well imply a more 'classical' audience that screams in shock and, more importantly, that laughs out loud and thus makes its response subject to public monitoring. Benjamin's many references to Charlie Chaplin and slapstick films (*Groteskfilme*) in the artwork essay and elsewhere strongly support an interpretation along these lines. For instance, we can glean the significance Benjamin ascribes to laughter from his 1929 essay 'Chaplin in Retrospect'. Benjamin ends this essay with a remarkable quote:

[i]n his films, Chaplin appeals both to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter. 'Admittedly,' [Philippe] Soupault says, 'Chaplin merely makes people laugh. But aside from the fact that this is the hardest thing to do, it is socially also the most important.'³²

The important social weight of laughter can also be felt in the artwork essay, albeit more implicitly. While Soviet montage cinema may be the other important filmic reference point in this essay the films of Eisenstein and Vertov are conspicuously absent in Benjamin's discussion of the collective experience in section XII. Here references to Chaplin and slapstick films abound. Above I have mentioned the passage at the beginning of the section in which Benjamin opposes the progressive response to Chaplin with the retrograde reaction to Picasso. At the end of section XII he repeats this opposition by likening the progressive response to slapstick films with the regressive response to Surrealism.³³

Moreover, in a footnote Benjamin claims that '[b]efore the rise of the movie the Dadaists' performances tried to create an audience reaction [*eine Bewegung ins Publikum zu bringen*] which Chaplin later evoked in a more natural way.³⁴ Unfortunately, the English translation glosses over a crucial element: Benjamin does not refer to just any kind of audience response, but to one that implies movement (*Bewegung*). In the case of Chaplin this movement comes from laughter, shaking and stirring the audience, as it were.³⁵ Bodies put into motion through amused laughter, so memorably captured at the end of King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), make visibly manifest that the viewers find a scene funny.³⁶ Hence the audience response can not only be *heard* but also *seen* via laughter. In an unpublished fragment from 1934 titled 'Hitler's Diminished Masculinity', written shortly before the artwork essay, Benjamin had already pointed in a similar direction. In this short fragment he likens the 'masses' *moved* to laughter by a Chaplin comedy with the rigid masses of Nazi Germany: 'Chaplin – the ploughshare that cuts through the masses; laughter loosens up the mass/the ground of the Third Reich is stamped down hard and firm, and no more grass grows there.'³⁷ While Hitler's dictatorship (and presumably the huge rallies that became a hallmark of it) leads to dry, barren, and suppressed uniformity, laughing about a Chaplin comedy creates a fertile ground by temporarily shaking the rigid postures of the viewers.

Broadly speaking, we have to distinguish two functions that can be deduced from Benjamin's writings on laughter – call them the *therapeutic* function and the *control* function. Drawing on the earliest handwritten draft of the artwork essay, Miriam Hansen has discussed in admirable detail Benjamin's arguments about the mass-psychological release effects of collective laughter.³⁸ In this draft Benjamin argues that it belongs to the prime social functions of film to strike a balance between the human being and technology, a balance knocked out of kilter precisely by modern tech-

nology. Via the technology of film laughing about Mickey Mouse may therefore acquire a healthy effect:

[i]f one takes into account the dangerous tensions which technification and its consequences have engendered in the vast masses – tensions which, at critical stages, take on a psychotic character – then one cannot but recognize that this same technification has created as protection against such mass psychosis the possibility of psychic inoculation by means of certain films in which a force articulation of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous ripening in the masses. The collective laughter signifies a premature and therapeutic eruption of such mass psychoses, Benjamin writes.³⁹

Ultimately, this therapeutic function has to remain highly speculative – and it is not for no reason that it received severe criticism from Adorno: ‘The laughter of the cinema audience is ... anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism’.⁴⁰ Less speculative is the *control* function of laughter. As we have seen, for Benjamin laughing about – and thus responding in a vocal and motor fashion to – a slapstick film or a contemporaneous Chaplin comedy like *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936) implies a progressive reaction. Sitting in the movie theater gives the audience a way to not only synchronise their reception but also to monitor one another. The public space created through laughter allows for a positive kind of control, because inappropriate or even ethically-questionable laughter becomes publically available – and thus a matter of knowledge about what kind of opinions and judgments exist out there. Alluding to a famous proverb, we might summarise Benjamin’s position as both ‘tell me *what* you laugh *about* and I’ll tell you who you are’ and ‘tell me *who* you laugh *with* and I’ll tell you who you are’.

4 Conclusion

I think that a reading of Benjamin along these lines sheds an interesting light on laughter in the cinema. However, we should not overlook the potential pitfalls of Benjamin’s take on laughter. First, laughter itself is not necessarily progressive; the audience effect can turn out to be regressive when a viewer feels the ‘peer pressure’ of laughing along with a violent event or a racist joke (and here one might heed Adorno’s warning as well).⁴¹ As I have argued above, knowing that their laughter will add up to

a mass response, the spectators calibrate their reactions to this expected collective response. Due to social desirability constraints this can happen even against one's own convictions; the viewer might laugh about something he or she might otherwise not find worthy of laughter at all. In fact, a participant in an empirical study on audience behavior vis-à-vis cinematic violence remembers:

[a] guy falls to his death and everybody laughed at that and I felt as if maybe I should laugh with them, and I did. I can't understand why I did that. I suppose you try to fit in with everybody else so you're not *left out*.⁴²

Admitting that there is no need to wax lyrical about the progressive potential of laughter does not affect the important control function of laughter in the movie theater. First, as mentioned above, laughing along with others due to peer pressure can spark a self-reflexive stance. The participant of the empirical study clearly questions his laughter critically, and thus monitors himself (albeit belatedly). Moreover, in some cases inappropriate laughter can become the target of an explicit critical response from other viewers. In her empirical study on violence Annette Hill found out that

[I]laughter is a common response participants notice and question. Certain movies generate acceptable laughter, such as *Pulp Fiction*, whilst others, such as *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* do not, and to laugh at inappropriate places risks censure from other members of the audience.⁴³

Last but not least, the monitoring function of laughter in the cinema remains intact even in cases of peer pressure responses. Just because someone feels the need to comply with what he or she considers socially desirable does not release him or her from the responsibility for a questionable act.

I hope that this article has helped to tease out some of the implications hidden in Bazin's seemingly simple statement that laughter makes the audience aware of itself. It is in the movie theater that laughter raises a collective awareness of a shared emotional judgment and puts this fact *entre nous*; it is in the movie theater that questionable laughter can be exposed and monitored; and it is in the movie theater that we become collectively aware that we, as an audience, sometimes share certain values and emotional judgments – and sometimes we do not.

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Notes

1. Bazin 1967, p. 121.
2. I have given arguments for this point in Hanich 2010a and 2014.
3. To be sure, laughter is not the only expressive form of behavior that can create public awareness. However, in this essay I concentrate on laughter alone.
4. Taylor 1980, p. 295.
5. Gilbert 2007, p. 7. Gilbert refers to Taylor 1985 (particularly chapter 10, section 3.1).
6. Taylor 1980, p. 293.
7. Ibid., p. 295.
8. Katz 1999, pp. 113–114.
9. Ibid., p. 117.
10. Neale & Krutnik 1990, p. 149.
11. As Martin Jay points out, Julia Kristeva thought that if disrupted by laughter the cinema can escape its complicity with authority and order. ‘If not for that demystification’, she concluded, ‘the cinema would be nothing but another church.’ See Jay 1993, p. 85.
12. Taylor 1980, p. 294.
13. Plessner 1970, p. 146.
14. As Erving Goffman once pointed out, ‘silence, coming from a person in a situation where participants are obliged to be busily engaged in tasks or talk, can itself be a noisy thing, loudly expressing that the individual is not properly involved and not attuned to the gathering; this silent kind of noise can distract attention, just as the loud kind can’. Goffman 1963, p. 214.
15. I have offered a typology of cinematic laughter and some of the functions these types of laughter imply in Hanich 2010b.
16. Provine 2004, p. 215.
17. See Zijderveld 1983, p. 253.
18. See Lorenz 1953.
19. Benjamin 2008, p. 36.
20. Benjamin: ‘Although paintings began to be publicly exhibited in galleries and salons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception. Thus the same public which responds in a progressive manner toward a grotesque film is bound to respond in a reactionary manner to surrealism.’ Benjamin 1969, p. 235.
21. The German version reads: ‘Und zwar ist der entscheidende Umstand dabei: nirgends mehr als im Kino erweisen sich die Reaktionen der Einzelnen, deren Summe die massive Reaktion des Publikums ausmacht, von vornherein durch ihre unmittelbare Massierung bedingt. Und indem sie sich kundgeben, kontrollieren sie sich.’ Benjamin 1977 (‘Kunstwerk’), p. 33 (the above translation is mine).
22. Benjamin 1977 (*Gesammelte Werke*), p. 1193 (my translation). Mentioned in Hansen 2012, p. 100.

23. See Elias 1994.
24. This is the reason why my translation reads as follows: 'By becoming public they control one another.' Other translators have rendered the passage as 'no sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another' (E. Jephcott & H. Zohn in Benjamin 2008, p. 36) or 'the moment these responses become manifest they control each other' (H. Zohn in Benjamin 1969, p. 234).
25. For slightly different interpretations of section XII in Benjamin's artwork essay see Hansen 2012, p. 100 and McBride 1998, p. 469.
26. Critchley 2002, p. 74.
27. See Foucault 1995; Deleuze 1992.
28. Why this should be the case 'nowhere more than in the cinema' – and not also, for instance, in stage comedies – remains open in Benjamin's text.
29. Critchley 2002, p. 12. He continues: '[j]okes can be read in terms of what or simply who a particular society is subordinating, scapegoating or denigrating. Grasping the nature of societal repression can itself be liberating, but only negatively.' Critchley 2002, pp. 75–76.
30. Hansen 2012, p. 86.
31. Ibid.
32. Benjamin 2008, p. 337 (translated by R. Livingstone). In German: 'Chaplin hat sich in seinen Filmen an den zugleich internationalsten und revolutionärsten Affekt der Massen gewandt, das Gelächter. "Allerdings", sagt Soupault, "Chaplin bringt nur zum Lachen. Aber abgesehen davon, daß das das Schwerste ist, was es gibt, ist es auch im sozialen Sinne das Wichtigste.".'
33. Curiously, Hansen does not discuss these allusions. The fact that she overlooks Benjamin's references to comedies is symptomatic of the general problem that the genre poses for the neat divide between early cinema and classical cinema. Since 1895 comedies transcend the boundaries between film historical periods. Moreover, even if the mode of address of the comedy may have changed throughout the decades its laughing audiences are hardly the absorbed, voyeuristic spectators often deemed typical for the classical paradigm.
34. Benjamin 1969, p. 250 (translated by H. Zohn).
35. In the German original Benjamin notes: 'Ehe der Film zur Geltung kam, suchten die Dadaisten durch ihre Veranstaltungen *eine Bewegung ins Publikum zu bringen*, die ein Chaplin dann auf natürlichere Weise hervorrief.' Benjamin 1977 ('Kunstwerk'), p. 37 (emphasis added).
36. In the late 1920s the film theorist and critic Rudolf Arnheim once turned around in the movie theater in order to follow the *audience* rather than the *film*. His comments anticipate what Benjamin would say a couple of years later: 'Die Körper liegen als dunkle Klumpen schwer und unbeweglich in bequemen Stühlen ... Manchmal geht ein Gelächter durch das Dunkel, dann wiegen sich alle die Körper eine Weile hin und her, so als wenn der Wind durch die Bäume geht.' Quoted from: Paech & Paech 2000, p. 133.
37. Benjamin 1999, p. 792.
38. See Hansen 1993.
39. Quoted from Hansen 1993, pp. 31–32.
40. Ibid., p. 32. In a famous letter Adorno had warned Benjamin against romanticising the sadistic impulses in the audience response to Mickey Mouse.
41. I thank Thijs Lijster for this helpful suggestion.
42. Quoted from Hill 1997, p. 29.
43. Ibid.

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