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Playing Off the Beat: Joke Performance, or the Groove of Infectious Laughter

BY ANNA BROMLEY & MICHAEL FESCA

Authors' Introduction

Comedians could be viewed as virtuosos of speech, voice, tact, and rhythm. They seem to have an implicit sense of split-second-timing in applying minor deviations from normative etiquette. In other words: they are capable of speaking off the beat. In this way, the comedic joke shifts the anticipated beat just enough that the alteration can be distinctly perceived, but without entirely breaking with the frame of reference. Delivering a joke's punch line and initiating a processual groove both rely on playing slightly off the beat in comparable ways. Our proposal is to complement widely discussed semantic notions of joke sharing with hitherto lesser perceived aspects of processual pulsing speech performance renegotiated as a form of implicit knowledge.

Contents:

1. Jokes as Semantic "Bundles"
2. Jokes and Wit as Aesthetic Capability
3. Sharing Jokes, Laughing, Grooving
4. Vital Drives

1. Jokes as Semantic "Bundles"

Speaking of wit today tends to refer to people cracking jokes. Less commonly, it would describe a form of knowledge deductively generated by means of situationally fashioned verbal repartee. Wit, in most cases, indicates word play (puns) yielding laughter, reminding us of Freud's variegated considerations of the techniques, motives, and tendencies of jokes.¹

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: 2002 (1905)

Freud's emphasis on the dramaturgic principles which make jokes successful occupy a prominent position among the treatises on the pun's verbal operations of association and ambiguity of different semantic scripts (i.e. Kraepelin: contrasting imaginings; Kant and Schopenhauer: incongruity between notion and physical object; Ruskin: Semantic-Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), script opposition).² His deliberations on jokes, published in 1905, suggest that the reflex to break into laughter is primarily one of tension release (*Spannungsabfuhr*). According to the German linguist Helga Kotthoff, this view participates in an ideology by which, "[the joke] would have [...] to be analyzed in its efficiency." Limited by this quantitative perspective, laughter, "in its multifaceted forms and functions barely came into focus [and] (...) was not attributed a capacity to actively create humorous meaning and to make scenes funny in the first place."³

But perhaps we could suggest, that in his concept of the third person, Freud, if only latently, did indeed also suggest a potential for humoristic meaning in laughter. In his view, there are three persons at stake in a joke: the first person, who generates the joke; the second person, who becomes the object of the joke; and the third person, who is made to laugh. In the laughter of the third person, Freud sees an infectious quality - that which in the first place caused the first person to laugh.⁴ As Kotthoff justifiably criticizes, Freud discusses jokes as semantic entities, as external stimuli. On the other hand, following the publications of Theodor Lipps, Freud also makes the distinction that someone can either be witty or make witticisms: (*jemand könne Witz haben oder einen Witz machen*).⁵ With this, Freud makes recourse to the conception of *esprit*, which we'll return to later. It was wit as, "that

² Emil Kraepelin, *Compendium der Psychiatrie*, Saarbrücken: 2007 (1883); John Morreal, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, New York: 1987, pp. 45-64; Helga Kotthoff, *Scherzkommunikation, Beitrage aus der empirischen Gesprächsforschung*, Radolfzell: 2006, pp. 7-10; Robert Waelder, *Die Grundlagen der Psychoanalyse*, Frankfurt/M.: 1971, pp. 53-54; Wolfgang Preisendanz: *Humor als dichterische Einbildungskraft. Studien zur Erzählkunst des poetischen Realismus*, München: 1976; Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, Boston: 1985, p. 114

³ Kotthoff (2006), p. 7, transl. by the authors. At this point we want to point to the comprehensive publications of Helga Kotthoff and her circle who examine the forms of gendered laughter: H. Kotthoff (Ed.), *Das Gelächter der Geschlechter. Humor und Macht in Gesprächen von Frauen und Männern*, Frankfurt/M.: 1988

⁴ Freud (2002/1905), p. 332, "that we supplement our own pleasure by achieving the laughter that is not possible for ourselves by the roundabout way of the impression on the person who has been made to laugh. (...) Laughter belongs to the highly infectious expressions of psychical states."

⁵ "There is no difference between wit, witticism and joke in German. All is included in the German word: Witz. "Lipps draws our attention to the fact that these definitions refer to the wit that the witty man possesses, and not to the joke or witticism that he makes.", Freud (2002/1905), p. 15

conscious and adroit production of a comic effect,"⁶ that Freud was interested in as he tried to isolate the joke from the comical, and this is precisely what is for him at stake in mobilizing his attention on the techniques and tendencies of his vast collection of jokes. The joke then, in Freud's eyes, is a stimulus which can be enacted and re-enacted in terms of a script or musical notation. The quality of a stimulus, adds Helga Kotthoff, can't help us in screening wit-communication for processual performance-qualities. For Kotthoff, such performance-qualities become primarily evident in everyday acts of pleasantry, teasing, and narrating jocular stories. By alternating between serious speech and kidding, these repartees playfully palpate relations and identities.⁷

Nevertheless, it seems to us that jokes and their script-like form of language performance can also be loci for examining an exceptional processual quality if we step back from *what-has-been-said* (the script) and turn toward *how-it-had-been-enacted*. What we want to hone in on is that cracking jokes is a matter of actively engaging listening bodies as laughing bodies. It's all about instigating rhythmic contractions of the diaphragm - a largely involuntary bodily drama. When a listener laughs about a joke and at the same time utterly disapproves of its content and/or its generating person, we have an exemplary case of such "drama." Herein what has been said in a witty aside is less important than the timing of the payoff of the joke - its interaction with the perception of certain affect which *make* a person laugh. The one who laughs is seized by a bodily drama. To examine this phenomenon, as well as laughter's infectiousness, it might be illuminating to turn toward the etymological emergence of the English term *wit* and the German term *Witz*, which includes both meanings: wit and joke.

2. Jokes and Wit as Aesthetic Capability

Freud's references to his extensive joke-collection vividly document how the German term *Witz*, in his day, was established in terms of a standardized and repeatable, thus enactable, lingual bundle - a bundle which, when set forth in writing, could be collected. *Witz* was not always understood in the ways which Goethe described as being, in his time, all the rage.⁸ Until the turn of the nineteenth century the term described an oral and processual generation of knowledge. The word, which derives from the Latin *videre* (to see) has

⁶ Theodor Lipps, *Komik und Humor; Eine psychologisch-ästhetische Untersuchung*, Hamburg: 1898, p. 90, transl. by the authors

⁷ Kotthoff (2006), pp. 7-8

⁸ Freiherr Woldemar Biedermann, *Goethes Gespräche, 1805-1810*, Weimar: 1889, p. 240

etymological links to the Old High German word *wizzi*, which translates into knowledge or observation, and in addition, to the English wit and witness. Along these lines, the German meaning of both joke and wit indicates an illuminating comment, a lively intellectual combination, the drawing of stunning and telling comparisons and metaphors. In the German-speaking world, until the late 17th century *Witz* was used interchangeably for the French term *esprit*.⁹ Jean Paul deduces *Witz* from the Latin *ingenium*. He advocates for (like Kant before him) *Witz* as the aesthetic capability of a reasoned, hermeneutic intellect. Intriguingly, Jean Paul unfolds his thoughts in aesthetic practice as a novelist. His prose is full of grotesque humor and the deliberation of identities, keeping its distance to the writers of both romanticism and classicism (Schiller, Goethe), which, at about the same time, were helping make *Witz* into a product of language and to thus manufacture it as a short, re-enactable semantic entity including a narrator-audience-relationship.¹⁰ It is precisely those circles from which Jean Paul keeps his distance - those who promoted, at the turn of the nineteenth century, a number of homogenizing knowledge policies (e.g. the figures of the virtuoso and the dilettante)...which have been passed on to us in the present by further limiting concepts and formats.¹¹ Premised on this newly-fabricated product called *Witz* (joke), the scattered contemporary considerations of jokes and wit focus, naturally, on jokes' plots, triggers, and scripts; that is on rhetorically positing release from serious everyday life. Once we're talking about cracking Jokes and less about jesting, however, the narrated joke becomes a recited joke. As such, it is a staged act, a skilled performance applying a dramatic composition based on a script. Whether provocative or innocuous, a joke as language-product resembles a page of sheet music waiting for a sophisticated and *lively* interpretation to affect a listener.

3. Sharing Jokes, Laughing, Grooving

⁹ Johann Christoph Gottsched, Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen, in: *Schriften zur Literatur*, ed. by H. Steinmetz, Stuttgart: 1972 (1751), pp. 96-97.; Ekkehard Knörer: *Entfernte Ähnlichkeiten. Zur Geschichte von Witz und „ingenium“*, Paderborn: 2007

¹⁰ Biedermann (1889), p. 240; Goethe. *Gespräche* 1809. Retrieved from Zeno.org, 03.10.2014; Karin Knop: *Comedy in Serie*, Bielefeld: 2007, p. 77

¹¹ Uwe Wirth, *Der Dilettantismusbegriff um 1800 im Spannungsfeld psychologischer und prozeduraler Argumentationen*, in: S. Blechschmidt/ A. Heinz, *Dilettantismus um 1800*, Heidelberg: 2007, p. 25-33; Uwe Wirth: *Dilettantenarbeit – Virtuosität und performative Puscherei*, in: G. Brandstetter/ G. Neumann, *Genie-Virtuose-Dilettant. Konfigurationen romantischer Schöpfungsästhetik*, Würzburg: 2011, p. 277-288

Clemens Risi, in his rhythmic re-reading of Bergson's "Le Rire," draws attention to the complex temporal processes of an audience's laughter by which expectations are activated whose fulfillment or disappointment generates comical effects only in the course of split-second-timing.¹² Split-second-timing means executing skillful breaks with and transgressions of the expected – breaks which overwhelm our perception in ways that either result in the boredom of aversion or in amazement and – sometimes – in laughter.¹³ Such reactions, according to Risi, synchronize an audience with itself. In addition, with the event of laughter, Risi argues that a synchronization of the audience with on-stage comedians occurs.¹⁴

Clearly, the breaks of a well-narrated joke perform transgressions of a given beat, pulse, or measure in complex senses (at least we can claim this for the German and Anglo-Saxon linguistic areas). They locate the borders of tact in regard to accepted cadences of expression and help position critique in ways which in turn are likewise perceived as tactful. Interestingly enough, the German term *Takt* (from the Latin noun *tactus*, which translates into sense of feeling or touch) includes two different aspects of temporality: the meaning of a measurable musical pulse which, in the West is seen as the basis of rhythm, and a social virtue of timing one's speech in a manner in accordance with customs dictated by the emergent emancipated bourgeoisie (which today remain widely regarded as appropriate). Viewed in this light, in the minor deviation from the expected as described above, an implicit socio-cultural knowledge of the prevalent pulse of a given normative etiquette becomes apparent. In this sense, the pulse as musical measure might be applied to reading the temporal normativities of speech as a highly habitualized insider knowledge which is exposed by the minor temporal deviation of measure in a joke. Typically, one would approach the temporal dimension of spoken utterance in relation to a regionally varying speech-rhythm. Our suggestion is to consider it in addition more precisely in relation to metric time, to rhythm understood as play with periodicity. This concept of rhythm, which in Western cultures is laid out on the basis of a pulse, derives from the Old Greek verb *rheein* which translates to flow. Apparently, rhythm wasn't always tied to a measured rhythm. Individual rhythmic feel is a question of perception. As such, for example, in Greek antiquity, syllabic

¹² Clemens Risi, Rhythmen des Komischen. Zu Christoph Marthalers musikalischem Theater, in: *Maske und Kothurn* 51, 4/2006: Komik, Theorien, Ästhetik, Strategien, pp. 207-314; Henri Bergson: *Das Lachen. Ein Essay über die Bedeutung des Komischen*. Translated into German by Roswitha Plancherel-Walter. Frankfurt/M.: 1988

¹³ Risi (2006)

¹⁴ Risi (2006)

lengths were precisely fixed. At that time, rhythm was understood as proportion¹⁵ and there was no such thing as an underlying measure or beat. By unevenly distributing long and short entities, the rhythm of speech in ancient Greek poetry generates a rather volatile waxing and waning. Not until the seventeenth century did measured rhythm emerge in Europe. Thereafter it has lastingly marked the subsequent development of European music, especially in its separation from literary expression at the turn from the nineteenth century.

The bar as a measure which could now to be filled¹⁶ allowed a homogenization of musical timing in music and with it the synchronized concertizing of a larger ensemble. Musical measure, with its strict grid of temporal reference, now offered room for interpretation. And this space was filled by the rising figure of an interpreter who could performatively unfold his work on the beat and timing, his skillful bringing articulation of musical notation's luster: the virtuoso. Likewise, the virtuosity of someone cracking a joke can be described as a correlative in speech. The transcript of a joke conveys only a coarse rhythmic framework, which must be executed and accentuated by the performer with ironic dissociations and undertones, with poetic hints and shadings.¹⁷ Rhythmic measure both in speech and music materializes as the soft, distinctive deviation of the performed from the scripted reference.

The culture of joking does not necessarily involve rehearsal, but more often a spontaneous improvisation of sophisticated interpretation. A joker must rehearse her ability to situationally micro-time a punch line to make the joke's punch-line *hit*. This becomes exceedingly apparent in the philosophical jesting practice of Slavoj Žižek, who regularly draws on jokes to illustrate his trains of thought, both in writing and in public speeches. His jokes are always performed and narrated with highly differentiated timing for a given. In some cases he even makes use of additional punch lines.

[see http://earwaveevent.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Slavoj_Zizek_Audio_1.mp3,
http://earwaveevent.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Slavoj_Zizek_Audio_1.mp3,
http://earwaveevent.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Slavoj_Zizek_Audio_1.mp3]

¹⁵ Eske Bockelmann: *Im Takt des Geldes. Zur Genese modernen Denkens*, Springer: 2004, pp. 22-25

¹⁶ Thrasylbulos G. Georgiades: *Musik und Rhythmus bei den Griechen*, Frankfurt/M.: 1958

¹⁷ Henri Meschonnic: *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie historique du langage*, Paris: 2002 (1982)

content/uploads/2015/04/Slavoj_Zizek_Audio_1.mp3,
Žižek's *Toilet Joke* in different narrative variations¹⁸]

Like a jazz musician becoming re-affected by her audience, once with the audience has been baffled by a stunning improvisation, the joker is fueled by the laugh of the "third person," the one she wanted to make laugh. This quality is related to the situational timing of improvising wit. It's a matter of a particular temporal perception, a temporal feeling which can be described as a feeling for rhythmical measure. That which Freud sketched as the third person would be a resonant body with certain socio-somatically informed perceptions. For both the performing person and the onlooker, the point is to somehow get into in a bodily-participative process of immersion. A kind of ping-pong situation between performer and witness arises: a play of embodiment in which each side is fueled by the other - a collective synchronization serving out grotesque comicality and wit in a manner akin to a musical groove, push, or swing. Only when prosodic features (that is, melody of speech, intonation etc.) combine with processual speech rhythms can *engendered feeling* be instigated.¹⁹ From this perspective, a successful joke can be seen as the artisanship of a masterly eloquence in *speaking off the beat* or, respectively, *speaking on the beat* – both being forms of *bodily seizing* with redeeming laughter.

Just like the musical phenomenon of a groove, spontaneous participation is affected. A successful joke operates like vocal chants described by Barthes: as a diffusion which is "less tied to an 'impression' but to an inner, muscular, humoral sensualism"²⁰ For this to happen, three elements must oscillate: first, a virtuosic excess of speech melody and speech timing.²¹ Second, a

¹⁸ Audio Example 1: Excerpt from Žižek's lecture: Why Only an Atheist Can Believe: Politics Between Fear and Trembling, Calvin College, Michigan, 10.11.2006. Retrieved 18.12.2014 from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ73hLO64Ng>; Audio Example 2: Excerpt from the book presentation of *Violence, Authors@Google program*, Google New York, 12.09.2008. Retrieved 18.12.2014 from: [youtube.com/watch?v=x0eyNkNpL0&list=PLC0F4DC2A7C03EAEB&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0eyNkNpL0&list=PLC0F4DC2A7C03EAEB&index=3); Audio Example 3: Excerpt from Slavoj Žižek's contribution to the international congress *Arquitectura: más por menos*, Fundación Arquitectura y Sociedad, Pamplona, 12.06.2010. Retrieved 18.12.2014 from: [youtube.com/watch?v=rzXPYCY7jbs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzXPYCY7jbs)

¹⁹ Charles Keil, Motion and Feeling through Music, in: C. Keil/S. Feld: *Music Grooves.*, Tucson: 2005 (1994), p. 56: „ There appears to be a serious referential flirtation, if not an out-and-out romance, going on between music of the engendered feeling type and dance. The engendered feeling entries above strongly imply a reference to music for dancing. ”

²⁰ Roland Barthes: *S/Z*, Frankfurt/M.: 1987, p. 113, transl. by the authors

²¹ Bettina Brandl-Risi, Virtuosität, in: E. Fischer-Lichte/ D. Kolesch/ M. Warstat,

rewarding tensional affective state for the addressee. And third, a denouement in the form of bodily collapse in laughter. Such alignment of bodily trajectory is the basis of both the performance of a joke and the laugh. In numerous interviews quoted by Charles Keil, musical grooves are approached as an enigmatic, intrinsic knowledge which one can only enter via embodied technique. Keil refers to this technique as *engendered feeling*. Charles Keil's seminal essays *Motion and Feeling through Music und Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music* locate the participatory moment of polka and jazz reception in nearly immeasurable micro-rhythmic deviations to base rhythmic structures through both a driving and laid back beat from the rhythm section,²² and in subsequent melodic discrepancies. Christiane Gerischer describes the same phenomenon as, "collective pulsations through communication and interaction of individual pulsations on the backdrop of specific macro- and micro- rhythmic structures."²³ Thus, the perception of grooves is a personalized one. How we synchronize with external pulses and pulsers represents something learned, highly specific to cultural and social backgrounds.²⁴ Taken as a whole, constant motion at a steady pace are striven for and perceived normatively as being comfortable. A groove engenders a strictly measured rhythm, but requires a steady pace to be able to *flow*, which brings the grooving person into a state of what has been referred to among jazz musicians (and much debated) as, *vital drive*.²⁵ As the big band auteur Carla Bley put it, vital drive lies in, "getting into the right track – the right pattern – in the right way and exerting the control and practice necessary to get it."²⁶

4. Vital Drives

Vital drive, a driving force – this term corresponds in multifaceted ways with the etymological origin of the word *Witz*, before its transformation by the bourgeois canon. In this sense, sharing a joke is a fueling, an oscillatory improvised wit in the engendered groove of speech and narration and bodily resonance - which, again, facilitates access to a form of conjoint implicit

Metzler *Lexikon Theatertheorie*, Stuttgart: 2005, p. 384; Clemens Risi, Koloratur des Wahnsinns – Wahnsinn der Koloratur, in: G. Brandstetter/ G. Neumann (2011), pp. 171-177

²² See Keil (2005)

²³ Christiane Gerischer, *O suingue baiano – Mikrorhythmische Phänomene in baianischer Perkussion*, Frankfurt/M.: 2003, p. 93, transl. by the authors

²⁴ N. Todd/ C. Lee, C./ D. Boyle, A Sensory-Motor Theory of Rhythm, Time Perception and Beat, in: *Induction, Journal of New Music Research*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1999, pp. 5-28

²⁵ See Keil (2005)

²⁶ Carla Bley (1965) as quoted in Keil (2005), pp. 16-17

knowledge. Like a stirring groove, the eloquent timing of a successful joke shuffles along the edge of almost abandoning customary speech rhythm – but doesn't go quite that far.²⁷

In the foreground, it would seem as though "the art of telling jokes," were in cunningly offering the linguistic joke, or pun, and its punch line. But that which the narrators of jokes and comedians actually offer is immersion into a groove of a spoken narration and its micro-timing. Whenever we talk about comic talents we refer precisely to this complex bodily synchronization of timings which has the capability to fuel laughter.

²⁷ Charles Keil calls this phenomenon *participatory discrepancies*. See: C. Keil/ S. Feld (2005)

Anna Bromley is an artist, cultural researcher, and writer based in Berlin. Her scenic miniatures connect qualitative social research methods with partly fictionalized re-enactments. Based on typical speech cultures in the markets of culture, science, and politics, her delegated performances, context specific installations, and essays explore subtle manipulation in speeches and negotiations and their theatrical aspects. Most recently, she received the Clara and Eduard Rosenthal grant and the Schöppingen Foundation grant for projects, intersecting art and sciences. In 2013 she co-curated the Project *IRREGULAR – ECONOMIES OF DEVIATION* at the New Foundation of Fine Arts Berlin. Currently, she is involved with artistic and theoretical examinations of humor (*Redemption Jokes*, 2014/15, with C. Buck, M. Fesca, S. Husse, J. Sotzko; *Epistemic Dudes*, Hamburg, 2013/16) and norms/counter-norms (*Therapeutic Alliances*, Hamburg, 2014, with M. Fesca; *FXPO*, Milano, 2015 with M. Fesca, Exposed Project).

<http://www.annabromley.com/>

Michael Fesca is an artist based in Berlin. The starting point of his self-deprecating performances are overly long production times and self-initiated, seemingly impossible tasks. For him, the phenomena of time, beat, and synchronization are of particular interest. In 2013, he was co-curator of *IRREGULAR – ECONOMIES OF DEVIATION* at the New Foundation of Fine Arts Berlin. 2014 Lucas Cranach fellow and nominated for Istanbul scholarship Berlin. He has published essays in the "Glossary of inflationary Terms" ("uncool") and in "What is the future of architecture II" (Crap is Good Press, the article, "Coolness for Trees"). His theoretical and artistic practice applies the potentiality of humor (*Redemption Jokes*, nGbK 2014/15, with C. Buck, A. Bromley, S. Husse, J. Sotzko), the question of timing and rhythm in his project *Abstruse Timed* (with Prof. Kai van Eikels, FU Berlin) and norms/counter-norms (*Therapeutic Alliances*, Hamburg, 2014, with A. Bromley; *FXPO*, Milano, 2015 with A. Bromley, Exposed Project; *Excess and Austerity*, with P. Bonino, I. Kannegießer, N. Küchen, A-K. Strecker).

<http://www.michaelfesca.de/>