Laughing in Sports and Popular Games: towards a Phenomenology of Laughter

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LAUGHING IN SPORTS AND POPULAR GAMES: TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

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TWO CASES OF FOLK GAMES

Hurling in Cornwall around 1600. Two villages fight their way through the landscape, and a game of violence and laughter unfolds. Following tradition, people have gathered on a public holiday. Two gentlemen from the local nobility have donated the silver ball, which the fight will now be about. As soon as the ball is released, the two teams, which nobody has measured in numbers or strength, try to grab it in order to take it to their respective goals. The goal may be their village pub or the seat of the patron or some other agreed place in the settlement. All through the landscape, over hills and through water, across fields and hedges, the wild chase proceeds. If one of the contestants gets stuck in a thorn bush, or if twenty or thirty fight for the ball in muddy water, the merriment is all the greater. Finally, the ball will reach one of the goals and there the crowd will assemble. And, all together, they will drink the beer lavishly provided by the patron of the victorious team.

Another example comes from rural Denmark in the nineteenth century. An elderly farmer remembered in 1913 a traditional ball game from his youth:

In the village of Ljørslev it was the custom that, early in the morning on the second or third day of Easter, the young people went to the churchyard to play ball. The participants formed two teams, and each of them had their goal at one end of the churchyard. The ball had to be released three times, and the third time they had to leave the goal, and then they could be hit by the ball. The game was similar to longball. If the ball was thrown over the wall of the churchyard, a forfeit had to be paid, which was enjoyed in the afternoon.

Historiographers and sociologists have normally treated games like these as forerunners of modern sport. Whereas popular games were not standardised with regard to space, time, rules and size of teams, sport has regulated all these dimensions of the game: the (non-)violence of behaviour, the control of results, the planning, strategy, tactics, techniques and the evaluation of competitive action. This is typically told as a story of social-functional improvement—as a story of progress.

What analysis has tended to ignore is the laughter of the participants. The games of popular culture cannot be understood if you ignore the sounds of enjoyment and pleasure, the ironical calls, the obscene remarks, the laughter provoked by the comic sights of participants falling and failing. All this accompanying intonation is not just a side-effect of the game, it is central to the social-bodily process. In this respect, such games were not only forerunners but represented another type of social interaction. They were at the bodily core of popular festivity, and were thus a type of social practice other than modern sport. And laughter is an indicator of these fundamental differences. The culture of popular laughter disappeared in the seriousness of modern sport. This is the thesis to be explored here.

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2. Longball is a cricket-like game of batting the ball, running and hitting. It is played by children in Denmark up to the present day.
3. This was recalled by the farmer Peder Kr. Nygaard from Ljørslev in 1913. Quoted by Ove Korsgaard 1986: Krop og kultur. Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, p. 13.
THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF LAUGHTER IN POPULAR GAMES

The games and competitions of pre-modern society were rich in laughter-provoking actions, and some of these practices are still known to us today. But laughter is not a simple single thing – there are many different forms of laughter produced by different bodily practices and exploding in different situations of social interaction. This requires a differential phenomenology of laughter in body-cultural practice. We can talk about the laughter caused by hitting (or missing) the mark, the laughter which arises when ‘playing the loser’, the laughter of hindering and tumbling, the laughter of mock fighting, the laughter at the grotesque body, the laughter at the fool, and the laughter of carnival.

HITTING THE TARGET

Modern throwing sports are typically designed so that the outcome is measured in centimetres – corresponding to the slogan *citius, altius, fortius!* – but this pattern does not play any important role in traditional popular games. There, the point is to hit a set target. This particular action is the source of popular games like bowling, quoits (casting a horseshoe) and curling. And one can literally ‘hear’ these games – they are accompanied by laughter. If an athlete throws the ball or the discus as far as she or he can, there is nothing laughable about the distance which has been thrown. But hitting the target – or failing to hit the target – or creating with a subsequent throw a new, unexpected configuration of the bowls – all this provokes surprise and laughter among participants and spectators. This pattern of hitting the target corresponds to the fact that jokes too have a certain ‘target’ or point: the throw can result in a sudden unexpected twist in events, similar to the ending of a joke, and this is what causes laughter. Laughter is pointed by a bodily and psychic explosion – the burst of laughter (French *éclat du rire*, German *in Gelächter ausbrechen*).

As with throwing, similar patterns can be found in running. Racing forward as quickly as possible – *citius!* – does not as such constitute the fascination of a popular game. The point is to touch or to catch someone. And the same with swimming. Swimming has been popular through many centuries, but was never practised along parallel courses for a timed result.

5. The ancient game of Kabbadi from the Punjab shows how this type of movement could be transformed into a modern competitive team sport expanding into other Asian countries.
In games from Brittany and Portugal, boys swim out into the water trying to catch a duck. The unpredictable target makes this a popular game.

PLAYING THE LOSER

Some of the activities of catching may appear to be a ‘game about losing’, because people do not strive to be first but try to avoid being last. They do not want to be ‘it’ or the ‘odd-man-out’. But is this avoidance really the point of these many games of run-and-catch in the world of popular culture? Let us look closer at the children’s game ‘You can’t catch me!’ The object of the game is to tag or touch other players – and to run away from them in order to avoid being caught oneself. Usually one player is ‘it’ and has to chase and tag the other players, one of whom then becomes the new person who is ‘it’. From a modern sports perspective, this looks like a game of running quickly and determining the slowest runner. In some respects it looks sports-like, though it does not culminate with a winner but rather with a loser. In the eyes of a sports observer, this is ‘not yet sport’. However, if the game were really to be practised in a sports-like way, it would not function. The slowest runner would very soon stay behind in tears, and the game would end abruptly. If the game is to continue, the players must act against the rules of speed, of winning, and of the achievement of excellence. Instead, the quicker runner approaches the slower one, teasing and mocking: ‘You can’t catch me, tra-la-la!’ The quicker runner provokes others in order to be touched him- or herself because only this makes the game flow. It is in the interest of all players that no real loser is produced. Catch-and-run is not about avoiding being the loser – it is a way of playing at being the loser.

Characteristic of this type of action is a certain intonation accompanying the game, the intonation of laughter. Losing can be funny; it has features of the grotesque. If the quicker runner is touched by the slower one – whether voluntarily in order to make the game go on, or involuntarily because of some fortuitous situation – this will create an atmosphere of joking, mocking and teasing. Playing the loser makes the players laugh. The play of chase-and-tag can be heard from a distance, stimulating sounds very different from those heard at the athletic track. Instead of winning and instead of avoiding the...
position of the scapegoat, the deeper appeal of the game is something else: don’t take it seriously!

HINDERING AND TUMBLING – MOVING IN CURVED LINES

Equally typical of popular games are situations of hindering and tumbling. Tumbling is typical of the movement of clowns – provoking laughter. Competitive races have since time immemorial been part of popular culture – but they implied the practice of hindering each other. This was excluded when games were transformed into modern sport: running was reorganised to be contested on parallel tracks, preventing the racers from touching each other, and aiming to produce certain, objective, quantified results. From the popular culture of festivity and game, some few running events have been preserved, now transformed into elements of folklore. Well-known is the Markgröninger Schäferlauf, which has its origin in a shepherd race in Württemberg. It continues as an annual folklore and tourist event. The race is known for its especially attractive feature: the ‘shepherdesses’ are allowed to hinder each other on the track.7

All this, however, is not only a question of history versus modernity. The practical problem arises with every new generation entering the educational system. When children are sent onto the track to learn the ‘correct’ sporting way of behaviour, they will begin by trying to hinder each other and jokingly push other about. Step by step, they have to be disciplined: ‘Don’t push each other, don’t shove!’

Typical of the popular type of race is the sack-race. The sack is an artificial handicap to make the participants tumble, and again you can ‘hear’ the event – in laughter. In popular races, tumbling is not a mistake or a drama, to be deplored, as it is in modern athletics, and to be described by sports journalists in tragic terms; it is instead a central, carnivalistic feature of movement.

In the same category are games of balance. Balancing is a play with imbalance and includes the probability of falling. The merriment provoked by falling is a typical pattern in popular games – in contrast to sport, where the fall, for instance, falling from the high bar of gymnastics, is a serious mistake.

The laughter accompanying popular types of movement – racing, balancing, jumping – may be connected with the contradiction between the curved line and the straight line. Sidestepping, detour, and ‘outcrop curvature’ (German: Hakenschlagen) constitute important sources of amusement and surprise. In this respect, tumbling can be related to the labyrinthine movement of games which contrasts with the straight line of the modern sports race8.

**Mock Fighting**

The curved movement of popular racing and tumbling can also be seen to be related to certain forms of fighting. Rowing tournaments in folk culture demonstrate this. Instead of competing on parallel courses for records, as in sports rowing, the people of folk-boating battled from boat to boat and tried to push each other into the water9.

The water tournament was thus a mock fight and tongue-in-cheek quarrel – this is what in Danish is called dyst. In contrast to the serious fighting of warriors and to the seriously regulated competition of modern sport, the dyst-fight includes the potential for mocking and laughter. A popular game playing particularly on these qualities of movement is the Nordic game ‘Markus and Lukas’. Two fighters stand at opposite sides of a table, both blindfolded and with a soft ‘sword’ in hand consisting of a piece of cloth or a rolled up newspaper. They move around calling each other by the names ‘Markus’ and ‘Lukas’ and then hit out towards each other in the direction of the voice10. The game is a variant of blind man’s buff – for two people. The participants and the spectators laugh. There will be neither a winner nor a loser – the grotesque process is what matters.

The rich world of pulling – from the German Fingerhakeln to the tug-of-war – has also strong elements of this mock fight. Tug-of-war is one of the few disciplines to have been excluded from the Olympics. Serious athletes regarded it as ‘something of a joke’11.

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THE GROTESQUE BODY

The game ‘mouth pull’, which is popular among Northern Inuit people, shows a further dimension of the culture of laughter: the display of the grotesque body. In ‘mouth pull’, two people stand shoulder to shoulder. Each puts his arm around his partner’s neck and sticks his forefinger into the other’s mouth. On a signal, both start pulling. Mouths and cheeks are distorted, eyes roll, the opponent’s features become grotesque. Intensifying their efforts, the competitors turn their heads outward, trying at one and the same time to relieve the pain and to resist more effectively, until one of them gives up\(^\text{12}\). Moreover, this competition can be ‘heard’. Spectators react to the eccentric deformation of the faces. The game exhibits the grotesque body.

A still more eccentric pulling event was portrayed by the Greenland painter Aron of Kangeq in the mid-nineteenth century. His painting showed the ‘arse’ pull. A group of Inuit assembles around two men competing with their trousers down. Between them stretches a short length of rope attached at each end to a piece of wood. The competitors pass these pieces through their legs and stick them behind their buttocks so as to tug on the rope using their back muscles\(^\text{13}\).

All this pull and tug may be competitive, but it is not sport. It is a form of play with the grotesque sides of bodily existence.

Besides the mouth and the ‘arse’, sexuality has always been a favoured theme of this presentation of the grotesque body\(^\text{14}\). Transvestite elements – men dressed as women and women behaving like men – were often a feature of popular festivity. In the Tatar festivity Sabantuy, a springtime holiday organised around korash wrestling, a woman performs movements which a man tries to imitate – and all burst into laughter. By sexual parody, the tensions and imbalances between the genders in Tatar patriarchy are displayed and exposed to common laughter\(^\text{15}\).

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\(^{14}\) The role of the grotesque body in popular carnival was emphasised by Mikhail Bakhtin 1968: Rabelais and his World. Cambridge: MIT.

THE FOOL

The culture of laughter also brought forth a special role or mask – the fool. The tomfool was an important character in popular games and competitions. The so-called *Medieval Hausbuch* from the fifteenth century shows a tournament of knights accompanied by a horse race of peasants; fools underscore the grotesque movement of the peasant race by, among other things, pulling the horses’ tails. On the copper engraving by Pieter Bruegel the Elder depicting ‘The Fair at Hoboken’ (1559) with its competitions, games and dances, the fool is in the foreground, holding children by the hand.

A special character of the foolish type was the *Pritschenmeister*, a droll or buffoon who played a central role in German urban shooting matches. His name derived from the *Pritsche*, a wooden sword or slapstick, which is also used by Kasperle, the punch of German puppet folk theatre. The *Pritschenmeister* hoaxed and teased the poorest scorer – even (or especially) if this was a high-ranking nobleman – presenting him with a strange prize: a flag made of coarse sackcloth fixed to a thorny branch – a parody of a mark of honour. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the *Pritschenmeister* became a special class of poets linked to these urban shooting festivities. They gave speeches with ‘foolish’ critical and humorous undertones. They ranged somewhere between the popular tradition of disrespectful laughter – and a pompous Baroque type of police, enforcing order.

The fool in the popular culture of laughter was poised between the ‘real fool’ who was a person with a mental handicap, and the ‘artificial fool’ who played the role of hoaxter as a sort of artist. In Danish village festivities up to the twentieth century, a ‘real’ fool could be given the title of leader. His ‘role’


20. Personal communication from a Danish student in the 1980s, recalling this custom from her home village.
for one day was poised between being mobbed as a handicapped person and being socially integrated into the local community\textsuperscript{21}.

**CARNIVAL: THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN**

Games were the bodily part of popular festivities, and especially of those which turned the world upside down, the carnival\textsuperscript{22}. Here, the ‘real fool’ would be king, and the king act as fool. In the ritualized anti-order of farce and burlesque, the rules of the church, of aristocratic hierarchy, of the wealthy, and of state authority were turned topsy-turvy. The principle of carnival was in high degree bodily. Normally, the body—like the populace—was ‘down there’. Now, for a day, the grotesque body was on top. The carnival-like aspect of the game is the context in which ‘forfeit’ appear. As in the initial example of Ljørslev, a forfeit was not a punishment, as in modern sports, but an important ingredient of the game. Without ‘mistakes’, there would be no drinking afterwards: without ‘penalties’ there would be no pleasure. Furthermore, it was not only the winners who would be rewarded, as was usual in urban shooting events, in aristocratic tournaments and in modern sports. Instead, the beer for the final feast was donated by the victorious side—as in the case of Cornish hurling\textsuperscript{23}. Turning the social world upside down, holding a carnival: this was also a feature of bodily competition.

During the Middle Ages and up to early modernity, people from the upper classes participated in this world of popular games and festivity, often as patrons, but also as players. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, they retreated and cultivated their own courtly festivities, inventing quasi-archaic tournaments, geometrical carrousels, and horse ballets. From these events, popular laughter was excluded. Laughter became a field of class struggle, authorities, by top-down regulation, trying to suppress popular laughter as ‘disorder’.

\textsuperscript{21} A particular version of the fool can be found in Trobriand cricket, seen in the classic anthropological film of Jerry W. Leach 1976: *Trobriand Cricket – an Ingenious Response to Colonialism*. Berkeley: University of California. In this Melanesian game, the fool played the role of the tourist photographing the sports event with a wooden camera.


\textsuperscript{23} Remuneration by the victorious side was a feature of many popular games around the world, among others of Al Kora, the hockey-like ballgame of Libyan Bedouins.
On the people’s side, laughter lay along a spectrum between the spontaneous laughter of the folk and the organized laughter which mocked certain people: the charivari. Farmers organized themselves in secret societies, consisting mostly of young bachelors and unmarried men, which went into action as soon as something went ‘wrong’ in society. In normal life, they would be responsible, for instance, for May festivities and would compete with other territorial groups in games, competitions and other events. But they could also appear at night, demonically disguised and with blackened faces, to turn their ‘weapon’ – collective laughter – against some person who was accused of acting against the rules of the community. The participants in this charivari organisation were often people from other places, called upon to help the locals who thus remained undiscovered. The malefactor was forced to stand in the circle and be subjected to ridicule, through speech and rhymes, mocking and hoaxing.

The charivari could become political. One of the last recorded cases was the trouble around the so-called Habererbund, a secret society of peasants in the Bavarian Alps in the nineteenth century. It directed a spectacular charivari against a nobleman who installed industrial sawmills and by so doing was accused of making people jobless. The laughter, organized nightly, exploded in armed clashes with police and military. It was not until the First World War that the state succeeded in defeating this outburst of organized laughter.

The Habererbund had some similarities with the way in which farmers used the game of ‘soule’ and similar football games. As this type of football spread out across the whole country, it conveniently damaged the hedges and destroyed the enclosures which the landowners had forced upon the farmers when taking possession of the common land. The game of ‘soule’, though an act of opposition, was legitimized by tradition and was ‘just a joke’, which the landowners found difficult to resist. The game spilled over into political-economic conflict.

There is no one all-encompassing name for the various elements that make up the configuration of popular laughter in games. But one pattern may have general significance: laughter at failure. In popular games, the ridiculous failure of the other was balanced by ironic laughter at one’s own failure. Trying to hit

25. The Breton ballgame La soule was played between several teams from village to village across the whole landscape. In our day it is still living at least one place in rural Brittany. A book of photographs tells the present-day story: Serge Moelo, & Jean-Pierre Le Bihan, 1986 : Kergohann hag ar vellad/Kergohann et la soule. Loudéac, Dastum.
the target implies the risk of failing to hit the target. Playing at being the loser means playing at failure. Tumbling and mock fighting create ironic situations of unwanted outcome. The grotesque body displays what is imperfect in human shape. The fool and the carnival are images of things going ‘wrong’ in life. All this gives birth to laughter, which is thus linked to a deep recognition of human failure and blurs the edges between success and failure which are sharpened by the modern culture of perfection.

MODERN SPORTS: LAUGHTER GOES UNDERGROUND

The dialectics between failure and perfection may form a background for the understanding of the modern repression of laughter. The process of early-modern state formation was accompanied by many forms of prohibition and prosecution, which were directed against popular laughter and the related forms of festivity and games. These have been described elsewhere in detail.\(^\text{27}\) For the topic of body culture, the prosecution of football and ‘soule’ through the centuries is especially illustrative.\(^\text{28}\)

The direct repression by prohibitive edicts had, however, a very limited punch. More effective were the attempts to create alternative and ‘well-ordered’ forms of body culture. Authorities tried to transform local fairs into military parades and musters.\(^\text{29}\) But it was especially modern sport which became an efficient instrument for disciplining popular culture, displacing the old games. Sport combined enjoyment and entertainment with streamlining following the patterns of industrial culture – the running track, the individual career, societal ‘progress’ – while avoiding the carnival-like elements of popular games.

In modern sport, the fool and the carnivalesque Pritschenmeister of the early modern rilemen’s meetings disappeared. When competition and play became means of production\(^\text{30}\) – the production of results and records – laughter became marginal or even dysfunctional. Neither the umpire or referee nor the

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\(^\text{29}\) Schaufelberger 1972.

sports functionary handing over the medals is a fool or could be replaced by a fool. Pierre de Coubertin’s Olympism developed rituals of a special solemnity which underline the serious ‘religiosity’ of the Olympic events, though the emptiness of their ‘meaningful’ gestures may make these appear involuntarily grotesque. And the newly-constructed discipline of ‘sports history’, describing the rational and progressive development of the principle of performance, had to forget the laughter – and the history of its disappearance.

On the level of superstructure, it has been claimed that, in the case of Germany the Enlightenment drove laughter out of the understanding of human life. From Immanuel Kant to Jürgen Habermas, there is no link between laughter and the quest for truth.

Fundamental to this shift was the change in bodily-practical patterns. Henceforth, there was to be no push and shove on the agenda of sport, no pull, no playing the loser, no mock fight – and no laughter in the churchyard. Very few hitting-the-target games and balancing exercises were left. Races, throwing and water activities were rationalized in order to produce results and records – *citius, altius, fortius*.

By this change, sport and circus were separated. While sport occupied the terrain of seriousness, circus shaped its own realm. Both phenomena were specifically modern. Both displayed in some way bodily excellence and ‘acrobatic’ skill. But one of them – the circus – kept the clown in a central role while sport excluded this figure. That is why during the nineteenth century, sport, and especially the pedagogy of Physical Education, were eager to distance themselves from the circus which was ‘non-serious’ and a joke.

In the nineteenth century, gymnastics tried to develop as an alternative to sport and competed with it in seriousness. The participants had to behave ‘correctly’, following defined rules of a medical-scientific, educational or aesthetic character. None of these rules left space for laughter – though there may have been some individual gymnastic instructors who developed a laughter-provoking or moderately clown-like style. In mass gymnastics, as in the East European Spartakiads, laughter was regarded as counterproductive or even subversive.

To this practice corresponded the different theories of sport achievement and of sport action, like Anglo-American functionalism or the ‘oppositional’ German *Handlungstheorie* of the 1980s. Systematically and theoretically, they made laughter disappear.

33. For a critical view of *Handlungstheorie* see Henning Eichberg 1985: ‘Handlung, Spielraum, Spiel-Raum.’
And yet sport is practised by human beings, and human beings laugh. Laughter in sports went underground. A phenomenology of laughter in modern sports is different from that of popular games.

THE LAUGHTER OF SUPERIORITY

In sport, one may hear the triumphant laughter whose undertones mock and deride the loser. This is not ‘fair play’, nor being a ‘good sport’, and yet... The laughter of triumph following one’s own success fits into the culture of competing for the top-position in the modern pyramid of sport. This top-down laughter, from a position of superiority, may correspond to what, since Henri Bergson, has been theorized by modern philosophers of laughter. Here, laughter has the function of derision, of laughing at the scapegoat. Making fun of the other was also the background to some feminist theorists who felt their gender insulted by male laughter and in reaction considered a sort of laughter strike. This understanding of laughter, as top-down scorn, was also at the root of the modern misunderstanding that ‘playing the loser’ in popular games was a way of determining a scapegoat or of imposing punishment.

THE DRAMA OF FAILURE

Falling over on the race track, falling off the gymnastic bar, taking a tumble on the football pitch – all this happens in the world of sport but is regarded as accident, not as a welcome pretext for laughter. When a top runner falls, spectators catch their breath: this is drama, and the unlucky faller may burst into tears. Sport, in contrast to popular games – is movement arranged to produce results measured by fixed scales. Whatever the numbers which are produced – centimetres, grams, seconds, and points – there is nothing to laugh at.
THE SMILE OF THE WOULD-BE WINNER – SMILE OF THE SALESMAN

Generally, there seems to be more smiling than laughter in sport. For the public, the victorious athlete smiles into the camera. In this situation, the athlete neither laughs at others nor at something nor at himself, but rather presents his or her own image by smiling: ‘Look at me!’ This is related to the smile of the seller – selling a product and selling him – or herself. Smiling expresses happiness, which is important for creating social atmosphere and facilitating communication. However, smiling was also very well suited to the cult of happiness under regimes like Soviet Stalinism. While laughter was regarded as a dangerous subversion of the Stalinist system, the iconology of smiling was strongly promoted by means of painting, sculpture and film38. There was a deep contradiction between the smile of ‘socialist happiness’ on one hand and the subversion of laughter on the other. The smiling sports athlete played an important role in Stalinist ‘socialist realism’. There was no failure and there could not be any failure in the perfection of ‘scientific communism’, therefore laughter had to be mistrusted.

This may throw light on a deeper contradiction between the striving for perfection in sports and the cultivation of smiling. And on the links between the repression of failure and the disappearance of laughter.

THE FITNESS SMILE

In modern body culture, there developed a rival model side by side with sport: gymnastics. In gymnastics, as in sport, the athlete is trained to keep smiling. The ‘fitness’ smile is part of the health-sport ‘habitus’ and has been upgraded by the recent surge in popularity of fitness for health: smile while exercising hard. If there is pain in the body, just smile – this is what the hygienics of the fitness movement teaches39. Aesthetic sports like synchronized swimming have taken this on.

The exercises of gymnastics and fitness aim at perfection. That is why laughter has no legitimate place here. In the popular practice of gymnastics, however, failure may give rise to laughter. Thus, for example, Danish so-called folkelig gymnastics displays some carnivalesque characteristics beneath the surface of modern disciplining exercises.

Laughter and smiling are different in bodily rhythm. Where the laughter of games is a spontaneous eruption, the smiling of fitness expresses self-control and normalization. You do not ‘burst into a smile’.

**FAN LAUGHTER**

Beneath the surface of mainstream sport and gymnastics, however, there is some more polyphonic sound in the larger world of sports. There one finds dissidence and an underground of laughter. Carnival has for instance invaded the world of the fans. Fan laughter is highly differentiated. The community-embracing laughter of the soft supporter, who appeared during the 1980s and in Danish is called a *roligan*, contrasts with the aggressive laughter of the violent supporter, the hooligan. Recent supporter groups known as ‘ultras’ and ‘casuals’ further differentiate this picture. Together, they manifest the underground presence of festivity and laughter. Again, however, disciplining strategies are on their way. Cheer-leading produces and trains a formalized, militarized form of smiling culture. Attuning the laughter of the supporter to modern happiness...

Even the phenomenon of streaking has been tamed and disciplined. Since the early 1970s, naked individuals have now and then been seen emerging from the crowd and running onto the sports field, attracting security officials – and the cameras of media. Developing against the background of the counter-culture on university campuses, streaking could be placed somewhere between demonstration, taboo-breaking provocation, personal pleasure and personal craze. What had been an action designed to shock the public or make them laugh, was, however, discovered in the 1990s by the entertainment industry and related business interests as a field of possible exploitation. Enterprises began to hire streakers to advertise on their naked bodies, and so began a strange melange of soft porn and commercialization.

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NEW GAMES – NEW CIRCUS

From the underground of modern movement culture, the New Games of the nineteen-seventies and eighties brought a new form of carnivalism into the world of sports (or anti-sports)\(^{44}\). This had a background in Californian hippie culture. In New Games, it was the process, not the result that counted. Inspired by this, the activities of the acrobat and the clown came to hold a new attraction and invaded school sport and Physical Education. This was a fundamental break with two hundred years of educational attempts to hold the ‘circus’ at a distance.

DARK LAUGHTER?

What deserves closer analysis is the role of laughter in other types of underground activities, in the world of subversive and ‘dark games’. They extend from the softer versions like the recent street-games ‘parkour’ and ‘urban tricking’ through façade climbing and bungee jumping to dangerous games like metro-surfing. The game-researcher Brian Sutton-Smith has warned against the idealization of play and game, pointing to games of risk and danger which are typically undertaken under the influence of alcohol\(^{45}\). Many of these non-sportive activities are characterized by laughter. So there is no reason, on the other hand, to idealize.

Or to put it in another way: are there certain forms of underground laughter corresponding to what in history has been called ‘diabolic laughter’?

LAUGHTER AS A CONVULSION OF THE SOCIAL BODY

From these contradictions inside sport and between sport and popular games, there may arise further questions about the social and psychological connections between the evolution of sport and the suppression of laughter. This throws, more generally, light on the – subversive? – role of laughter in the development of the modern Western culture of achievement as it relates to production and power, and all this on the level of bodily practice.


What appears on the horizon is the anthropology of laughter⁴⁶. Anthropology touches three levels – the body, the psyche, and social relations. It has become evident that laughter has a **bodily base**⁴⁷. Laughter is more than the reaction to a cognitive point, such as follows the joke, and more than an expression of emotion, more than ‘humour’ and ‘merriment’. Laughter is also related to the body-nonsense of slapstick – from Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy to Mister Bean. Laughter is physically convulsive. One can talk about a ‘physiology of laughter’⁴⁸. But the term ‘physiology’, conforming to scientific norms, can be misleading, as laughter cannot – like biological physiology – be decoupled from cultural practice. And yet, as a bodily process of convulsion, laughter is existential and universal – like pain, schadenfreude, hubris⁴⁹... At the same time, laughter is an explosion of **psychic energy** and creates a social-psychic atmosphere⁵⁰. How this energy – with its physical and psychic dimensions – can be understood in the framework of cultural studies, remains so far an open question⁵¹.

And last but not least, the bodily and energetic process of laughter is linked to **social relations**. The phenomenon of tickling illustrates this: we cannot tickle ourselves – we can only be tickled by other people. This shows the limits of the physiological approach – and it shows that social relations are bodily in a very special way: they are inter-bodily.

Social relations also have political dimensions. For the reorganization of European sports policies, the authorities of Olympic sport in Europe have recently proposed the so-called ‘European Sport Model’, which has the form of a pyramid⁵². The icon of the pyramid represents, as has been argued, the hierarchy of achievement, of ranking, of graded competitions – and of top-down control.

⁵⁰. At the very beginnings of modern psychology one finds the empirical approach of Hall/Allin 1897.
⁵². See footnote 34.
At the same time however, the pyramid is the configuration which historically has excluded and now continues to exclude laughter from the world of sport. The pyramid represents graduated perfection. To explain their model, the European sport authorities chose football as paradigm. However, the world of football as popular practice is much greater than appears in the hierarchical win-or-lose competitions transmitted on TV. Football includes street football, pub teams, ‘wild clubs’, and children’s football, as well as remnants of old popular games like Ashbourne Shrovetide Football, which has been called ‘one of the world’s oldest, largest, longest and maddest football games’.53 Most or all of these popular football practices are linked to laughter. The ‘European’ pyramid, in contrast, is rather a pattern of perfection and anti-laughter.

In this context, one may ask what the concept of ‘European laughter’ describes—or whether it is perhaps misleading. Some contributions to the colloquium under the title ‘European Laughter’ (in Perpignan, 2007) indicated that laughter is popular, local, ethnic, sub-cultural, nationally differentiated, and that it has also some trans-cultural and universal dimensions, but that it is not ‘European’. In the case of the ‘European Sport Model’ it appears that the adjective ‘European’ designates something like exclusion, control, and the colonization of laughter.

BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

Let us now turn back to the body-cultural base of laughter. Anthropological reflection and historical observation have shown that laughter is more than just ‘text’. Indeed, humorous genres of literature, jokes, stand-up comedians, TV comedies, satirical sketches, cartoons, grotesque sculptures etc. present a great range of material from various cultures of laughter, but beneath all this, there is a base of body, energy and atmosphere. Umberto Eco’s famous criminal novel about laughter and labyrinth has delivered an important—though involuntary—contribution to the study of the relation between words and practice, between base and superstructure.55

Eco’s novel describes the ‘labyrinth’ as a confusing building, a maze, puzzle or *Irrgarten*, where the protagonist searches for the right way between false pathways and dead ends, permanently confronted with situations of choice. Blind alleys lead the searcher astray; he may feel lost. Eco illustrated this world of entanglement and criminological quest, however, by the now destroyed floor mosaic in the medieval cathedral of Reims, which was a classical labyrinth

This illustration did not fit the novel’s description. The classical labyrinth offers only one single way. There is no possibility of going astray, nor any situation of choice. The path leads in a complex way, changing directions, but on one unmistakable track to the centre where one has to turn in order to get out again. The labyrinthine movement is swinging and rhythmic, a dreamlike flow of detours – in contrast to the pseudo-labyrinthine maze where movement is characterised by discontinuity, jumping from cross-point to cross-point, from one situation of choice and doubt to the next: ‘Have I chosen the right way’? Thus, with respect to bodily movement, the labyrinth and the pseudo-labyrinthine maze are two different configurations. On the level of words, in the superstructure of text and fiction, they can be confused. But on the level of bodily practice, there is fundamental difference.

This illustrates some fundamental problems between word and practice. Eco’s semiotic credo – ‘the world as text, the text as world’ – remains on the level of superstructure, where all is possible, and anything can be thought. But on the level of human bodily existence, one practice may exclude another.

The classical labyrinth was a pattern of dance and game, and the children’s games in the paths of the labyrinth were – and are – full of laughter. The labyrinthine mosaic in the cathedral of Reims was removed in the eighteenth century, because playing children disturbed the sacred atmosphere by their laughter. The labyrinth is the dance of the joker, the world of the fool. And we are allowed to laugh at the intellectual confusion of the semiotic philosopher Umberto Eco who intellectually ‘forgot’ the body. Who let his protagonist search in a labyrinth where there was nothing to search for, only something to find.

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57. This is what Eco did. Her was well aware of the two different labyrinth patterns, but introduced a third ‘labyrinth’ pattern, which he called network labyrinth (with reference to Deleuze and Guattari) or labyrinth of assumption, presumption, supposition or conjecture (with criminological association): Eco 1985: p. 53-56. This third type of labyrinth, which Eco applied to his novel, was free of bodily practice and purely imaginative or semiotic.

A CASE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: LAUGHTER DUEL IN INUIT CULTURE

The study of laughter profits from intercultural comparison. Let us take a side-step to Greenland – inside the Danish state, but outside Europe, a culture of the so-called Fourth World.

The Inuit of the Northern regions are known for their inclination to laugh. Their game of mouth pulling was mentioned above. ‘Inuit boxing’ differs from European sport boxing by, among other things, the role of laughter. What in Western gymnastics is the horizontal bar, in Inuit culture is a laughter-generating attempt to balance on the seal rope. Jumping on the walrus skin is a display of grotesque movements. A particular work of art in this laughter culture is the drum dance, which for centuries helped this stateless society to do without the judicial power of chiefs – because, through laughter, the public acted as a collective ‘judge’. One of the first to describe this meeting between opposing dancers was the Danish poet Hans Christian Andersen in the 1830s: ‘The assembly laughed and judged’.

Drum dance is a multiple work of art. First of all it is music and rhythm, which the dancer produces with the large frame-drum in hand. Then it is a dance, which is presented singly, in pairs or in groups. Central to the drum dance is singing. The narrative of the song may consist of wordless chains of sound, ya-ya-ya, or it may be elaborated both rhetorically and by content; in this form, drum dance is central to the literary tradition of the Inuit. The poetical-rhythmic song is underlined by bodily movements, which are often grotesque, clown-like and laughter-provoking.

This art can be practised as entertainment at a festivity – typically in the winter house, – or as a competition for the public, as something like ‘sport’. It may also be a serious fight designed to provoke the opponent, a duel. Drum dance can also form part of an exorcising ritual, working to stave off dangers to the community. Embodying traits of magic, it is a central activity of the Inuit shaman as an ecstatic healer. Through collective trance, the community confirms itself. In recent times, drum dance has also been used as a means of political expression by anti-colonial Inuit movements.

Among these forms, the juridical duel deserves special attention. The stateless society of the Inuit needed forms of conflict solution, as there was no chieftain as judging authority. If a conflict inside the community threatened to escalate, the individuals involved in the quarrel or their fellow inhabitants could decide to hold a drum dance\textsuperscript{62}.

The ‘judicial’ drum dance was a sort of duel, but did not directly threaten the opponent’s life. First, one of the two attacked with drum in hand. His song accused his opponent, offended him and challenged him by provocative body language. The aggressor moved close to the face of his opponent, breaking into his intimate space. Face to face, this verged on head boxing. The verses were carefully prepared, as for a judicial indictment, and the tune could be taken from the family heritage. The opponent had to endure this. He had to hold out, smiling and with relaxed demeanour, to show that right was on his side. He knew they would later exchange roles, and then it would be his turn to ridicule the other.

But the bodily dialogue consisted of more than the two opponents. The whole community would surround them in a circle, watching – and laughing. Their laughter was the collective ‘judge’ of the scene. There was no need for a superior authority: all the people present could read the body language of the opponents – and could participate in the decision-making process by their laughter. For some time, the outcome could remain uncertain, floating and wavering between the fighters. Who would lose his composure, the easy flow of movement, the smile? But then the moment would come when laughter took sides, in favour of one of the two and against the other. The laughter of the community, vibrating collectively, ‘decided’ the case\textsuperscript{63}.

There could be diverse outcomes to this event. One of the opponents could be laughed out of court in a way that made it impossible for him to remain in the local community. Excluded, he would emigrate – and maybe die in the wilderness of the North. But another possible outcome was to unite the two opponents through this joint theatrical display. Their grotesque interaction could give both of them status and thus emotionally defuse the original tension.

The social advantage of drum dance was that it allowed the open expression of hidden stories in the community which otherwise could not or would not be revealed. In drum dance, it was also possible to rise above some one else and put him down – which was otherwise strictly taboo in everyday Inuit life,

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dominated as it was by norms of humility and self-restriction. The grotesque drama made this inversion possible. In a laughter-cultural context, the boasting of the opponents was both real and play-acting. The result depended on a complex balance: if one of the dancers went too far, the laughter of the spectators could turn against him. And yet, here, even the grumbler and troublemaker had a chance to translate his machinations into cultural performance. Last but not least, laughter kept its ambivalence, its social ambiguity. Laughter has – just like the expressive body – not one unequivocal meaning. It is open to differing interpretations – which can go in very different directions. After a drum dance, every participating group could go home with the firm conviction that ‘our man, our woman’ won. There were no centimetres, grams or seconds – as in sport – to disprove this evaluation. In this respect, laughter was and is a part of social wealth within this culture. It is not only order and perfection that create cultural richness, it is also the disorder of the imperfect human being that implies human qualities. Laughter has a quality which is related to fractal chaos. And yet, laughter, like play and game – is not harmless. Laughter is human – and it can be diabolical... And academic discourse about laughter is not harmless either. What happens when the cold hand of academia seeks to close its grip on this most human of convulsions?