

# Why We Laugh

## <some theories />

Victorianism

Tendentiousness

People Acting Like Machines

The Three Part Joke Structure

# Two Victorian Theories of Comedy

- **Henri Bergson:** humans have become too much like machines, and so **we laugh at inelastic or repetitive behavior** as a way to correct their growing inhumanity and mindlessness.
- **Sigmund Freud:** humans have to repress certain sexual and aggressive impulses to exist in polite society. **We tell jokes as a way to express these impulses, and laugh as a way to gain pleasure** where we would otherwise be denied it.

# Victorianism

- Both of these theories take an unspoken cultural norm (a sort of cultural superego) for granted, **which happened to be staunchly oppressive and Victorian.**
- It is historically useful to note where our contemporary culture is different and similar in our appreciation of the comedic.

# Comedy's Social Activation

- “To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society [...] laughter **must answer to certain requirements of life in common.** It must have a social signification” (Bergson).
- “Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo [...] our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (Bergson).
- **Our appreciation of the comic comes directly from our interactions as social beings.**

# Freud's Three-Part Joke Structure

- “Generally speaking, **a joke calls for three people**: the one who makes the joke, the second who is taken as the object of the aggressiveness of the joke, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled.”

# Tendentious Jokes

- Freud is talking about **Tendentious jokes**, jokes that contain unspoken sexual, political, or aggressive content.
- Because people aren't allowed to say certain things, they use jokes as a way to access repressed content.
- **Most contemporary comedy is tendentious.**

# Example: David Cross

- From *Bigger and Blacker* (2010)
- ~30min talks about religion and universal healthcare debate.
- Brings out an unspoken, untested logic present in certain political rhetoric.

# Bergson's Mechanization

- **Physical mechanization/ineleasticity:**  
repeating the same limited physical action in response to different input, or for a long arbitrary duration.
- **Mental mechanization/ineleasticity:**  
displaying arbitrarily limited response to a wide variety of different input.  
Dogmatic, political, personal.



# Bergson's Mechanization

- **society will therefore be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character**, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity **as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies**, that inclines to swerve from the common centre around which society gravitates: **in short, it is a sign of eccentricity”** (13).
- **Laughter is, above all, a corrective.** Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness” (93).

# The Catalina Wine Mixer (POW!)

- We've already seen this ...
- The repetition of a meaningless exclamation shows us something about the mindlessness of this character.
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs0uLXodDVA>

# Family Guy

- Uses this device all the time.
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNkp4QF3we8>

# A Serious Man (Coen Brothers 2009)

- The Coen Brothers develop this Bergsonian mode of humor in many of their films, especially verbally.
- Characters will often repeat words or phrases as a response to varied input or questions without changing their response.
- This is important to the Coens' oeuvre, because many of their films are about the loss of humanity --

# A Serious Man

- Who is inelastic in this film and what do they gain from being inelastic? What do they lose?
- What do people in this film consider inelastic? What do they punish and how?
- How does what is considered 'socially unacceptable' change? How does that differ from what we, as the audience, might find socially unacceptable?

# Comedy as Social Conscience

- Sometimes comedy finds inelastic and antisocial behavior and makes some kind of overall critique of them.
- It does a meta critique of society by talking about the things that it wants to hide or repress.

# **Louis CK: Hilarious (2010)**

- What are some specific example of social inelasticities does Louis critique?
- What are some specific examples of this film's tendentiousness?