

Editor's Introduction: Modernism's Laughter

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This special issue of *Modernist Cultures* is animated by two claims. First, that modernism is funny, and the moderns inveterate laughers, gigglers, joke-pullers, and devastating wags. Second, that modernism's ubiquitous laughter is overlooked, undertheorized, and downright gagged by the aura of high seriousness that still infuses critical descriptions of modernism: of its heroic gambits to shore up a besieged world of authenticity, plenitude, and presence; of its aristocratic disdain for the enervating banality of quotidian modernity; of its arch and unfeeling formalism. This lacuna is due, perhaps, to the fact that attention to modernism's laughter messes with our map of modernism, confounding familiar distinctions between modernism's mainstream and its margins, its heroes and its villains, and making some strange bedfellows along the way. Follow the modern ridiculous, for example, and you'll find funny connections between the coterie chuckles of the Stieglitz circle and the absurd antics of slapstick screen comics. Pursue the modern appetite for satiric violence, and you'll see curious affinities between Catholics and cannibals, conservative cranks and Marxist queers, avant-garde ideology critique and the public performances of modernity's most famous clowns. Of course, laughter has long been understood to be fueled by such incongruities, and so I should say, at the outset, that we hope you find this issue laughable. And I say "we" to you first because laughter is always involved in the cultivation of community, and because this issue urges us to find modernism funny again.¹ Inviting us to consider the promiscuous spectrum of comic phenomena playing across a range of modernist cultures, these essays ask, together: what happens if we take seriously modernism's attempts not to take things so seriously?

One persuasive attempt to do exactly this is Tyrus Miller's important revision of modernist periodization, which holds that the transcendent negotiation of a traumatic socius became more difficult during the "late modernism" of Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, and Samuel Beckett. If, as Miller asserts, laughter in late modernism marks "the comical inability of humans to consummate the man-machine," then it can no longer fulfill the redemptive function Henri Bergson famously ascribed to it, repairing mechanical breaches in the social pulse of the *élan vital*.² Stripped of its purgative utility, the laugh of late modernism marks, for Miller, the "minimal spatial difference between conscious life and the pure extensivity of dead nature: a difference that preserves the subject, however diminished, in situations of adversity" (Miller, 51). On one level, of course, this formulation of laughter is explicitly non-romantic, erupting from the very inextricability of the vital and the mechanical in the late modern period. On another, though, the defensive, self-confirming telos of such laughter seems to confirm a pesky romantic strain in modernist formulations of the comic: the aristocratic laughter that, for Baudelaire, sounds "the joy at [man's] own superiority and the joy of man's superiority over nature";³ the transcendent irony through which, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, the artist "tears himself away from the world of contingencies."⁴

Provoked by Miller's powerful formulation, this special issue asks: how might we understand modernism's laughter more broadly as a phenomenon irreducible to a defensive buffering of the ego, or a romantic victory over material contingency? The following essays find a variety of answers to this question, to wit: modernism's laughter is a mode of gay affirmation; a wry form of spiritual conviction in a post-consensus world; a comic engine producing transgressive affects as compensation for metropolitan *ennui*; a manner of dislocating subjectivity and opening new and less violent forms of ethical relation; a sign of the very spontaneity and naturalness of capitalist ideology; a subversion of the values of industrial modernity; and a manifestation of the exile's melancholy.

Taken together, the essays work to remind us that modernism's laughter is inextricably connected to its understanding of the limits of the social world. A joke, Freud knew, is only a joke if someone laughs besides the teller. And thus, in its various failings and successes, modernism's laughter can

express and affirm homosexual difference, as Tyrus Miller argues in his essay in this collection; or, as Evelyn Waugh's laughter does, it can produce negatively an awareness of the fall of epic community, as Alan Dale contends; or revitalize dialectically a jaded metropolitan one, as Jonathan Greenberg claims. Modernism's laughter can trace the unboundedness of a self opening towards an inassimilable alterity, as Judith Brown argues of Sherwood Anderson's dark laughter. And it can, as Paul Morrison asserts, *domesticate* excessive modes of expressivity within normative bourgeois protocols, just as easily as it can, as William Solomon suggests, *produce* anarchic excess through the collective experience of machine-age irrationality, or, as I argue, mark a form of political feeling that has not yet found its public. Modernism's laughter operates on the unstable seam of sociality, provoking identifications and disidentifications, cultivating intimacies, and ruthlessly dividing the social field into sophisticates and rubes, comrades and enemies, laughing subjects and comic objects. In this sense, laughter at once enabled moderns to come to grips with the transformation of human society wrought by modernity and allowed modernism actively to refashion the contours of the self and the boundaries of community.

Tyrus Miller's "Ridiculously Modern Marsden" explores the peculiar comic register of "the ridiculous" and its modernity through the self-directed laughter of modernist painter and poet Marsden Hartley. A modern on the margins of the Stieglitz circle, and one who – like his friend Charles Demuth – too often found his homosexuality the butt of the joke among his fellow artists, Hartley chose to turn himself into an object of comedy. This work of making himself ridiculous, Miller argues, was "rooted in Hartley's consciousness of homosexual difference," and strategically "*expressed* his artistic seriousness and motivated the modernistic energy of his artistic idiom." What's more, Miller places this strategic ridiculousness in a genealogy of modern self-reflection and subjective freedom connecting Jean-Paul Richter, Baudelaire, and Dostoevsky. The ridiculous, Miller claims, is "one of the specific ways modernity may be artistically expressed" – an expression of a self-divided mind that, pushing this division to the point of extreme fragmentation, culminates in satanic laughter or courts linguistic incomprehension. Tracing the play of this ostentatious self-ridicule in Hartley's critical writing, poems, and painting, Miller shows how Hartley twins comedy and tragedy, turning laughter into a sign of ridiculous authenticity, a strange mode of gay affirmation.

Within the modern tradition of the ridiculous, laughter marks the comic subject's implication within, and attempt to distance itself from, those social and moral hierarchies that fetter it. The moral judgment that Hartley's queer ridiculousness would at once acknowledge and surpass echoes, as Miller's essay points out, the doubleness of laughter in the Baudelairean formulation: the laugher at once distances himself from that condition of human fallibility he locates in his comic object and identifies with this fallenness. Laughter, for Baudelaire, is the comic product of this moral contradiction; the quintessentially modern joke is that our capacity for reflection ushers in an awareness of a more fundamental incapacity – our imperfection, our human finitude. As this issue's pair of essays on the work of Evelyn Waugh demonstrates, modernist satire is similarly characterized by the vertiginous blurring of distanced moral judgment and identification with morally transgressive behavior.

In "To Crie Alarme Spiritual: Evelyn Waugh and the Ironic Community" Alan Dale accounts for the spiritual dimensions of Waugh's satire in the early, ultra-modern novels, *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934). Behind Waugh's facade of hyper-drollery, Dale insists, are the convictions of a spiritual absolutist whose comic fury is all the more intense because the position of religious faith from which it issues remains veiled. Placing Waugh's novels in the decidedly non-modern ambit of medieval Catholic satire, Dale argues that the modernity of Waugh's novels inheres in their post-consensus context, in which a stable theological ground can no longer be taken for granted. In the fallen world of these books "the satiric norm is absent beyond conjuring," and Waugh's coldness and cruelty follow from his distance from the characters he so mercilessly skewers and from his curious reticence about the spiritual values that subtend his comedy. Why, then, this strategy of negative comic signification? Why refuse to state the values and models of heroic behavior against which Waugh measures the modern person and finds it so pathetically lacking? Dale answers that Waugh's

didacticism is abetted by laughter, because "sin is more varied than saintliness, and more memorable because more awful." The satirist's reticence about his belief in fact helps to *enact* the "condition of irony – the modern condition . . . the sense of living without consensus as to an overarching theophilosophical system." Waugh's strange modernism lies in his willingness to let us misread him, to *not* get his biggest joke, which is always already on us. These are damned funny books indeed.

But how easily can one separate the morality that often buttresses satire's comic violence from the disreputable, unseemly, or otherwise excessive pleasures afforded by satire? In "Cannibals and Catholics: Reading the Reading of Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*," Jonathan Greenberg explores satire's unstable dynamic of enjoyment and identification, one always threatening to careen out of the author's control. As an example of this instability, Greenberg offers the messy public debate in which Waugh attempted to defend himself from the Catholic press's charge that his novel *Black Mischief* was an immoral book. Waugh's defenses – that his offended readers mistook his irony, that his book was in fact a moral condemnation of the actions it represented, and that its cruelty was, finally, fictional after all – only serve to demonstrate, for Greenberg, satire's *dialectical* nature: the structural inextricability of morality and sadistic pleasure, outrage and amusement, anger and blasé indifference. Waugh's comedy issues from "a complicated dynamic whereby we can identify with the perpetrators of vice, distance ourselves from its victims, and justify our position through defensive constructions." We glimpse Waugh's own cannibalism, then, in his evident "appetite for the horrors he perpetrates." Moreover, Waugh's production of transgressive affect, troped thematically though the novel's primitivism, fuels a specifically modernist emotional dynamic. In it, the pervasive boredom that characterizes the metropolitan characters – and that is enacted in the unflappable sophistication of Waugh's own prose – is combated through satire's own cannibalism, producing tasty new affects for the blasé metropolitan subject.

Taking a different approach to laughter's supposed primitivism, Judith Brown's essay, "A Certain Laughter: Sherwood Anderson's Experiment in Form," reads Anderson's 1925 novel *Dark Laughter* in the context of the explosion of theoretical treatments of laughter that emerge in the early 1920s in the traumatic wake of the Great War. At first glance, the novel's formulation of laughter seems to be structured by a familiar primitivist binary: on the one hand, Anderson critiques the sophisticated irony of post-war European decadents in a way that conjoins whiteness, deathliness, and mechanization; on the other, Anderson locates a vital laughter in the African-American characters haunting his novel's margins, a laughter that signals an unalienated relationship to the body that becomes the locale of Anderson's authentically American modernist idiom. But Brown argues that this putative ground of the body and sensation is decidedly unstable in Anderson's text, and that the novel finally erodes the tired binary of black vitality and white deathliness in its more radical attempts to intertwine laughter and narrative form. "Laughter," Brown suggests, "conceived as outside the boundaries of language and the rigid posture of the modern subject, emerges as a useful though uncontrollable form, a form compatible with modernist literary experimentation and its aesthetics of formal violence." The work of the novel's modernism *doubles* the play of the novel's fluid and deforming laughter, both, together, reconceiving the limits of modern subjectivity and allowing for new modes of ethical relation that do not eclipse other subjectivities in the process of dislocating character. Recuperating the disruptive potential of modernist laughter, Brown reads Anderson's *Dark Laughter* through the scene of redemptive collective laughter that concludes Preston Sturges's film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Whereas Sturges offers the salve of collective laughter as a fantasy of nondifferentiation from laughing others, Anderson's dark laughter preserves the uncertain play of difference, undermining the alleged superiority of the laugher.

Both Greenberg's and Brown's essays remind us that laughter is an inescapably corporeal phenomenon. *Some body is affected*: the face twitches and then splits as sound spews from the mouth. Later this eruption will be registered as a titter or a chuckle, a cackle or a guffaw, but as laughter happens what matters most is its impingement on the body, the somatic fact of being moved. In Waugh's case, this embodied dimension of the laugh implicates the satirist in the immoral pleasures he decries, and in Anderson's case, it threatens to secure the authenticity of embodied experience in the

supposed vitality of an idealized other. But in Paul Morrison's "Garbo Laughs!" the grounding of laughter in soma suggests that "the body is naturally capitalist" and thus secures the status of capitalism as pre-ideological, as self-evident as the sweetness of champagne, the charm of silly hats, or the desire of a good woman to settle down with a good woman in a nice "house house."

Through a witty close reading of Ernst Lubitsch's film *Ninotchka* (1939) – a Greta Garbo comedy explicitly marketed through the promise that in it the infamously impassive "face of the century" would, in fact, *laugh* – Morrison reads Lubitsch's film as a parable of the descent of Greta Garbo's gestural excess to bourgeois intelligibility, and thus, of the domestication of her very modernism. In its remaking of Garbo's star persona, *Ninotchka* seeks to render the Garbo myth universally accessible, her inexpressive visage psychologically transparent. The film's refashioning of Garbo through the story of her character's metamorphosis from unsmiling Bolshevik to laughing capitalist hinges on a moral distinction between wit – linked in the film to aristocratic composure, unnatural gender relations, and an unseemly distance from bodily appetite – and healthy laughter, the sign of a body free to be its smiling self. But this distinction is also a political one: between the Soviet characters witty expressions of *distance from* communist ideology and the American characters tendency to see laughter as a *release from* the ideological deformations of the body when it is, Morrison argues, the mode in which capitalist ideology insinuates itself as bodily truth. Garbo's laugh thus marks the eclipse of modernist gesture at its most sublime – the refusal of the so-called naturalness of bourgeois bodily appetites.

If Brown's and Morrison's essays measure the radical gestures of modernism – its refusal of commonplace bourgeois romances of racial or sexual desire and the ideologies of embodied laughter that structure them – against the domesticating forces of Hollywood laughter, the issue's final two essays trouble the boundaries between modernist critique and screen comedy. In his essay, "Slapstick Modernism: Charlie Bowers and Industrial Modernity," William Solomon asks us to consider how vernacular and avant-garde comic practice might function as twinned responses to standardized mass production and the rationalization of the workplace. Complicating our tendency to understand modernism's various machine aesthetics as eerie proto-fascist premonitions of the condition of total mobilization, Solomon's slapstick modernism offers a means of "facilitating physical and psychic adjustments to the conditions of existence within industrial modernity." Returning us to the recently rediscovered comic films of Charley Bowers – a pioneer of animated silent film and a proto-surrealist *bricoleur* lionized by André Breton – Solomon demonstrates how Bowers' absurd machinic assemblages generate "laughter at the expense of the ethos of productive rationalism, in the process opening up an alternative understanding of machinery as the locus of exuberantly unsettling bursts of joy." Bowers' highly self-reflexive aesthetic converts cinema into a desiring machine that allows for the experience of subversive collective affects on a mass scale. Solomon argues that the riotous slapstick of Bowers' films thus operates in a Benjaminian fashion, turning the optical world into a space for the collective experience of aberrant psychic states. On screen, the strictures of the rational and logical world are overcome and the "filmic stimulation of mass hallucinations" unfolds in an atmosphere of laughter. Insofar as Bowers' silent comedy functions as a "potentially progressive mode of resisting the use of scientific and technological innovation to serve the exclusive interest of hegemonic social forces," this slapstick modernism anticipates the work of certain literary black humorists we tend to associate with postmodernism.

Finally, my own essay, "Killing Time: *Monsieur Verdoux* and the Comic Passion of Charlie Chaplin," offers a reading of the domestication and death of Chaplin's silent slapstick persona in his 1947 sound comedy, and its consequent refashioning of comic feeling. In this film, the Tramp, modernity's most public person, is killed by satire, polished smooth and supplanted by an inhuman character – both a dandy and a serial killer of women. The film's remaking of modern personality is, I argue, of special interest for students of modernism since the Chaplinesque became, for moderns of various political allegiances, a powerful characterological umbrella for grasping the lineaments of human personality and the timbre of emotional life as they were transformed by capitalist modernity. The kinds of liberatory affects that modernism located in the Tramp's idiosyncratic personality

depended upon his particular temporal being – a form of unstructured contingency – imagined as the outside of instrumental reason. The dark laughter of *Monsieur Verdoux*, however, follows from its self-conscious mimesis of rationalized time. Through the temporal condensation and burnished passion of wit, *Verdoux* critically mimes the punctual efficiency of instrumental reason and its erasure of desire, memory, and historicity. Paradoxically, the melancholy affective complex that emerges in the film's curious sound gags, when considered in the political context of America's postwar consensus, might better be understood as the passionate dislocation of exilic feeling. *Verdoux*'s noisy satire is as particular as Chaplin's silent clowning was putatively universal because it is founded on the funniness of the foreigner, who provokes laughter through obtrusive exteriority, comedy through dissent, and dissent through the excessive congruence of satire. The more *Verdoux* is on time, the more untimely is the film's critique, and the less Chaplin's laughter is at home in modernity.

Taken together, these essays suggest that modernism's laughter is essential to any complete story of modernism's affective energies, and to any full account of how the moderns actually *experienced* modernity – experienced it as an embodied affair that made acute and pressing demands on the body, the senses, the very life of the feelings. As way of being moved, laughter can occupy various positions on the critical spectrum of feeling terms. Given its seeming involuntariness, it has been often consigned to the domain of raw physiological sensation, a corporeal impingement that precedes ideation. Other theorists, noting laughter's implication in psychic economies of identification and displacement, defense and aggression, attribute a heightened imaginative or psychological dimension to laughter, which aligns it more closely to those psychological states we call emotions. And still others, pointing to its connection to systems of moral and social judgment, have underscored laughter's position as imminently *reasonable* and *social* feeling, one fully compatible with the cognitivist claim that emotions are formed by beliefs and attitudes, and thus shape or guide action.⁵ And yet laughter's complex role in modernism's affective life remains to be examined.

Perhaps this is because, in the critical imagination, modernist emotion is still rather like fairy-tale porridge: bluntly interpreted as either too hot – the romantic reservoir of subjective inwardness – or too cold, the impersonal stuff of Eliotic poetics, or the steely externality of Lewisian satire.⁶ We owe this picture, in part, to the success of Fredric Jameson's now-famous story of modernist affectivity and inwardness. To capitalist modernity's abstraction of sensual experience, effected both through technological mediation and rationalization's ruthless dismantling of all natural unities, *including* the senses and mental functions, aesthetic modernism responds with a sensory regime at once autonomous and fragmented, both a symptom of reification and its Utopian compensation. The social fragmentation, alienation, and solitude that are, for Jameson, aesthetic modernism's hallmarks, find canonical expression in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, a painting that comes to embody the modernist metaphysics of expressivity itself, in which the subject is conceived as a "monadlike container, within which things felt are then expressed by projection outward."⁷ This is the modernist subject as alienated monad, forged by the socio-historical conditions of modernity but rich with emotional compensation.

To be sure, modernity yields fantasies of monadic inwardness – and the strong kinds of affect and centered kinds of subjects that accompany it – but it also fuels a more delirious, public traffic in those "free-floating and impersonal" affects that, for Jameson, constitute the euphoric terrain of the postmodern. In this sense, the wide cultural playing field of modernism's laughter traversed in this issue – from Charles Baudelaire to Charley Bowers – supports more recent attempts by critics like Miriam Hansen to reconsider modernism as a vernacular phenomenon, encompassing a "whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon the processes of modernization and the experience of modernity."⁸ Early slapstick film comedy, for Hansen, becomes a privileged example of cinema's capacity to function as a reflexive horizon of modernity, a public mode of articulating and negotiating modern anxieties (about Fordist mass culture, or an increasingly multiethnic society, or changing gender roles and modes of intimacy) that "is crucially anchored in sensory experience and sensational affect" (71). Indeed, the reservoir of salutary affects associated with Chaplinesque temporality bears out that modernism was itself aware of slapstick's reflexive response to rationalization, and found in it vernacular models for its experiments in dislocated

personality. Similarly, the irrational collective affects produced by Bowers' cine-assemblages join avant-garde and industrial comic practice, and belie facile distinctions between them. Thus attempts like Hansen's to restore a modernist sensory-reflexive capacity to mass entertainments like Hollywood film have the effect of making modernist affect seem less privileged and private, and more public, even *ordinary*.

But is this quite the modernism we want or need? Many of the essays in this collection, even as they operate with a more expansive definition of modernism, wish to maintain the critical edge of modernism's laughter. Collectively, the essays assume that modernism's laughter is most energizing when its attendant affects call into question bourgeois emotional protocols – interiority, domestication, and instrumentality chief among them – and the forms of collective and political life they sustain. Recovering the potential of modernism's laughter, then, demands attention to affect's capacity for the fitful disorientation of personhood, thereby helping to recuperate the modern's under-acknowledged investment in a broad range of affects that worry the stable confines, and attendant metaphysics, of modern inwardness.⁹ If we understand modernism not primarily as a mode of reflexivity but rather as the restive refusal of bourgeois forms of life (moral, social, aesthetic, and political), then the *modernism* of its laughter would reside in its challenge to emotion as the expressive ground of modern personality. In this sense, laughing with the moderns allows us to write a new chapter in the politics of modernism – here, its repudiation of the various ideologies of affect that would, with a laugh, consign queer eroticism to the ridiculous margins of more native, more vigorous American modernism (Miller); or bind metropolitan *ennui* to the imagined affective transgressions of the colonized (Greenberg); or naturalize bourgeois consumption (Morrison); or authenticate a primitive realm of collective feeling devoid of real difference (Brown). And this laughter is equally at home in Stieglitz's *291* or in the pages of little magazines as it is in the sublimely magnified face of Garbo or in the domestic punctuality of Chaplin's murderous bourgeois.

In these ways, modernism's comic affects help to make our accounts of the politics of modernist feeling more nuanced, drawing our attention away from laughter as, inevitably, an emotional defense mechanism – a means of subjective hardening against an ugly, traumatic, or otherwise untenable outside. Instead, modernism's laughter reacquaints us with what, for some of us, may still be the most moving aspects of modernist feeling in the first place – its challenges to instrumentality; its modes of ridiculously light eroticism; its nonsensical energies; its feelings of ludicrous disorientation or uncanny uncertainty; its satiric cultivation of enjoyment, disgust, and the transgressive frisson. At times pained and melancholic, at others simply joyous, laughter is modernism's manner of recognizing the self's implication in the material world and in the unruly demands of a modern, feeling body that is never, properly speaking, itself.

Notes

¹ On the work of joking in the building of community, see James English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

² Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 51.

³ Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts," in *Charles Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 161.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 55.

⁵ For a notoriously physiological account of emotion, and of laughter as an affect, see William James, "What is an Emotion?" in *The Emotions* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1967), 11-29, especially page 17. For an account of laughter's psychically economic role in the expenditure of affect, see Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (London: Penguin Classics, 2002). For a cognitivist account of laughter as a social emotion and an ethical posture, see Ronald de Sousa's chapter "When is it Wrong to Laugh?," in *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 275-299. And for a modernist account of laughter as *incompatible* with emotion, requiring "*the absence of feeling*," see Henri Bergson's essay "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 63.

⁶ The most notable recent exception is Charles Altieri's *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetic of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2003). See also Edward P. Comentale's essay "Hulme's Feelings," in *T. E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, eds. Edward P. Comentale and Andrzej Gasiorek (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2006).

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press 1991), 15.

⁸ Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as a Vernacular Modernism" *Modernism/Modernity* 6:2 (April 1999), 60.

⁹ I explore this idea more fully in my forthcoming study *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).