It’s no joke: The critical power of a laughing chorus

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Abstract
There is no known time in history, nor known human community without laughter. Laughter imbues our social life. Laughter dominates our daily interactions, perhaps more visibly so on social media, where it is now a weapon wielded frequently against marketers. Yet, marketing theory paid little attention to laughter as a social phenomenon or a collective consumer (re)action. This article begins to address this neglect through an integrative review of theories of laughter and specifically by introducing Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of a laughing chorus. I engage the notion as a way to understand the internet publics’ rowdy laughter directed at marketing. I show that seemingly nihilistic, irresponsible and discordant laughter is nonetheless an efficacious and notably polyvocal social commentary. To probe further the power of a laughing chorus, I draw on the works of Henri Bergson and Alenka Zupancic and elaborate on laughter as a form of expression that does not depend on reason and argumentation for its effects. I contend that a critical impetus of a laughing chorus may not always be in its content, but in the comic element, centred on repetition. That is, collective, excessive laughter involves a distinct mode of critique, which is not premised on discursive deliberation. I conclude with a reflection on theoretical and methodological opportunities in taking laughter seriously in marketing and consumer culture studies.

Keywords
Consumer activism, critical marketing, humour, laughter, memes, social media, politics, ideology, theories of humour

In April 2017, Pepsi released an advertisement, featuring a reality-TV-star-turned-model Kendall Jenner, who breaks a tense stand-off between protesters and police by handing an officer a Pepsi. Meant to signify a moment of harmony, the advertisement was met with an avalanche of ridicule, parody and memes. The response soon turned into sardonic laughter across the media and prompted Pepsi to withdraw the advertisement. Occurring on the heels of this Pepsi debacle, the incident of a passenger being forcefully removed from a United Airlines plane was captured on
phones and went viral, making headlines across the world. Past the initial shock of seeing the images of the person covered in blood and dragged through the aisle the commentary took a laughing tone. The internet ‘peanut gallery’ went into overdrive mocking the United Airlines CEO’s press statements. Subsequently, the company apologised and announced policy changes.

Much has been said about these and similar ‘public relations nightmares’; the ways the companies handled the situations and the consequences for their brands (The Telegraph, 2017; e.g. Marketing Week, 2019). But what do we make of thousands ironic tweets, mocking remixes and lampooning memes as a response? How do we to understand a consumer response that is a roaring laughter – absurd remarks, grotesque quips and outright buffoonery? What does marketing theory have to say about popular laughter that impels marketers to (re)act?

As a starting point, I propose to think of this laughter as a laughing chorus. This is Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) term who, in his influential study of popular laughter, Rabelais and His World, states that ‘the marketplace with its laughing people’ is a fixture in culture’s history. Bakhtin explains the term with reference to Pushkin’s Boris Godunov, where the laughter of a crowd portrayed as historically consequential. I suggest this term not to attribute any historic gravitas to the laughter in the opening episodes. Rather, the term allows to foreground ‘laughter’, while bracketing various terms currently used, namely ‘outrage’ or ‘backlash’. Also, online laughter does appear similar to one at a medieval market: it erupts momentarily and ferociously, bringing together hundreds of discordant voices, who laugh at each other as much as at the target. The booming cacophony is not easily ignored. Even a cursory look reveals a laughing chorus today is as variegated as Bakhtin describes – chuckling, hackling and lampooning, with bursts rising up as the laughter intensifies and spreads. One obvious difference is the form – hashtags, likes, retweets and memes. And, today’s laughter projects in ways and to distances that medieval laughter perhaps could not. This is partly because online laughter is intensely mediated, often serving as a kernel for news stories, thus broadcast across media, making possible the kinds of interventions we see in the episodes above. Differences notwithstanding, the term aptly highlights the raucous, aggregated nature of online laugh as a public response.

Bakhtin (1984: 474) asserts that ‘a chorus of the laughing people’ is not a metaphor, underscoring that without attention to ‘laughter in the marketplace’, we cannot understand culture. However, in the studies of people and marketplaces, their laughter has received little attention. The existing research on humour in marketing tends to take a socio-psychological perspective and examines the role of humour in goal attainment and persuasion (e.g. Warren et al., 2018). In interpretive research, despite the recognition of playfulness, ironic (self)reflexivity and humour as integral to consumer experiences (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), there is no systematic inquiry into consumers’ laughter. Furthermore, the studies on collective consumer response, mostly located within the ‘consumer activism’ research, tend to talk of rational actors, reasoned discourses and deliberate actions (Handelman and Fischer, 2018). Such emphasis is not surprising; it is consistent with the Habermasian conception of public sphere as a predominantly serious realm, where ‘communicative rationality’ reigns supreme (Fraser, 1990). A notable exception is work on Adbusters, an anti-consumerist collective, that use humour strategically as a rhetoric tool (Rumbo, 2002). This rare exception however only serves to illustrate how marketing scholars have yet to take a serious look at laughter and particularly at laughing publics, who may not share a world view, yet manage to level a caustic critique that forces marketers to respond.

This article takes a laughing chorus as an entree to discuss the significance of laughter in social life and consumer culture. The purpose is to move toward studying laughter as a social phenomenon that is ever present, if fleeting (Goldstein, 2003), and increasingly visible thanks to the
internet, but yet to be studied as such in marketing. Specifically, my aim is to address the neglect of laughter as a collective consumer response that appears excessive, rowdy and frivolous and may not depend on rationality and argumentation for its effects. To that end, I first review the history of thought and directions in current research on humour. This review underscores the centrality of funniness to our understanding of people’s lifeworlds and relations to social structures and lays the basis for studying ‘laughter in the marketplace’ in its complexity and heterogeneity. I work through the empirical episodes to explore the social efficacy of laughter on the internet and to reveal popular laughter as a polyvocal social commentary. To further probe into the laughter’s efficacy, I shift my focus from the discursive aspects to the comic,¹ drawing on Henri Bergson’s (1911) theory of the laughable and Alenka Zupancic’s (2008) revision thereof. Thus, I seek to advance an understanding of a distinct critical power of a laughing chorus on the internet.

The theoretical contribution is twofold. First, I posit that laughter is a multifaceted lens for studying contemporary consumer culture. Through an integrative literature review, I explicate that predicted on existing socio-cultural tensions, incongruities and contradictions, laughter refracts the tacit aspects of people’s lifeworld, the established beliefs and the emerging discontents. Such understanding represents a departure from the previous work in marketing and consumer research, which views humour in limited socio-psychological terms and/or as a device designed to enhance a communicative appeal. Second, building on Bakhtin’s conception, I propose that a laughing chorus (mediated laughter of online publics) is a distinct mode of popular critique. I bring the comic into a theoretical focus and draw on the examples to derive that such critique works on the logic of repetition, rather than representation, and embodies polyvocality. I contend that this mode is apparent only as the comic escalates through repetition, that is, beyond a single joke and humorous content. Overall, I submit that popular laughter is a serious site of polemic and critique with overlooked but significant theoretical and methodological potentials for marketing theory.

Before I proceed, terminological and methodological clarifications are in order. Following the foundational works reviewed below, I use ‘laughter’ to designate social phenomenon generally (e.g. Bakhtin, 1984) and ‘the comic’ to indicate funniness as a ‘family resemblance’ aspect that threads and manifests variedly across different expressions, forms and genres (Bergson, 1911; Eagleton, 2019; Heller, 2005: 4). Methodologically, I am influenced by a cultural studies approach (Pickering, 2008). I take the opening episodes as representative examples and build an analytic account on observations as the events unfolded in April 2017. In the aftermath, I watched comedy shows and news clips and collected related media coverage. I read these cumulatively, drawing on a range of outputs, characterised by intertextual links between tweets, memes and the media stories featuring these, which then circulated anew on social media. I used the established method in textual analysis to identify and map themes with the aspects of laughter theories in mind, to develop the conceptual understanding presented below (Spiggle, 1994).

**Theoretical background: Studying laughter as a social phenomenon**

Discussions of laughter can be found throughout the Western philosophical canon: from the ancient Greeks (Plato and Aristotle) to the scholars of Enlightenment (Hobbes, Kant and Schopenhauer). After all, laughter is long-believed to be a feature, distinguishing humans from animals (Critchley, 2002). Many early philosophers, however, regarded laughter in negative terms, linking it to folly, malice and loss of control. Definitive here is Plato’s statement in Republic, ‘when we abandon ourselves to violent laughter, our condition provokes a violent reaction’ (cited in Morreall, 1987: 10). Thus, laughter was often, if implicitly, set apart from reasoned thought and (civil) action. Perhaps
such positioning of laughter explains why so few dedicated treatises emerged from numerous comments on the subject. A scattered nature of observations notwithstanding, the philosophical thinking on laughter is commonly grouped into three categories: superiority theories, relief theories and incongruity theories (Billig, 2005; Morreall, 1987). I view these not as competing theories but as directions of thought on laughter that ground current research. Each theory illuminates ‘the riddle of laughter’ from a particular perspective (Elias, [1956] 2017: 289). I briefly explain.

Superiority theories posit that we laugh at misfortunes of others, thereby expressing our sense of superiority. Plato is the early proponent of this view, but Hobbes formulated it, stating: ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly’ (cited in Morreall, 1987: 19). For Hobbes, laughter is an expression of a (nasty) human condition – self-interest and competitiveness. We laugh at deficiencies of others to boost self-esteem, enhance status and assert superiority (Billig, 2005). In this theory, humour is bound up with an ideology of order: people, ideas and institutions, which are judged inferior by some standard, are laughable. The scholarship within this tradition focuses on motives, power dynamics and distinction claims in humour and the ethics of laughter.

Next, relief theories suggest that laughter is a way of releasing pent-up nervous or psychic energy. This line of thinking is associated with Freud, though its roots are in Spencer’s biological view of the social (Billig, 2005). In Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious ([1905] 1960), Freud posits jokes as ‘the most social of all mental functions’, contending that these connect the individual and the social. When joking and laughing, we vent a build-up of normally repressed emotions and the energy of repressing those emotions. The release produces pleasure. Put differently, humour is how we indulge sentiments and emotions that otherwise should be tempered in a (polite) society. While relief theories have passed their hey-day, these explanatory logics can be found in the discussions of laughter as a collective venting of energy and humour on taboo subjects (Critchley, 2002; Eagleton, 2019).

Finally, traced to Kant, Locke and Schopenhauer, incongruity theories hold that we laugh at something that violates our mental models (Morreall, 1987). The premise here is that we live in an orderly world and have an understanding of how things are or should be, then laughter is our reaction to a disruption of that understanding. Laughter marks a surprising encounter with a mismatch – a conjuncture of desperate elements. To react, one must be able to recognise a mismatch, that is, incongruity operates cognitively. For early theorists, humour was about intellectual aptitude and cognitive flexibility. Later theorists clarified that laughable incongruity is a matter of perception (Billig, 2005). Still, laughter presupposes some claim to a norm or a common expectation. For a joke to work, there has to be a shared understanding of the social world; ‘no social congruity, no comic incongruity’ (Critchley, 2002: 4). Thus, laughter points to tacit consensus, implicit understandings and accepted patterns. It is this relation to the socio-symbolic order that has made incongruity theories (in one form or another) dominant in social sciences (Morreall, 1987).

What these theories have in common is the focus on the individual and the causes of laughter. Henri Bergson’s Laughter (1911) breaks the pattern, shifting the focus onto a laughing group and social function (Billig, 2005). Notably, Bergson premised his theory on the notion of sociability, rather than morality, variously evoked in the theories above (Hakenson, 2013). For Bergson (1911: 5b), social adaptability is ‘a requirement of life in common’ and laughter is in the service thereof. To define laughter as a social phenomenon, he posits three observations. First, laughter is human; we laugh at other people and at objects and animals only if they imitate or appear to express some human qualities. For example, we would laugh at the cloud only if it is shaped like a hairstyle of a
president. For Bergson (1911: 4a), human is not ‘an animal who laughs’, as Aristotle claimed, instead ‘an animal which is laughed at’. Then, laughing at others requires ‘a momentarily anaesthesia of a heart’. That is, second, laughter is characterised by absence of feeling; an effective punchline often comes at the expense of empathy (Billig, 2005). Bergson suggests that for its effects, laughter appeals to shared understandings. Hence, his third observation – ‘laugher is always laughter of a group’ whether real or imaginary (Bergson, 1911: 5a). Bergson likens laughter of a group to a thunder that frightens, thus claps on any lapses in sociability. These observations along with the examples from Molière’s comedy of manners mean Laughter is often read in negative terms as reinforcing social compliance (e.g. Butler, 2015; Eagleton, 2019). The reading of laughter as a disciplinary means puts Bergson’s theory at odds with the prevalent belief in laughter’s intrinsic goodness (Billig, 2005: 125). Still, Bergson’s approach was impactful: it reoriented the studies of humour towards the question of social function.

Indeed, a substantive body of research investigated the social effects of laughter and examined the role of humour in a range of contexts (see Bos and Hart, 2008; Goldstein, 2003; Kuipers, 2006; Swinkels and Koning, 2016; Tam and Wesoky, 2018). There is a consensus that laughter is socially significant, but scholarship is divided in characterising its function, crudely put, whether laughter is a force for good or evil. Take as an example the studies of humour in a workplace, where laughter is shown to provide a respite from work pressures, fosters feelings of togetherness, facilitates teamwork and creativity. At the same time, researchers find that humour serves to assert boundaries, reinforce values of dominant groups and normalise existing hierarchies (for review, see Butler, 2015; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007). Similarly, work that takes a broader socio-historical perspective points to laughter’s duality in relation to power. In Laughter and Ridicule, Billig (2005) unpacks humour as a disciplinary technology, used to (re)socialise into hegemonic culture and affirm dominant ideologies (also Pérez, 2016). Humour can also encourage irreverence towards authorities, question normative hierarchies and challenge conventions (e.g. Obadare, 2009). Humour has a capacity to bring people ‘outside’ of their immediate circumstance and give a distance, thus enabling people to see the world differently and up for scrutiny, if not contestation (Critchley, 2002). This accords with Bakhtin’s (1984: 123) idea that laughter ‘purifies from dogmatism [and] liberates from fanaticism’. However, studies of humour under the Soviet regimes suggest, in Critchley’s words (2002: 17), ‘by showing us the folly of the world, humour does not save us from that folly’. Even when directed at authorities, laughter often promotes tolerance, that is, we vent frustrations and discontent only to carry on (see Yurchak, 2006).

More recent research on humour tends to collapse the distinction between good and evil, opting for the ‘inescapable ambiguity of humour’ view (Butler et al., 2015: 497). Humour is recognised as a product of contradictions, tensions and interpretative difficulties that characterise social order and as a mode of articulating understandings and interpretive frames, pertaining to that order (e.g. Chiaro and Baccolini, 2014; Fluri and Clark, 2019). Hence, researchers look into humour for insights into the lifeworlds, particularly of social contexts and groups with limited voice and representation in the public sphere, such as the shanty town residents (Goldstein, 2003), visually impaired (Macpherson, 2008), linguistic minorities (Ridanpää, 2017) and Kurdish women (Clark, 2019). Among many insights, this research reveals how laughter is implicated in redefining marginality, including through the work of both contesting and sustaining values of normativity, as Hayens (2016) finds in the study of a ‘marginalised city’ in Chile. With the social media affordances for humorous interactions, researchers examine the everyday ideological work of humour, be it in relation to symbolic boundaries – gendered, classed, racialised identities and social
hierarchies, or issues of national policies and global politics (e.g. Davis et al., 2018; Graefer et al., 2018; Shifman and Lemish, 2010; Weaver, 2011).

Overall, current studies diverge vastly in topics, genres and context of humour under investigation; what unites them is the take on laughter as a matter of text and image, which is concerned with the crucial issues: race, gender, socio-economic inequalities and political conflicts. To illustrate the value of taking laughter seriously as a discursive arena, below I offer a reading of laughter levelled at Pepsi and the United. The reading reveals a diversity of critical expressions and importantly polyvocality that constitutes a laughing chorus as a piercing social commentary.

Two laughs in April: A discursive approach

The media coverage of the Pepsi advertisement seethed in mockery. Illustrative here is The Guardian’s (2017) description where phrases such as ‘a can of liquid corporate America’, ‘Kendall’s radical act of bravery’ and ‘the most photogenic officer’ anchored the set-up for a sardonic conclusion: ‘The crowd goes wild; Jenner has clearly restored peace and justice to America. Finally, thanks to her and Pepsi, all is good in the world’. Arguably, the media channelled the sentiment spurred and cultivated by social media. Indeed, many reports opened with a reference to humorous tweets or memes, exposing the absurdities of the campaign and cultural marketing broadly (e.g. ABC News, 2017). Initially though, laughter focused on the Pepsi’s representation of protest, ridiculing company’s sterile vision of a protest, which trivialised the idea. Commentators dissected the advertisement frame-by-frame, noting the elements of deliberate political correctness and juxtaposing those with advertising tropes to point out the incongruities. Most laughable was Pepsi’s bid to represent diversity. The effort to include people from ‘different walks of life’, per Pepsi’s statement, was undercut by featuring good-looking youth, ‘hot extras’, as a Twitter user put it (Mashable, 2017). Similarly, Pepsi’s strife to depict multiculturism was undone by the abundance of ethnic stereotypes, such as an Asian man playing a Cello. The internet laughed at the inoffensive protest signs, well-dressed-in-hues-of-brand protesters, and a jubilant procession, more of a street festival than a police stand-off. Many jokes targeted Kendall Jenner, mocking her as a Pepsi’s choice peacemaker. She was cast as a classic comic figure – a marionette, whose class privilege positions her at odds with the idea of social justice and whose puppeteer is greed and vanity. Overall, underlying the focus on representation here is the concern with ‘what is a protest’ and ‘who is a protester’. Put differently, mocking the calculated ‘attention to the form and mechanical application of rules’ (Bergson, 1911: 18b), the laughing chorus reasserted what marks and makes a social gathering into a collective expression of disapproval.

As laughter gained momentum, another critical theme emerged: the notion of cultural branding came under attack in two ways. First, people laughed at the brands’ preoccupation with being a part of culture and the insulate world of marketing. Popular here was Man Repeller’s (2017) ‘Untold Story’, a spoof of a meeting transcript that ‘peek[s] inside the boardroom when Pepsi’s team came up with the idea’. The author imagined a Mad Men like setting with suited men talking ‘millennials love resistance’, ‘diversity’ and ‘authenticity’, while fashioning themselves to be ‘culture-whisperers’, not soda-sellers. Others followed the lead, including The Saturday Night Life skit with their version of Pepsi creative process, and ‘Are you wondering what Pepsi was thinking?’ musings on Reddit (The Ad Age, 2017). Some satirised the industry fixation with a single demographic – millennials, and over-reliance on social media celebrities for market research and promotion. Other poked fun at the advertisers’ obsession with aesthetics and authenticity, which ironically often results into a contrived and clichéd output. Still others laughed at branding mantra ‘to sell more,
seize a cultural moment’, that is, find an idea or a cause and make a brand ‘a voice and a leader’ (Reddit, 2017). Reflective of this thinking, The Feed on SBS (2017) created ‘Pepsi is a catalyst of peace’ parody, pitching Pepsi as a solution to the Climate Change crisis and the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. To emphasise the nonsense of the idea, commentators insistently referred to Pepsi as a soda, a can of corn syrup, a fizzy drink, liquid sugar and canned diabetes. Such choice of words sought to strip a cultural veneer off and down to a commodity, thus fleshing out laughable incongruities of the cultural branding imperative.

Second, people laughed at the idea of a soda company appropriating a social justice movement for a sales pitch and implying that major social issues, such as structural oppression, racial tensions and police brutality, could be resolved if only we consume together. Abound were humorous hashtags such as #BlackSodaMatters and sarcastic tweets such as ‘who else is reminded of Dr Martin Luther King’s famously resonant ‘I have a Pepsi’ speech’. A popular tweet came from Beatrice King, a daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., ‘If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi’ (Figure 1). The internet creatives took to photoshop to make this point vivid. The result was #PepsiSavesTheDay meme, where photos, often historically significant, were modified to include a Pepsi can. This meme saw Pepsi/Jenner infixed into the iconic images of struggle for social issues, from the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950–1960s and the Tiananmen Square of 1989 to more recent photos from Occupy-movement and Black Lives Matter protests (Mashable, 2017). This meme foregrounded the absurdity of Pepsi inserting itself into the most forceful expression of sociality and crudely moulding a cultural moment to sell soda.

The laughter in the wake of the United Airlines incident unfolded in much the same way: the focus on the incident grew into a scathing commentary on marketing and corporate America. In a gist, on 9 April 2017, in Chicago after boarding the plane, the airline asked for volunteers to disembark. When no one volunteered, United forcefully removed a passenger (identified as

![Figure 1. Laughing at Pepsi. Source: Mashable (2017).](image-url)
Dr. Dao, *The Washington Post*, 2017). A video of the passenger covered in blood and dragged out of the plane went viral. After an initial shock, the internet took to humour. Dark humour and sarcastic commentary ran amok on social media. The news media picked the zaniest tweets for their coverage, a representative here is CNN’s (2017) ‘United Takes a Beating on Social Media’. #NewUnitedAirlinesMottos hashtag overtook the #BoycottUnitedAirlines sentiment. The old taglines were re-rendered, for instance, a 1968 classic ‘Come, Fly With Me’ became ‘Comply With Me’. New taglines aimed to capture the incongruent core of the incident, including ‘United Airlines. Putting the Hospital in Hospitality’, ‘Board as a Doctor. Leave as a Patient’ and ‘Not enough seating? Time for a beating’. Talk shows, such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (ABC), made a parody, amplifying the laughing chorus (*BuzzFeed*, 2017; *CNN*, 2017).

As mockery heated up, the United doubled their terse response to the incident with a CEO’s statement (*The Washington Post*, 2017). Ostensible corporatese jarred and Twitter roared with laughter, snowballing definitions for the word ‘re-accommodate’ (Twitter Moment, 2017). One tweet conveyed the overall reaction: ‘New United statement: We would like to offer an actual apology, but our apologies department is overbooked so we offer an apology voucher’ (*BuzzFeed*, 2017). This cleverly hit two targets: the empty apology and the empty corporate-speak. Shortly after the statement, the news spread of the CEO’s letter to employees (*CNN*, 2017). Again, abundantly corporatese, phrases such as ‘politely asked to deplane’ and ‘followed established procedures’ sent the media into an overdrive.

Corporate jargon is an easy target for comedy; TV show ‘The Office’ (BBC) made it into an art form. Of note here is the way laughter took on corporatese. One series of memes featured clips with gruesome fight scenes from classic films to illustrate the United’s use of ‘accommodate’ and ‘deplane’. A face-smashed Rambo, for example, was inserted into the crevices produced by these words, indicating the hollowness and filling it with bloodied flesh as it were. By focusing on a mauled body with little resemblance to humanity, memes drew attention to the humanity erased from a corporate account. There, policies are established, systems randomly select and procedures are followed. Here on Twitter, a bleeding nose, broken jaws and bruised eyes – a human transformed into a pulp by a corporate machine. Another series of memes was a photo of the passenger’s bloodied face overlaid with the United logo and ‘Fly the Friendly Skies’, a 1965 promise of a humane airline experience. In this instance, we see Bergson’s ‘anaesthesia of the heart’ in laughter: the victim feelings disregarded, and his suffering turned into a ready-made to call out a company on failed marketing promises. Perhaps most poignant example of inserting humanity into corporatese was the United logo rendered in blood strokes (Figure 2).

A day’s worth of tweets reveals that aside from corporatese, the laughing chorus targeted corporate greed. Predictably, many satirised service quality, ever-shrinking seats and ancillary-revenue-driven pricing strategy. Others lampooned an ordinarily sombre flight ‘ceremony’: a greeting from storm-troopers as flight attendants, a passenger playfully slapped into a seat and an information card amended to reflect new ‘embrace for impact’ positions in case of ‘re-accommodation’ (*BuzzFeed*, 2017; *CNN*, 2017). These jokes speak of an uneasy recognition that passengers are increasingly expected to surrender their rights when air travelling. Illustrative here was the meme featuring a violent character from a hit TV show ‘Walking Dead’ strolling through a plane with a baseball bat wrapped in a barbed wire. Among dozens of caption variations, one read: ‘eeny ... meeny ...’ – a children’s counting rhyme emphasises a seeming randomness of a passenger’s mistreatment (Figure 2). Overall, many memes pointed to the contingency of profits on the ordering practices that are incongruent with our notions of human dignity. The idea captured splendidly by a much-shared tweet: United Airlines is pleased to announce new seating on all
domestic flights – in addition to United First and Economy Plus, we introduce Fight Club (CNN, 2017).

These critical themes would be familiar to consumer activism researchers (Handleman and Fisher, 2018). However, popular laugher differs from consumer activism in two major ways: first, the critique is constituted by voices from multiple publics, who may diverge in moral positions and stance on an issue. Posting with the same hashtag may signal a temporarily shared sentiment but not a shared world view (Papacharissi, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015). This is partly due to ‘context collapse’, that characterises social media, where intended meanings are impossible to maintain, and relatedly, participants’ motives and agendas are hard to gauge (Philips and Milner, 2017). Second, participation does not require an articulated opinion or having one at all (Philips, 2015). The social media allows many to contribute merely with a like/repost, while others add their spin to an aspect that resonates personally, either supporting or subverting it. Non-linear contributions and contestations result in an amalgamation of twists, seemingly less concerned with articulating and developing an argument, and more with stretching it to the absurd. In short, unlike a consumer activist group, a laughing chorus is profoundly polyphonic and discordant. This crucial characteristic notwithstanding, the laughter has impelled an action.

By the day’s end, Pepsi was trending across the media as was the phrase ‘tone-deaf’ (The Ad Age, 2017). After defending the advertisement through a statement on harmony, Pepsi withdrew it with an apology, that did little to stop the laughter. Many TV comedy shows jibed about Pepsi ‘missing the mark’, as people kept uploading new memes. One tweet aptly sums it up: ‘Kudos to Pepsi for uniting Americans across the political spectrum in derisive brand-destroying laughter’ (People, 2017). The impact of laughter on United was mixed. Memes, one-liners and spoofs kept the company under fire for days and the United CEO apologised three times, calling the episode ‘a mistake of epic proportions’ and announcing a change in a policy (The Washington Post, 2017). But, with focus on witty tweets, media simply lamented the travesty of air travel and the unfortunate economics of overbooking. For a high-profile incident, there was remarkably little
substantive reporting. As Fortune (2017) observed, humour softened a stock market blowback; serious customer complaints drowned in a sea of memes, as did independent investigations into practices that lead to such eviction.

Taking laughter seriously as a discursive matter reveals the plurality of expressive forms and voices of multiple publics that otherwise might be concealed or excluded by the dominant forms of deliberation (Graefer et al., 2018; Obadore, 2009). Arguably, we see a widening of discursive contestation as the official public sphere seizes upon these forms and voices (Fraser, 1990). Similarly, visible are the complex dynamics of a consensus formation, with media amplifying and circulating these forms and voices, while also flattening them into listicles and trimming them into news-bites to fit the hegemonic forms of expression. Notably, it is often the comic nature of these expressive forms that serves as alibi for their appropriation and circulation (Davis et al., 2018). Yet, the funniness is typically bracketed in the discursive approaches to humour. This is partly because the comic remains under-theorised in the contemporary studies of humour (Eagleton, 2019; Heller, 2005). As noted above, research tends to focus on the meanings, the role and the uses of laughter, including in relation to power, and the notion of norms (Hokenson, 2013). However, to probe further into the power of popular laughter and specifically into what sets a laughing chorus apart from a collective commentary online, the comic needs to be considered theoretically. To this end, I return to Bergson (1911: 3b), who attempted to formulate ‘the laughable’ and draw on Zupancic (2008) insightful reading of his thesis. I then revisit the two episodes, focusing more on the comic to think through the ways and the make of the laughable online.

**Doubling up with laughter: Unpacking the Bergson’s formula of the comic**

Bergson’s *Laughter* (1911) is recognised for the unique focus on the social function of humour. The function hinges upon his original idea that the comic resides in rigidity. Per Bergson, we laugh at a person moving awkwardly, struggling to open a door (think, a Charlie Chaplin sketch). Also laughable is a person stuck on an idea or ideals, out-of-touch with social environment (think, a Don Quixote type). There is a multitude of potentially laughable rigidities: from inelasticity of character, mind or body to social automatism, inertia and uniformity. While forms of rigidity are many, we only laugh when one manifests flagrantly, right before our eyes and vis-à-vis an expectation of suppleness and liveliness. Since life requires constant adaptability, then ‘the comic always implies a halt in the smooth run of life’ (Zupancic, 2008: 111). Laughter points to a manifest obstruction or absence of adaptability; it jars our sensibilities and urges us to attend to the immediacy of social life. For some scholars, this corrective feature, centring on the notion of sociability, implies that the comic is a disciplinary means in the service of society (e.g. Billig, 2005; Butler, 2015), which puts Bergson’s thesis at odds with commonly positive view of laughter that lauds its redeeming quality and reconstructive function (Billig, 2005; Butler, 2015; Critchley, 2002). However, in their re-readings of *Laughter*, Zupancic (2008) and Hokenson (2013) argue that to appreciate the corrective aspect, we must consider ‘why do we laugh at rigidity?’ within the unique Bergsonian notion of the social.

Bergson’s central idea about rigidity comes from his philosophy, which was itself a protest against the mechanisation of humanity, evidenced by the popularity of laws of life (e.g. Darwin’s theory of evolution) in the thinking of the time (Zupancic, 2008). Bergson claims that social life and its every mode are in continual change, ever-flowing and instinctive. He asserts that ‘life and society require of each of us a constant alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present
situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt in consequence’ (Bergson, 1911: 8b). Then, rigidity in any form is antithetical to life; ‘a foreign body, in the living continuity of human affairs’ thus to be discouraged (Bergson, 1911: 28b). Yet, lapses into automatism, repetition and absentmindedness are inevitable because continuous attentiveness is burdensome. Therefore, laughter is ‘a sort of social gesture’ that wakes us out of collective and individual lapses. For Bergson, a story of a customs’ official, who rescues a drowning person and asks if she has anything to declare, is exemplary of such function. Laughter reproves automatism, habituality and intransigence. As such, laughter is never merely aesthetic or disinterested; there is always an impetus, even if unavowed or unintended, to discourage callousness in social life. Laughter is the corrective that serves to uphold the living nature of the social and assure the suppleness of ‘the civilisation’ (Hokenson, 2013).

Following from the premise that rigidity is laughable, Bergson (1911: 17b) offers an elegant formula of the comic: ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living’. There are two crucial points. First, living and mechanical are the principle terms, but their relation is of an interference, rather than of an opposition: ‘something mechanical in something living’ (Bergson, 1911: 23a, 25b). This is in contrast to incongruity theories (discussed above) which assume that the terms ordinarily inhibit separate domains and/or develop independently (e.g. body–spirit), then their collision or coincidence violates our mental models, thus causing laughter. An example is a laughter-inducing ‘clash’ of body–spirit, occurring when a priest farts during a sermon. For Bergson (1911: 32a), we laugh here not at a collision of the terms but because this instance reveals their reciprocal interference and the rigidity in seeing them as independent, insulate and fixed. Second, as Zupancic (2008) explains, Bergson’s formula is fundamentally conceptual: it subsumes the typical incongruency pairings and embodies the differences of the terms. Take a common incongruous opposition ‘culture–vulgarity’, per Bergson, ‘culture’ could be as laughable as ‘vulgarity’, if appears rigid. It is the rigidity that makes ‘culture’ comic, not the opposition of ‘culture’ to ‘vulgarity’. A juxtaposition merely exposes that rigidity. Within this argument, Bergson (1911: 52b) contends that virtue is as funny as vice if lacks suppleness. Put differently, moral goodness is context-contingent. This contention translates into bracketing the designation of value judgements, commonly implicated in the discussions of the laughter-inducing incongruency pairings. Overall, Bergson’s laughter is ambivalent in that it is not concerned with morality (Hokenson, 2013; cf. Butler, 2015) or upholding binaries that constitute symbolic order, instead conceiving their relations as that of interreference (with a potential to undo each other), thus fundamentally precarious (Zupancic, 2008: 143).

Let me now return to Two Laughs in April with this view of the comic. First, laughter resides neither in the subject of laughter, Pepsi advertisement, nor in the actions, the United press release, nor in the clever memes and zany tweets, but in the rigidity the mishaps expose. To be sure, there are multiple rigidities: from a manifestly staged protest with cliched set-up and stock ethnic stereotypes to the marketers’ fixation on being a part of culture and conceiving ‘culture’ as a ready-made. In the United case, a strikingly mechanical action was only matched by the ostensibly lifeless company’s response. These rigidities combined constitute the encounter between the lived reality and the expectations, partly conjured up by marketing. The initial laughter arises as the encounter punctures ‘a social masquerade’, exposing a corporate ‘likeness to a thing’ clocked in the brand’s promise of care and fulfilment (Bergson, 1911). In both episodes, the encounter foregrounds, Bergson’s (1911: 16a) rigidity where ‘a form supersedes its matter’. Put in familiar terms, laughter arises at the gap between the symbol and the product, often unnoticed or simply
disregarded. While not entirely unexpected, the flagrancy of the gap catches us by surprise, inducing laughter even in a situation of a passenger mistreatment.

Second, all is potentially laughable, if appears rigid. There are no social categories or subjects that would be out of bounds for laughter (Bergson, 1911). This indifference towards (moral) order and authority does not imply that laughter is essentially subversive, but the ‘reversibility’ of terms in the comic formula (Zupancic, 2008: 113). Practically speaking, now we laugh at marketers’ stilted representation of a protest, and now at our expectations that marketers feature one authentically and agitate genuinely for a social issue. Importantly, such reversing emerges through humorous repetition and reiterations. This is well illustrated in the Pepsi episode. As the memes with soda inserted into historic images proliferate, drawing on an infinite archive of analogies, what becomes evident is a cultural vastness that defines a protest in popular imaginary. These endless reiterations on the theme akin to a line-up of carnival mirrors where images bounce off each other to refract a popular understanding of ‘dissent’. Thus, emerging understanding points to the impossibility of authentically representing a protest and in turn flags the rigidity in the supposition at the core of the laughter-inducing encounter. In the United episode, the effect is produced when a belief in customer rights referred back to itself confronted by the emptiness of ‘customer’ and its non-correspondence to a human. To highlight the inhumane treatment of the passenger, scores of grotesque re-imaginings of customer service featured a mutilated human body. Repeating this set-up ceaselessly and graphically, memes turned the victim into a prop, thus, instead of (re)asserting humanity, they presented ‘customer’ as an object, mute and without affect. In this way, laughter pivoted on the very supposition that spurred it, highlighting the contingency of the idea that ‘customer’ and ‘humanity’ are one and the same.

And again, to speak of reversing of terms is not to suggest that there is some essential critical reflexivity in laughter. What we see as an ideological unmasking in these episodes transpires through repetition. Repetition is a central comic mechanism (Bergson, 1911; Heller, 2005), but it may not work to the effect of reversing (as seen in the Pepsi example above) in a single joke. Instead, reversing occurs through comic intensification. That is to say, reversing happens in a laughing chorus, where comic set-up is repeated and redoubles with every burst. Moreover, reversing is not premised on individuals’ critical predispositions and political allegiances, but on a continuous play with the same set-up. And, although in both episodes, reversing constitutes an ideological critique of marketing, laughter is not always critical in this sense. To reiterate the first point, laughter challenges rigidity – a single-minded adherence to an idea, ‘whether it is good or bad is of little moment’ (Bergson, 1911: 45a). Furthermore, given the mechanism of the emergence, the critique implicates those who laugh as much as their targets. As in the episodes, reversing collapses a distance between the two, and so, unlike Adbusters or consumer activist groups, a laughing chorus does not stand apart or above the critique it levels (Bakhtin, 1984; cf. Rumbo, 2002). Finally, laughter is oppositional, even transgressive, yet not necessarily emancipatory. Again, because reversing is activated in repetition, laughter manifests native beliefs and delusions, thus, like Bakhtin’s (1984) carnival, might illuminate momentarily the entrenched world order but does not liberate from it. Crucially, since reversing, put crudely, is a by-product of a comic intensification, then a critical impetus of a laughing chorus is distinct from one seen in consumer activism and in critical marketing generally (as I explain later).

Third, laughter is a social gesture, an outward expression different from action since it is ‘without any aim or profit, from cause than a kind of inner itching’ (Bergson, 1911: 44b). Laughter erupts suddenly, hence has a capacity to interrupt but not to direct. Still, its social efficacy is not to be underestimated, for there is ‘something explosive in gesture, which awakens our sensibilities
when on the point of being lulled to sleep’ (Bergson, 1911: 45a). This explosive element was on display in both episodes, as laughter pushed its way into the news cycle and impelled a response. Bergson elaborated little on ‘explosive’, simply likening laughter to a rumbling thunder. Bakhtin (1984) located it with ‘the massed people’ and the latest studies of the internet publics concur – this power is numerical (Rambukkana, 2015). However, unlike in the medieval times, it is not constituted by physical co-presence but intensely mediated. In the insightful study of trolls, Phillips (2015) ties the current surge in such power to the logic of the sensationalist-24/7 news media. While on an ‘attention harvest’, in Wu’s (2016) terms, the media constructs news out of the comments already-gathering attention, amplifying them and driving more people to social media. The sheer noise thus created, like Bergson’s thunder, forces companies ‘to run for cover’, withdraw a campaign and offer an apology.

In summary, laughter erupts at a sight of a spectacular rigidity or a spectacle of rigidity, as in the opening episodes. The chorus grows through countless repetition of a comic set-up. What manifests in a comic sequence then is a more general social rigidity – commonly pervasive, prevalent and tacit beliefs and patterns. To use Douglas’s (1968: 365) phrase, a comic play ‘affords an opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity’. Then, popular laughter is a corrective gesture insofar as it interrupts business as usual, jolt us from the lull of the entrenched ideas and conventions, and alerts us to their contingent nature.

The power of a laughing chorus

‘Outrage’ is how media commentators typically describe the public responses we see in the opening episodes. While the term captures the explosive-ness of a laughing chorus, the label is actually used to refer to any reaction online, regardless of how it is expressed. Arguably, the term serves to underscore a supposedly over-emotional nature of the reaction – an outburst, therefore either to dismiss it as irrational and frivolous or as mere venting, a way of coping with ‘events that seem beyond reason” (Davis, 2019). Then, commentators, take Davis (2019) as an example, proceed to lament the loss of the traditional public sphere with reasoned arguments and its digitalisation, characterised by the immediacy of response from ‘the crowd… amenable to waves of feeling, that grip its members in ways that they don’t expect and can’t always easily explain’. There is much to unpack regarding what is at stake in labelling and dismissing public feelings and the crowd. In ‘Who Is Afraid of the Crowd’ (2010), Mazzarella takes on the latter, arguing against evoking ‘the crowd’ as an ‘obscene limit’ of individual agency and imagining the relations between reason and body in zero-sum terms. In Affective Publics, Papacharizi (2015) addresses the former, demonstrating productive political power of affect. It is beyond the scope here to outline their arguments fully. Still, following from these works, my point is that content-wise ostensibly unserious, a laughing chorus can be sensible or absurd. However, if taken within a historical-theoretical perspective and considered beyond the content of a single joke, then online laughter is a serious public expression with a distinct critical edge. My argument is that today’s popular laughter not only involves particular expressive forms (Graefer et al., 2018; Philips, 2015) but importantly, a critical potential at play that does not rely on the dominant forms of deliberation and modes of contestation.

There is plenty of the nonsensical, the weird and the absurd in a laughing chorus, which is largely constituted by memes, vernacular artefacts, created and spread by online publics (Shifman, 2013). Memes seem rather akin to conceptual art: radically open (ambivalent and intertextual) and reliant on ready-mades, pieces of content pulled from popular culture. A good example is
#PepsiSavesTheDay with a cut-out can inserted in various fictional and historic contexts. Comprised of intertextual leaps and interdiscursive references, memes resonate with multiple audiences, prompting polyvocal readings that transcend any original and even work at cross purposes, such as the calls to respect the customer (re)circulating as a mockery of the entitlement implied. Perhaps unlike conceptual art, memes rarely require a high level of cultural literacy. True, some are self-referential and hermetically sealed within a context, but most aim for relatability in some sense to achieve shareability (Shifman, 2013). Therefore, memes are often made of images, either iconic or stock photos, clichés and catch phrases. But memes go beyond borrowing recognisable imagery and language to employ and enact ‘a grotesque pantomime of dominant cultural tropes’ (Philips, 2015: 8). This aligns with Bakhtin’s (1984: 96) claim that popular laughter is not an isolated aspect of culture, but only became such with the establishment of ‘serious culture’ spurred by the medieval ruling classes.

It is hard to say what Bergson (1911) and Bakhtin (1984) would have thought of memes; still, their observations on laughter reflect well the basics of memes. For instance, both privileged visual over verbal expression. Bakhtin (1984) is known for his favourable evaluation of vulgar and bodily humour, viewing it as an affront to the individualised private body of the modern culture and the severance of bodily life from other spheres. Bergson (1911) is partial towards extra-linguistic genres of humour and celebrates irrationality, absurdity and non-sequiturs as the most effective ways to expose rigidity. For Bergson, logical concepts are but the imperfect means by which we try to control the chaotic flux, which constitutes life. Both recognised an inherent populist strand in laughter, insofar as it traffics in ‘general types’ and aims at ‘expressing an average of mankind’ by way of abstraction (Bergson, 1911: 52a) and ‘directed at all and everyone’ with emphasis on bodily strata ‘as something universal, representing all the people’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 19). This impulse towards populism is discernible in memes (Philips and Milner, 2017). Memes swiftly respond to events and in a way that people can readily understand, which often means over-literal, corporeal, concrete and simplified manner. Yet, as the episodes illustrate, taken together memes advance a point and provoke a discussion beyond social media, forming a polyvocal commentary on the events.

What the episodes also highlight is that while some memes are explicitly critical and political in their content, there is a strong emphasis on comic entertainment. In other words, just as it is a mistake to dismiss a laughing chorus as frivolous and nonsensical, to take it as deliberately forwarding a particular critical agenda is equally erroneous. Bakhtin (1984) provides us with a sense that popular laughter can be an end in itself, an inalienable part of culture. All uncrowning notwithstanding, laughter is ambiguous (Graefer et al., 2018; Obadare, 2009). However, following Zupancic (2008), I suggest that we might be looking at the wrong place for a critical edge of laughter when we focus on content, intent or even outcomes. In tracing a laughing chorus, if we shift the focus towards the repetition, as constitutive of the comic, we see that memes multiply following a certain logic. What is repeated is not specific elements but a set-up at the encounter of ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living’ (Bergson, 1911). Then, as memes become crasser, they also become more abstract, in that any specificity of the episodes is lost, so much so that a bloodied face of a real person is turned into a ‘generalised body’ that bleeds (Bakhtin, 1984). What remains, and thus what repetition radically lays bare, are the basic terms – brand//culture and customer//human being – encapsulating the marketing ideology that aims to merge the two into one, dissolving the gap in-between. That is, at work here is a distinct critical mode, based on the logic of repetition, rather than representation prevalent in critical marketing.
Let me sketch out a difference. In critical marketing, we start with a market or consumption phenomenon, peel away the layers of meanings and work through different articulations to reveal its essence and/or uncover the underlying political-economical structures and ideology (see Caruana et al., 2008). We often take a historical perspective to trace the ‘how’ and ‘why’ and tease out the nuances that gave it this or that material form (see Campbell and Deane, 2018). In contrast, as the episodes show, the critique that emerges through repetition does not make a phenomenon more comprehensible. There is little concern with nuances or the ‘why’. Reactive to the events, the intensifying laughter merely restates in various ways the terms at the initial encounter, almost like an incantation, without any probing and explaining the causes. Moreover, this critique through repetition is not concerned with revealing any (hidden) relationships and assumptions. A laughing chorus reveals nothing that is not already known. Yet, and Zupancic (2008: 209) puts it best:

it does not usually claim directly that there is nothing behind. Rather the contrary: behind the veil there is always a naked bottom, behind the folding screen a scantily clad lady, and there is always, of course a lover hidden in the closet . . . there is always something behind. Yet the comic point is that what is behind is – Surprise, surprise! – nothing but what we would expect (from the surface of things).

Indeed, there is no surprise in a non-correspondence of brand//culture and customer//human being, aside from its particular egregiousness in these episodes. What is then the critical work of repetition here? Comic repetition seems to flatten any depth, cut off all subtleties and restate the opposition of the terms, often hyperbolically, whereas critical marketing would meticulously unearth and scrutinise the ideological constitution of, for instance, consumer subjectivity (Caruana et al., 2008). But then, by continuously and variously repeating the opposition, laughter does not affirm or subvert it, instead reproduces it as the two terms and amplifies an always-already-there schism. Thus, comic repetition indicates the contingency of the socio-symbolic order involved. To sum up the difference, the critique through repetition does not reveal ‘a naked bottom’ of marketing; instead, it asserts that marketing is ‘a naked bottom’ and it does so not by way of logic, argumentation and reasoning, but through bursts of roaring laughter.

Towards laughter as a theoretical lens

Marketing theory has not had a lot to say about repetition in social reproduction, beyond the limited terms of pecuniary emulation. Similarly limited are discussions of laughter, as noted earlier. The centrality of repetition to the comic and the very prevalence of the latter on social media calls for a broader theoretical understanding of both. This article is a step in that direction. I aimed to demonstrate that it is potentially productive to consider a laughing chorus as a form of social critique and a mode of expression that does not depend on logic, rationality and even representation for its effects. There is much to gain in studying the ideological play, the comic mechanism and the intensely mediated nature of laughter today. Laughter is a complex matter and might prove a fertile one for theory development, given the historically unprecedented access to the comic afforded by the social media.

As discussed above, Western philosophy has always recognised the connection between laughter and thought. Walter Benjamin (1934 cited in Parvulescu, 2010: 12) once commented that ‘there is not better starting point for thought than laughter’ and Michel Foucault (1970: xv)
concurred in recalling that The Order of Things ‘first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered . . . all the familiar landmarks of my thought - our thought’. The passage was a taxonomy of animals in a fictional Chinese encyclopaedia, which contained peculiar categories and species. To emphasise, the passage repeated a familiar form but filled it with wildly different content, the laughter thus erupting shook and ‘broke up all the ordered surfaces’. In a word, comic repetition has repercussions on the stability of categories of knowledge and, by implication, our socio-symbolic order. As such comic repetition holds a significant critical potential.

Precisely because of the capacity to interrupt, illustrated by Foucault, modern societies sought to civilise, control and contain laughter, pruning it down to a smile and a ‘bourgeois notion’ of humour (Bakhtin, 1984). In a tour de force account of this process, Parvulescu (2010) shows that laughter was believed to embody intemperance, irrationality and excessive emotional response, thus deemed a threat to rationality, morality, order and ultimately governance. Banished from public culture, laughter remained a mode of thought and expression among the marginalised, often as the only opening in ‘which a self [could] unfold’ (Parvulescu, 2010: 5). We have numerous literary, historic and ethnographic accounts of how laughter flourished in the shadows of the authoritative discourse and the hegemonic culture. Be it in African American and immigrant communities in the West, or societies under colonial and Soviet regimes, laughter there engendered unique sociability, a way of sensing the world and being in it (e.g. Bussie, 2007; Carpio, 2008; Goldstein, 2003; Yurchak, 2006). And just like laughter made a Black man visible in Ralph Ellison’s The Invisible Man, today it is by laughing that a Turkish woman states her presence (BBC, 2014). Importantly, to locate laughter in the opposition to the public sphere and the state order is not to say it is essentially humanistic or virtuous. Recent studies into the rise of alt-right point that Nazi ideology, bigotry and misogyny thrive on comic antics, buffoonery and absurd humour (Nagle, 2017). Laughter has complex social and subjective dimensions, and as such offers crucial insights into our cultures, our relation to the world and our affective experiences (Berlant and Ngai, 2017).

Laughter is an entry into the lifeworlds of those who unable or unwilling to speak in the language of the public sphere (e.g. Fluri and Clark, 2019; Goldstein, 2003; Musharbash, 2019). Laughter is also an analytic lens into social life (Billig, 2005; Watson, 2015). Laughter arises at the sight of disjunction, incongruity and contradiction, thus pointing to ‘the paradoxical, “logical,” nonlinear and precarious constitution of our (symbolic) universe’, its functioning (Zupancic, 2008: 142). ‘A play upon form’, in Douglas’s (1968: 362) terms, the comic lets us see the familiar defamiliarised, highlighting the gaps and the seams in the logics that organise our societies, otherwise obscured. As Critchley (2002) notes, laughter is premised on common sense, and also where that sense falls apart. This capacity to hold and jointly articulate manifestly clashing positions is actualised through repetition and translates into laughter’s a propensity for frame-breaking and defying our sense of distances and differences between some categories, values and norms and the appearance of unity in others (Zupancic, 2008). Thus, laughter brings into perspective customary customary perceptions of the world. Not to belabour the point, I conclude with Bakhtin’s (1981) comment on the analytic power of laughter:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it.
Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note
1. In philosophy, ‘comic’ is commonly used to designate funniness as an aspect that threads and manifests variably across humorous expressions and genres (Heller, 2005). Hereafter is used similarly.

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