

Ágnes Heller, *Was ist komisch? Kunst, Literatur, Leben und die unsterbliche Komödie*, Edition Konturen, Wien 2018, pp. 263, € 29.80, ISBN 9783902968302

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Ágnes Heller, the philosopher, intellectual dissident, and former member of the group around Georg Lukács known as the Budapest School, has recently died. A prolific writer, she has published more than forty books and countless articles, work that not only knows an impressive thematic scope, but that also has changed its theoretical approach over time. Since the 90s, Heller has increasingly turned her attention towards aesthetics, exploring subjects such as Shakespeare, comedy, and the historical novel. Her book on comedy, entitled *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life*, originally published in 2005, has appeared last year in German (under the title *Was ist komisch? Kunst, Literatur, Leben und die unsterbliche Komödie*). This occasion is a good reason to revisit this work.

Was ist komisch? proposes a philosophical investigation into the nature of the comic. What makes a play, a novel, or a movie *comic*? Why and of what do we laugh? In themselves, these are exactly the type of questions that invite speculative or sweeping answers. Heller, however, circumvents this danger through her phenomenological approach. By careful analysing several comic genres, as well as examples out of our everyday experience, she formulates a series of hypotheses on the nature of the comic. Each comic genre is exemplified by key works, in a selection, as she admits, principally informed by personal preference. Whereas the chapters three to six of the book are focused on the visual arts (the drama, the novel, "die existenzial Komödie", and the joke respectively), the chapters seven and eight are dedicated to the visual arts (the image and the movie). In the first and the last chapter Heller offers more general considerations on the comic in general. As this broad range of subjects might perhaps already suggest, the book is encyclopaedic and playful in character.

Heller's point of departure lies in a deceptively simple observation: historically, philosophy has always favoured the tragic, not the comic. From Aristoteles to Heidegger, tragedy has been seen as a genre that is more akin to philosophical

contemplation than the comedy. Heller points out at least three reasons for this preference. First, just as philosophy tries to view the world as a coherent whole, tragedy homogenises. In the tragedy play, every tragic figure exists only *in its relation* to others. Speaking with Hegel – who, as is well-known, has written to some extent on Greek tragedy – one could say that every moment in a play only makes sense in the light of the whole. Comedy, in contrast, enacts heterogeneity, both through juxtaposing heterogeneous elements in the world and through the heterogeneous structure of its presentation. Second, tragedy – according to Heller – presents us with the idea of something that stands *above* life, some kind of judgement (truth, justice, guilt), whereas for comedy there is nothing higher than live itself. And third, philosophy by its very nature presupposes the classical unity of the true, the good, and the beautiful. This is problematic for comedy, insofar as the comic is related to the ugly, the base, and the distorted. On these grounds, philosophy would not only be unable to understand the comic, the philosophical attitude would even be to some degree *hostile* towards it. "Philosophie," as Heller notes, "steht immer noch auf Kriegsfuß mit dem Komischen" (p.19). Although the claim about a still prevailing hostility seems exaggerated (does the work of Kierkegaard, Marx, or Nietzsche, or more recently, of Russell or Derrida, not include the comic *philosophically?*), a general disdain of traditional philosophy for the comic is certainly true.

This line of argument at the same time justifies the examination of comic *works* (in the broad sense, from artworks to jokes). For Heller, both art and popular culture are able to portray and explain the comic. Philosophy by its nature cannot grasp the comic, but many comic works are by their nature philosophical. But in what way are they *philosophical*? This question leads us to what is the basic hypothesis of Heller's book: the comic is related to a form of *rationality* (a conviction, it can be remarked in passing, that she had already defended in an article from 1980, entitled *Comedy and Rationality*). Here the author of the masterful *Everyday life* (1984) lets one of her lasting themes reoccur, because the form of this rationality is precisely *common sense*, that is, the rationality of everyday life. "[...] die Komödie", as Heller summarises this point, "stellt das Alltagsleben vom Standpunkt der Vernunft her dar" (p.89). Comic is what appears as "irrational" from the point of view of everyday rationality. We laugh about what appears excessive from the point of view of common sense in everyday

life: the stupid, vain, or tyrannical person, the philosopher who neglects practical life, or the overtly practical person who can only think in practical terms. In this sense, comic works that portray irrationality can point beyond themselves towards irrationality in the real world. Heller, in discussing the comic novel (*Don Quichote, Shamela, The Good Soldier Švejk*), strikingly likens the parodic function of the novel to a distorting mirror: "Die Parodie und ihr „Vorbild“ sind identisch insofern, als das Original im Zerrspiegel wiedererkannt werden kann, doch sie sind auch nicht identisch, nicht nur weil es einen Spiegel gibt oder dieser ein Zerrspiegel ist, sondern auch, weil der Spiegel etwas über das Original aussagt, das sonst verborgen bleibt: seine Nicht-Rationalität" (p.122). In this point comedy and social or political critique coincide.

The rationality of the comic is modeled on the logic of the Kantian aesthetic judgement. On the one hand, this means that the judgement implicit in the experience of the comic is non-conceptual. The comic, Heller maintains, is *by definition* "undefinierbar und unbestimmbar" (p.30). On the other hand, however, it does not originate in feelings or emotions. Indeed, the viewer, in order to experience something (a person, an action) as comic, must have a certain *distance* towards it. Thus the phenomenon of the comic, for Heller, stands midway between the rational and the irrational. Her view could perhaps best be categorised as a weak rationalism. She pairs this basic view with three theories of laughter: the theory of dominance (Hobbes), the theory of liberation (Freud), and the theory of incongruence (Kant). Elements of all three theories are interspersed throughout her discussions.

In a way that reminds of Heidegger or Arendt, Heller chooses to describe the comic as a part of the human condition. For this reason, as the subtitle of the book already reveals, she sees comedy as immortal. Human life would be characterised by a tension between "das genetische Apriori" (our genetic code) and "das soziale Apriori" (all social and cultural factors) (pp.36-37). Between these two there exists a "existentiellen Abgrund" (p. 246). Laughter and crying would be two ways of responding to the manifestation of this tension. Her description of this eternal facet of the human condition – which evokes Heidegger's theory of existentials [*Existenzialien*] – seems to be related to the interpretation of the existential comedy (Beckett, Kafka, Ionesco) she advances. In this modern version of the comic play, namely,

life itself is presented as absurd and as an unsolvable mystery. As Heller writes: "Die menschliche Existenz selbst ist die wesentliche Inkongruenz" (p.261). This seems to me a more problematic side of the investigation, insofar as the phenomenon of the comic becomes hypothesised into a supra-historical category, an abstraction independent from all historical, social, and cultural factors. It stands in a strange contrast with the more historical approach that Heller adopts when analysing a concrete work. Clearly, this very brief discussion of *Was ist komisch?* fails to do it justice. In many senses, as Heller herself self-consciously notes, with its encyclopaedic and meandering character the book is very similar to a comic novel. Its strength lies exactly in its more specific considerations, when Heller – whether discussing the plays of Terence, the images of Bruegel, the films of Chaplin, or Jewish jokes – lets her prose sparkle with brilliant observations. It is a book that should be of interest not only to philosophers, but also to scholars in the field of literary studies and cultural criticism.

Bibliography

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