

The Missing Laugh

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What is lost could be another manner to rephrase *What if* questions and the alternative chronologies and the perspectives they bring.

When we confront the absolute, i.e., the factual History, with a divergent possibility, we necessarily uncover what has been missing all along and likely did not let us go any further. Because if “those that do not know History are doomed to repeat it, then those that do not discuss Alternative History are cursed to miss the early exit signs that precede the fall”¹. Being sustained by imagination, Alternative History can provide preventive scenarios in manners we are still exploring.

But there is another reason for challenging the absolute.

Yes, we have the research motivation. Yes, we have the intellectual challenge. We even have the creative appeal to explore Alternative History in our scientific field of expertise. However, all of them pale in comparison when you consider that one cannot be human and not hold dear in one’s heart another human being with whom we had a good laugh with.

Joy, whether from creation, from the irony uncovered when stepping with a past that never was, or through storytelling, brings people closer. You will never look at anyone as an enemy if you ever shared a laugh with that person.

We, at Academia, tend to overlook that joy and laughter are as much the children of Reason as are Logic and Mathematics. We fear sometimes that our work will be belittled if joy is associated with it. And that is another reason to walk the miles that Alternative History proposes. We find our own cultural blind spots, sometimes ridiculous, but that do not belittle us, as they sustain our claim to humanity, and learning from them with a shared laugh is the beginning of insight.

And a shared laugh comes through storytelling.

The setup and the punch line are the two parts of the ‘storytelling’ body of a joke, a dual micro verse of how (higher) literature works, and the place for anonymous genius to thrive. Jokes that survive centuries and cultures, being re-imagined and retold time and time again, are a testimony for the capacity to joy intertwine storytelling and the human condition in no more than one or two phrases in many cases. And their diminutive count of words is a testimony of how the creative and analytical modes of the brain can align in synergy when joy and insight are within the same objective.

There is a gap between the setup, providing the context of the joke, and the punch line, that twists the expected outcome of the context. That gap, that should be managed as the silent pauses in a musical piece fosters the laugh. It also allows for the audience to experience a familiar course of

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thought through an unexpected or reversed conclusion. And this is the most interesting part. There is logic in the manner we find funniness in reversing reality. There is also an unexpected abstract possibility that allows for exploring reality in a new manner.

Abstract, possibilities, models for and of the physical reality, all these return us to the most revered functions of thought and analytical probing. And yet, for so long, joy, laughter, and comedy have been looked suspiciously by academics, savants, and intellectuals in general. Politics and politicians lived a rather strange relationship with comedy, as time went by, from assuring that the only ones able to speak freely would be the court jesters (sometimes even at the expenses of the monarchs and reigning power) to subdue laughter or only allowing it to laugh at the expenses of given targets. Because, unlike the intellectuals that neglect the value of joy and laughter on many occasions, politicians instinctively recognized tools of value for power and influence when they see it.

That is not to say that laughter and comedy per se are enough to change the political ideas of anyone². They are not. Logic is well-accompanied by comedy in this aspect, as well as in many others. But logic does not have the same tainted reputation of joy and we can but wonder if we, particularly in the Western world would view joy and comedy differently had the legendary 'About Comedy' aristotelic book had been preserved.

Notwithstanding, having we come to the realization that many theories and perspectives of the great philosopher Aristoteles are wrong (the four elements of nature *versus* the atomic nature of matter comes to mind immediately), shouldn't we have the intellectual maturity to assume we can appreciate the value of comedy without his pre-approval?

We, at Academia, forget that joy is one of the strongest antidotes for fear and that fear blocks rationality. We forget to enjoy in exploring avenues for the fear of being ridiculed. We forget but we do not need to remain in forgottenness. Alternative History, by mining the past for what is lost, can provide the golden stepping stones for embracing both joy and rationality. It is not the only path but it definitely one that is available to sail through without fear.

² As repeated, in several episodes of 'Governo-Sombra' or 'Programa cujo nomes estamos legalmente impedidos de dizer' of the Portuguese SIC tv network, by the famed comedian Ricardo Araújo Pereira, pointing out that several recent elections throughout the world witnessed that comedians making fun, parody, satire (or other humorous approach) of a given candidate does not prevent their election, or change anyone's intention regarding the electoral vote.