

What's So Funny? Laughter and Anger in the Time of the Assassins*

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During a recent rehearsal with my dance group, I asked one of the dancers to read aloud an item from the “Shouts and Murmurs” page of *The New Yorker*, which read as follows:

The President whammed his fist on the table. The Cabinet Room went silent. “This isn’t some goddam B movie, gentlemen,” he said. “This is real life.”

The scientist looked at the floor.

“We have the smartest minds in the world working on this,” the President continued. “The top biologists and astronomers and geneticists. And you’re telling me that the closest anyone can come to identifying this . . . *thing* is . . .”

“I’m afraid so, Mr. President,” the scientist said. “What we’re dealing with here is the Flying Penis from Venus.”

The Treasury Secretary giggled, and the chief of staff did his best to not join in. But a look from the President silenced them.

“This . . . *thing*,” the President said. “This creature, this—”

“Flying Penis from Venus,” the scientist said.

The President burst out laughing, and the rest of the room joined him, relieved to release their pent-up mirth.

“I suppose it is kind of funny,” the President said, “in that it’s so improbable. But come on, guys—it’s already killed forty thousand people, so we really have to focus here.”¹

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1. Paul Simms, “Eight Short Science-Fiction Stories,” *The New Yorker*, September 14, 2015, p. 50.

Not one of the dancers cracked a smile. When I then attempted to read the same passage, I could not get through it without having to visibly suppress a laugh each time I uttered the “improbable” designation. Obviously, what is salient here is that one person’s funny bone is another’s yawn. Trying to account for my somewhat hysterical response to the joke, I found the following explanation in *Wikipedia*:

Paradoxical laughter is an exaggerated expression of humor which is unwarranted by external events. It may be uncontrollable laughter, which may be recognized as inappropriate by the person involved. It is associated with altered mental states or mental illness, such as mania, hypomania, or schizophrenia, and can have other causes. Paradoxical laughter is indicative of an unstable mood, which can quickly change to anger and back again, on minor external cues.

The last sentence neatly encapsulates my state of mind these days. Forgive me if I am about to subject you to a similar “instability” via a series of somewhat arbitrary equations that, in my daily consciousness, form a kind of ping-pong between anger and laughter, outrage and hilarity, conflict and clarity, as revelations of rampant injustice and flagrant disregard for the social good stream out from the orbits of power. Along the way I will deliver a few jokes plus pleasurable memories of absurdist art events from the past. Taking a cue from a recent review of Henry James’s autobiography, I must add that in advance of this excursion I feel “comically smaller” than the issues I am about to belabor, self-effacing as that may seem.²

Every morning I eat breakfast while ingesting *New York Times* articles about the latest atrocities enacted by religious fanatics, sociopathic adolescents, and trigger-happy cops, which are noteworthy—in most cases—for the desperate attempts of journalists and politicians to account for such savagery. Dismay at reports and photos of drowning immigrants trying to escape the ravages of civil war in the Middle East and anger at the “collateral damage” of US drone strikes, the injustices of our juridical/incarceration system, the rabid antics of the NRA, the brutality of the jihadists, and, I should add, the unspeakable, debased pronouncements of, of all people, the president of the United States (which, incidentally, is not the first time I have found myself embarrassed to be a US citizen)—all of this, on one day or another, permeates my favorite meal. Unlike a sizable percentage of the US population, I cannot share their paranoia. The chances of my spouse or myself, or others close to me, becoming victims of xenophobia or deportation are practically nil. The account by an acquaintance that a friend of a friend of hers had been killed in one of the Paris attacks and news reports of blacks murdered by police every four days in America have done little to alter my sense of security. Not anyone I know. After all, I am a US-born, white, childless, middle-class adult living in an American metropolis, am I not? Well out of harm’s way. Nevertheless, I—and

2. Adam Gopnik, “Little Henry, Happy at Last,” *The New Yorker*, January 18, 2016: “. . . all the while he knows that he is comically smaller than the things he is related to.”

of course I am not alone—am filled with anger that anxious and bigoted police can so readily have recourse to their weapons and that mass killings can continue to take place in different parts of the world, not only relatively close to home. It is a perplexing issue that, on a personal level, outrage at such acts can coexist, if only sporadically, with outrageous hilarity.

Funny (Were It Not So Horrifying)

Look, having nuclear—my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump, at MIT; good genes, very good genes, OK, very smart, the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart—you know, if you're a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, OK, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world—it's true!—but when you're a conservative Republican they try—oh, do they do a number—that's why I always start off: *Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune*—you know I have to give my, like, credentials all the time, because we're a little disadvantaged—but you look at the nuclear deal, the thing that really bothers me—it would have been so easy, and it's not as important as these lives are (nuclear is powerful; my uncle explained that to me many, many years ago, the power, and that was thirty-five years ago; he would explain the power of what's going to happen and he was right (who would have thought?), but when you look at what's going on with the four prisoners—now it used to be three, now it's four—but when it was three and even now, I would have said it's all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don't, they haven't figured that the women are smarter right now than the men, so, you know, it's gonna take them about another hundred and fifty years—but the Persians are great negotiators, the Iranians are great negotiators, so, and they, they just killed, they just killed us.³

Absurd in the Sense of Illogical

Artist Simon Leung conducted a seminar at the Whitney Independent Studies Program some years ago. Centered on Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, his lecture included a series of projections, one of which was of a penis protruding through a "glory hole" in the wall of a public lavatory stall. At the end of his presentation, a male student asked, "Was that your penis?" Without missing a beat, Simon replied, "Did it look like my penis?" Choking on laughter, which, much to my embarrassment, lasted longer than that of anyone else, I almost had to leave the room.

Without delving deeper into what might at this point appear to be a fixation with the male organ, I should emphasize, in case you haven't already surmised it, that my particular sense of humor veers toward the absurd, ridiculous, incongruous,

3. Donald Trump, July 21, 2015, Sun City, South Carolina; published on Slate.com, July 31, 2015.

ludicrous, preposterous, and stupid, and sometimes obscene. The “Flying Penis From Venus” joke incorporates all of these features, hence the extremity of my reaction. I still cannot utter the words aloud without experiencing some kind of internal frisson. And the absurd illogic of Leung’s response to the student’s salacious question, compounded by the mockery of Duchamp’s iconic final joke, is what propelled me into a convulsive fit of laughter. The following is another example of what can send me over the edge, a cartoon:

A tom turkey lies with its head on a chopping block while a farmer, holding an ax, stands next to it. The caption, clearly representing the turkey’s voice, reads: “Thanksgiving, shmanksgiving—we both know this is because I slept with your wife.”⁴

On showing the above tidbit to my mate, I was nonplussed that her only response was a small shake of the head. She found it barely amusing. This is not to say that the woman with whom I live has no sense of humor. As I said before, one person’s funny bone, etc.

In my aforementioned state of “instability,” I continue to peruse “Shouts and Murmurs” and *New Yorker* cartoons and laugh with my friends. Conventional wisdom in the press tells us that life must go on. In the face of the evasion of imprisonment by egregiously corrupt legislators and corporate heads, we continue to attend theater and gallery openings, enjoy food and companionship and the affection of those with whom we live, while statistics measuring the increasing hardships of the glaringly impoverished in the US are never far from our middle-class mind-sets. Yes, our lives go on while fifty percent of the people incarcerated in US prisons are innocent of the criminal charges brought against them. Yes, our lives go on while the only public source of water in Flint, Michigan, a largely black community, was the lead-laden Flint River. That this body of water was for years a toxic dumping ground for the auto industry is a fact well known to do-nothing, duplicitous officials.

A friend who is of a Freudian bent maintains that laughter is relief from the tyranny of anger. Maybe we should also be talking about relief from the tyranny of irony, or the tyranny of email.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel has written that if, under the eye of eternity, nothing matters, “then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism and despair.”⁵ Nagel blurs the social and emotional constraints of everyday life, their negotiations and suppressions, all of which might be said to require the relief of laughter, to say nothing of thought-provoking conversation, mutual admiration, and a good meal. Eternity has never held any allure for me, and my self-image includes neither heroism nor despair.

4. Zachary Kanin, *The New Yorker*, November 30, 2015.

5. Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), quoted by James Wood in “Is That All There Is? Secularism and Its Discontents,” *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2011.

Yet sometimes I feel like a rat caught in a squirrel cage, doomed to repeat the same obsessive gyrations from anger to laughter, laughter to anger. Anger and laughter. Laughter and . . . STOP! STOP! Let me off this roller coaster!

Choreographer Patricia Hoffbauer, who also dances with me, responded to a first draft of this paper:

Yvonne,

I like your essay even though I don't think the jokes you use are all that funny, which reinforces your point . . . yes, different funny bones, different age? Penis jokes are the least funny thing, for me. But you really think they are hilarious. What is that about? What would Freud say about that?

Yet how else can you, we, discuss this fucked up world if not with the help of humor? Humor as a weapon of caustic criticism . . . for me to make work that is relevant to our lives today, and not an exercise in empty formalism or "deconstruction," which too much dance tends to be, we have to involve the world itself. And this world is so enraging in its injustices, that only laughter can help us cope. Humor in this case is not ha-ha funny; it's about consciousness, it's about communicating something serious through light means.

So to me, your questions about "what's so funny?" are pertinent in the sense that they address our desperate state of paralysis. . . . [The question] explains that art making is an antidote to, and a way to revolt against, the deadly effects of anger in a state of not-doing. It's not funny; it's fucking CRAZY! And rather than saying this whole thing (life) is impossible, you make work that prods a critical consciousness to emerge. Call me what you will, but I believe art can change us and make us better people. If I were not an artist I would probably be depressed, an assassin, suicidal . . . who knows!

Funny in the Sense of Puzzling

An entry in my diary dated February 25, 2013:

I keep trying to reconcile images of my very alive brother from years ago with that hole at the cemetery. It's like when I was seven years old in the ophthalmologist's office, my crossed monocular eyes glued to a machine that required that two American flags merge into one, a task at which I failed abysmally. How could my brother fit into that little box which was so neatly placed in the hole? Is the word "remains" supposed to make it easier to understand? The mortuary attendant who told my niece that he was "guarding your father" didn't crack a smile, of course. My brother and his remains remain an absurd etymological puzzle.

So what's funny now? Does one laugh to sidestep grief? Or do I laugh to circumvent my anger at the frustrating dancing around death that pervades our culture? You may well ask at this point, "Where is she going with all this?" Patience, my friends. I must first ask *myself* why, in the last few years, beyond my brother's death in 2013, has my need to laugh become an ever more persistent imperative? Yes, our lives go on. Yes, I seek opportunities for laughter in the face of the atrocities and inequities. At the same time, being the guileless person that I am, I must also ask, "How can this be?" Why am I not out in the streets as I was during the Vietnam War and before the invasion of Iraq, or marching with like-minded feminists, gagged and bound together in chains in Washington, DC, to protest anti-abortion threats to *Roe v. Wade*?⁶ And aside from my impersonal annual contributions to Amnesty International, NYC Rescue Mission, Planned Parenthood, the Innocence Project, and a slew of other nonprofits, I must ask if we former demonstrators are so inured to the so-called War on Terror, so accustomed to the culpable and reactive depredations of our government in what is turning into multiple postmodern Thirty Years' Wars, so hardened to the sight of homeless people begging on New York streets and the A train, that we have surrendered to helpless rage or despair? Why am I not shouting from my window, "I'M FED UP AND I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!"

Reluctant to deal with these questions right now (and well aware that the above *cri de coeur* might regrettably be shared by tea-party and Donald Trump supporters!), I shall continue tracking my instability problem by taking a hairpin turn with two examples of early-twentieth-century jokes cited by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

Mr. and Mrs. X live in fairly grand style. Some people think that the husband has earned a lot and so has been able to lay by a bit; others again think that the wife has lain back a bit and so has been able to earn a lot.⁷

A king was making a tour through his provinces and noticed a man in the crowd who bore a striking resemblance to his own exalted person. He beckoned to him and asked: "Was your mother at one time in service in the Palace?" "No, your Highness," was the reply, "but my father was."⁸

In accounting for the ellipses and compression in the above two jokes as an example of repression vis-à-vis their avoidance of outright "smut," Freud writes,

The repressive activity of civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have now, however, been repudiat-

6. No More Nice Girls, a mid-1980s group of eight to ten women, including Joan Braderman, Vanalyn Green, Y.R., and Ellen Willis, carrying a banner emblazoned with "NO FORCED LABOR." I must add that most of this essay was written prior to the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the subsequent Women's Protest Marches in US cities.

7. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, vol. 6 of the Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976), vol. 6, p. 66.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

ed by the censorship in us, are lost to us. But to the human psyche all renunciation is exceedingly difficult, and so we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost. When we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut. In both cases the pleasure springs from the same source. We, however, could never bring ourselves to laugh at the coarse smut; we should feel ashamed or it would seem to us disgusting. We can only laugh when a joke has come to our help.⁹

Without meaning to desecrate the memory of the extraordinarily influential thinker and writer, I have to laugh a little at Freud's late-nineteenth-century class-bound aperçu—I am sure that Freud would have characterized much of our contemporary humor as “smut”—while appreciating the role that omission—call it repression if you will—plays in these jokes. My own sensibility, formed by my working-class antecedents, especially my old-world Italian father, seems to prefer the earthiness of “peasant” smuttiness to the obliqueness of refined suggestion. Nevertheless, Freud's extended analysis of the techniques and social role of jokes—e.g., “their purpose of continuing pleasurable play and their effort to protect [this] from the criticism of reason” and “the pleasure . . . that is derived from [their] simultaneous sense and nonsense”¹⁰—can shed light on the humor in some twentieth-century art objects and performances.

Down Memory Lane: Funny in the Sense of Droll

In a solo performance called *Prairie* at Judson Church in 1963, Alex Hay, with two bed pillows attached by a rope that also wound around his waist to connect the pillows to his body, climbed up to a horizontal aluminum-pipe beam about eight feet above the ground that formed the top section of a trapezoidal playground-like construction designed by sculptor Charles Ross. Struggling to recline on the beam, Hay apparently was trying to sleep but of course was unsuccessful thanks to his precarious perch. All the while, he responded to recorded questions like “Is that comfortable?” and “That doesn't look comfortable” with “No, this isn't comfortable” or “This is more comfortable” or “This isn't comfortable at all,” etc. His statements were interrupted by occasional falls from the beam that left him suspended in midair by the rope, to be followed by his clamoring back up to resume his insomniac labors. *Prairie* was a high point among similar absurdist shenanigans at Judson Church.

9. Ibid., p. 145.

10. Ibid., p. 181.

Funny in the Sense of Peculiar

Early Minimalist sculptures could elicit both delight and incredulity. According to Robert Morris, when Philip Johnson was confronted by Morris's *Slab* at the Green Gallery in 1962, he said he felt like "swatting" it. Its stoic, inexpressive, obdurate, singular presence would belie the ensuing reams of theoretical and scholarly analysis. Pop art, too, could evoke some of the same responses. Claes Oldenburg's happenings, with their messes of paint and debris, often suggesting the monkeyshines of the Keystone Kops, put in high relief the decorous painterly investigations of his contemporaries Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. But it was the total absence of metaphor and cultural reference that at first made Minimalist sculpture so intractably, and peculiarly, disruptive.

Responding to the issue of Minimalism, Patricia, my email pal, wrote the following:

I never had any reaction to those minimalist sculptures. To me (a culturally different person from the NYC artists in the '60s) [Patricia was born and raised in Brazil], most of those sculptures lacked a sense of humor and therefore were an expression of a puritanical sensibility and an ode to straight lines—similar to the "purity" of lines of the bodies in Merce's [Cunningham's] work.

To which I replied:

You had to have been in your 20s at a time when the high-flown claims of Abstract Expressionism were rampant and dominating. Remember, I lived with one of those guys. His A-E paintings were my introduction to late modernism in the visual arts. So in the late '50s when the irreverence of Rauschenberg's paint-besmirched and tire-encircled goat and Morris's subsequent *Slab* came along, it was like a breath of fresh air, a clearing of the decks. You've probably heard me say that I nearly fell on the floor in a fit of laughter when I first saw Rauschenberg's paint-splattered *Bed* at the Castelli Gallery in 1957. The audacity of what followed produced whole new chapters in art history.

But these days I find it hard not to be cynical about the value of art, and I'm not talking about commercial value. Publicly, I try never to rationalize my work in terms of its social value or even speculate about its possible salutary effects on spectators. Instead, I prefer to focus on "aesthetic strategies." Nevertheless, I can sympathize with your statement that "art making is an antidote to, and a way to revolt against, the deadly effects of anger in a state of not-doing" and, despite some doubts, agree that making art is one way to go, a way to live with what you describe as "our desperate state of paralysis."

Absurd in the Sense of Bizarre

Lucinda Childs's canonical solo *Carnation*, presented at Judson Church in 1964, is another story. Having assembled a number of props from her domestic life—kitchen sponges, hair curlers, a lettuce strainer—she proceeded with the utmost composure to arrange the curlers, first in the interstices of the strainer, which she had placed upside down on her head like a high-fashion hat with veil, then one by one between the sponges stacked in her mouth. Looking like a cartoonish Daisy Duck, she then dumped the whole assemblage, including the strainer, into a garbage bag that enclosed one leg, hobbled over to a wallboard partition, and did a handstand against it, which forced the paraphernalia to tumble out of the bag all over the floor. Lowering herself to a headstand, she then removed her leg from the bag, revealing a bed sheet, one corner of which was tied to a big toe. Still upside down, she fumbled with the sheet until she found a free corner, which she attached to her other big toe, then somersaulted backwards to lie flat on her back while pulling the sheet up to her chin. By way of these circumambulations the otherwise glamorous dancer moved from kitchen and bathroom to bedroom. The spectacle was not only astonishing and bizarre, but a powerful feminist statement years ahead of the women's-liberation movement.

Funny in the Sense of Odd

In a recent workshop geared primarily toward visual artists, I divided the fifteen participants into four groups. I had previously asked each of them to bring in a photo, text, and object. One participant introduced a photo of a dog. Searching for some way to extrapolate bodily action from the photo, I asked him if the dog seemed happy, and if so, what did that suggest in terms of movement? He started to move his upper body and hips in a silly manner. I immediately assigned his two confederates the task of watching him intently. What at first appeared inane or puerile in isolation now achieved a kind of gravitas through the concentrated attention of his companions, who had become performer-witnesses. That they were female and he the object of their scrutiny is yet another issue. By turning the tables on the “male gaze” and its more familiar imperatives, their “female gaze” enhanced the oddity of the situation.

Although laughter as “relief from the tyranny of anger” offers a modicum of truth, I am still not completely convinced that this explains, in my case at least, how in these dire times, when I am not directly affected by the political/economic machinations and social upheavals that are responsible for the misery of others, I am lured implacably to such relief. A hedonistic explanation might be that since I am at a remove geographically, economically, and physically from such misery, I feel free to seek out sources of fun. Contrarily, perhaps I have simply been describing a moral repugnance that can be accessed and illustrated more potently by a scene in a recent dance of mine called *Assisted Living: Good Sports 2*. Ruefully, I have to admit that this scene may suggest that performance, with its simultaneous

juxtapositions, is a more effective medium than the ramblings with which I have been taxing you.

Assisted Living: Good Sports 2 is a performance for five dancers, one reader, and two prop movers. It was first presented at the Montpelier Dance Festival in 2011, and performed by Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, Emmanuelle Phuon, Keith Sabado, Yvonne Rainer, Will Orzo, and George Sanchez.

Toward the end, while four of the five dancers lie on the floor seemingly out of control with laughter, each with her/his head on another's heaving abdomen, and Patricia, on the other side of the space, executes in slow motion a series of positions derived from sports photos, I deliver a monologue: "Steve Jobs and a Chinese worker from a factory that makes iPhones go into a bar . . . Has anyone heard this joke? . . . The factory worker has half his face blown off . . . Does that sound familiar? . . . So they go into this bar and . . . You know, I'm not very good with jokes. Oh, Lord, I see it coming . . . they go into this bar and the bartender says, 'What'll it be, folks? . . . but I can't remember the punch line, so can anyone help me out here? . . . the factory worker with half his face blown off and Steve Jobs?"

Finally, I lead each dancer, one at a time, to a preassigned spot where each has been given a line of text to recite. When it is Keith's turn, he struggles, still laughing, to make the transition to an agonized utterance, "My younger brother is full of shrapnel wounds and dying in front of me." Inevitably, in every performance, my eyes tear up as I observe this transition.

Laughter in Another Time

Not confident that I have reconciled or even mitigated the instability of my hilarity/outrage, laughter/anger mood swings and unable to answer with any certainty the question "What is to be done?" with "Make more art," I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, with its complex and expansive take on laughter in the early sixteenth century, a radically different perspective from that of subsequent periods, including our own. Rabelais's folk culture, which integrated and celebrated the "lower" bodily states of birth, digestion, defecation, and death, dodged not only the moralism and judgments characteristic of later eras but also the bitterness of satire. Bakhtin affirms over and over the productive value of laughter as

a universal philosophical principle that heals and regenerates . . . For the Middle Ages and Renaissance the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning . . . [and] because folk humor existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature and precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness.¹¹

11. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 70, 71.

Reading Bakhtin has eased whatever snobbish ambivalence I may still be laboring under with regard to my father's "peasant" sense of humor.¹² My mother, who had working-class aspirations to "the finer things," loudly protested whenever, for example, he unpacked his barbershop joke, which, during my childhood, was fairly frequent:

A man is getting his hair cut in a barbershop. After a few minutes the barber goes to a corner of the shop and spits on the floor.

"Why'd you do that?" asks the man.

The barber replies, "Oh, I'm leaving this dump soon."

After a few more minutes of cutting the man's hair, the barber goes to another corner and urinates.

The customer is somewhat indignant. "Why did you do that?"

The barber replies, "I'm leaving this dump in an hour."

When the barber has completed the haircut, the customer goes to a corner and takes a shit.

The barber is outraged. "What made you do that?"

The man replies, "I'm leaving this dump right now!"

Bakhtin again:

The images of feces and urine [in Rabelais] are ambivalent, as are all the images of the material bodily lower stratum; they debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously. They are blessing and humiliating at the same time. Death and death throes, labor, and childbirth are intimately interwoven. On the other hand, these images are closely linked to laughter. When death and birth are shown in their comic aspect, scatological images in various forms nearly always accompany the gay monsters created by laughter in order to replace the terror that has been defeated.¹³

Winding down, I can't help wondering to what extent laughter inhabits the lives of the Syrian refugees. Certainly it has been an important experience for the impoverished and oppressed in my own time and country. The great African-American comedians with their corrosive wit and empathy—Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Whoopie Goldberg, Dick Gregory, Larry Wilmore, to name a few—come

12. My father was born in 1891 in a tiny village near Turin and left school at age eleven to become a stonemason's apprentice.

13. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 151.

to mind. In any case, much invigorated by Bakhtin's ruminations on Rabelaisian ribaldry and relieved, at least temporarily, of the need to scream out my window, I offer another quote:

Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning; it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and [humanity]; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great [art], posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter.¹⁴

I shall leave it to Patricia, my email pal, to have the last word on whatever vestiges remain of my instability impasse:

I think the laughing hysteria of *Good Sports 2* juxtaposed to Keith's story about his brother dying from shrapnel is an odd moment, not funny. It makes the audience suddenly realize that none of it is really "all that funny." . . . So I think what you create in that moment is shock, perhaps surprise, embarrassment for the viewers . . . as in, "Should I really be laughing at any of this?" The spectators are challenged to find a viewing perspective that enables them to experience the complexity of the scene at that moment. They are invited to grasp the explosive disturbance produced by the radical and ancient juxtaposition of laughter and tears.

14. Ibid., p. 66.