

Annie Gérin

# A second look at laughter: Humor in the visual arts

**Abstract:** Responding to current practices in the field of contemporary art, this essay is a study on humor research methodology as it pertains specifically to artistic propositions. It draws on art historical methods for visual analysis (in particular Erwin Panofsky's iconological method and Ernst Gombrich's psychology of perception) and on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), developed by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin in 1991 for the analysis of jokes and short humorous texts. It argues that mechanisms specific to the visual domain must be central to the study of humor in the visual arts.

**Keywords:** art, methodology, iconology, humor, irony, parody

---

**Annie Gérin:** Université du Québec à Montréal. E-mail: gerin.annie@uqam.ca

---

## 1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, more and more artists have been exploiting the processes of irony, parody, the absurd and the grotesque, harnessing them for artistic purposes. As Jacques Rancière describes it, “humor is the virtue to which artists nowadays most readily ascribe: humor that is a minimal, all too easy to miss, hijacking or deflection in the way of presenting a sign sequence or arrangement of objects” (Rancière 2009a: 54).

Contemporary artists perceive a specific potential in humoristic strategies, as a means of delegitimation<sup>1</sup> and as a cultural weapon meant to attack complacency in politics, identities and cultural practices. They play with acquired knowledge, opening through humor a space for critical distance that is often seen as political in itself. As Rancière explains,

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall (1997) explains how representations circulating in art and mass media legitimate ideologies and create stereotypes. For Hall, the most effective way to counter stereotypes is not to ignore them or replace them with different representations. Instead, he recommends engaging with them, and exposing their culturally and ideologically constructed nature. Humoristic genres, especially those using parody, can serve this process of delegitimation.

The means consist in producing a sensory form of strangeness, a clash of heterogeneous elements provoking a rupture in ways of seeing and, therewith, an examination of the causes of that oddity. The critical strategy thus comes down to including the aesthetic effect of sensory rupture with the community of the representative cause-effect schema. (Rancière 2009b: 74)

If such an interest is ubiquitous in current artistic practices, it is, however, not entirely new to the history of art. In fact, recent studies probing into pre-Christian Roman (Clarke 2007) and Medieval art (Gibson 2006) propose that humoristic strategies in art have been present throughout its history, yet often swept to the margins of scholarship, mainly because of the discipline's biases against ornamentation and mass-produced objects such as prints and illustrations. These studies have also revealed the paucity of interpretative tools available to art historians interested in examining such works beyond the obvious analysis of subject matter, or the reductive understanding of images as text.

The following essay presents a study of humor research methodology as it pertains to *artistic propositions*. By artistic proposition I refer to artefacts and other manifestations that lend themselves to some form of response, interpretation or interaction, to operations that are meaningful through their plastic and formal properties and that are in dialogue with broader debates in the field of art (Levinson 1993: 411). The works I have chosen as examples betray a particular interest in art that aims to deconstruct and/or mobilize. But it is crucial to remember from the outset that these artworks are not as straightforwardly effective as we would like to think, and that they function as critical objects only so long as the situation allows. If their conditions of reception or context change, their effectiveness may also collapse. Furthermore, as Nathaniel Hong perceptively argues, “humor can be used both as a secondary reinforcement in the process of developing critical political consciousness [and] it can also be a surrogate for conflict that ultimately contributes to escapism and acquiescence” (Hong 2010: 28).

## 2 Understanding artistic images

In a well-known essay titled “Magic, myth and metaphor. Reflections on political satire”, Ernst Gombrich (2000) poses a question that is at the heart of the problem of how to understand artistic images. If a motif recurs throughout the history of art, but constantly varies in meaning, how can its viewer properly interpret its intended significance in a given work of art?

Gombrich muses on the motif of the Devil. An extremely complex figure, the Devil can come off as moralistic, apotropaic or titillating. He can be used in cau-

tionary tales, political metaphors, and sometimes in comedies and farces. Furthermore, the Devil may appear under various guises. He may adopt, among other shapes, that of a man, a goat, or a hybrid of the two. Examples of this sort of symbolization abound in both religious and secular art. This fundamental problem, that underlies the interpretation of most images, is exacerbated in cases where artists use humoristic strategies such as irony or parody. These rhetorical modes may alter the conventional meaning of a given motif, even subverting it by making it signify the opposite of what it usually means.

Aside from reflecting on the aesthetic and formal qualities of objects, art historians have elaborated tools of interpretation throughout the short history of their discipline, born in the Nineteenth Century as a history of styles. Erwin Panofsky's work on iconology, developed in the 1930s, has expanded on early formal and stylistic concerns and is now widely accepted as a grounding for interpretative concepts and methods. Through the study of motifs and their associated meanings, iconology serves to decipher artworks, and to place them in wider networks of images and ideas.

Because it is one of the most important instruments in the art historian's toolbox, this section will revisit and expand on Panofsky's method in order to adapt it to the goal of analysing humoristic artworks.

## 2.1 Iconology

In the introduction to *Studies in iconology: Humanistic themes in the art of the Renaissance*, first published in 1939, Erwin Panofsky details processes of analysis and interpretation that constitute three levels of understanding of the work of art (Panofsky 1972: 3–17)

In order to ground his explanation in everyday experience, Panofsky uses the analogy of a greeting in the street. According to Panofsky, in the first instance, we distinguish a man in the street, surrounded by various object: a car, a house, a tree. We also recognize a smile on his face. In the next few seconds, as the configuration evolves, we interpret the change in details as an event (the tipping of a hat). What we have identified so far is of a factual or expressional nature and only requires familiarity with the objects and events observed. This is what Panofsky calls *primary* or *natural* meanings.

If we realize that the tipping of the hat stands for a greeting, we then access a second level of understanding: *secondary* or *conventional* meanings. As Panofsky points out, “this form of salute is peculiar to the western world and is a residue of mediaeval chivalry” (Panofsky 1972: 4). To achieve this level of interpretation we must be familiar with the objects and gestures observed, but also with their

meaning in a given culture and context. This level of analysis points to the rigorosity of Panofsky's approach, which sheds a bright light on the cultural nature of the simplest visual configuration and warns viewers against taking images for granted.

If we are acquainted with the saluting person, if we have knowledge of his personality, education, social condition, and his disposition towards us, we might be able to link this simple gesture to his deeper feelings about us, this particular encounter, or his general frame of mind. As Panofsky puts it, besides conveying a conventional greeting, the action of the man can reveal much of what makes up his mood and personality. These factors do not all manifest themselves comprehensively in the isolated action of a polite greeting, but are nevertheless present symptomatically. The complex meaning discovered here, through a balance of careful knowledge and intuition is what Panofsky refers to as *intrinsic meaning* or *content*.

Following Panofsky's method, let us now examine one of the best known art works of the Western tradition, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495–98), a wall-painting which covers the back wall of the dining hall at the Santa Maria delle Grazie convent in Milan. Here, a pre-iconographical description distinguishes thirteen men, dressed in colored togas, all sitting or standing side by side along one edge of a long dining table strewn with food and drink, speaking to one another with animation, some wearing surprised looks on their faces, others mournful. The scene takes place in an architectural interior pierced by three large windows overlooking a mountainous vista.

The *secondary* or *conventional* meaning reveals itself as the viewer realizes that the represented scene is the Bible's "last supper"; that the central character is not just a man, but Christ; and that the man whose face is turned away from the viewer, the man who reaches with Christ for a loaf of bread, is most likely Judas. In this second phase, the *iconographical analysis* exposes the subject matter by linking representations of objects to themes and concepts, known through artistic and literary sources or oral tradition (in this case, Matthew 26:23, "And he answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me"). This interpretation can only be grasped by a viewer who has been exposed to Christian culture and its conventional manifestations. Someone who has never heard, read or seen representations of the stories of the Bible will not recognize the "last supper" in this configuration, and will most likely misinterpret the intended meaning of the work.

Many commentators would be happy to stop here (and they too often do!), as the meaning of the representation has been more or less elucidated. But Panofsky encourages astute viewers to dig further for *intrinsic meaning* or *content*, into the intention of the artist, into the *Weltanschauung* (the worldview from which this

representation emerged), and eventually into the cultural significance of the work, or its broader symbolic value. This is done through synthetic intuition, conditioned by the interpreter's own psychology and *Weltanschauung*.

As the purpose of this essay is not to delve deep into the study of da Vinci's *Last Supper*, I will simply point to one aspect of the *iconographical interpretation* of this work that evokes a specific *Weltanschauung* (and that would escape a viewer concluding his study at the iconographical analysis level): a humanisation of the apostles much greater than in previous representations of *The Last Supper*. Here, Christ's disciples are depicted by the artist without the traditional halo, and are individuated by their differently colored clothes, gestures and facial expressions. The multiplication of particularities calls attention to their (and Christ's) earthbound nature. It testifies to the general development of Renaissance humanistic thought to which da Vinci contributed. The interpretation of the work therefore exceeds the strict understanding of the subject matter. As Panofsky explains,

The art historian will have to check what he thinks is the *intrinsic meaning* of the work, or groups of works, to which he devotes his attention, against what he thinks is the *intrinsic meaning* of as many documents of civilization historically related to that work or group of works, as he can master: of documents bearing witness to the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation. Needless to say that, conversely, the historian of political life, poetry, religion, philosophy, and social situations should make an analogous use of works of art. It is in this search for *intrinsic meanings* or *content* that the various humanistic disciplines meet on a common plane instead of serving as handmaidens to each other. (Panofsky 1972: 16)

While the third level is the ultimate goal of Panofsky's method, the pre-iconographical description and the iconographical analysis provide necessary controls that limit the scope of the interpretation developed as the intrinsic meaning. This is particularly important when the viewer attempts the examination of a work produced in a different historical period or a foreign geographical or cultural context. As Christine Hasenmueller notes,

where the artist and the interpreter are not part of the same cultural/historical group, representational conventions are not part of a shared tacit knowledge: it is necessary for the interpreter to understand and bracket characteristics of representation typical of the time and place a work of art was made in order for this "identity" between representation and nature to occur. (Hasenmueller 1978: 292)

Pre-iconographical descriptions and iconographical analysis also afford additional insight into the mechanism of representation that triggers specific responses to the work, as well as into formal or contextual subtleties that impact

Object of interpretation	Act of interpretation	Equipment for interpretation	Controlling principle of interpretation
I-Primary or natural subject matter – (A) factual, (B) expressional –, constituting the world of artistic motifs.	<i>Pre-iconographical description</i> (and pseudo-formal analysis).	<i>Practical experience</i> (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).
II-Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of <i>images, stories</i> and <i>allegories</i> .	<i>Iconographical analysis</i> in the narrower sense of the word.	<i>Knowledge of literary sources</i> (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes and concepts were expressed by objects and events).
III-Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of 'symbolical' values.	<i>Iconographical interpretation</i> in a deeper sense ( <i>Inconographical synthesis</i> ).	<i>Synthetic intuition</i> (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung.'	History of cultural symptom or 'symbols' in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts).

Table 1: The iconological method (Panofsky 1972: 14–15)

the intrinsic meaning of the work and that may escape more casual viewers. Panofsky was well aware of these issues. This is why he insisted that for an iconographical interpretation to be successful, the description and analysis of a work's iconography had to be "correct" in the first instance.

## 2.2 Iconology and humor

Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* has been parodied many times by contemporary artists. One of the best known examples of such an appropriation is *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996), a controversial work of art by Jamaican-American photographer Renée Cox, shown in an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2001. The work is a montage of five photographs of twelve clothed men (eleven black and one white) and a naked black woman (the artist's nude self portrait) at the center, standing in the place traditionally occupied by Christ. Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper* refers directly to da Vinci's *Last Supper* in its basic form. But the *iconographical interpretation* of the work leads us into a very different direction. Through what Rancière describes as "ruptures in ways of seeing", the piece denounces the hurdles that prevent most female artists and African American artists from breaking into the American art establishment, as well as what Cox perceives as the African American male's betrayal of the African American female. By a procedure of delegitimation of a famous masterpiece (painted by a white male and representing thirteen white males), Cox opens up a space for debate about the challenges that face women of color in the art world.

Other such instances abound. In 1988, for example, Australian artist Susan Dorothea White painted *The First Supper*, replacing da Vinci's thirteen white men with women from around the world, representing Christ as an Aboriginal woman. In 1998, Brazilian artist Vik Muniz reinterpreted *The Last Supper* using Bosco Chocolate Syrup. The 1961 film *Viridiana* by Luis Buñuel recreates the scene, but this time featuring a group of beggars. The image has also been taken up in popular culture; some will have noticed parodic uses of *The Last Supper* in television shows such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *That '70s Show*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lost*, and many others. What all these interpretations of the *The Last Supper* have in common is parodic – and often ironic – uses of the source, which displace and subvert the *The Last Supper's* meaning. These contemporary works move beyond the Bible story in order to critique gender and race relations as well as consumer culture and class. The critique is not only carried through what is represented, but most importantly through *how* it is represented. Here, style, medium and color transform the meaning of an otherwise recognizable configuration.

While Panofsky's methodology is silent on these specific tropes, they must be taken into account when dealing with contemporary art. Indeed, as many have argued, irony, parody and *détournement*<sup>2</sup> have become dominant rhetorical modes in art (Higgie 2007; Hutcheon 1985, 1992; Molon 2005; Munder and Lunn 2006; Rancière 2009a, 2009b; Ryan 1999).

### 2.3 Revisiting iconology

Over the past few decades, several critiques of Panofsky's method have emerged, and adjustments have been proposed. These take into account developments in art history and critical theory on the one hand, and recent trends in art practices on the other.

The most prevalent criticism directed at iconology is that it is overly concerned with subject matter (especially literary references), as opposed to form, which it tends to downplay. According to the principle of *ut pictura poesis*<sup>3</sup>, iconology seeks to "read" images as texts, avoiding distinctively *visual* aspects of visual arts. Because of this bias, iconology has difficulty contending with modern art movements (from the late nineteenth-century rejection of academic norms and the subsequent focus on formal issues and visuality) such as Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, and Dadaism. It is noteworthy that Panofsky chose to ignore all these movements that had already begun to enter European and North American art galleries in the 1930s. Today, careful attention must also be given to practices that include not only new formal considerations, but also non-traditional media, including photography, video, performance, installation, and web-based art.

Furthermore, while Panofsky was clearly aware of the fact that viewers bring their intuition, knowledge, personality and *Weltanschauung* to the task of interpretation, he never addressed the fact that a given work might target certain publics while excluding others for reasons of gender, ethnicity, education levels, familiarity with artistic debates, etc. Certain codes at play in the work of art might be meaningful only for a limited group.

---

<sup>2</sup> Term coined by the International Situationists in 1957. *Détournement* involves the appropriation by an artist of artworks, slogans, publicity, or other pre-extant images or texts in order to create a new work, whose meaning is antagonistic to that of the original. *Détournement* is similar to satirical parody, but it employs more direct reuse of the original works rather than constructing a new work which merely alludes strongly to the original.

<sup>3</sup> "As is painting, so is poetry". The phrase appears most famously in Horace's *Ars poetica*, published c. 18 BC.

Panofsky is also silent with regards to the context of presentation of art, even when works are specifically created to be in dialogue with their environment. Artworks function differently in galleries, in churches or in private homes. Juxtaposing a work of art with others can also alter the way in which it will be interpreted. The same can be said about liminal information (or, in Gérard Genette's [1987] terms, the "paratext"), such as decorative frames or titles.

One final significant caveat proposed by Gombrich is that, according to the iconological method, the "interpretation proceeds by steps, and the first step on which everything else depends is the decision to which genre a given work is to be assigned" (Gombrich 1972: 21). Basing his critique on a discussion of the *impresa* (a witty combination of motto and image that might resemble family crests or other *insigniae*, produced by Renaissance artists for the pleasure of their patrons) Gombrich contends that there must be clues lodged *in the work itself and/or its context* that allow certain users to (re)evaluate the genre and to seek second- or even third-degree meanings. He argues that *a priori* knowledge of the genre should never be taken for granted (as Panofsky seems to do).

This last criticism is obviously of crucial importance for the study of humor in the visual arts. It can be restated as a question: what are the *visual* rhetorical mechanisms that provoke a humorous reading of an otherwise serious motif?

## 2.4 Color, texture and form

Panofsky self-consciously tried to distance himself from his formalist precursors. It is therefore not surprising that he downplayed form in his analyses. He never, however, evacuated it altogether, stating clearly that motifs are to be found "according to the manner in which objects and events were expressed by forms under varying historical conditions" (Panofsky 1972: 11).

For René Payant, one of the most important challenges put to the iconological method was abstract art, which liberated form and color from the representation of things (Payant 1987). In "De l'iconographie revisitée", Payant tackles the analysis of a Jasper John's 1955 painting titled *Flag*, a work that marks the return to figuration after a decade of hegemony of Abstract Expressionism in the New York art scene. The work represents a simple American flag whose shape coincides exactly with the perimeter of the rectangular canvas it was painted on. But *Flag* is far from being an illusionistic painting. Its thick and textured painted crust is crafted from glued paper, oil painting and encaustic (a painstaking ancient technique that involves heated beeswax and pigments). The edges of the flag show evidence of *dripping* (an unmistakable parodic reference to Abstract Expressionism, in particular the work of American artist Jackson Pollock). For Payant, *Flag*

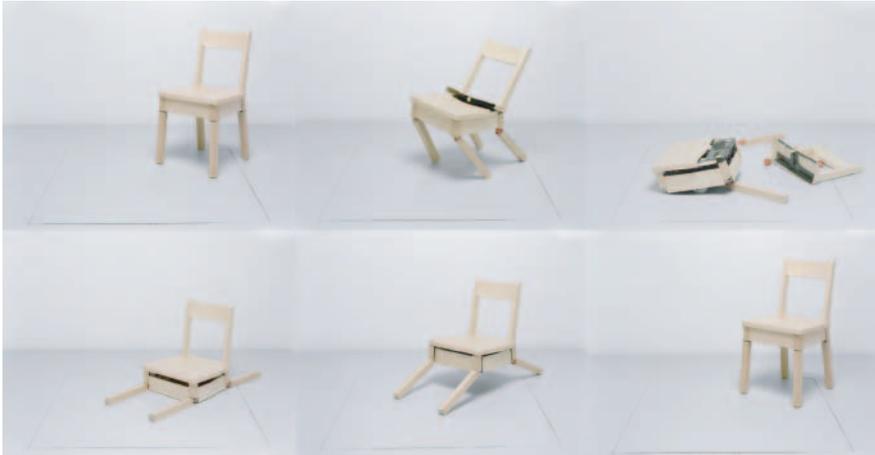
is an ironic work whose meaning has little to do with the iconography of the flag, which was most likely chosen by the artist for its prevalence in American visual culture and therefore its banality (an exotic flag would have provoked very a different effect). Here, “the purity of the image is disturbed by the pictorial matter” (Payant 1987: 38) and this exuberantly incongruous materiality ironically shifts the understanding of the work from its iconography (the American flag) to its fabrication and the blunt “thingness” of the artwork.

This resistance to straightforward significance is also found in the art of another American Pop artist, Andy Warhol. In his 1972 *Mao Tse-Tung*, for example, form and color interfere with, rather than support, the recognisable iconography, demanding a second-degree interpretation of the work. The conventional portrait of the Chinese Communist leader is printed in bold colors, oranges, pinks, greens, yellows and blues, and repeated mechanically in a grid, producing a decorative – albeit garish – wallpaper. Here again, there is a humorous effect induced by the incongruity between iconography and color, and between the image of Mao and the presentation of the work in the guise of mass-produced, commercial wallpaper. In the end, the search for the *intrinsic meaning* of the work leads us away from Mao, and towards a critical reflection on mass culture and the media.

Technique, medium, scale and kinetic properties can also provoke humorous interpretations. For example, Brian Jungen, a Canadian artist of Dunne-Za First Nations and Swiss ancestry, made a splash in 1999 with series titled *Prototypes for New Understanding*. He presented what appeared at first glance to be traditional West Coast First Nations masks. These had been crafted from Nike Air Jordan shoes. Playing with scale rather than non-traditional materials, Australian artist Ron Mueck creates hyperrealist (but largely off-scale) sculptures, often represent-



**Fig. 1:** Andy Warhol, *Mao Tse-Tung*, 1972 (a portfolio of ten screenprints), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1973. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. SODRAC (2012).



**Fig. 2:** Max Dean, *The Robotic Chair*, 2006, courtesy of the artist, photo credit nichola feldman-kiss.

ing nude bodies. These are made of fibreglass, silicone and hair. His 2000 work *Boy*, a 16.5 foot-tall sculpture of a young boy, produces humorous incongruity through its scale. Finally, Canadian artist Max Dean uses motion as a humor trigger. *The Robotic Chair* (2006) is a seemingly plain, sturdy, wood-veneer chair. But the chair is programmed to collapse suddenly and boisterously into a random, disconnected stack, responding to the commands of a “nerve center” located in its seat. Guided by an overhead vision system, the base then acts autonomously to reconstruct the chair. It slowly drives itself across the floor, finding each strewn component, the legs and the chair’s back, and proceeds to re-attach them in order. Eventually, the chair warily hoists itself to stand upright. Here movement and sound provide a comical, slap stick effect, while the zoomorphism of the animated chair leads viewers into the realm of the absurd.

### 3 The analysis of humoristic artworks

In order to achieve fruitful analyses of humoristic artworks, iconology must integrate the abovementioned preoccupations with form and context, which emerged as much from evolving artistic practices as from the introduction into the art historical discipline of concerns drawn from the psychology of perception (Gombrich 1961, 1972) and visual semiotics (Barthes 1977; Payant 1987; Groupe  $\mu$  1992). But the overall lesson to be learned from iconology is still valid: viewers need to look beyond iconographical analysis for deep meaning in artistic propositions.

They must, however, broaden their approach to include concrete modes of investigation that are appropriate to the rhetorical, formal and material properties of the art objects under examination.

### 3.1 The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)

The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) was developed by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin in 1991 for the analysis of jokes and short humorous texts. What is particularly compelling about it is that, while it grounds itself in semantic analysis, it is also open to broader narratological, aesthetic and social concerns. The reflection on the social context of humor it encourages is critical, since it puts forth the cultural specificity of humor.

The GTVH is based on the *incongruity/resolution* model. *Incongruity theories* (or theories of inconsistency, contradiction or bisociation) go back to Aristotle's discussion of metaphors and puns in the *Rhetorics* (Attardo 1994: 20). Grounded in cognitive processes, incongruity theories claim that humor results from the perception of a disparity between a set of expectations and what is observed, or a mismatch between things that are simultaneously perceived. A debate is ongoing about whether incongruity stands on its own or is always part of the incongruity/resolution dyad (Ruch et al. 1993). Christian Hempelmann and Andrea Samson speak of a spectrum of resolvability. They explain that “resolution [is] always partial, as the logic that enables it is always playful, or faulty. Thus, incongruity-resolution humor should be considered one extreme, namely one closest to but distinct from full resolution, while nonsense humor takes up the opposite extreme, closest to no resolution but at least pretending to have one” (Hempelmann and Samson 2008: 627).

Because incongruity points to cognitive mechanisms, as Attardo argues, “linguistic analysis has tended to side (largely unwittingly) with this kind of theory” (Attardo 2008: 104). For the same reason, the incongruity theory seems like a convenient basis on which to establish analytical models for humor in art. But, as Arvo Krikmann points out, “most of the humor theories ever proposed are actually mixed theories, and many contemporary researchers believe that humor in its totality is too huge and multiform a phenomenon to be incorporated into a single integrated theory” (Krikmann 2006: 28). It is therefore possible that readings of works based on incongruity theories in the first instance might also draw from other prevalent theories of humor, such as *hostility* and *release*. *Hostility theories* and *release theories* shed light on the function of humor rather than focusing on cognitive mechanisms. Indeed, hostility theories claim that humor is lodged in a feeling of superiority over what is ridiculed or considered deviant

from the norm: according to Paul de Man (1983), this might even apply to self-irony. Release theories, on the other hand, propose that humor is meant to release tensions, frustrations, desires, or other forms of psychic energy.

If we return to the analysis of Cox's parody of da Vinci's *Last Supper*, incongruity between the well-known historical source and its 1996 remake seems in fact to be the trigger that provokes a humorous reading of the work. But one could also convincingly argue that this work displays hostility directed at art institutions and serves the purpose of releasing psychic tension on the part of the artist.

The GTVH uses, for the purpose of analysis, the following six “knowledge resources” (Attardo 2008: 108): *script opposition* (the incongruity between two or more overlapping narratives or scripts); *logical mechanism* (the resolution phase of the incongruity/resolution model); *situation* (the elements, often non-humoristic, that ground the joke or the humorous statements in recognisable circumstances); *target* (the butt of the joke); *narrative strategy* (the genre of the joke or humorous statements); and *language* (the actual lexical, syntactic, phonological, and all other choices made at the linguistic level). While it was developed for the study of short verbal humoristic pieces, it can be transposed with some variations to longer or more complex texts: novels, short stories, theatre plays, television shows and films (Attardo 2008: 110). It can also be adapted to the study of visual arts.

### 3.2 GTVH meets iconology

In an article focusing on the analysis of cartoons, Hempelmann and Samson (2008: 609) note that humor researchers often treat images as text instead of reflecting on the specific phenomenology of pictorial representations. They argue that formal and aesthetic aspects of images have an impact on cognitive processes (611). They also remark that very few systematic attempts at understanding formal and aesthetic features of visual humor have been published, and that aesthetic components of visual humor are largely unexplored. For these authors, the semiotic processes of humor comprehension, which concern the cognitive core-elements of humour (incongruity and incongruity detection) function generally well with images, but they also suggest that mechanisms specific to the visual domain (grounded in formal and aesthetic issues) should emerge from further research (Hempelmann and Samson 2008: 618, 632).

This is where Panofsky's iconological method can be usefully applied, with the caveats expressed above. If we follow the logic of Panofsky's method, the very first step in the analysis of a humoristic artwork should be a *pre-iconographical*

*description* of the work, followed by an *iconographical analysis*. The analysis would have to consider that, unlike language that is physically linear and directed, images are experienced in a much more random way, even when composition guides the interpretation of the work. It would need to understand images as complex, multilayered and often contradictory sign systems. It would also have to take into consideration the fact that resolution can not be said to always be part of humor in the visual arts. Indeed, many art historians and philosophers of art would argue that the specificity of art objects lies in their polyphony, and what Jacques Rancière calls their “sensory form of strangeness” (Rancière 2009b: 74). Indeed, there are scores of Dadaist and Surrealist works, for example, that avoid punch-lines and leave their viewers suspended between mismatched realities. One example can be seen in Merret Oppenheim’s 1936 *Object*, consisting of a cup, saucer and spoon lined in luxurious Chinese gazelle fur. In this work, it is the tenuous nature of any potential resolution that makes this extravagantly sensual work humorous.

Here are the ten steps, or paths of investigation I propose. They follow the logic of Panofsky’s method, while integrating particularly insightful elements from the GTVH.

1. *Pre-iconographical description*. The identification of *primary* or *natural* subject matter.
2. *Iconographical analysis*. This corresponds to the investigation of *secondary* or *conventional* subject matter. Along with the pre-iconographical description, the iconographical analysis provides a necessary control mechanism that limits the scope of the interpretation developed later as the *intrinsic meaning*.
3. *Visual aspect*. Significant aspects of the medium, form, color, line, composition, scale or technique. As we have seen in the discussion above, sometimes *how* things are represented can be more significant than *what* is represented.
4. *Incongruity*. The incongruity between two or more overlapping motifs, visual narratives, themes, sources, styles, colors, scales, etc. In a complex work of art, many incongruities can coexist.
5. *Rhetorical strategy*. The rhetorical device(s) the artist draws upon: parody, irony, caricature, satire, pastiche, grotesque, the carnivalesque, etc. Because artworks can be very complex, more than one strategy can be at play in a single work.
6. *Target*. The butt of the joke, so to speak.
7. *Targeted public*. The ideal viewer(s) for the image. This consideration is crucial as it points to the possible circulation of the work, its potential efficiency, and perhaps to a superimposition in the work of distinct levels of

meaning accessible by different publics and consequently plural valid interpretations.

8. *Context of presentation.* The context of presentation (a page in a journal, a gallery, a public site, etc.) might influence greatly the meaning of a work of art and needs to be carefully examined. The context might also call into play the notions of paratext and intertext.
9. *Artist.* When this information is available, knowledge about the artist's biography, aesthetic preoccupations, political leanings, etc., can serve as a control mechanism or supply additional information.
10. *Iconographical interpretation.* The previous steps should lead the viewer to what Panofsky termed the *intrinsic meaning*, or the *iconographical interpretation* of the artistic proposition. Here, the viewer will draw from the previous analysis, his broad cultural understanding and his intuition, to place the work in an appropriate network of art, ideas and human concerns.

Because mass-published graphic satire is the artistic genre most analysed in current humor research, it might be beneficial to underscore some concrete considerations that pertain specifically to this genre. Researchers too often forget that works of graphic satire are not “stand alone” pieces. They are included in a page, juxtaposed with captions, texts, other images, and included in an overall graphic presentation. The position of the work in the page and the overall conception of the page may very well be significant. Furthermore, a journal, newspaper or book, all have their own histories, readerships, print-run, technologies of production, etc., that can influence the social meaning of the image. If the work has been torn from its original context and pasted onto another surface, such as a scrapbook, a wall-newspaper or pinned to a door, this also has to be taken into consideration. Finally, the limitation in form (and often color) available to graphic satirists has forced them to develop sophisticated means of playing with Ben Day dots, “slinky” strokes and crosshatching. They will juxtapose, for example, different styles in the context of a single image, hence provoking sympathy for one motif, and aversion for others. They might allow characters to break or step out of the drawn frame of the image to produce certain effects. Occasionally, they will skillfully direct their viewer's eye from the satire to elements placed elsewhere on the page, beyond the frame of the work.

### 3.3 Group of Seven Awkward Moments

The following example uses the knowledge resources outlined above in the analysis of an artwork by contemporary Canadian artist, Diana Thorneycroft.



**Fig. 3:** Diana Thorneycroft, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (White Pine and the Group of Dwarfs)*, 2009, courtesy of the artist.

### 3.3.1 Pre-iconographical description

The scene takes place in a forest. A woman wearing a crown, a pink and yellow dress and a green cape is standing by the shore in a canoe. She holds a whip and a bucket. A book (the words “Pierre Berton The Last Spike” are written on its cover), a striped blanket, handcuffs and a bottle of champagne are strewn about. On the shore, seven short men (six of them bearded) wearing colorful bonnets stand, staring at the woman. Various forest animals, bunnies, deer, squirrels, birds, etc., also look at the woman. An easel and a half-finished painting have been left by a large tree, which also serves as a backdrop to the scene.

### 3.3.2 Iconographical analysis

Viewers who have been exposed to the Walt Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* will immediately recognize by their appearance the woman as Snow White and the men as the seven dwarfs. Connoisseurs of Canadian art will also

recognize that the scene is unfolding against the backdrop of a very well-known 1957 painting by Group of Seven artist A. J. Casson, *White Pine*.<sup>4</sup> Several other objects represented here connote directly Canadian culture, or rather “Canadiana”: the striped Hudson’s Bay Company signature blanket, the canoe, the typical Canadian Shield fauna and flora, and Pierre Berton’s 2001 book *The Last Spike*.<sup>5</sup> Snow White is surrounded by sadomasochistic sexual paraphernalia including a whip and handcuffs.

### 3.3.3 Visual aspect

The work consists of a large-scale, brightly colored photograph (42 × 60 inches) depicting a diorama, also produced by the artist. The diorama, an exhibition device usually found in museums of natural history and ethnology, calls to the ethnological character of the scene and its constructed nature. It was assembled from rocks, Disney plastic figurines (the play of light on their small bodies reveals their specific, non-biodegradable materiality), as well as miniature plastic trees and animals, all set against a painted background. Photography is considered a technology of representations that simultaneously creates an “effect of the real” and puts at distance the scene represented. The composition is conventional with regards to the “pastoral scene” tradition in painting, and consistent with compositions devised by Group of Seven artists.

### 3.3.4 Incongruity

There are three main incongruities in this work. The first resides in the juxtaposition of two different universes, that of cartoon-like, Disney fairy tale characters and that of Canadiana (standing in for Canadian nationalism). It points to a certain anxiety expressed by many Canadians with regard to the mass importation of American culture in the Canadian media and leisure industries. The second noteworthy incongruity contrasts the cheerful Disney characters with the sexual implications conveyed by the champagne, whip and handcuffs. The third resides

---

<sup>4</sup> The Group of Seven were a group of Canadian landscape painters who worked in the 1920s, and whose artworks have been used by the Canadian establishment in various ways to promote a certain idea of “Canadianness” in Canada and abroad.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Berton, 1920–2004, was a star of Canadian radio and television and the author of some fifty books on Canadian history.

in a mismatch between the representation of nature and the materials used to construct it: it is obviously made of plastic, a non-biodegradable substance. These three incongruities are meant to trigger the humoristic interpretation of the work, and are produced by the materiality of the objects displayed in the diorama, their colors and styles, as well as by the choice of the objects themselves.

### 3.3.5 Rhetorical strategy

In this complex humoristic artwork, more than one rhetorical strategy is at play. There is a pun in the title, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (White Pine and the Group of Dwarfs)*, which brings together “Group of Seven” and “Seven Dwarfs”. The work is clearly parodic (of A. J. Casson’s 1957 *White Pine*) and operates a *détournement* (see note 2) of the Disney figurines. It is also satirical, ridiculing overdetermined symbols of Canadian nationalism. For example, the inclusion of Pierre Berton’s book in the canoe calls to mind his famous humorous statement: “A Canadian is somebody who knows how to make love in a canoe”. This *implied* statement serves as an informal caption, framing critically the relationship between the figurines present in the image, the canoe and the backdrop borrowed from the Group of Seven.

### 3.3.6 Target

This image targets Canadian nationalism, and specifically the form promoted by Canadian cultural institutions and cultural policy under the Conservative Harper government.

### 3.3.7 Targeted public

Although the juxtaposition of Disney characters and sexual props can be understood by a portion of the Western public as straightforwardly funny, specific knowledge of “Canadiana” (and not Canadian culture per se) needs to be available to the viewer attempting a deeper interpretation of the work. The targeted public is Canadian, educated, and has been in contact with images of Canadian nationalism and Canadiana through school, the media, museums and other institutions.

### 3.3.8 Context of presentation

This work was recently shown in an exhibition presented at the Carleton University Art Gallery (summer 2010) titled *Group of Seven Awkward Moments*. Carleton University, located in Ottawa, is well known for its Canadian Studies Program and in particular the “critical nationalism” research conducted by the scholars who work there. This context of presentation of the work guaranteed a constant flow of targeted viewers: students, professors and a generally educated crowd based in Canada’s capital city. All the works in the exhibition represented toys and figurines set against a parody of a famous painting by a Group of Seven artist.<sup>6</sup> The figures engage in various activities such as camping, fishing, skiing, and of course playing hockey. All the images included in the exhibition seem light-hearted at first glance. But further examination reveals a disturbing undertone, referring to violence, child abuse, environmental destruction, etc. The context of this slightly disquieting exhibition encourages a more sinister reading of the work under study here.

### 3.3.9 Artist

Thorneycroft (1956–) is a Canadian artist who works in a variety of mediums, including drawing, photography and set construction. She is known for her dark, humorous works that touch on contemporary taboos, such as nationalism, religion, and child abuse. Although the series of dioramas is formally different from previous ones, the social anxiety it expresses through dark humor is very typical of her work.

### 3.3.10 Iconographical interpretation

A thorough examination of Thorneycroft’s *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* (*White Pine and the Group of Dwarfs*) based on these lines of inquiry reveals that, while it may appear comical to a general public, this seemingly light hearted work poses a sharp critique of Canadian nationalism and the institutions that serve to sustain it. It also seems concerned (through material choices made by the artist) with how Canadians’ relationship to nature is mediatized, sanitized and pre-

---

<sup>6</sup> The entire *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* series can be viewed on the artist’s website: <http://dianathorneycroft.com/portfolio-seven-awkward.php>.

packaged. And it reveals itself in its satirical insightfulness not only through the motifs that constitute the representation, but mainly through visual means and materials. This is typical of the humoristic strategy the artist used in the series *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* to which this work belongs. As curator Sharona Adamowicz-Clements notes, “Thorneycroft amasses an assortment of kitsch-like cultural paraphernalia which she strangely and confusingly inserts into her pictures. At first sight, the images appear to be celebratory, proverbial and amusing conveying a clichéd representation of the unique Canadian experience. But with a second look comes the realization that there is more to these works than harmless parody” (Adamowicz-Clements 2009: 4). Revealing an uneasiness felt by Thorneycroft – also voiced by many Canadian intellectual and artists – with regards to Canadian nationalism and the way its myths are perpetuated in the media, schools, museums and other institutions of knowledge and persuasion, “awkward moment” becomes more than just awkward. To its targeted public – Canadian, educated, aware of nationalistic debates in art, literature and politics, in tune with Canada’s current *Weltanschauung* – it takes on a biting, satirical quality, opening through humor a space for critical distance.

## 4 Conclusion

Umberto Eco astutely remarked, with regards to the telling of jokes, that “what remains compulsory, in order to produce a comic effect, is the prohibition of spelling out the norm. It must be presupposed both by the utterer and by the audience. If the speaker spells it out, he is a fool or a jerk; if the audience does not know it, there is no comic effect” (Eco 1984: 6).

Obviously, this judicious remark on the art of jokemanship does not apply to the interpretation of humoristic artistic propositions in the context of scholarly research. In fact, the opposite is true. In order to unlock the potential richness of humorous artworks and link them to broader visual, cultural, political and intellectual contexts, scholars need to lead their readers through meticulous descriptions and iconographical analysis, investigations of norms and traditions, as well as the examination of the formal mechanisms that produce humor effects in a given work.

The method outlined above, drawing from Erwin Panofsky’s iconological method and on the General Theory of Verbal Humor can buttress humor research in the field of visual arts. It also has the potential to reveal how works of art often function as *loci* where preoccupations derived from different human activities, scholarly disciplines and spheres of experience intersect. This privileged position

makes the analysis of visual art objects a worthwhile endeavour for scholars working in a variety of field of investigation.

## References

- Adamowicz-Clements, Sharona. 2009. *Diana Thorneycroft: Canada, myth and history*. Kleinburg: McMichael Canadian Art Collection.
- Attardo, Salvatore. 2008. A primer for the linguistics of humor. In Victor Raskin (ed.), *The primer of humor research*, 101–155. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, Salvatore. 2001. *Humorous texts: A semantic and pragmatic analysis*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. *Linguistic theories of humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Barthes, Roland. 1977. The rhetoric of the image. In *Image, music, text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 32–51.
- Burke, Peter. 2001. *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images as historical evidence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Clarke, John R. 2007. *Looking at laughter: Humor, power, and transgression in Roman visual culture, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- De Man, Paul. 1983. The Rhetoric of Temporality. In *Blindness and insight: Essays in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism*, 187–228. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 187–228.
- Eco, Umberto. 1984. The Frames of Comic Freedom. In Umberto Eco, V. V. Ivanov & Monica Rector (eds), *Carnival!*, 1–9. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Genette, Gérard. 1987. *Seuils*. Paris: Seuil.
- Gibson, Walter S. 2006. *Pieter Bruegel and the art of laughter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gombrich, Ernst. 2000. Magic, myth and metaphor. Reflections on political satire. In *The uses of images. Studies in the social function of art and visual communication*, 184–211. London: Phaidon Press.
- Gombrich, Ernst. 1972. Aims and limits of iconology. In *Symbolic images. Studies in the art of the Renaissance*, 1–30. London: Phaidon Press.
- Gombrich, Ernst. 1961. *Art and illusion. A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*. New York: Bollingen Foundation.
- Groupe µ. 1992. *Traité du signe visuel: Pour une rhétorique de l'image*. Paris: Seuil.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage.
- Hasenmueller, Christine. 1978. Panofsky, iconography and semiotics. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36(3). 289–301.
- Hempelmann, Christian F. & Andrea C. Samson. 2008. Cartoons: Drawn jokes? In Victor Raskin (ed.), *The primer of humor research*, 613–644. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Higgin, Jennifer (ed.). 2007. *The artist's joke*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press and Whitechapel.
- Hong, Nathaniel. 2010. Mow'em all down Grandma: The "weapon" of humor in two Danish World War II occupation scrapbooks. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 23(1). 27–64.

- Hutcheon, Linda. 1985. *A theory of parody: The teachings of twentieth-century art forms*. New York: Methuen.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1992. *Double talking: Essays on verbal and visual ironies in contemporary art and literature*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Krikmann, Arvo. 2006. Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humor. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 33. 27–58. <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol33/kriku.pdf> (accessed 26 October 2012).
- Levinson, Jerrold. 1993. Extending art historically. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51(3). 411–423.
- Molon, Dominic, Michael Rooks & David Sedaris. 2005. *Situation comedy: Humor in recent art*. New York: Independent Curators International.
- Munder, Heike & Felicity Lunn. 2006. *When humor becomes painful*. Zürich: JRP|Ringier.
- Panofsky, Erwin. 1972. *Studies in iconology: Humanistic themes in the art of the renaissance*. New York: Icon.
- Payant, René. 1987. De l'iconologie revisitée. In *Vedute. Pièces détachées sur l'art 1976–1987*, 31–49. Laval, Canada: Trois.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2009a. *Aesthetics and its discontents*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2009b. *The emancipated spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso.
- Raskin, Victor. 1985. *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Ruch, Willibald, Salvatore Attardo & Victor Raskin. 1993. Towards an empirical verification of the General Theory of Verbal Humor. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 6(2). 123–136.
- Ryan, Allan J. 1999. *The trickster shift: Humor and irony in contemporary native art*. Vancouver: UBC Press.