

Book Review

Delia Casadei. 2024. *Risible: Laughter Without Reason and the Reproduction of Sound*. 219 pp. Oakland, CA. ISBN: 9780520391338. \$34.95.

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A thoroughly researched and thoughtfully written book, *Risible* is not a traditional academic treatise on laughter. Consisting of two brief introductory and concluding chapters, and encompassing six substantive and largely discrete essays, it is not an easy book to summarise. Each essay is a distinct chapter that explores in some breadth and depth a particular aspect of the phenomenon of laughter. A number of diverse themes run through the text, such as what is it to be human, the consequences of colonialism, technical advances and the exploitation of labour, and the capacity for self-fulfilment in post-modern capitalism. As might be guessed, the links between these concepts and laughter are at times somewhat tenuous, but the overall impact of the narrative is considerable.

The short introductory chapter introduces many of the basic ideas: what it is to be risible, the radically different perspectives on laughter, laughter and reproduction, and laughter as a commodity. The first substantial chapter rounds up the usual suspects from the historical and philosophical writings on laughter and comedy, Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Bergson, Freud, and Bakhtin, as well as some less notorious characters, at least as far as laughter is concerned, such as Bataille and Foucault. Little effort is expended on integrating these highly diverse perspectives, rather Casadei seeks to show what one might *make* of laughter in all its manifestations. The second chapter continues in a similar vein, but the focus shifts to the various views on whether laughter is an essentially human characteristic or is one we share, more or less, with other animals. The constant tension between laughter and reason is canvassed with respect to another set of established authorities on the human condition including Aristotle, Erasmus, Rabelais, and Vico.

The third essay then pursues, in a unique fashion, the debate as to whether laughter is generally good for us or whether it is a malign force of control. Casadei again draws on an eclectic set of sources including the Old Testament, Greek mythology, Spielberg's film, *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, Propp, and Kafka. Taking reproduction as her theme, Casadei explores the degree to which we find laughter associated with the control necessary to ensure capitalism continues as the dominant mode of material reproduction, while juxtaposing these associations with those

linking laughter to biological reproduction and the continuation of homo sapiens as a species.

In the first essay of Part Two there is a pronounced change of tack with an exposition of Casadei's own investigations into the early recordings of "laughing songs." The first recording, made on a wax cylinder in 1890, was by a black American singer, George Johnson. The song as a music event, the difficulties of the recording process, and the labour required to produce sufficient batches of cylinders are examined in detail. Along the way, the place of laughing songs in the history of recording and the place of black minstrelsy as a cultural practice are also considered in some depth. The second essay in this Part is even more eclectic in its subject matter. It opens with a discursion addressing a scene in Mann's *Death in Venice* in which a troupe of Neapolitan musicians entertain the main characters with a laughing song. Casadei takes up this scene as a way of exploring the idea of contagion as it might be used to understand, in its literal sense, disease and laughter, and also, metaphorically, in the dissemination of cultural artefacts such as laughing songs. As it happens, a contrafact based on the Johnson song, written by a Cantalamessa and produced in Naples in 1895, inspired a number of Neapolitan laughing songs. Casadei is particularly taken by the lyrics of the unacknowledged copy of the Johnson song which espouse the capacity of laughter to restore health.

The final substantive essay in the book concerns the emergence of laughter tracks in US TV sitcoms in the 1950s. As with the exposition on the early sound recordings, this topic will be new to many students of laughter and Casadei provides numerous insights into the techniques involved in the production of the tracks and the economic conditions that encouraged their use. The reactions of producers, actors, and audiences are examined together with a fascinating vignette on how the president of CBS was required to testify to a McCarthyite style subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives on possible malpractice in the TV industry. The brief concluding chapter is more personal in style as Casadei explains how she became interested in laughter as a musicologist and how she was inspired to pursue the range of themes related to laughter and explored in this work.

To convey a better idea of the substance and style of the work it is helpful to consider the opening and closing pages of Chapter 3, 'Laughter as (sound) reproduction.' Casadei introduces the chapter with a brief description and criticism of a psychological study of laughter during doctor-patient consultations. Revealing, as far as Casadei is concerned, is that the consultations took place in a clinic aiding Assisted Reproduction. There is much in her analysis with which I would agree, but what struck me most was the rather loose connection between laughter and reproduction. I was not convinced that the study's location in the clinic was anything more than convenience and that the "spectral kinship" between laughter and reproduction that Casadei discerns is more relevant to her own interests than the authors of the study.

However, finding and developing such links and associations involving laughter and life in general is Casadei's stock in trade in this volume.

The final part of this chapter on laughter and reproduction opens with a discussion of a *New York Times* article on a technical glitch with Amazon's Alexa which caused it to laugh randomly. A sketch of a late-night comedy show in which Alexa is interviewed about her behaviour is then recounted. Finally, a literary illustration of disturbing laughter found in a Kafka short story is considered. This section is no more than two and half pages long and, as well as the three substantive elements, Casadei manages to remind the reader of earlier references to Abraham and Sarah's laughter in Genesis and the laughter of the Greek goddess, Demeter. The chapter concludes with this sentence: "Alexa's laugh also voices reproductive labor, that of invisible workers: the feminised, racialized maid who Alexa is cheerfully replacing, the people who harvested the metals of which Alexa is made, the factory workers who produced the outsourced labour of her construction assembly, the underpaid coders who gave her a voice and a mind and who, voluntarily or involuntarily, outfitted her with a laugh." (p. 85). As with much of the work, this conclusion may prompt one of two radically opposed reactions. If one is not persuaded by Casadei's exegesis, then her conclusions amount to no more than virtue signalling with a vengeance. Alternatively, if one concedes that her proposed associations involving laughter may possess a kernel of truth, then one glimpses the possibility of a fuller understanding of laughter as a, perhaps the, critical act in human conduct.

As can be observed, the style of writing is almost Joycian, not just in its lyricism but in its flow of ideas from one to another. There is little attempt to develop a particular position using extended logical argumentation, in keeping with Casadei's position on laughter as the antithesis of *λογος*, perhaps, but there are legions of interesting ideas drawn from Casadei's extensive reading. There are some 37 pages of notes; this is an authoritative source of challenging notions.

I found reading this book was akin to having an extended and engrossing conversation with the author. Casadei rarely failed to draw me in and on. Whether it was a particular take on traditional theories of laughter, offering new information on recording techniques, or considering the economic conditions necessary for the successful marketing of sound recordings or TV comedies, I was intrigued. The conversational metaphor also applies to the not infrequent occasions when I wanted to answer back: the stretched link between laughter and reproduction, the association of laughter with cholera, or simply Casadei's brief autobiographical sketch of being an academic in the current phase of late capitalism. In being continually called upon to question what I understand by laughter, how I listen to recorded music, indeed, on what it is to be a being who laughs, I am prepared to acknowledge that I finished the text a wiser individual than the one who started it.