Love and second sight: Bergson and romantic comedy

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This paper applies Henri Bergson's work on "affect" to romantic comedy, particularly the Hollywood film *While You Were Sleeping* (Turteltaub 1995). Bergson offers phenomenological descriptions of affects, from simple sensations to complex emotions, theorises them as qualitative multiplicities, and suggests how they afford an insight into nature as not a fixed essence but rather as durational processes of constant creative change, in which oppositions such as quality/quantity, belief/intelligence, myth/reality are productive forms of difference. Romantic comedies combine the sense of "nature", which Bergson argues is the tendency of life to reproduce and develop itself, with an emphasis on emotional life, and these two things are linked. Romantic comedies are commonly described as formulaic, irrational, sentimental or fantastic, but each of these terms can be construed positively. Formulae refer to underlying natural cycles, reflecting the comic concern with rebirth and growth; the irrational, sentimental and fantastic refer not only to emotional states but also to particular mechanisms – Freud's dream condensation and displacement, LeShan's "magical thinking" and Moore's "expressive behaviours", all characteristic of situations of human significance where there is uncertainty, desire, and a gap between aim and result, or between sender and receiver. Expressive behaviours, both individual and social (e.g. rituals), attempt to "fill the gap" between subjects, when rationality fails, providing the social glue that makes human societies cohere. Finally, Bergson's work on humour is examined in relation to the above themes. It is argued that the way Bergson theorises nature and affect as qualitative multiplicities connects them to emotional or expressive behaviours as manifest in romantic comedy and helps put them all on a firmer philosophical footing.

Romantic comedies are often characterised "feel-good" fantasies where "dreams come true". The philosophy of Henri Bergson demonstrates how "feelings", fantasies and dreams can constitute a special kind of knowledge of creative possibility, novelty and change. Bergson's philosophy is vital and in many ways optimistic, but it is not without rigour. Laughter, love, life and faith are all topics he takes seriously, to a greater degree than any thinker of the last 100 years. It is possible to think of Bergson as a "comic philosopher". He is also an important early thinker of "affect" - developing a critical vocabulary to talk about aesthetics, not only artworks but also in terms of the term's original meaning: "that which relates to the senses" as something other than subjective, individual pathology or the product of mass manipulation.

For Bergson, affection is not an adjunct, a subjective residue from engagement in the “real” world – rather it is the nexus that links perception and action and the conduit to new ways of being. It arises from bodily engagement in the world so it is also profoundly social – not in the sense that it can be reduced to the social but in the ways that affect or emotion link the human world to the natural. For Bergson, nature is not a fixed essence but continual creation that finds its analogue in emotional life, via qualitative multiplicity. In his last work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1977) he examines the relationship of the natural and the social via social manifestations of affects such as dreams, fantasy, belief, myth as manifested in expressive behaviours. I believe that these concepts can enhance understanding of romantic comedies. I propose first to pursue Bergson’s thinking on “affect”, then to analyse romantic comedy in terms of its typical “comic” structures and finally his analysis of laughter or humour to see how these can be connected to his concept of nature.

While You Were Sleeping (1995) is a Hollywood romantic comedy starring Sandra Bullock (Lucy) as a train ticket vendor who rescues Peter Gallagher (Peter), whom she is secretly in love with, from being hit by a train. He goes to hospital in a coma and his family mistake Lucy for his fiancée, setting in motion events which culminate in her marrying the man’s brother, Bill Pullman (Jack) in one of those last-minute, change-your-mind-at-the-altar climaxes typical of the genre. It is a classic romantic comedy of mistaken identity, in which the heroine transfers her affections from brother to brother, from an initially desirable but unknown object to an initially undesirable (indeed sceptical) but ultimately more knowable one, with similarities to Shakespearean comedy, Jane Austen’s novels, modern rom-coms like *Bridget Jones* and fairy tales like *Snow White*.

The plot of *Sleeping* is “essentially ridiculous” (Webster 1995) – based on coincidences, not a causal logic. It relies on contrivance, and we are used to measuring fantasy against reality and finding the former wanting. But comedy is also *about* fantasy – the heroine fantasises an ideal love and ultimately it comes true, just not quite in the way she expected or with the person she imagined. Romantic comedies are often dismissed as silly. But what could be more serious than falling in love? Love is what allows the human race to continue – it fulfils what Bergson calls the fundamental aim of life – to continue and reproduce itself by whatever means necessary: “Our psychic structure originates in the necessity of preserving and developing social and individual life” (1977, p. 108).

For Bergson, humanity’s aims and aspirations are based on nature – “human” attributes such as intelligence but also religious belief are particular solutions to the problem of life reproducing itself, answered in different ways by different life forms throughout natural history (1977). The natural underwrites the human. Nature is not opposed to culture - human beings are just as natural (or unnatural) as any life form, but this does not mean conformity to some timeless essence. Nature is movement, it is never “given”, it is all-encompassing but incomplete – a Whole but an open Whole, as Deleuze puts it (1986, p. 9). Nature’s nature is to nature – *natura naturans*, to borrow a term from Spinoza (Shaviro 2012). Nature proceeds by moving and changing, but it is unpredictable – it is not the realisation of a plan; it does not function like intelligence. But it can be perceived as having an “intention” in relation to human life, and this aspect comes to the fore in myths or stories such as the one we are examining. Or to put it another way, comedy relates to Nature because it is concerned with how human society can reproduce and develop through the formation of new relationships of friendships and love.

Deleuze (1999) states that Bergson is the first philosopher of difference. Difference is positive – it does not proceed by negation (Hegelian dialectics), nor is it merely an effect of

discourse (Derrida) (Grosz 2005). Difference is opposition that generates the new. The key differences Bergson establishes are in kind and degree, quality and quantity, emotion and intellect. One cannot be reduced to the other – they are linked, but in complementary rather than antagonistic ways (Deleuze 1999). And the key site for understanding the processual quality of change for Bergson is emotional life, or to put it more precisely, phenomenological description of the continuous change and evolution of psychical states. Romantic comedies combine the sense of "nature's plan" on the one hand with an emphasis on emotional life on the other, and these two things are linked.

Psychical states are examples of qualitative multiplicities (Deleuze 1991, p. 10; Bergson 2001). Bergson argues that scientific explanations of states of feeling are inadequate, because they explain intensity (quality) by magnitude (quantity) of cause, a rationalisation which substitutes explanation for experience. Sensation is more than a response to a stimulus. Similarly, his colleague, William James (1884), argues that rather than a stimulus eliciting a mental response, which is translated into bodily sensation, stimulus is registered by the body first. Bodily reaction is primary in sensation – rather than crying because we feel sad, we feel sad because we are crying. The body is more than a medium that conveys a message – it is constitutive of the message. The body's active role becomes a way of questioning the stimulus/response, quantifiable model. Bergson refutes the scientific reduction of feeling to quantity but also avoids Romantic etherealism because of the centrality of body to his account of sensation. Even "simple" sensations such as increasing physical effort are not quantifiable, rather "this increase of sensation ought … rather to be called a sensation of increase" (2001, p. 48). Consciousness of an increase in effort is centripetal, not centrifugal: not measured by concentration at a single point but in terms of its transformation into "a greater number of peripheral sensations, and a qualitative change in some of them" (some might become pain) (2001, 26). Such "simple" sensations are comparable to more deep-

seated feelings and complex emotions in that they develop by “a qualitative progress and increasing complexity, indistinctly perceived” (2001, p. 26) or “a certain quality or shade which spreads” (2001, p. 8). Qualitative multiplicity incorporates differences in kind – a feeling is made up of different elements that progress and change in time, as opposed to quantitative multiplicity, which is marked by extensity (existing in space, not in time, made up of separate bits), and by differences in degree (number, quantity).

Bergson describes the continuity of psychical life: “I pass from state to state … I change without ceasing” (1913, p. 3). Each state is different from the last, but also connected to it, and looking within each state reveals that it is always changing within itself. “But it is expedient to disregard this uninterrupted change” (1913, p. 5) because action and language freeze this continual movement in order to act, or to say something about how we are feeling. Having frozen the movement, having separated one thing from another, the only way to reassemble the parts is to invent an enduring presence behind them – an ego or identity, on which states are threaded, like pearls on a chain. But in doing so, in locating oneself as an identity, an actor, the original experience is forgotten, as on awaking, dreams usually disappear. This continuous psychical existence is additive. States don’t pass like clouds, never to return; they are connected, by memory. Psychical life is like a snowball rolling down a slope, accumulating all the time – nothing is lost: “The past is preserved by itself automatically … In its entirety … it follows us at every instant” (1913, p. 7). Memory connects past and present and gives a basis for future actions. This process is unconscious insofar as only memories which serve present need are admitted. Memory, like perception, is organised around action, which cuts out everything else, though memory in total remains, as a reservoir of virtuality that could inform future actions and states. It remains in the body as habit, or more broadly, character.

The intensity of a feeling relates to how it develops and transforms in duration or lived time:

> …an obscure desire gradually becomes a deep passion… the feeble intensity of this desire consisted at first in its appearing to be isolated and, as it were, foreign to the remainder of your inner life. But little by little it permeates a larger number of psychic elements, tingeing them … with its own colour: and lo! your outlook … seems now to have changed radically. How do you become aware of a deep passion … if not by perceiving that the same objects no longer impress you in the same manner? All your sensations and all your ideas seem to brighten up: It is like childhood back again. We experience something of the kind in certain dreams, in which we do not imagine anything out of the ordinary, and yet through which there resounds an indescribable note of originality (2001, p. 8).

To describe such feelings, Bergson uses a narrative form - they are best described as a story or process. A story develops, but it does not get "bigger". The growth of a feeling is defined by its progress, which is more like a permeation – it does not replace one state with another, but includes and transfigures them: "Its image has altered a thousand perceptions and memories, and in that sense it pervades them, though it does not itself come into view" (2001, p. 9). The feeling can only be seen in what it animates, much as Bergson argues that change cannot be seen in itself (1913). The second point is that such feelings are narrative-like in that they are defined by their quality of movement or dynamism. Emotions and narratives have the power to "move" us. Moreover, in describing "desire", Bergson supplies a template we can apply to romantic comedy.

Bergson argues that the flow of psychical states manifests itself most obviously in dreaming (1911). Dreaming is removed from action, so the habitual activity of intelligence, which is to freeze movement, divide and analyse experience, is suspended. Memory is active, but lacking a focus of action, tends towards free association. Freud (1900, 1997) argues that dreams are disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes: that is, desire pervades them, but remains hidden. He offers in his early work not an explanation of desire but rather examples of its mechanisms: condensation, which combines a number of images or words into one, so a

person appearing in a dream may have the characteristics of another, or be both simultaneously, a relationship of similarity (metaphor). Another example is displacement – where emotion associated with a number of ideas or experiences is attached to another, so the relationship is one of contact between different ideas, which are then perceived as a whole (metonymy) (Freud 1900, 1997). Bergson points out that logic is spatial and discrete: "two bodies cannot [simultaneously] occupy the same positions in space"; A cannot become B, Peter cannot become Jack (2001, p. 88). But dream logic is temporal - things metamorphose, as in Bergson's account of psychical existence. Freud's dream mechanisms are also similar to the principles of magic: the law of similarity: "if two observables have similar characteristics they have similar effects" (a heart-shaped leaf might be used in a love potion) and of contagion, in which contact between two objects leaves an imprint on each (water "memory" in homeopathy) (LeShan 2012, p. 96). Such mechanisms are characteristic of not only dreams but also myths and fairy tales, which in turn have significant resemblances to aspects of romantic comedy.

In *While You Were Sleeping*, dreaming is the dominant metaphor – the hero's sleep becomes the dream state of the characters. The heroine's desire is displaced and redirected from Peter, to his family and then onto Peter's brother, Jack. This is revealed in a conversation with her boss, Jerry, at a New Year's party:

> Jerry: He looks good…
> Lucy: That's not Peter, that's Jack.
> Jerry: And who's Jack again?
> Lucy: Peter's brother.
> Jerry: Peter's the guy who's in a coma.
> Lucy: Yeah.
> Jerry: So why did you bring Jack?

Lucy: I didn’t bring Jack, he followed me.

Jerry: So Jack’s the fiancée?

Lucy: No, Peter.

Jerry: But Peter doesn’t even know you exist.

Lucy: I know.

Jerry: So Jack is Peter? Lucy, they have doctors for this kind of thing.

Although the classic Hollywood narrative stresses individual, directed, desire, Lucy’s desire manifests itself indirectly through condensation and displacement. She doesn’t know what she wants, but ends up getting it anyway. She rarely acts on her desires; her acts are selfless or at least ambiguous. Saving Peter could simply be the act of a conscientious employee – she tends to sacrifice her own immediate interest for the well-being of others, so either her eventual happiness is a sentimental plot contrivance or evidence of some larger force at work. Peter’s family displace their concern for him onto Lucy – she incarnates their hope for his recovery. They are operating under an illusion, albeit a benevolent one. Peter wakes up and when he fails to recognise Lucy, the family convince him that he has lost his memory. Peter accordingly manages to convince himself that he really is in love with Lucy, while Lucy is becoming attracted to her brother Jack, the family sceptic, the one she has to convince, but instead he is convinced to fall in love with her. In dreams, people and objects change identities, and this is a key aspect of romantic comedy. Like the lovers in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the characters of the film wander from the known to the unknown, from the “city” of everyday life into the “forest” where imagination rules and bushes turn into bears, falling in love, only to discover their true love is another.

Frye’s archetypal criticism connects the comic with natural forces of life and death, growth and decay (2004). Comedy’s concern with romantic love connects to fertility rites and the continuation of human society. Bergson (1977) argues that human society is founded on

mutual obligation but that this in turn is based on the need of life to preserve and reproduce itself. Society is an organism in which parts (individual beings) are subordinated to the good of the whole: “Everything … conspires to make social order an imitation of the order observed in nature” (1977, p. 14). It is this, not reason or morality, that makes societies cohere. Thus Bergson refutes both social contract philosophy (where reason overcomes self-interest) and religion (fundamental moral edicts). This social concern is in line with Frye’s comic universe of reconciliation, continuity and the formation of new family units. Comedy is linked to religious rituals involving the death and rebirth of gods, for example Persephone - myths of resurrection, allied to seasonal cycles.

While You Were Sleeping illustrates these themes in a number of ways – it is set in winter, but the hero comes back to life, saved literally and figuratively by love, as an exchange between a policeman and an orderly concerning Lucy’s presence at the hospital on Peter’s admission reveals:

> Policeman: Is that the woman that saved his life?
> Orderly: Yeah, it gets even better than that, she’s his fiancée!

The story is set at Christmas, a Christian rebirth myth, and concerns social integration – the main characters all start isolated, and attempt to join and continue society (the heroine joining the hero’s family). For Bergson, this is also one of the functions of religion – the formation of community through the institutionalisation of social obligation, which is in turn based on the need or desire of life continuing.

Rebirth is “irrational”. From the rational, individual perspective it is easy to understand that life ends, but to understand rebirth requires a non-rational, non-individual perspective (we individually die, but life as a whole continues). Bergson argues that human intelligence is double-edged – it allows autonomy and individuality but at a price: awareness of mortality.

Religious or mythical thinking balances the inevitability of death: "Religion is a defensive reaction of nature against the dissolvent power of intelligence" (1977, p. 122). Throughout the screenplay, knowledge is linked to death, error to life. The backgrounds of the characters are full of death – Lucy is an orphan, the family business is selling dead people's furniture. Jack's initial role is skeptic and amateur detective, determined to reveal the "truth" about Lucy. But when Jack starts questioning Lucy about Peter, the traumatized family patriarch swiftly intervenes: "Why are you asking all these questions? I don't wanna know." Forced to reveal a defining truth about Peter, Lucy blurts out: "He only has one testicle." In comedy, the truth is unpleasant, and better avoided. When Lucy asks her boss whether she should tell the truth, he responds: "When my mother found out I was getting marrying … her intestines exploded. Now you tell them now, you might as well shoot Grandma." The grandmother (Elsie, played by Glynis Johns) has a heart condition, and it is frequently mentioned that any shock (such as the truth) could kill her. In church, Elsie remarks: "I prefer the mass in Latin, it's nicer if you don't know what they are saying." Jack's gaze at Lucy is initially critical, but it gradually metamorphoses into fond regard. The hunter gets captured by the game. Later, Peter, convinced that he has to love Lucy, soliloquises:

> She's gotta be special, and I can spend the rest of my life finding out why. I don't have to know now, I don't have to know tomorrow, I don't have to know in a year, I don't have to know all the answers… does this make any sense?
>
> Hospital orderly: Not really, but it's quite common after a head injury.

Belief acts as an antidote to too much intelligence, which courts death and disillusionment.

Bergson is not only interested in belief but also how it is manifested as behaviour, and Moore (1999) argues that the concept of "magic" shows how belief can inform action in the world, in the form of expressive behaviours. Magic is not an aberration (as science views it) but a symbolic mechanism that enables retention of propositions and adoption of new practices that

are not fully understood. For Bergson, argues Moore, “there are kinds of action and experience which … invite, prefigure or require the magical… and he wants to find them by starting from a phenomenology of action” (1999, pp. 137-138). Bergson argues that life is primarily bodies in movement - reflection, intelligence or even consciousness are more like effects of movement than causes. Language, the tool of intelligence, reduces experience to categories of the already known: “what intelligence grasps is thought to be all that can be attained… the same reasoning would prove also the impossibility of acquiring any new habit” (1913, pp. 201-202). Action acts knowledge. Its “sense” is in performance rather than explanation. In fencing, the “fencer knows … it is the foil that has drawn the arm forward …he can lunge properly… only from the time he feels things in this order” (1977, p. 126). Rationally, the hand pushes the sword, but to perform the action properly requires ascribing agency to the instrument – animism, or magical thinking. Such a leap of faith is common, when acquiring a new skill or undergoing a new experience, and takes the form of an action, which breaks the circle of familiarity: “thousands of variations on the theme of walking will never yield a rule for swimming” (Bergson 1913, p. 204). The archetypal form of such action in romantic comedy is falling in love.

Another example of expressive behaviour is the way a gambler playing roulette will encourage the ball to land on the right number, using expressive gestures – words of encouragement, banging the table, invoking “luck” (Bergson 1977, pp. 145-146). Like fencing, these are both situations in which intelligence falls short – in the former because of how some physical skills are learned; in the latter because of the element of chance. Both are situations of human significance where there is uncertainty. Such behaviours are “irrational” but Moore counters that this view “dismisses as an aberration a common and complex human practice” (1999, p. 140). Rather, “Actions at the edge of our power will turn out to have the form of magic descriptions” (1999, p. 141). What might mislead here is that mentioning the

second cause (luck) makes it look as if one is relying on it; the first cause, agency, is taken for granted - luck is only invoked in the attempt to bridge the gap between aim and result:

> it is by rational means… by complying with mechanical sequences of cause and effect that things are set going. We begin by doing what depends on ourselves: it is only when we feel that it no longer lies with us to help ourselves that we have recourse to extra-mechanical power (Bergson 1977, p. 141).

It is never a matter of choosing between intelligence and magical/mythical thinking, both are necessary, and Bergson argues that they complement each other.

Moore's third example develops the idea of attributing expression or intention to events such as earthquakes "in terms of our experience of an agency that is not our own" (Moore 1999, p. 141):

> For "science", when the tensions in the earth's crust reach … breaking point, and strata fall into an altered equilibrium, earthquake is simply the … *name* of all the … disturbances that happen. They *are* the earthquake. But for me *the* earthquake was the *cause* of the disturbances, and the perception of it as a living agent was irresistible (William James, cited in Bergson 1977, p. 155, italics in original).

Why treat a chance/natural event as intentional? Precisely because of its human significance. If events are traumatic, it is common to ascribe intention to them, precisely because of their human significance, as opposed to an earthquake occurring on Mars, which would seem merely random. Again, in romantic comedy, this could correspond to the frequent invocation of fate, destiny or even providence. It seems unlikely that Peter's family would mistake Lucy for his fiancée and even more unlikely that Jack's attempts to discredit her fail – he sets a series of tests for her, but mainly through luck, she gets through them. But luck in comedy takes on a providential aspect – a sense that the gods are in Lucy's favour.

Expressive behaviours are characteristic of romantic comedy. Romantic comedy is typically melodramatic – it contrives charged situations and characters respond to them in a

correspondingly charged manner. At the start of the film, Lucy is working at the ticket booth, when Peter wishes her Merry Xmas. Taken off guard, she misses her opportunity to reciprocate, so she grunts in frustration and then repeats to herself what she would have said to him. In the context of this film, Lucy's soliloquies can be read as expressive behaviour. They are conventional in melodrama, and in this case are also "l'esprit d'escalier" – the kind of thing we wished we could have said. When Peter is taken to the hospital the stage is set for melodrama: the arrival of his family is heralded by a chorus of emotional cries - anger, lament, sorrow. Their expressive behaviour finds its object in Lucy – in a situation where they have no control over the life of their son, they transfer their concern onto her. They invent the story of Lucy and Peter's courtship themselves, reading into her muteness their own desires: "we could all use a nice story." Later Lucy revisits hospital and talks to comatose Peter. This is clearly expressive: it expresses a forlorn wish, because Peter cannot hear her. But her presence has real effects – it helps convince the family of her love for Peter. Indeed when the doctor initially says to Lucy: "Let him hear your voice", it suggests that when science falls short, affect comes to the fore. By expressing a desire, Lucy goes part of the way to making it come true. Her "folly" proves to be her saving grace.

Expressive behaviour is not only manifest in characters – it is Christmas, and rituals of religious celebration clearly fall into Moore's categories as events that can have agency. People do special things because it is Christmas. Jack and Lucy are forced to kiss "under the mistletoe", which presages their later union; Peter revives to the strains of "Auld Lang Syne", a song commemorating friendship, family ties, death and rebirth. The film has a background of expressive ethnicity and identity – the family are Catholic, they go to church, Peter's godfather is Jewish, her employer is African-American, and the soundtrack is mainly African-American. These are cultural stereotypes of ethnic expressivities that can be read as

responses to historic marginalisation and lack of agency, in opposition to mainstream WASP white American culture.

In comedy, characters are ignorant of their own motives; they do not know their desire, rather they are guided. By following outer forms or rituals, they acquire inner conviction. Ritual is not just predictability – it can produce new possibilities. Lucy isn't really Peter's lover, but she sits by his bedside, talks to his unconscious body, socialises with the family, and thus becomes convincing to herself and others. This insight reverses the traditional identification of emotion only with an inner world – Bergson argues for the active role of the body on the world in creating sensation and emotion – an "outside/in" model, which questions the idea that humans simply impose their "intentions" on the world, or that emotions are primarily mental experiences. Bergson argues that consciousness is dependent on bodily engagement in the world: "the attitude of consciousness is mainly the consciousness of an attitude", reversing the conventional emphasis on mind over matter, and making bodily disposition central to "attention to life", a Bergsonian leitmotif (1911, p. 121; xiv). Another example of bodies coming first is the "accidental" touch, a convention of romantic comedies – Jack and Lucy slip on the ice and clutch each other, but it becomes like a game – in effect they are rehearsing for their true embrace at the end. This echoes how Bergson's account of sensation is rooted in the actions of bodies in the world. But it also supports his general point that feelings and sensations are not simply reactions to what has already happened:

> … sensations map out our future actions …it might be asked whether pleasure or pain, instead of expressing only what has just occurred… could not also point out what is going to … take place. It seems … improbable that nature, so profoundly utilitarian, should have assigned to consciousness the merely scientific task of informing us about the past or the present, which no longer depend on us. (2001, pp. 33-34).

Romantic comedies are also amusing, and Bergson has plenty to say on the topic. *Laughter*'s thesis is that audiences laugh when they perceive “something mechanical encrusted upon the living” (2005, p. 24). When a person acts like a thing, or a thing acts like a person, it seems incongruous and we laugh. Laughter arises from the tension between life (growth and change); and mechanism (stasis and repetition), the simultaneous perception of both prompting bemused response to the resultant absurdity. It seems that Bergson is setting up dualisms: mechanism/vitality, artificial/natural, but his real interest is in how opposites create productive tension – difference as a positive force. On the one hand, a comic character “fails” to adapt, resists the demands of life and vitality, keeps doing the same thing, is a victim of self-delusion, like Don Quixote, or Lucy, for that matter, although in her case the delusion is not only her own. But repetition taken to its limit becomes a kind of vitality in itself. Many comic effects arise from the productivity of the mechanism:

> Many a comic form, that cannot be explained by itself, can … only be understood from its resemblance to another, which only makes us laugh by its relation to a third, and so on [like] … the force which divides … the branches of a tree (2005, p. 32).

This is another example of magical thinking: “similarity” - like affects like; and “contagion” - action at a distance (LeShan 2012, p. 92). We commonly say that laughter is “infectious”.

Lucy's attempts to keep up her act, the unlikely ways she is helped by the family and to some degree providence, keep the audience on a tightrope – an ever-complicating obstacle course of misunderstandings and coincidences: “You're Peter's fiancée?” becomes the film's leitmotif. Such repetitive comic mechanisms are exemplified in farce: Lucy concealing an importunate neighbour (Joey) in a cupboard, a situation that requires more and more elaborate cover-ups – an episode metonymic for the plot as a whole. Rituals provide rich

ground for comedy because of their repetitive structure – for example, the final marriage ceremony, with its repeated objections.

Bergson argues that laughter's social function is to highlight failure to adapt to social norms, exemplified by "rude mechanical" characters like Joey, Lucy's "unsuitable" would-be suitor, constantly door-knocking with absurd gifts and propositions. But as usual with Bergson, the social aspect is only half the story. The way comedy works by repetition and ramification causes him to observe: "an inexorable law dooms every living thing, during the brief interval allotted to it in time, to cover the widest possible extent in space…. Comic fancy is … a living energy" (2005, p. 32). The comic is both highly mechanical, artificial and at the same time an embodiment of a kind of life force – Joey is incorrigible. The comic text ramifies not by cause-effect but by suggestibility and association, as musical vibrations create sympathetic resonances which set off complementary patterns. Hence the comic plot tends to be both coincidental, but also highly patterned, with much parallelism and complementarity, from stock characters or stereotypes through to typical plot structures ("boy and girl meet, lose each other, find each other again"). For many commentators, this patterning equates to predictability, but they are ideologically predisposed to devalue comedy because of its generic nature: "Art reveals to us the individuality that lies behind the generic categories of the everyday imposed by use… [but] Comedy directs us to the generalities" (2005, p. 45).

Their second charge is that comedy is fantasy but as previously mentioned, dreams have logic, described in the final section of *Laughter*. This is based around effects, not causes - Don Quixote fails to adapt to reality, but in pursuing his delusion makes it real. The comic character imposes his idea on reality, and reality adjusts to it - this is the dream logic. Comic absurdity is similar to dreams: "the mind enamoured of itself, now seeks in the outer world nothing bit a pretext for realizing its imaginations", freely associating ideas, relaxing the rules

of reasoning, producing obsessively recurring images, idées fixes, repetitive effects, catchphrases, choruses, creating a crescendo or momentum effect (2005, pp. 90-95).

Dreams and laughter are marked by a relaxation of will – a slackening of attention to life and utility, but in this undirected space, new things may grow – there is room for play. This clearly links to Bergson's account of the qualitative multiplicity of psychic states in constant movement and the necessity of ignoring this for the purposes of action. The absurd imaginations and mechanical movements of foolish characters in comedy may become the butt of righteous laughter, but the implications of comedy outrun the moral; they point to the productivity of life and difference and its ability to endlessly ramify: "Given one form of the laughable, other forms… lacking in the same essence become laughable" (2005, p. 88). The play of wit is a holiday from necessity. So laughter and dreams provide ways of connecting to a larger reality.

In this essay I have argued that Bergson's discussion of "affect" can be applied to romantic comedy, because they share a common emphasis on emotional life and also how it connects to larger natural processes through qualitative multiplicity. I emphasised that Bergson is no unworldly Romantic – his account of sensation proceeds from a phenomenological examination of bodies in action, moving from simple sensations such as physical effort to complex ones such as love or desire, and that these are best understood from the point of view of narrative. I then proposed a number of mechanisms that characterise this narrative: dream displacement and condensation and how these link to magical thinking commonly manifested in myths and fairy tales. But such magical thinking also often occurs in ordinary life and has a compensatory function – where intelligence fails, mythical thinking fills the gap between aim and result. Bergson's point is that both are necessary but on its own each is insufficient - this connects to his broader concept of difference and nature – that each are different kinds of response to the "need" of life to reproduce itself; in turn love and

reproduction are the main concerns of romantic comedy. But again, Bergson is always concerned to relate the magical back to the needs of action and to look at particular examples (expressive behaviours) of how acts of belief and faith are integrated into everyday life. The creativity of the difference of nature, the virtual, finds its analogue in human emotional life. Tapping into this revitalising creative energy requires emotional connection with self and others and this is the fundamental message of comedy, and Bergson. In reason we apprehend what is, but in affect we register what could be.

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