
Kierkegaard On Farce¹

Jasna KOTESKA
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Macedonia

The article Kierkegaard on Farce deals with the question of farce in the works of the Danish philosopher and the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), most notably in his work Repetition (1843). It proposes that Kierkegaard saw farce as a powerful tool to question not only performativity, the nature of movements, the repetition, and the uniformity, but also the very foundations of our symbolic order.

Key Words: Søren Kierkegaard, farce.

1. Dual Nature of the Social Order

In 1840s Kierkegaard developed the idea that humans cannot even be sure if they believe at all. Ultimately they only believe that they believe.

Kierkegaard noticed the strange power of performativity in religious practices. Something strange happens when religion materializes, as it regularly sort of appears as a form of theater, or performance, or Posse (“I perform that I believe, therefore I

¹ The text is an excerpt from the book: Jasna Koteska, Kierkegaard on Consumerism, The Aesthetical, the Ethical, and the Religious Reading, Kierkegaard Circle, University of Toronto and Central European Research Institute Soren Kierkegaard, Ljubljana, 2016, ISBN 978-1-988129-02-0
believe”). Such performativity seems to be imbedded in social reality as well. Kierkegaard noticed that the social order, that maintains social harmony, is based on the dual nature of the laws: there is one publicly articulated law, but behind it, as a shadow, there is always the opposite obscene “law”. For example, a person spits on the street when no one is looking, runs a red traffic light, etc., in other words, a person would violate the law here and there, not as an act of resistance to the community, but paradoxically, in the name of the desire for imaginary identification with the “communal spirit.” Notice how no one believes that a family man is sexually satisfied; he must find a lover to convince the community that he has finally started enjoying himself. Other examples are the paradoxes around liberal and conservative upbringing. In the film, American Pie (1999), by Paul Weitz, the father is trying very hard to introduce his son to the secrets of sex, but paradoxically the father’s obscene behaviour only instills a feeling of shame in the son and a desire to retreat. The father would actually help the son if he would most conservatively forbid him to date girls, to which the son would respond with resistance. Or recall the screenplay disaster of Emmanuelle 2 (1975), from the erotic series about Emmanuelle by Giacobetti that followed after the married couple agreed to live in an open marriage. Another example is the behaviour of the adulterers themselves. When they are caught in flagrant adultery, they deny it with all their might because they intuitively know that an admission of adultery is a more dramatic blow to the relationship than the act of adultery itself. “If he/she is ready to admit, that means that he/she really does not love me.” If there is no prohibition and everything is allowed, then paradoxically, nothing is allowed, as Kierkegaard wrote. The paradoxes of these types are based on the fact that order is ambivalent and sends out contradictory signals. In an ideological world a dual law is always in play - the visible one (the allowed) and the hidden one (the obscene). Where does this split in the law come from, why is the law split in two and why is one thing propagated and another “obeyed?” That is because the law is not all encompassing; laws are insufficient and can never cover all areas of permissions and offenses.

The Russian formalist, Bakhtin, wrote extensively about the essence of carnivals, and the joy they incite is not to turn the world upside down, but that the world needs to empty itself, a periodical public acting out, liberating from the rigid signalization of the
public law. Since ancient times, carnival celebrations saw men dressed up as women and princes transformed into slaves; for that one night, all of them got a chance to free themselves from the meaningless roles imposed by and around sex and class. There is a story about Queen Elisabeth of Hungary, a gorgeous princess who, however, loved to publicly humiliate herself. Carnival behaviour was an opportunity to relieve the tension of the “imposed” social categories and order, to “suspend the law.” And paradoxically, what holds the community together is not the publically declared law, but this violation of it.

2. To Walk versus To Come Walking (Beckmann versus Chaplin)

The first part of Repetition is almost entirely devoted to the issue of a farce. Kierkegaard used the word Posse (meaning dent or bump). Kierkegaard’s love of theater is well documented, but in Repetition he does not talk about just any theater, but about a specific genre. Farce is not an established canonic tragedy or comedy; it is a popular theater (as if by comparison, a philosopher today will write about a reality show). Kierkegaard left a detailed explanation about Berlin’s performances, and these parts of the book are explained in wonderful detail: he give advice about which are the best seats in the various balconies, what tickets for which boxes one should buy, discussing how the spectators from the audience look at each other, how their reactions differ, what kinds of gossips are being produced there, etc. And he explains his fundamental love of farce as follows:

Since neither tragedy, nor comedy, nor satire will satisfy him, precisely because of their perfection, he returns to farce... In farce one does not know whether one should laugh or cry. The whole effect depends upon the mood of the observer. There is no one who has not been through a period when no richness of language, no passionate interjection, was sufficient, when no expression, no gesticulation was satisfactory, because nothing satisfied except the wildest spontaneous leaps and somersaults... To watch a farce is, for the sophisticated, like playing the lottery, only without the unpleasantness of winning money. Such uncertainty does not serve the ordinary theatergoing public... They like, therefore, to denigrate farce or look down on it contemptuously, which is the worse for them. A real theatergoing public generally has a certain narrow-minded seriousness...
While in tragedy or comedy, one knows what to expect of the play, such prescience is impossible with farce, because the same farce can leave two very different impressions, and what is strange is that it can be least effective when it is best performed. One cannot, therefore, trust the reviews of friends and neighbors and the newspapers concerning whether it was entertaining. That determination can be made only by the individual (Kierkegaard 2009, 26-28).

Posse (farce) involves deformity, something that breaks the contour of things, it is a disruption of a continuity of the self. Kierkegaard was drawn to farce, to the question of performativity, and its potential for tearing apart the social tissue of reality. Since early in his life -- in 1838 already Kierkegaard drafted a philosophical comedy The Battle between the Old and New Soap-Cellars, his doctorate dissertation was about the concept of irony in Socrates, etc. And in his brilliant analysis of Kierkegaard’s Repetition, Samuel Weber says that Kierkegaard’s style throughout his books does not resemble the lyrical or the prose writing, as much as it resembles – a scenario! (Weber with Smith 1996). His Repetition is staged as a theater, the arguments are given different voices, therefore the book, although it has consistency, as we said earlier, it does not necessarily have unity. That is because Kierkegaard experimented with the potential to break the book into many parts, to give voices to different characters in order to test the true meaning of repetition.

And interestingly enough, Kierkegaard used farce once again to question the concept of the movement. Kierkegaard writes:

In serious theatre one rarely sees an actor who can actually walk or stand well… [In farce, the actor] does not just walk, he comes walking. To come walking is something completely different, and with this ingenious action he sets the whole scene… (Kierkegaard 2009, 32).

Repetition opened with the movement Diogenes made to dismiss the school of Eleatics. And already on the next few pages, the book transforms into a complicated inquiry about the movement of a person in a farce. The character in a farce does not walk, but he comes walking, Kierkegaard says. What was so different about the way the famous
German actor of that time, Beckmann, walks? Samuel Weber compares the walking of Beckmann (as described in Kierkegaard) with that of Chaplin, because they both walk in a specific manner, and they both carry a small bundle on their shoulder. But their walk is not the same. Charlie Chaplin walks as someone who walks differently from others, he walks with exaggeration, with a stylization, in order to represents “a nobody” among the crowds of people, but he does not go down a path from which there is no return. In a farce, on the other hand, Beckmann comes not in the expected ways, even if this is calculated geometry, a performance, even if is a repetition, even when it is a simulation (Weber with Smith 1996). What is peculiar about Beckmann is that he shifts while walking: he shifts the registers of movements, he starts with incredible speed and then exaggerates slowness, or vice versa.

But – and this is of crucial difference - Beckmann walks as if he is already leaving! He walks as if he is already going away. Kierkegaard was fascinated by this dual character of movement in a farce: the actors don’t just walk, they come walking. At the same time they walk not in order to arrive at some point, but they walk as if they are already leaving. “The figure is moving away from any kind of fixation”, writes Weber. What attracted Kierkegaard so much to farce was the fact that the figure loses its contours in a movement, it dissolves “in a bath of laughter”, as Weber writes.

“In a bath of laughler” -- laughter is of a specific interest of Kierkegaard, and he is drawn to farce because one can never know if the particular performance will be entertaining or not, one has to allow oneself to be lost in the performance Kierkegaard: “No effect of a farce is brought about through irony, but through naivety. The spectator must therefore become involved as an individual with the spectacle” (Kierkegaard 2009, 29). Today’s comedy (let’s call it “commercial comedy” or “consumerist comedy”), on the other hand, does not invoke losing oneself, but the other way around: the act of laughter is used to fix the self, to fix and uniform the audience. The laughter in the corporate comedy is an artificial laughter. The so-called “laugh track”, or “laughter track” were introduced in the American sitcoms in the 1950s. It consisted of a separate soundtrack for a recorded comedy show containing the sound of audience laughter, and it was first invented by the American sound engineer Charles Douglass. The mysterious “laff box” (the recorded laughs) were first incorporated in the American sitcom The Hank
McCune Show in the 1950s, and it soon become “the only laugh game” in the industry of comedy. Even prior the mechanization of the laughter, already Kafka criticized humor in the movies. The silent movies arrived in Prague before the First World War, and Kafka often went to the cinema. In one of his testimonies about the early silent American movies, Kafka writes:

Chaplin is a technician. He’s man of a machine world, in which most of his fellow men no longer command the requisite emotional and mental equipment to make the life allotted to them really their own. They lack imagination. As a dental technician makes false teeth, so he manufactures aids to the imagination. That’s what his films are. That’s what films in general are (Janouch 2012, 159).

“He manufactures aids to the imagination”, Kafka wrote, essentially the same thing which troubled Kierkegaard, why the superficiality of humor, how it came that humor began to be used for anesthetizing the audience? Kierkegaard’s love of farce, among other things, stemmed from the potentiality of the farce to dissolve, to suspend the false unity of the audience, of humanity. The hysterical laughter that farce produces does not stabilize the subject, does not unify the audience, but on the contrary, it deconstructs the audience as wholeness, it displays its false unity, and Kierkegaard in great details explained precisely how different parts of the audience react differently to performances of farce. Consumerist usage of humor, on the other hand, works completely in the opposite way, and one described by Kafka: as a technical tool for falsely manufacturing unity (A few years ago an interesting phenomena spread on the internet, as a small movement of ironically mocking the laughter in today’s advertising industry; it’s name: Women laughing alone with salads. There are several web sites dedicated to these phenomena, as ironic comments on today’s consumerism. They post advertisements of women with salads, and some of the comments read: “She finally achieved the perfect scoop of salad”, or women who are holding bowls of salads but are actually smiling at something else in the distance: “There is a really funny clown just out of the frame; he tells salad jokes), or: “Why would I socialize with the people at the party when I have my salad”, etc. In March 2014 a text “I Was a Woman Laughing Alone with a Salad, it’s Really Not that Funny” in The Guardian was published by Sarah Hartshorne where,
inspired by the stock photography used by many advertising companies (Hartshorne 2014), she pointed to gender aspects of using advertisements to impose schizophrenic identities on women today (in this case used by the multi-million dollar industries of food), as they are forcing women to be multi-taskers: mothers, sex objects, consumers of food, etc. in short by using stereotypes they falsely fix the identities of their consumers. While, to come back to Kierkegaard - for him laughter (in farce) has a potential to do precisely the opposite, and what Weber calls “to die laughing” - farce forms a certain relation to death, death of a fixed image, and laugh precisely at this truth, that a person is not fixed; you lose yourself, but not in a negative sense. Being spaced out, losing one’s sense of self, the contours are erased, the sense of moving differently is introduced – this is why for Kierkegaard farce had a rare power as an art form that tells the truth about us as human beings.

3. Gjentagelse and Consumerism

In Danish the word “repetition” existed, but Kierkegaard instead used the word Gjentagelse - formed from the words gjen (with the meaning to begin) and tagelse (to take). The literal translation of Gjentagelse is: to take again. In Repetition Kierkegaard applauded the Danish language for coining the word of a philosophical importance:

Repetition (gjentagelse) is a good Danish word, and I congratulate the Danish language for its contribution to philosophical terminology (Kierkegaard 2009, 18).

Constantin Constantius experimented with what exactly means to take something again. Can a person achieve a profound happiness not by the occurrence of the new, not even by the occurrence of the same again (as in the Latin: repetition), but by the act of taking (the lost) from the past again. “Gjentagelse makes one happy because it suggests the possibility of recovering what has been lost, of overcoming the transience of time and ultimately, finitude”, Weber writes, and he makes a very important point about the repetition and consumerism:
(Kierkegaard) takes an everyday trivial expression, such as ‘Hold on a second, I’ve forgotten something, I’d better go back and get it’. What could be more common, more banal: A slight inadvertence, ‘wait a minute, I’ll be right back’. It reminds me of the eternal litany of American television, which interrupts its programs every few minutes with the admonition: ‘Stay with us, we’ll be right back after this message’. Only here, in Kierkegaard’s text, the ‘message’ is that we may not be right back, not even if we buy everything that Kierkegaard-Constantin is selling”... This is not so unfamiliar today: indeed it may very well be at the heart of what we call ‘consumerism’. But more generally, this sense that the most trivial details may be the tip of an iceberg consisting of a mass of things that we would prefer to ignore – this is also one of the leitmotifs of +ian psychoanalysis (Weber with Smith 1996).

For the ideology of consumerism the importance of these lines is everlasting -- Weber introduces the idea that repetition and consumerism are closely linked: corporations are using repetition to promise that what humans are missing will be mediated, and they will be made complete again. But what if the primordial lack cannot be mediated? What if the fundamental lack is the natural state of humans? Even more dramatically, the ideological world is constructed in such a way that it does not let you forget that there is an initial, primal, primordial lack in the first place. The consumerist universe parasites precisely on this primordial lack, and it needs to announce it again and again: “Stay with us, we’ll be right back”. The shortage cannot be forgotten, the consumer has to be warned over and over again. I am coming to take it again.

“Wait a second, I forgot something” in the language of TV commercials means precisely the opposite: they forget nothing, and they don’t allow the consumer to forget, as well. But when introducing the concept of repetition, Kierkegaard had something else in mind. His repetition was meant as a reminder of Plato’s idea that true meaning is stored in the past, and it can be rediscovered again by recollection, by the remembrance that we already posses the truth. But modern times already forgot the ancient concept that truth does not require effort that the subject already has all the resources it needs. The Kierkegaardian model is more pessimistic: we no longer have means of accessing truth, the Socratic model is no longer available for humans as they lost their faith, so they have to repeat the knowledge by means of repetition. The
Ancient Greek model says that the salvation will come from remembering the past. The modern concept says that the recovery, if possible at all, will arrive only from the unknown future, through the act of repetition. For Kierkegaard recollection is no longer possible; we have to replace it with repetition.

Psychoanalysis treats repetition as a symptom of a kind: the reduction of tension happens only when we have something familiar, known, old, while the arrival of the new (unknown) always causes anxiety. A person discovers the situation which once gave her/him pleasure; when “re-discovered” anew the subject cherishes the state of repeatability, "now as always". But psychoanalysis also warns us that in repetition there is a certain refusal to recognize the past, and hence: time. During repetition, a person finds in the present what has been missed in the past. Psychoanalysis says that repetition is “remembering as a habit”, it is a habitual memory, which does not represent the past, but it sort of plays the past, or in Kierkegaardian terms, it performs the past, while at all times it remains the element of the present moment. When I remember, I remember what made a given scene different from others in the past. On the other hand, when I repeat something, I repeat a given situation, habit or image and am trying to find what makes the given scene similar to others. In other words, repetition is always a play of the same performance (Sedler 1983, 90). Time does not flow, and although repetition insists on the years that passed by, it does so in order to confirm that time is always already frozen.

Kierkegaard was well aware of this time paradox and in Repetition he describes a scene when he arrives for the second time in the Berlin theater, but this time he fails to see the girl who was a frequent visitor. The performance is now awful, the narrator cannot find the previous peace and he concludes that repetition is impossible: pure repetition does not exist, what exists is the sadness of recollection. It is not possible to take everything back again! Here two more concepts related to repetition should be introduced: the Freud’s fort-da narration, and also the concept of uncanny, and we are leaving them for some other investigation.
References


Hartshorne, “I Was a Woman Laughing Alone with Salad, it's Really Not that Funny”, *The Guardian*, 2014.