The Racial Politics of Laughing at *Get Out*

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Abstract: In late 2017 Jordan Peele's *Get Out* – a film portraying the horrors of American white supremacy – was nominated for a Golden Globe as a comedy. The ensuing debate over whether *Get Out* was a horror or a comedy drew attention to the laughter the film was indeed producing in its audiences. Black moviegoers reported white audiences laughing at disturbing moments, while white viewers were perplexed by black audiences laughing during other key scenes. Asked about these dynamics, Peele explained that "it's the kind of movie that black people can laugh at, but white people, not so much." This paper turns to Theodor Adorno's accounts of the laughter produced by the culture industry and other artistic sources to elucidate the differential racial politics of laughing at *Get Out*. I argue that Adorno's conception of laughter as an experience that both entrenches and resists social power shows how white laughter at *Get Out* functions to secure white supremacy while black laughter at the film prompts the imagination of more democratic modes of social organization. Crucially, however, Adorno's insistence that the politics of laughter are never stable or unidirectional directs us to attend to the emancipatory potentialities of white laughter and the political dangers posed by black laughter. I conclude that bringing Adorno to bear on *Get Out* illuminates the film's political efficacy as well as the outlines of a broader Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter.

The Racial Politics of Laughing at *Get Out*

Even laughter may yet have a future. (Nietzsche 1974, 74)

In November 2017, the Hollywood Press Association announced that *Get Out* – a critically acclaimed film portraying the horrors of American white supremacy – would compete as a comedy in its annual Golden Globes award contest (Desta 2017). Written and directed by sketch comedian Jordan Peele, *Get Out* tells the story of Chris Washington, an African American man in his mid-twenties who accompanies his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage, to meet her well-to-do family at their countryside estate. Despite Rose's and her family's earnest assurances of their liberal attitudes about race, Chris becomes uneasy upon meeting the family's two mysteriously stilted and obsequious black housekeepers, Georgina and Walter. Chris's suspicions (and those of Rod, his black friend with whom he communicates by phone throughout his trip) are confirmed when Dean – Rose's neurosurgeon father – takes advantage of Chris's temporary absence while on a walk with Rose to auction off his body to implant it with the brain of the highest white bidder – the same operation he has already performed on the bodies of Georgina and Walter. After being hypnotized by Rose's psychiatrist mother Missy, Chris manages to evade the planned lobotomy by outwitting and outmuscling the Armitage family, killing them all before escaping from the estate with Rod.

Following the Association's announcement, an uproar ensued over how *Get Out*, a horror film featuring only a few obvious moments of comic relief, could possibly be categorized as a comedy. While this dispute was itself somewhat frivolous – for strategic reasons, Peele's production company had submitted the film for consideration in the Globes's notoriously capacious "comedy/musical" category – it drew attention to a more interesting and important set

of questions surrounding the laughter that *Get Out* was indeed producing in its audiences.

Following the film's release, black moviegoers reported white audience members laughing at

seemingly inappropriate moments (e.g., the lobotomy scene), while white viewers were equally

perplexed by black audiences laughing during other key scenes (e.g., Chris's murder of Rose)

(Benjamin 2017; Ngangura 2017; Yuan and Harris 2018). When asked about the film's

classification as a comedy, Peele responded, "The real question is, what are you laughing at? Are

you laughing at the horror, the suffering? It is the kind of movie that black people can laugh at,

but white people, not so much" (Desta 2017).

The present paper turns to Theodor Adorno's accounts of the laughter produced by the

culture industry and other artistic sources to elucidate this differential racial politics of laughing

at *Get Out*. As a theorist who is uniquely sensitive to how popular culture both binds subjects to

and frees them from society's institutions and mechanisms of power, Adorno is well-positioned

to make sense of the laughter associated with *Get Out*. Famous for his melancholic ethos (Rose

2014), Adorno adopts a predictably harsh stance against laughter. He argues that despite its

reputation for resisting powerful political figures and social institutions, laughter often

participates in and bolsters these forces. "In wrong society," he and Max Horkheimer write,

"laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless

totality" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). Adorno identifies two kinds of "wrong laughter"

that entrench social power: (a) laughter manufactured by the "culture industry" (the film,

television, and radio apparatus that mass produces cultural products in late modernity) and (b)

so-called "polemical" laughter. The former type of laughter cruelly attacks sites of social

difference as a means of entertainment, while the latter targets sites of social power in such a

way that reassures the subject of her own innocence with respect to that power. Despite this two-

pronged critique, Adorno's opposition to laughter is not absolute. His essays on the culture

industry, lighthearted art, Samuel Beckett, and Charlie Chaplin sketch a "reconciled" form of

laughter that resists social power and prompts the imagination of alternative modes of social

organization. With these concepts of "wrong" and "reconciled" laughter, Adorno provides a

subtle, multi-faceted analysis of how laughter operates politically in a late capitalist social order.

This attention to the politics of laughter in terms of the question of *social order* sharply

distinguishes his approach from the prevailing philosophical preoccupation with laughter as a

spontaneous and intrinsically subversive experience that originates in the human subject (Bataille

2001; Derrida 1978; Foucault 1994; Freud 2003; Hobbes 2012; Kant 2000; Nietzsche 1982).

I argue that Adorno yields three critical insights about the racial politics of laughing at

Get Out. First, the laughter of white audiences participates in and entrenches white supremacy by

fusing the logics of the culture industry and polemical laughter. That is, white audiences who

laugh at the film identify the Armitage family as the source of racial wrongdoing in such a way

that distracts from and excuses their own complicity in white supremacy. Second, and

conversely, black laughter at *Get Out* constitutes a form of reconciled laughter that resists white

supremacy. The film's absurdly horrific depiction of white supremacy generates laughter that

disrupts and transforms how black subjects conceive of their place within the racialized social

order. Third, Adorno's insistence that the politics of laughter are never stable or unidirectional

reveals that white laughter at *Get Out* contains the seeds of a reckoning with white supremacy,

while black laughter at the film risks devolving into a resigned cynicism. In sum, *Get Out*

demonstrates how an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter illuminates the political risks

and possibilities of laughter more generally. Rather than simply identifying two discrete political

modalities of laughter (wrong, oppressive laughter on the one hand and reconciled, emancipatory

laughter on the other), such a critical theory attends to concrete experiences/events of laughter in

their dialectical complexity, seeking to cultivate their emancipatory potentialities and ward off

their oppressive tendencies.

The paper proceeds in four sections. Section I introduces Adorno's critique of the modern

capitalist social order. Section II describes his critique of laughter manufactured by the "culture

industry" along with his less familiar objections to "polemical" laughter directed against forms

of social power. Section III turns to *Aesthetic Theory* and Adorno's essays on lighthearted art,

Samuel Beckett, and Charlie Chaplin in order to trace a "reconciled laughter" capable of actually

resisting social power. Section IV uses these findings to elucidate both the racial politics of

laughing at *Get Out* and the contours of a broader Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter.

I. The "Systematized Horror" of Modern Society

Understanding Adorno's views on laughter requires a familiarity with his broader critique

of the modern capitalist social order. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*DoE*), Adorno's famous 1944

joint venture with Max Horkheimer, provides the clearest and most forceful statement of this

argument. The text's opening essay offers a polemical origin story for the "advance of thought"

known as enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 1). The authors explain that

enlightenment begins when archaic humans seek to disenchant the chaotic, mysterious forces of

nature to control them for their own benefit (2). Enlightenment entails an idealist epistemology

wherein the subject's consciousness is held to be constitutive of and adequate for grasping the

objective natural world. In enlightenment,

> being is split between *logos* – which, with the advance of philosophy, contracts to a
> monad, a mere reference point – and the mass of things and creatures in the external
> world. The single distinction between man's own existence and reality swallows up all
> others. Without regard for difference, the world is made subject to man. (5)

Elsewhere Adorno describes enlightenment epistemology as a philosophy of *identity*: the

objective world is – or can be made – identical with the subject's conceptions of and designs for

it (Adorno 1973, 146–48). This belief in the equivalence of all natural objects from the

perspective of the human subject finds expression in the methodological priority afforded to

mathematics, quantification, and formal logic and in the modern emergence of the principles of

self-preservation and utility-maximization (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4). For Horkheimer

and Adorno, enlightenment is a set of material exercises of power that gives birth to an idealist

epistemology wherein a knowing human subject rules over a known, objective world.

The capitalist mode of production extends this enlightenment philosophy of identity

across the entire social field. The commodity form reduces all qualitative differences between

objects into mere differences in price. Everything in the world becomes exchangeable with

everything else because everything is ultimately for-man: "bourgeois society is ruled by

equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For

the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is

illusion" (4). However, as Marx shows in the first volume of *Capital*, capitalist development

hinges decisively on extending this logic of identity even further through the commodification

and profitable exchange of *human* labor-power (Adorno 1973, 146). Enlightenment is thus not a

relationship to the world that humans achieve once and for all, but rather a social-historical

process with its own internal dynamism. "Enlightenment is totalitarian" because it constitutes an

insatiable demand by the human subject that everything submit to his calculation and control:

"For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility

must be viewed with suspicion. Once the movement is able to develop unhampered by external

oppression, there is no holding it back" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 3–4). Enlightenment

begins with human exercises of power over nature, and it culminates historically in the mass

objectification of human beings by themselves in capitalism.

Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that enlightenment betrays its own promise of securing

human freedom. By devoting itself single-mindedly to self-preservation and utility-

maximization, reason abjures its capacity for critical self-reflection and transformative thought

and functions to bind humans to their prevailing conditions of existence ever more tightly: "what

appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism,

is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand" (20). The

apparatuses of mass control developed in twentieth-century capitalist society exemplify these

deeply conservative, repressive tendencies of enlightenment. Whatever escapes, resists, or

simply appears to be outside the system of profit-based exchange must be incorporated,

disciplined, or eliminated: "Everything which is different, from the idea to criminality, is

exposed to the force of the collective" (21–22). Fascism reflects the result of carrying this logic

of identity to its natural conclusion. According to Adorno, Auschwitz marries enlightenment's

antipathy to the non-identical with its most technologically advanced systems of control and

destruction. "Genocide is the absolute integration," he writes. "Auschwitz confirmed the

philosopheme of pure identity as death" (Adorno 1973, 362). Horkheimer and Adorno find that

attempts to deliver humanity from the violence of nature by installing the knowing human

subject as sovereign culminates in the unleashing of even greater violence by humans against

themselves: "humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of

barbarism" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xiv). This is the dialectic of enlightenment.

It is crucial to note that Horkheimer and Adorno do not conceive of enlightenment as a

"motor" of history à la Hegelian idealism; rather, they trace the modern social order's historical

development *as* a process of enlightenment. As Fredric Jameson notes, for Adorno the category

of identity only becomes thinkable when a social system based on exchange-value has leveled

the differences between qualitatively distinct use-values (Jameson 1990, 23). Because categories

of thought are functions of material social conditions (Adorno 1973, 317), capitalism is not a

product of the enlightenment logic of identity; the logic of identity is itself a product of capitalist

historical development. Modern society obeys the logic that its own development has made

possible and discernible as such. *DoE* likewise must not be read – as it so often is – as offering a

free-standing philosophy of history. The speculative history sketched by Horkheimer and Adorno

instead reflects a targeted strike against the capitalist social order's conception of its own

historical development as natural, idyllic, and pre-ordained. As Susan Buck-Morss notes,

> to read [*DoE*] as a positive if gloomy statement of the essence of history is to miss the
> point. The book was a *critical negation* of that rationalist, idealist, progressive view of
> history in which bourgeois society had itself become "second nature." (Buck-Morss
> 1977, 61)

Horkheimer and Adorno, in short, understand their narrative about enlightenment as always

already a narrative about mid-twentieth century Western social life.

The stark and unyielding force of *DoE* corresponds to what its authors consider to be the

dreadful reality of that life. "The world is systematized horror," Adorno laments (Adorno 2005b,

113). "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" because literally every thought or action predicated on the dichotomy between knowing human subject and known objective world re-inscribes the violent and potentially fascistic logic of identity governing the social order as a whole. Adorno's 1951 text *Minima Moralia* illustrates just how thoroughly the enlightenment logic of identity has penetrated spheres of life conventionally thought to resist or escape its influence (2005b). One such sphere is the social order's various practices of laughter.

II. Adorno's Critique of Laughter

Adorno offers a two-pronged critique of laughter. First, laughter manufactured by the capitalist culture industry entrenches social power[1] by cruelly attacking sites of difference in such a way that becomes enjoyable second nature to subjects. Second, polemical laughter, or laughter directed against forms of social power, obeys this same violent logic by attacking its targets in such a way that assures subjects of their own political innocence.

<u>Laughter in the Culture Industry</u>

The culture industry essay from *DoE* features Adorno's most frequently discussed (though by no means most extensive) reflections on laughter. Here he and Horkheimer consider the Durkheimian thesis that the shattering of traditional social ties in modernity yields cultural chaos. They argue that this thesis "is refuted by daily experience. Culture today is infecting everything with sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94). Modern culture is homogenous and homogenizing because it has become an *industry*. What counts as "culture" in the mid-twentieth century capitalist social order are Hollywood films, television shows, radio broadcasts,

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[1] The following sections make frequent reference to "power" and "social power." Consistent with the above account of enlightenment, Adorno believes that subjects exercise "power" when they make nature or other humans into objects for their use or control. In modern capitalism, such exercises of power congeal into various relations of domination (e.g., capital over labor; monopoly over consumer; humans over nature) whereby the social order as a whole reproduces itself. I call these relations of domination "social power."

and print periodicals. Having ceded the autonomy it once enjoyed with respect to the economic

process, culture has subordinated itself to the capitalist imperatives of profit, efficiency, mass

production, and total administration (128).

Horkheimer and Adorno contend that the culture industry performs a continuous bait-

and-switch on its consumers that disciplines them to accede to their own domination by capital

(94). Radio programs, television shows, and blockbuster films (today we could add Youtube and

Netflix) promise subjects a pleasurable escape from the miseries of the daily work process even

as they impose the terms of existing social life on them ever more forcefully:

> Film denies its audience any dimension in which [subjects] might roam freely in
> imagination […]; thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality.
> […] The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple
> those faculties through their objective make up. They are so constructed that their
> adequate comprehension requires a quick, observant, knowledgable cast of mind but
> positively debars the spectator from thinking. (100)

Cultural products secure the power of capital by repeatedly diffusing the subject's

dissatisfactions in a way that leaves the social order responsible for them unchanged: "the culture

industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises" (111). The pleasures

provided by the culture industry are ephemeral and hollow (and, of course, always for profit),

and they systematically distract the subject from any thought of challenging the whole.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, subjects enforce their own social domination by

consuming cultural products.

Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of laughter begins about halfway through "The

Culture Industry." Consistent with the critique described above, they target the laughter

generated by newspaper comics, Hollywood cartoons, and stunt films as a distracting pseudo-

pleasure that only increases its subjects' subservience to social power (110–14). Miriam Hansen

notes that their focus on laughter constitutes a direct response to Walter Benjamin's arguments in

the second version of his famous "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

essay (Hansen 2012, 163–82). Here Benjamin contends that the collective laughter generated by

Disney films like *Mickey Mouse* can have emancipatory, even revolutionary, political effects by

diffusing the violent, fascistic energies that develop in audiences under late capitalism:

> If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have
> engendered in the masses at large – tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic
> character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization has created the
> possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of
> certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic
> delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective
> laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychoses. […] American
> slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious
> energies. (Benjamin 2002, 118)

For Benjamin, the collective laughter generated by Disney films can help forestall outbreaks of

mass violence. Hansen explains that "by activating individually based mass-psychotic tendencies

in the space of collective sensory experience and, above all, in the mode of play, the cinema

might prevent them from being acted out in reality" (Hansen 2012, 165). Benjamin believes that

the laughter manufactured by the culture industry is keyed toward anti-fascistic political ends.

Horkheimer and Adorno take issue with this assessment. In a 1936 letter to Benjamin,

Adorno expresses doubts about the therapeutic and subversive power he attributes to laughter:

"the laughter of a cinema audience […] is anything but salutary and revolutionary; it is full of the

worst bourgeois sadism instead" (Adorno 1999, 130). He and Horkheimer make this

disagreement with Benjamin a major theme in the culture industry essay, contending that the

collective laughter generated by a Disney film *intensifies* (rather than diffuses) the public's

violent, fascistic tendencies under capitalism. When an audience laughs at the comic mishaps of

a Mickey Mouse or a Donald Duck, they engage in an act of cruelty that embodies and re-

inscribes the social order's hostility toward non-conformity and non-instrumental activity:

> Cartoon and stunt films were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism. They
> allowed justice to be done to the animals and things electrified by their technology, by
> granting the mutilated beings a second life. Today they merely confirm the victory of
> technological reason over truth. […] The quantity of organized amusement is converted
> into the quality of organized cruelty. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110)

Adorno repeats this argument in *Minima Moralia* when he describes "the collective of laughers"

at newspaper comics as those "who have cruel things on their side" and the "laughing placard of

a toothpaste beauty" as "the grimace of torture" (Adorno 2005b, 141). The audience that laughs

at cartoon characters disciplines itself by publicly reaffirming that non-instrumental, "silly"

behavior will be met with a cruel and overwhelming collective response:

> To the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they
> hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all
> individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons
> and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can
> accustom themselves to theirs. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110)

Rejecting Benjamin's rosy assessment of the laughter manufactured by the culture industry,

Horkheimer and Adorno contend that such laughter constitutes a micro-performance of fascism

that re-inscribes the cruelty of the social order and primes its subjects for more extreme acts of

mass violence. The culture industry's broader political strategy of fusing individual pleasure with

social cruelty appears in microcosm in its manufacturing of laughter. Industrialized laughter

makes fascism fun, carefree, and second nature.

Before considering Adorno's critique of polemical laughter, we should take stock of just

how far we have departed from conventional philosophical and popular discourses around the

politics of laughter. As noted in the Introduction, modern philosophers from diverse traditions

conceive of laughter as an irreducibly spontaneous and disruptive experience that originates in

the human subject. Horkheimer and Adorno radically complicate this view by demonstrating that

laughter is often anything but spontaneous, disruptive, or centered in the subject. A great deal of

laughter is instead *manufactured* by a social order's apparatuses of control. While laughter

passes through individual human subjects, the latter are not the primary loci of laughter. Adorno

believes that treating laughter at a Disney film (for example) as beginning and ending in an

individual subject yields a woefully inadequate account of how this laughter functions politically.

Such an approach leads Benjamin to overstate laughter's emancipatory efficacy and to overlook

its operation as a mechanism of social control. Adorno shows that the political origins and effects

of laughter can only be understood in light of the conditions governing society as a whole. In

other words, we must grasp laughter not only as a subjective *experience*, but also as an

objectively conditioned *event*.

<u>Polemical Laughter</u>

Given Adorno's antipathy to the culture industry, one might expect that he looks more

favorably upon "polemical" practices of laughter that target institutions and mechanism of social

power. Surely Adorno supports laughing *at* capitalism, the culture industry, and fascism, right?

Adorno first raises the question of polemical laughter in a *Minima Moralia* aphorism titled

"Juvenal's error." Citing Juvenal's remark that "it is difficult not to write satire," Adorno asks

what role irony (particularly satire) can play in the modern social order (Adorno 2005b, 209).

Satire, he explains, works by exposing the distance between social reality and ideological

presentations of that reality:

> Irony convicts its object by presenting it as what it purports to be; and without passing judgment, as if leaving a blank for the observing subject, measures it against its being-in-itself. […] In this it presupposes the idea of the self-evident, originally of social resonance. He who has laughter on his side has no need of proof. (210)

Adorno argues that while modern society could certainly benefit from satiric criticism, its saturation by the imperatives of self-preservation and utility-maximization has transformed reality into its own justification such that the gap between reality and ideology has closed.

> The impossibility of satire today should not be blamed, as sentimentality is apt to do, on the relativism of values, the absence of binding norms. Rather, agreement itself, the formal *a priori* of irony, has given way to universal agreement of content. As such it presents the only fitting target for irony and at the same time pulls the ground from under its feet. Irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. […] There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail. (211)

For Adorno, the modern social order makes polemical laughter – laughter directed at forms of social power – both necessary and impossible.

Adorno investigates the nature of this impossibility in a 1958 essay on Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*. I examine this essay more closely in Section III, but for now I want to note simply how Adorno enlists Beckett to question the value of polemical laughter. He writes:

> the laughter [Beckett's play] arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh. This is what has become of humor now that it has become obsolete as an aesthetic medium and repulsive, without a canon for what should be laughed about, without a place of reconciliation from which one could laugh, and without anything harmless on the face of the earth that would allow itself to be laughed at. (Adorno 1991b, 257)

Building upon *Minima Moralia*'s claim about the impossibility of satire, Adorno contends that humor has become "obsolete" because the all-encompassing nature of the capitalist social order makes it impossible for the subject to occupy a "place of reconciliation" from which to laugh at it in a critical manner. An external standpoint from which to laugh at social irrationality is not

available to the modern subject because the latter is helplessly entangled with his object of

laughter. Laughter that presumes to originate from a privileged, external position is "repulsive"

because in attacking an object deemed to be socially anomalous or irrational, the subject

occupies the same self-sufficient position he did when enjoying laughter manufactured by the

culture industry. When Adorno argues that satire has become impossible and that humor is

obsolete, he does not mean that these genres cease to exist in modernity; rather, they no longer

perform their intended emancipatory function and, like laughter manufactured by the culture

industry, operate as ideological supports for the social order. Laughter that aims to resist social

power by re-inscribing the principle of the constitutive, self-sufficient subject ultimately re-

entrenches that power.

Adorno crystallizes his objections to polemical laughter in a 1967 essay, "Is Art

Lighthearted?". In this piece Adorno assesses the political value of comedies or parodies that

targets fascistic political assemblages. He writes: "Several years ago there was a debate about

whether fascism could be presented in comic or parodistic form without that constituting an

outrage against its victims" (Adorno 1992, 251). (Adorno here is almost certainly referring to

Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (Adorno 1974, 81).)

Adorno rejects the notion that laughter at fascism serves emancipatory political ends:

> By now the polemical form of humor has become questionable as well. […] One cannot
> laugh at [fascism]. […] Comedies about fascism would become accomplices of the silly
> mode of thinking that considered fascism beaten in advance because the strongest
> battalions in world history were against it. (Adorno 1992, 251–52)

Comedies about fascism disrespect its victims not because they violate some code of moral

decency, but because the laughter they generate presumes to originate from a position external to

the social order responsible for the emergence of fascism in the first place. Subjects falsely

believe they are laughing at something in which they are not implicated. By re-inscribing the

myth of subjective self-sufficiency, such laughter absolves the subject of responsibility for

resisting the fascistic energies that continue to circulate in society. Adorno explains how

> the historical forces that produced the horror [of fascism] derive from the inherent nature
> of the social structure. They are not superficial forces, and they are much too powerful for
> anyone to have the prerogative of treating them as though he had world history behind
> him and the Führers actually were the clowns whose nonsense their murderous talk came
> to resemble only afterwards. (252; see also 1974, 81; 1991a, 148)

Adorno believes that laughter directed at fascism obeys and thus entrenches the violent logic of

identity that governs the modern social order as a whole.

To sum up, despite important differences in mode of production and intentional structure,

both laughter manufactured by the culture industry and polemical laughter constitute micro-

performances of fascism within the modern capitalist social order. Laughter manufactured by the

culture industry owes its fascistic efficacy to how the pleasures it provides distract subjects from

their participation in society's mechanisms of domination and control. Meanwhile, the fascistic

efficacy of polemical laughter consists in how its targeting of sites of social irrationality distracts

subjects from their entanglement in that irrationality and from any thought of challenging the

social order as a whole. While laughter manufactured by the culture industry emerges from

society's mechanisms of control and polemical laughter takes aim at these very same

mechanisms, both modalities enact a cruelty that distracts subjects from the oppressive

conditions of the broader social order. They likewise reflect two sides of the same proto-fascistic

coin, where *fascism* is understood as a performance of social violence that enforces existing

conceptions of identity in such a way that conceals its own character as both (a) socially

determined and (b) violent.

III. Reconciled Laughter and Aesthetic Experience

This is not the end of the story when it comes to Adorno's views on the politics of

laughter, however. Adorno envisions an alternative, genuinely anti-fascistic practice of laughter

called "reconciled laughter." Instead of providing mere entertainment or a reassurance of one's

political innocence, reconciled laughter troubles the subject in such a way that makes it both

possible and necessary to imagine alternative forms of social organization.

<u>Reconciled Laughter</u>

In the culture industry essay Horkheimer and Adorno introduce a decisive distinction

between "wrong" and "reconciled" laughter. Wrong laughter, like that manufactured by the

culture industry or polemical laughter, embodies and entrenches social power. It succeeds at

doing so because it *convincingly parodies* a more "reconciled" social condition: "the collective

of those who laugh parodies humanity. […] Their harmony presents a caricature of solidarity.

What is infernal about wrong laughter is that it compellingly parodies what is best,

reconciliation" (112). While a full account of Adorno's idiosyncratic understanding of

"reconciliation" is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief excursus will suffice. Adorno rejects

the traditional Hegelian conception of reconciliation as a social *state* wherein the split between

subject and object has been overcome. This, he believes, is the fantasy of idealist philosophies of

identity, and it functions to suppress the object's innumerable and inexhaustible differences with

the subject: "It is precisely the insatiable identity principle that perpetuates antagonism by

suppressing contradiction. What tolerates nothing that is not like itself thwarts the reconcilement

for which it mistakes itself" (Adorno 1973, 142–43). Adorno advances an alternative vision of

reconciliation as a *fleeting moment* wherein an object becomes radically non-identical to the

subject. He writes that "reconcilement would release the non-identical, would rid it of coercion

[…]. Reconcilement would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is

anathema to subjective reason" (Adorno 1973, 6; see also 2005c, 247; Feola 2014). While a

relationship of non-identity might seem to constitute the very antithesis of "reconciliation,"

Adorno believes that the term is appropriate because it is only under such conditions that both

subject and object are freed from the intrinsically violent logic of identity. Reconciliation, in

other words, *abolishes the hierarchy* between subject and object and allows them to confront one

another as equals (181). Reconciliation as non-identity necessarily takes the form of a fleeting

moment because any permanent or sustained experience of the non-identical risks becoming

identical to itself. "The idea of reconcilement forbids the positive positing of reconcilement as a

concept," Adorno writes (145).

      Horkheimer and Adorno contend that "wrong laughter" succeeds at entrenching social

power because it compellingly parodies such an experience of reconciliation. Consumers are

drawn to Disney films and political cartoons because they believe they are escaping or opposing

social power when they laugh at them. Crucially, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that when

wrong laughter parodies reconciliation in this way, it parodies an achievement that *laughter itself*

actually makes possible. They identify "reconciled laughter" as an experience that provides a

fleeting moment of reconciliation: "Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from

power; wrong laughter copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire

it" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). In other words, wrong laughter succeeds in entrenching

social power only because subjects have a passing familiarity with laughter's ability to actually

deliver reconciliation. The political efficacy of wrong laughter makes reference to and depends

on the possibility of a "reconciled laughter" that resists such power.

The concept of reconciled laughter transforms how we understand Adorno's critique of

laughter. Contrary to what a cursory reading of "The Culture Industry" or *Minima Moralia* might

suggest, Adorno does not simply reject Benjamin's claim that collective laughter serves

emancipatory political ends. His critique of "wrong" laughter in fact *requires* the possibility of a

"reconciling" laughter that resists forms of social power. Earlier in *DoE* Horkheimer and Adorno

describe just how tightly bound these contradictory political valences of laughter are:

> If laughter [throughout class history] has been a sign of violence, an outbreak of blind,
> obdurate nature, it nevertheless contains its opposite element, in that through laughter
> blind nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence.
> […] Laughter is in league with the guilt of subjectivity, but in the suspension of law
> which it announces it also points beyond that complicity. It promises a passage to the
> homeland. (60)

Adorno thus *agrees* with Benjamin about the emancipatory potential of laughter, but he believes

that Benjamin takes a too one-sided (i.e., non-dialectical) view of the politics of laughter under

modern social conditions.[2] Grasping how laughter functions in the modern social order requires

distinguishing carefully between its opposed political tendencies. Making sense of reconciled

laughter in particular requires understanding how laughter can challenge the logic of constitutive

subjectivity. For this, we must turn to Adorno's aesthetic philosophy.

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[2] Adorno in fact overstates the extent to which Benjamin ignores the political dangers associated with laughter
manufactured by the culture industry. In a footnote to the "Work of Art" essay quoted above, Benjamin writes that "a
comprehensive analysis of these films should not overlook their double meaning. It should start from the ambiguity
of situations which have both a comic and a horrifying effect. […] What is revealed in recent Disney films was
latent in some of the earlier ones: the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of
existence" (Benjamin 2002, 130n30).

The Double Character of Art

The central argument of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is that art provides the sole hope for

reconciliation in modern society. In a world where "wrong life cannot be lived rightly," art

possesses the unique ability to achieve autonomy in such a way that makes it possible to imagine

alternative forms of social organization. Adorno writes: "artworks detach themselves from the

empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this

other world too were an autonomous reality. Thus, however tragic they appear, artworks tend a

priori toward affirmation" (Adorno 1997, 1). Artworks tend toward "affirmation" (i.e.,

reconciliation) because their existence is indifferent to the subject and his interests. Through this

non-identity with the terms governing social life (i.e., art's "uselessness"), art exerts a "counter-

pressure to the force exerted by the *body social*" and keeps alive the possibility of a more

reconciled mode of social life (33).

The autonomy that art achieves with respect to society is not the individual freedom or

escape imagined by liberal, enlightenment philosophies. As was the case with "reconciliation,"

Adorno submits the dominant liberal conception of "autonomy" to a radical reinterpretation. Art,

he explains, has a "double character": although it is non-identical to society, it always remains a

"social fact" (1, 5). That is, art is produced by subjects in a determinate historical situation (43),

employs the socially available materials and techniques of production (34), takes existing social

content for its thematic material (225), and generally offers itself for sale in the marketplace

(236). According to Adorno, "art is related to its other [i.e., society] as is a magnet to a field of

iron fillings. Not only art's elements, but their constellation as well, that which is specifically

aesthetic and to which its spirit is usually chalked up, refer back to its other" (7). Consequently,

the autonomy that art achieves with respect to the social order is thoroughly mediated by that

order: "art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as

autonomous art" (225; see also Zuidervaart 1991, 88).

Adorno insists that this constitutively impure quality of art's autonomy is not cause for

despair, but is rather the source of its distinctive political efficacy (Adorno 1974, 89). Were art to

achieve absolute (i.e., liberal) autonomy from the social order, it would no longer be able to

critically engage that order. Like the polemical forms of laughter discussed above, art that

imagines itself as having completely escaped the terms of social life leaves the latter unchanged

and perhaps even strengthened. Conversely, were art to shed its claim to autonomy, it would

devolve into the mere entertainment and pleasure-peddling of the culture industry:

> if art had absolutely nothing to do with logicality and causality, it would forfeit any
> relation to its other and would be an a priori empty activity; if art took them literally, it
> would succumb to the spell; only by its double character, which provokes permanent
> conflict, does art succeed at escaping the spell by even the slightest degree. (Adorno
> 1997, 138)

From Adorno's perspective, because it emerges out of a critical engagement with social reality,

the "impure" autonomy proper to art is paradoxically *more* autonomous than that imagined by

liberal, enlightenment philosophies.

But how does art actually achieve this form of autonomy? That is, how does art transcend

society without sacrificing its connection to it? Adorno contends that an artwork becomes

autonomous when its own objectivity reflects, embodies, and sublimates the contradictions

coursing through the social order as a whole. "Because the spell of external reality over its

subjects and their reactions has become absolute," Adorno writes, "the artwork can only oppose

this spell by assimilating itself to it" (31). An autonomous artwork pushes its own social features

(e.g., its materiality, techniques of production, themes) to their limits such that they become non-identical to themselves. Adorno's favorite example of this is Schoenberg's compositions which press the prevailing system of tonality to its extreme such that it gives rise to the new musical form of atonality (Adorno 2002b, 399). Adorno claims that "by reenacting the spell of reality, by sublimating it as an image, art at the same time liberates itself from it; sublimation and freedom mutually accord" (Adorno 1997, 130; see also 1974). For Adorno, art achieves autonomy from the social order by immanently overcoming its own social features. In art, a piece of objective social reality becomes otherwise to itself.

The subject's experience of an artwork – what Adorno calls "aesthetic experience" – is consequently an experience of the non-identical. By undermining the enlightenment principle that the objective world is or can be made identical to the subject's concepts and interests, art *challenges* the subject. Adorno writes: "aesthetic experience […] is a countermovement to the subject. It demands something on the order of the self-denial of the observer, his capacity to address or recognize what aesthetic objects themselves enunciate and what they conceal" (Adorno 1997, 346). As an encounter with objective non-identity, aesthetic experience makes the subject non-identical to his own self-conception as an autonomous, world-constituting entity. Art, in other words, undoes the subject by making him aware of the objectivity within himself; it reveals him to be a product (rather than the origin) of a larger social and historical process. "The experience of art," Adorno explains, "is the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness" (244–45). "Aesthetic experience […] breaks through the spell of obstinate self-preservation; it is the model of a stage of consciousness in which the I no longer has its happiness in its interests, or, ultimately, in its reproduction" (346). By opening the subject up to a

non-identitarian (and thus non-coercive) relation with the objective world, aesthetic experience

provides a fleeting moment of social reconciliation.

Adorno describes aesthetic experience as a "shock" to the subject: "the shock aroused by

important works […] is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the

work; it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing" (244). Aesthetic

experience occurs in sudden, momentary shocks (or "shudder[s]" (245–46)) because an

anticipated or sustained experience of the non-identical is impossible (lest the non-identical

become identical to itself). Adorno insists that aesthetic experience is not a *feeling* or *affect*

because it calls into question the very subject in whom feelings and affects arise (164). If, as

Adorno contends, *spirit* is "that through which artworks, by becoming appearance, are more than

they are" (86), then aesthetic experience is best understood as a spiritual event through which the

subject becomes otherwise to herself.

Laughter as Aesthetic Experience

Adorno's essays on lighthearted art, Beckett, and Chaplin demonstrate how laughter can

constitute just this kind of momentary, subject-undoing, spiritual aesthetic experience/event that

resists the fascistic energies coursing through the modern social order. In "Is Art Lighthearted?"

Adorno considers Friedrich Schiller's thesis that art provides a "lighthearted" escape from the

miseries of "serious" life (Adorno 1992, 247). Adorno rejects this argument as prefiguring the

culture industry's view of art as entertainment and consolation: "For all the noblesse of his

gesture, Schiller secretly anticipates the situation under the culture industry in which art is

prescribed to tired businesspeople as a shot in the arm" (248). Adorno nevertheless

acknowledges a grain of truth to Schiller's thesis. While individual artworks are not lighthearted

(lest they devolve into mere entertainment), art *as such* features a lighthearted quality: "The

thesis of art's lightheartedness is to be taken in a very precise way. It holds for art as a whole, not

for individual works. […] A priori, prior to its works, art is a critique of the brute seriousness that

reality imposes upon human beings" (248). Art is lighthearted – even playful (Adorno 1997, 39)

– because it refuses to take existing social reality *too* seriously: "That is what is lighthearted in it;

as a change in the existing mode of consciousness, that is also, to be sure, its

seriousness" (Adorno 1992, 248). Previewing his claim about the double character of art, Adorno

explains that an artwork's political efficacy consists in how it embodies a dialectical tension

between serious life and lighthearted escape. Art is serious because it emerges from, bears the

traces of, and critically engages the social order, but it is lighthearted in its resistance to the terms

governing that order. Adorno concludes that "as something that has escaped from reality and is

nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness. It is

this tension that constitutes art" (249).

Adorno leverages this conception of art to restate the critique of laughter he and

Horkheimer leveled in the culture industry essay. He argues that laughter that functions solely as

a lighthearted diversion from the oppressive conditions of the social order inevitably becomes an

ally of that order: "laughter, once the image of humanness, becomes a regression to

inhumanity" (251). The distinction between wrong and reconciled laughter reappears here as a

distinction between laughter that contributes to human regression and laughter that enacts an

"image of humanness." However, Adorno says more about the latter type of laughter than he did

in "The Culture Industry." Laughter that is an "image of humanness" maintains a dialectical

tension between lighthearted and serious qualities. It is lighthearted in that it pokes fun at

existing social reality, but it is serious in how it acknowledges its embeddedness in that reality

and calls its own conditions of existence into question: "the moment of lightheartedness or

humor is not simply expelled from [artworks] in the course of history. It survives in their self-

critique, as humor about humor" (252). Reconciled laughter, in other words, laughs at itself.

Adorno reiterates this point by invoking Beckett: "humor is salvaged in Beckett's plays because

they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair"

(253). Unlike practices of laughter that distance the subject from his object, the "seriousness" of

reconciled laughter implicates and in turn undermines the subject who laughs. Reconciled

laughter embodies the serious/lighthearted dialectic that Adorno identifies as essential to art and

aesthetic experience.

Adorno's work on Beckett further demonstrates the centrality of laughter to his account

of aesthetic experience. Adorno held Beckett in very high esteem (he intended to dedicate

Aesthetic Theory to Beckett (Adorno and Tiedemann 1997, 366)), and he particularly admired

Beckett's 1957 play *Endgame* (Zuidervaart 1991, 150–77). *Endgame* features a series of dark,

absurd dialogues and interactions between a wheelchair-ridden blind man, his restless servant,

and the former's elderly parents who live in garbage cans. The play is set in a barren,

depopulated world where all the characters are waiting to die (Beckett 1978). Adorno interprets

Endgame as depicting the "general disaster" in which the enlightenment logic of identity

culminates historically (Adorno 1991b, 266). Having completely used up and destroyed the

natural world, humans descend into a state of complete meaninglessness and alienation:

> The Beckettian situations of which his drama is composed are the photographic negative
> of a reality referred to meaning. They have as their model the situations of empirical
> existence, situations which, once isolated and deprived of their instrumental and

> psychological context through the loss of personal unity, spontaneously assume a specific and compelling expression – that of horror. (253)

Adorno argues that Beckett's absurdism reveals the social order's non-identity with its own claim to rationality. By depicting "the absurdity into which mere existence is transformed when it is absorbed into naked self-identity," *Endgame* "renders reality unreal with a vengeance" (246; 1997, 31). This artistic sublimation of social reality makes it possible – even imperative – to imagine alternative forms of social organization. Adorno concludes that "the immanent contradiction of the absurd, the nonsense in which reason terminates, opens up the emphatic possibility of something true that cannot even be conceived of anymore. It undermines the absolute claim of the status quo" (Adorno 1991b, 273). Beckett's *Endgame* turns existing social reality against itself, and Adorno interprets the play as a prime example of autonomous art.

Laughter is the aesthetic experience that Adorno associates with *Endgame*. Beckett's "schizoid situations are comical," Adorno writes, "but the laughter it arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh" (257). The claim that *Endgame* generates laughter that *suffocates* the subject recalls Adorno's account of aesthetic experience as a "shock" that renders the subject non-identical to himself. The subject literally cannot survive the laughter generated by Beckett's play because it calls into question his status as an entity at home in a world identical to his own conception of it. Strung between seriousness and lightheartedness, such laughter undoes the subject and prompts him to imagine an alternative mode of social life: "The category of the tragic surrenders to laughter, just as his plays cut off all humor that accepts the status quo. They bear witness to a state of consciousness that no longer admits the alternative of seriousness and

lightheartedness" (Adorno 1992, 252). Beckett's work gives rise to a dark, self-reflexive laughter

that delivers a fleeting moment of reconciliation by undermining the subject who laughs.

Adorno's reflections on clowns and clowning provide perhaps the strongest indication of

the importance he attributes to laughter as an aesthetic experience. According to Adorno, clown

performances recall an archaic rationality premised on close, affective, mimetic relations distinct

from the distant, detached, instrumental rationality that predominates in modern society. By

playfully imitating or parodying elements of the social order, clowning troubles the self-evidence

of modern reason. Clowns embody an "anarchistic and archaic immediacy [that] cannot be

adapted to the reified bourgeois life, and becomes ridiculous before it – fragmentary, but at the

same time allowing it to appear ridiculous" (Adorno 2002a, 489). Clown performances

exemplify the double character of art: by eschewing enlightenment rationality in favor of

mimesis and parody, clowns strive for autonomy with respect to society, but by appearing in and

interacting with elements of modern social life, they remain a social fact. Indeed, Adorno

believes that *all* art features a clownish quality. He identifies "that element of the ridiculous and

clownish that even the most significant works bear and that, unconcealed, is inextricable from

their significance" (Adorno 1997, 119). Adorno even suggests that philosophy itself obeys a

logic of clowning. Philosophy's task, he argues, is to grasp elements of social reality in such an

imaginative way that offers a glimpse of a more reconciled mode of human life:

> Philosophy contains a playful element which the traditional view of it as a science would
> like to exorcise. […] The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of
> his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the
> point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can
> give him hope for what is denied him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then
> again it is not all that serious. (Adorno 1973, 14)

Adorno understands the logic of clowning – obeyed by art and philosophy in general – as key to

resisting the fascistic tendencies of the modern social order.

It is likewise not surprising that Adorno admires his era's most famous clown-like actor,

Charlie Chaplin. In a short but crucial 1964 essay, "In Malibu," Adorno recalls meeting Chaplin

at a California dinner party during his exile in the United States (Adorno 1996; Habermas 1983,

99). Adorno writes that Chaplin struck him as embodying two opposed tendencies. On the one

hand, Chaplin views the world as mere material for parody, and his insatiable will to

performance evokes the violence of enlightenment reason. Chaplin's

> powerful, explosive, and quick-witted agility recalls a predator ready to pounce. […]
> There is something about the empirical Chaplin that suggests not that he is the victim but
> rather, menacingly, that he would seek victims, pounce on them, tear them apart. (Adorno
> 1996, 59–60)

On the other hand, Chaplin's performances playfully subvert this violence by embodying a

mimetic rationality whereby the subject becomes otherwise to himself. Adorno notes that "it is as

though he, using mimetic behavior, caused purposeful, grown-up life to recede, and indeed the

principle of reason itself, thereby placating it" (60). Adorno argues that Chaplin's aesthetic

genius consists in how he accommodates these two opposed tendencies without resolving their

antinomy. Chaplin is "a vegetarian Bengal tiger" who "projects upon the environment his own

violence and dominating instinct, and through this projection of his own culpability produces that

innocence which endows him with more power than all power possesses" (59–60). Rather than

offering hollow entertainment *or* detached polemical indictments,[3] Chaplin's clownish

performances turn the violence of the social order against itself.

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[3] Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator* (which concludes with Chaplin pleading with the audience to resist
authoritarianism) is the obvious exception here, and Adorno takes issue with this turn in Chaplin's style (Adorno
1974, 81).

Adorno concludes by recalling how Chaplin parodied Adorno himself at the dinner party. At one point during the evening, Adorno absent-mindedly extended his hand to say goodbye to an actor who had lost his hand during the war. Upon grasping the actor's iron prosthetic, Adorno was startled and "sensed immediately that I could not reveal my shock to the injured man at any price. In a split second I transformed my frightened expression into an obliging grimace that must have been far ghastlier" (59). Chaplin, of course, witnessed the entire encounter, and before long he was mimicking Adorno's reaction in front of the entire crowd, generating great laughter. One of Hollywood's biggest stars parodying one of the world's most melancholic philosophers – who just happened to be the film industry's most virulent intellectual critic – was surely a sight not to be missed!

By parodying Adorno, Chaplin reveals the philosopher – exactly the kind of character who exemplifies life at its most serious, sober, and high-brow – to be just as ridiculous a figure as anyone else. Adorno's description of the laughter generated by Chaplin's performance is decisive for grasping his conception of reconciled laughter. Adorno writes: "all the laughter he brings about is so near to cruelty; solely in such proximity to cruelty does it find its legitimation and its element of the salvational" (60–61). The salvational, reconciling power of this laughter – its capacity to undo the self-identical subject and give rise to a fleeting moment of reconciliation – depends paradoxically on its "proximity" to its opposed political tendency: cruelty. Those who laugh at Chaplin's parody are certainly cruel towards Adorno, but by revealing the absurdity of the larger social order, Chaplin's performance turns this cruelty against the subjects who laugh. According to Adorno, laughter resists the social order only when it embodies, sublimates, and displaces the cruelty of that order. Without this violent, "suffocating" element, laughter lacks the

seriousness necessary to avoid lapsing into mere entertainment. As he notes in *Aesthetic Theory*,

"only by the strength of its deadliness do artworks participate in reconciliation" (Adorno 1997,

134). For Adorno, laughter contributes to social reconciliation only when it bears traces of the

social order's violence within itself.

In sum, Adorno's aesthetic philosophy and essays on lighthearted art, Beckett, and

Chaplin reveal the possibility of a genuinely anti-fascistic, emancipatory laughter. By turning the

violence of the social order against the subject who laughs, reconciled laughter undermines the

logic of constitutive subjectivity at the root of that violence. Rendering the subject non-identical

to itself in this way prompts the imagination of new, less oppressive forms of social organization.

VI. *Get Out* and a Critical Theory of Laughter

This extended examination of Adorno's views on laughter may appear to have carried us

quite a distance from *Get Out* and the controversial laughter it has generated. However, Adorno's

sensitivity to how the laughter produced by popular culture both binds subjects to and frees them

from social power makes his account particularly well-suited for grasping the relationship

between *Get Out*, its different audiences, and the prevailing structure of social domination (white

supremacy). An engagement between Adorno and *Get Out* consequently helps elucidate the

racial politics of laughing at the film as well as the contours of a broader Adorno-inspired critical

theory of laughter.

We can begin with Peele's claim that *Get Out* is "the kind of movie that black people can

laugh at, but white people, not so much" (Desta 2017). Considered in Adorno's terms, this means

that the laughter of white audiences is a form of "wrong" laughter, or laughter that participates in

and strengthens social power (in this case, the institutions and mechanisms of American white

supremacy). *New Yorker* critic Rich Benjamin helpfully describes how *Get Out* performs the

"death of white racial innocence," or the collapse of the rhetorical posture of shocked disbelief

adopted by white liberals when confronted with evidence of racism in American society

(Benjamin 2017). The character of Rose exposes white racial innocence to be a ruse that

functions to insulate white supremacy from political efforts to identify and dismantle it.

Benjamin writes:

> What a juicy moment when Rose, on the phone with Chris's black friend [Rod], realizes
> that the jig is up; her caper is about to be exposed. Rose drops her sweet face and hardens
> it into a stare. Her stony eyes reveal her about-face from liberal ingénue to calculating
> racial predator. […] Her family's bloody antics, like this country's recent racial politics,
> had careened to that moment when everybody knows what's what, and all bets are off.
> (Benjamin 2017)

Tari Ngangura contends that white audiences use laughter to secure their sense of racial

innocence against this challenge posed by the film. By laughing along with the Armitages'

scheme, white audiences seek to redraw the lines of racial innocence that divide "good" (i.e.,

non-racist) whites from "bad" (racist) whites (Ngangura 2017). "The Armitages are obviously

bad, racist people," white audiences seem to be saying, "and we can laugh at Chris's travails

because we're *good* white people who would *never* do anything like that." The laughter of white

audiences signals and performatively re-inscribes their own distance from the racism depicted by

the film. Ngangura argues that this reaction reflects a fundamental, yet utterly predictable failure

by whites to grasp how the film challenges their place within the racialized social order: "The

white liberals I saw knee slapping themselves into hysterical oblivion clearly missed the mark

and seemingly saw the film as only a comedy and not a commentary of their actual faults…You

are Rose. All of you" (Ngangura 2017).

From this perspective, white laughter at *Get Out* reflects a micro-performance of white supremacy that fuses the logics of polemical laughter and laughter manufactured by the culture industry identified by Adorno. It identifies a target (the Armitages) as the source of racial wrongdoing in such a way that secures the subject's own political innocence and distracts her from the ways she participates in and benefits from white supremacy. Arising within the context of a Hollywood film, this self-distracting laughter transforms the horrors that befall Chris and the Armitages' other victims into mere material for entertainment. By distracting subjects from both their own cruelty and that of the racialized social order, white laughter at *Get Out* primes one for future involvement in and/or indifference toward more extreme acts of racial violence.

Meanwhile, we can understand the laughter of black audiences at the film as a form of reconciled laughter. Just like Beckett's *Endgame*, Peele's *Get Out* depicts existing social reality in a horrific form that exposes its absurdity. Tinged with horror – the horror of white supremacy – black laughter at *Get Out* troubles the laughing subject's position within the racialized social order. As Rich Benjamin notes, "That moment of understanding, the very instance when whites acknowledge the blunt truths that make their innocence no longer cute, let alone plausible, is what delivers profound horror – or sidesplitting laughs" (Benjamin 2017). Ngangura explains that by depicting white supremacy in the horrific form it actually assumes in the everyday lives of black subjects, the film renders that reality laughable: "I'm allowed to laugh during *Get Out*, because the awkward situations Chris had to extricate himself from are regular scenarios in my everyday life. Incredulous laughter is what makes them bearable" (Ngangura 2017). Viewing *Get Out* is a liberating event for black audiences because the film affirms the validity of their experiences in a social order that sustains itself in no small part by denying the reality of those

experiences. Laughing at the film disrupts and transforms how black subjects conceive of their place within a social world governed by the mechanisms and institutions of white supremacy. In Adornian terms, it renders the black subject non-identical to the non-identical status he or she occupies in a white supremacist social order. This non-non-identity is not a consolidation of the terms of identity under white supremacy, but rather their displacement. The laughter generated by *Get Out* yields a rare glimpse of an alternative, non-racialized mode of social organization.

But are Peele's rules for laughter sufficient? That is, is it possible for white audiences to laugh at *Get Out* in a "reconciled" way? And can black audiences laugh at the film in a "wrong" way? More generally, is the political valence of laughter (i.e., its capacity to entrench or resist social power) determined simply by the laughing subject's position within a given structure of domination (here, white supremacy)? It is on these questions that Adorno's approach proves particularly fruitful. As described earlier, Adorno demonstrates that laughter that participates in and entrenches forms of social power (wrong laughter) necessarily contains within itself possibilities for emancipation. If wrong laughter did not make reference to its reconciling capacity in this way, it would sacrifice its oppressive efficacy as subjects would no longer believe it provides an escape from power. Conversely, laughter that actually resists social power (reconciled laughter) always emerges out of and bears traces of that power's violence. If reconciled laughter were not contaminated by serious life in this way, it would sacrifice its critical relation to society and risk becoming an ideological support for it. Adorno shows that in a fractured social order, experiences/events of laughter are dialectically complex and contain their opposed political tendency within themselves.

The wrong laughter enjoyed by many white audiences of *Get Out* likewise contains the

seeds of a reconciled laughter that would undermine white supremacy. Indeed, white laughter at

Get Out is so unnerving precisely because it stems from an otherwise noble opposition to racism

("we can laugh because this film's plot is so obviously racist that it could never – and should

never – actually occur") that has been (mis-)deployed to secure the subject's own racial

innocence. A reconciled white laughter would instead spring from a horror-tinged recognition

among white subjects that they too are Rose, Dean, Missy, and even Jeremy, Rose's younger

brother who fetishizes Chris's body.[4] This laughter would motivate a reckoning with their

participation in and benefiting from the racial terror depicted by the film and with white

supremacy as a broader system of domination. However, as Adorno's treatment of Chaplin

suggests, because reconciled laughter always emerges out of and bears the traces of social power,

it is never politically pure. White laughter at *Get Out* that rests content with its own

"enlightened" anti-racism or enjoys itself a bit too much thus risks backsliding into a wrong

laughter complicit with white supremacy.

Meanwhile, black laughter at *Get Out* also risks devolving into a form of wrong laughter.

Wrong black laughter would enjoy the film's depiction of white terror as a merely entertaining

registering of an essentially un-transformable social reality. In this way, it would resonate with

the cynical, dismissive guffaws enjoyed by Detective Latoya, the middle-aged black

policewoman who invites her co-workers to laugh along at Rod's attempt to file a missing person

report for Chris, whom he speculates (not all that inaccurately, it turns out) is a victim of "this

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[4] Along these lines, Bradley Whitford, the actor who plays Dean Armitage, acknowledges how the laughter produced by his character challenged his own white liberalism: "Dean was a delicious opportunity for self-parody. I mean, I say lines like, 'I would have voted for Obama for a third term.' In my defense, I say them to white people as often as I say them to African-Americans. I didn't realize how much of a laugh line that was" (Yuan and Harris 2018).

family [that] is abducting black people and brainwashing them to work for them as sex slaves

and shit" (Peele 2017). Such wrong black laughter would reflect a celebration of one's own

relative or transient privileges (e.g., working in law enforcement or enjoying a movie) amidst

wider social suffering. Wrong black laughter, despite its "origin" in the black subject, functions

politically to support white supremacy's silencing of black trauma.

The case of *Get Out* demonstrates how the theoretical practice that emerges in Adorno's

reflections on laughter can illuminate the politics of laughter in the contemporary social order.

An Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter engages concrete experiences/events of laughter

as dialectically complex sites of both political danger *and* opportunity. It differentiates between

"wrong" laughter that participates in and entrenches social power (e.g., white laughter at *Get*

Out) and "reconciled" laughter that prompts the imagination of new modes of social organization

(e.g., black laughter at the film). But rather than divvying up experiences/events of laughter into

discrete categories (wrong laughter on one hand; reconciled laughter on the other), such a critical

theory calls attention to the emancipatory possibilities upon which wrong laughter necessarily

relies (e.g., the incipient anti-racism in white laughter at *Get Out*) *and* the violence in which

reconciled laughter necessarily participates (e.g., the risk of resigned cynicism posed by black

laughter at the film). In short, an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter understands the

intensely dialectical quality of laughter as embodying, expressing, and offering a means for

overcoming the political contradictions of late modern society.

Crucially, this critical theory of laughter does not amount to a "theory of critical laughter"

(Coulson 2007) – that is, a theory that promotes a particular type or style of laughter (e.g.,

"reconciled" or "critical" laughter) as capable of challenging an oppressive social order. Adorno

believes that such an approach inevitably fails to contribute to social reconciliation because it sketches in advance what can only emerge within the context of a concrete political situation (i.e., an experience/event of the non-identical) (Adorno 2005a, 277–78; 2005d, 292–93). Following the dictum that "we are not to philosophize above concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things" (Adorno 1973, 33), Adorno models a theoretical practice that grasps laughter as an experience/event wherein the social order both reproduces and becomes otherwise to itself. The controversy over the laughter produced by *Get Out* provides an occasion for seeing what this approach looks like at work. Rather than offering a necessarily illusory "theory of critical laughter," an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter intervenes in the social order by making the political dangers and opportunities posed by laughter thinkable and urgent. In doing so, it helps make possible, however obliquely and fleetingly, a more reconciled mode of social life.

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