

MA Thesis

Humor and Contemporary Dance Performance: The case of La Ribot

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MA Contemporary Theatre and Dance Studies

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Chapter 1: General Introduction

- *Is frivolity underestimated?*

- *Maybe... But who cares?*¹

Konstantinos Tzoumas

I. Motivation – Research Question

Most books and essays about humor begin with a statement about the fact that it is a subject that has not received the attention it deserves; this thesis will not be an exception, since one of my first observations was a lack of interest about the use and function of humor in dance performances, as well as a limited or underrated use of humor in contemporary dance. I always had a curiosity towards the nature of humor as an enigmatic aspect of life and very often while watching dance performances I posed questions to myself about the different forms of humor and the elements which specifically constitute humor in performance.

While reflecting on which artist I wanted to focus my interest towards humor, the first name that came to my mind was that of La Ribot; some years ago, I had seen *Gustavia* at Kalamata Dance Festival and it was the first time I realized that I am intrigued by the humorous aspect of a contemporary dance performance. This specific performance triggered many thoughts in me, thoughts about the “why” and the “how”

¹ «Κωνσταντίνος Τζούμας: “Ζούμε την εκδίκηση της αγαρμποσύνης σ’ όλη της την κουρελαρία.”»
Interviewed by Pavlina Exadactylou, in the newspaper *Lifo*, 20.3.2012, www.lifo.gr.

of using humor in performing arts, the paradox of humor, as well as a certainty that it can be serious and non-serious at the same time; also, questions regarding the mechanisms that lie beneath it. Furthermore, I started thinking about what might be the role of the body when used in a humorous way, what makes a body funny and how the image of the body changes when a performer uses verbal humor.

Apart from *Gustavia*, in this essay I am going to analyze *Laughing Hole* and five pieces from *Distinguidas*. The major characteristic of these works is humor; it seems like these performances are structured according to a dramaturgy of humor, performances that use techniques that have a humorous effect and that their choreography is similar to that of a joke. I will deal with the use of jokes in the performances, comparing the structure of a joke to the structure of the specific performances, mainly in terms of economy and displacement; how humor functions in the performance and specifically, how is it constructed in La Ribot's performances and how it can act as a metaphor for something else, a way to say the truth in a covert way.

My hypothesis is that the dramaturgical axis of these performances is humor and my analysis will be based on Bergson's automatism and Freud's construction of joke; more specifically, I will support that the five miniature pieces chosen from *Distinguidas* are, according to Freud, structured like jokes, based mainly on condensation with modification. In *Gustavia* humor comes from the creation of a comic character, whose main characteristic is a mechanic movement along with the use of speech, whereas in *Laughing Hole*, the automatism comes from the action of the laughter itself, in combination with a word-play based on repetition. Furthermore, I will refer to characteristics of jokes as defined by Freud, characteristics which apply

to the construction of all three performances, as well as when speech -both oral and written- is used. Therefore, humor is produced as a result of the combination of all these elements, the specific use of the body, the timing of the performance and the playful use of language.

II. Methodology – Structure of the thesis

In the first chapter of the thesis, I outline my aims and my methodology and I briefly present the work of Maria La Ribot and position her in the European dance scene. Afterwards, I suggest a classification of the several notions around humor, defining the notions of humor and comic and their various forms, as well as referring briefly to the theories of humor as a link to the following chapter.

The second chapter is an account of the two theoretical perspectives on humor I am going to use, the theory of Bergson and that of Freud, explaining their relevance to my research. Both Bergson and Freud have proved that humor has mechanisms: repetition, displacement, absurdity, grotesque -along with other elements- are common humor techniques used in these performances.

The third chapter consists of a detailed analysis of the performances, focusing on the comical elements, identifying the mechanisms and interpreting them according to the aforementioned theories. The starting point will be the specific procedures used in these performances, the characteristics of the structure of the performances that specifically lead humor to be the dramaturgical axis of the performance. In other words, my aim is to show that everything in the performance weaves around humor and joke mechanisms. In the last chapter I will present my conclusions; summing up

my findings and attempting an interpretation about what they aim at - in other words, why humor is used and not another means of expression.

III. Introduction to the work of Maria La Ribot

Maria Ribot (as known as La Ribot) is a dancer, choreographer and visual artist who is considered to be an important representative of contemporary dance in Europe - she emerged as one of the leading artists in Spain in the mid-80s. In her works, she combines video, performance and live art. In general, her work is characterized by the use of humor and eccentricity and is often characterized as body-burlesque.²

Adrian Heathfield writes about the influence of dance theater in the work of contemporary choreographers who are representatives of the new minimalist dance movement and uses La Ribot as an example: “In the hyper-connective context of contemporary culture, cross-art-form practice, including the work of movement artists, is now much more promiscuous, ambitious, intensive and eclectic in its affiliations and borrowings. La Ribot’s oeuvre quietly exemplifies something of this openness, whilst focusing its extension towards traditions of performance art within a visual art frame. The work draws on the aesthetics of conceptual and minimalist art, emphasizes action in “real” space and time, and is often located within galleries and complemented by aspects of installation.”³

Most of her works are solo performances in but the last few years she has also collaborates with other performers. Concerning the works I will analyze, only

² www.laribot.com

³ Adrian Heathfield, “After the fall”, in *Contemporary Theatres in Europe – A Critical Companion*, ed. by Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout, London and New York: Routledge. 2006, p. 194.

Distinguidas are solo pieces; *Gustavia* is a collaboration between La Ribot and Mathilde Monnier, while *Laughing Hole* is performed by La Ribot, Marie-Caroline Hominal and Delphine Rosay.

La Ribot is not the only representative of using humor in contemporary dance performance though; some works of Pina Bausch, like *Kontakthof* and *Viktor* were humorous; in these works, humor emerged mainly by elements/motifs as absurdity and repetition. Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, Claudia Triozzi, Vera Mantero are some examples, contemporary to La Ribot, each one completely different from the other, using humor in their work.

Chapter 2: Theory

I. Classification of the comic categories

A classification of the key words connected to humor is necessary in order to clarify later what is observed in La Ribot's performances. First of all, one question arises: are the words humor and comic synonymous? According to Patrice Pavis, humor in theater terminology is one of the various comic phenomena.⁴ Hence, Pavis considers comic as a general term that refers to a situation, whereas humor is a subcategory. On the other hand, according to Freud, humor is one of the three categories of laughter; the other two are the wit and the comic. It is quite interesting that the notion of humor as we know it nowadays is recent; the contemporary interpretation of the word humor is recorded for the first time in the England of 17th century; until then humor was only a connotation of a psychological mood. Also, the words pun and joke were recorded for the first time in 1670.⁵

On the contrary, the notion of comic is known since the ancient times, when theater was performed for the first time. Aristotle elaborated on comic in his second book of *Poetics*; unfortunately, this part of his study is lost. We do know, however, from his statement in the introduction about tragedy, that Aristotle considered comedy inferior to tragedy: "As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind of the Ridiculous, which is the species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous is something wrong and a deformity not productive of pain or harm; the

⁴ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998.

⁵ Jan Bremmer-Herman Roodenburg (ed.), *Πολιτισμική ιστορία του χιούμορ: Από την Αρχαιότητα έως τη σημερινή εποχή*, μτφ. Γιώργος Διπλάς, Αθήνα: Πολύτροπον, 2005, σ. 17-18.

mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.”⁶ Aristotle connected laughter to degradation; in fact, Plato and Aristotle were not opposed to humor in general, but to crude humor, which was the kind of humor used in comedies of the time, e.g. by Aristophanes.⁷ As Billig states, “Socrates and Plato did not approve of carnivalesque humor, whereby the lower orders might mock philosophical notions of truth and beauty”.⁸ Aristotle's definition is, along with Plato's, the archetype of the superiority theories.

According to Billig⁹, there are three major categories in the theories of humor; the first category consists of the superiority theories and Thomas Hobbes developed the most representative of them, in the seventeenth century. The main idea of this theory is that the one who laughs tries to predominate on the one who is laughed at. In contrast, there were the incongruity theories, formulated on the following century. The third category is the Victorian relief theory, with main representatives to be Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain. According to Berger, “the proponents of the three main theories focus upon one factor, which they claim to be the cause of laughter – but always something important is omitted and the theory remains incomplete”.¹⁰

As Bremer observes¹¹, laughter is a phenomenon that is expressed in the body and through the body. It is weird that this aspect is neglected by most theorists of humor –

⁶ Αριστοτέλης, *Περί ποιητικής*, μτφ. Η. Π. Νικολοΐδης, Αθήνα: Κάκτος, 1995, σ. 189.

⁷ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London-California-New Delhi: Sage Publications LTD, 2005, p.40.

⁸ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London-California-New Delhi: Sage Publications LTD, 2005, p.42.

⁹ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London-California-New Delhi: Sage Publications LTD, 2005, p. 6.

¹⁰ Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter & CO, 1997, p. 177.

¹¹ Jan Bremmer-Herman Roodenburg (ed.), *Πολιτισμική ιστορία του χιούμορ: Από την Αρχαιότητα έως τη σημερινή εποχή*, μτφ. Γιώργος Διπλάς, Αθήνα: Πολύτροπον, 2005, σ. 71.

it is quite obvious that body plays an important role in humor, otherwise, the Church might not be so strongly opposed to it – it is not a coincidence that during the Middle Ages laughter was considered something dangerous, such as a sin, even a sign of madness, and therefore suppressed.¹²

Concerning humor, Berger attempted a definition: “That quality of action, speech or writing, which excites amusement, oddity, jocularly, facetiousness, comicality, fun”, or “the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of subject”.¹³ Higgle emphasizes more on the revolutionary aspect of humor: “humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstance”.¹⁴

Pavis is more specific towards what is the function of humor in theatre, saying that “it is one of the favorite techniques of playwrights [...] It draws on the comic and irony but has its own tone. While irony and satire often give an impression of being cold and cerebral, humor is warmer and doesn’t hesitate to laugh at itself or to be ironical at the ironist’s expense”.¹⁵ Freud described humor in the following terms: “Like jokes and the comic, humor has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure

¹² Jan Bremmer-Herman Roodenburg (ed.), *Πολιτισμική ιστορία του χιούμορ: Από την Αρχαιότητα έως τη σημερινή εποχή*, μτφ. Γιώργος Διπλάς, Αθήνα: Πολύτροπον, 2005, σ. 78.

¹³ Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter & CO, 1997, p. 3.

¹⁴ Jennifer Higgle (ed.), *The Artist’s Joke*, London-Cambridge: Whitechapel - MIT Press, 2007, p. 113.

¹⁵ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 66.

from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability."¹⁶

Concerning the comic element, according to Patrice Pavis, "it is not restricted to the genre of comedy; it can be grasped from various angles and in various areas. An anthropological phenomenon, it responds to the instinct of play, to man's love of joking and laughter, to his ability to perceive unusual and ridiculous aspects of physical and social reality. As a social weapon, it gives the ironist a means of criticizing his milieu, of masking his opposition with witticisms or grotesque farce. As a dramatic genre, it centers the action around conflicts and peripeteia that bear witness to human inventiveness and optimism in the face of adversity".¹⁷ Also, the comic element has a psychological, a social as well as a dramaturgical dimension.

Freud dealt with the psychological aspects of the comic and stressed the fact that the perception of the comic action or situation is related to the observer's judgment, what he named "the superiority of the observer". Furthermore, there is the sense of liberation and release: "Humor is not only somewhat liberating, like jokes and the comic, but also something grandiose and edifying: characteristics that are not found in the other two kinds of pleasure through intellectual activity. Its grandiose aspect apparently proceeds from the narcissism and victoriously affirmed invulnerability of the ego".¹⁸

Patrice Pavis adds to this: "all comic phenomena -parody, irony, satire, humor- contribute to degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to the frailties they share with all humanity, but in particular the dependence of their mental

¹⁶ Jennifer Higgie (ed.), *The Artist's Joke*, London-Cambridge: Whitechapel - MIT Press, 2007, p. 215.

¹⁷ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998.

¹⁸ Jennifer Higgie (ed.), *The Artist's Joke*, London-Cambridge: Whitechapel - MIT Press, 2007, p. 215.

functions on bodily needs. By laughing at the other, one laughs a bit at oneself; it is a way to getting to know oneself better and a way of surviving against all odds, always landing on one's feet no matter what the problems and obstacles".¹⁹

Bergson put more emphasis on the social dimension of the comic; laughter is contagious, it is something that we must share with somebody else: "Laughter presupposes definite sociocultural groups and the subtle relationships between them. It is a social phenomenon."²⁰ Again according to Pavis, "comedy has a 'natural' tendency to show a realistic representation of a social milieu. It constantly alludes to current events or aspects of civilization and unmasks ridiculous social practices – alienation comes naturally to comedy".²¹

A notion particularly relevant to that of the comic is the absurd, which came to constitute a theater movement by itself after World War II. The origins of this movement date back to Camus and Sartre, and it arose in the context of the war and the post-war period, when these existentialist philosophers put on stage "a disillusioned picture of a world devastated by conflict and ideology."²² Although the plays written by Camus and Sartre do not meet any of the formal criteria of the absurd, their characters remain its philosophical spokesmen. Among the theatrical precursors to the contemporary theater of the absurd there are farces, parades, grotesque interludes in Shakespeare and Romantic drama, and playwrights of the first half of the 20th century who defy categorization, such as Apollinaire, Jarry, Feudeau and Gombrowitz.

¹⁹ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 67.

²⁰ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com.

²¹ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 65.

²² Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 2.

Grotesque is another comic axis, presenting things in a caricaturesque, burlesque and bizarre way, thus placing them away from any accepted norm. Theater grotesque retains its essential function as a principle of deformation having, furthermore, a highly-developed sense of the concrete and of realistic detail.²³

Apart from the theatrical terms of the absurd and the grotesque, there are also two terms which mainly come from the cinematic field, gag, burlesque and slapstick. In film, a gag is a comical effect or sketch that appears to be improvised or produces visually using objects and unusual situations. Burlesque is an exaggerated form of the comic, using trivial expressions to speak of the noble or elevated, making a travesty of a serious genre by using grotesque or vulgar pastiche, and is best expressed in film: “in the comic films of Buster Keaton, the Marx brothers and Max Sennet, the visual gags reflect the stylistic distortions of classical burlesque. In this sense, the textual principle of the burlesque becomes a playful and visual one, as it contrasts serious behavior with its comic deconstruction through an unexpected upset.”²⁴ It is an explanation of the most serious things using laughable and ridiculous expressions. Finally, slapstick is a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero's dignity; more specifically, Alan Dale, in his book *Comedy is a Man in Trouble*, defines slapstick as the name for popular rather than literary low physical comedy.²⁵

²³ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 165.

²⁴ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 41.

²⁵ Dale says in specific: “The word derives from an implement –the double paddles formerly used by circus clowns to beat each other. The loud crack of the two paddle blades as they crashed together, could always be depended upon to produce the laughter and applause. The term is now often used by itself as a pejorative, meaning ‘merely’ low physical comedy, but in part because popular comedy and literary comedy are thought of as belonging to distinct audiences, separate occasions.” Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*, Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 1.

II. Bergson on Laughter

Henri Bergson is widely known for his writings about time, consciousness, memory and creativity. In his essay, *Laughter and the essence of comic* (1900), he studies laughter as a cause of the comic and he tries to define the laws and the process of the comic. Bergson did not want to give a psychological explanation; his essay is more about laughter as a social gesture. His basal question regards the major element of the laughable. According to him, the main elements of jokes are repetition, inversion, reciprocal interference (of series of events), whereas the main characteristics of the comic character are rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness and anti-sociability. Maybe Bergson's most important remark about comic is its social aspect – that laughter is always the laughter of a group that laughter cannot exist outside society. Also, he stresses the fact that the comic does not exist outside what is strictly human and he defines the man as the only animal that laughs but is also laughed at. “Joking presupposes an absence of feeling – the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. It is a kind of automatism that makes us laugh.”²⁶

When Bergson wrote his theory on laughter, there was a spreading admiration about machines and what they could do and probably this was an inspiration for his theory.²⁷ Thus, mechanization and automatism hold a special place in Bergson's theory, as well as in La Ribot's performances. Automatism in movement is connected to repetition, two notions that are present in La Ribot's work and contribute in transforming the image of the body, making it look like an object. Bergson uses the example of the toy Jack-in-the-box to explain why the mechanic, repetitive movement

²⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 4b.

²⁷ Dianna C. Niebylski, *Humouring Resistance: Laughter and the Excessive Body in Latin American Women's Fiction*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 21.

is funny.²⁸ Therefore, in my analysis I will recognize the parts of the performance that signify the specific humor mechanisms –automatism and repetition– either in the use of the body or in the use of speech. Also, in *Gustavia* and *Laughing Hole*, repetition in speech creates the same effect, generating a vast amount of images in the mind of the spectator. According to Bergson, the repetition in comic is found in a repressed feeling which goes off like a spring and in an idea that delights in repressing the feeling anew.

Apart from automatism and repetition, as aforementioned, Bergson analyzed the characteristics of the comic physiognomy; the five pieces from *Distinguidas Project* that I will analyze are based on La Ribot's comic figure, hence in my analysis these elements will be deployed. Connecting the nature of comic character with the notion of automatism, Bergson claims that “the comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life.”²⁹ Concerning the comic form that cannot be explained by itself, Bergson says that “can only be understood from its resemblance to another, which only makes us laugh by reason of its relationship with a third, and so indefinitely, so that psychological analysis, however luminous and searching, will go astray unless it holds the thread along which the comic impression has travelled from one end series to the other”.³⁰

²⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 23a.

²⁹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 28a.

³⁰ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 22a.

Bergson is the only theorist of humor who takes into account the body in humor: “Comedy directs our attention to gestures”. Also, he refers to the notion of distortion and ugliness, stressing the fact that we are not laughing with someone who is ugly but with someone who represents an ugly person.³¹ Accordingly, in La Ribot’s pieces we are laughing when there is a representation of a movement or gesture that is isolated from its context and put in the performance.

III. Freud’s theory of joke and its relation to the unconscious

Sigmund Freud is famous for introducing the field of psychoanalysis -treating neurotic patients through talking- and for the many books that he wrote concerning the unconscious, a notion that he was the first one to refer to. He was intrigued by what is hidden behind our need to use humor, hence he has written about the psychology of humor in his book *The Joke and its relation to the unconscious* (1905) and in one essay, *Humor* (1927). Billig assumes that Freud’s most important observations towards humor were, the fact that tendentious joke produce much laughter than to innocent ones, the distinction between the form and the content and the conscious experience of the person who laughs does not contain the key to understanding the nature of laughter.³²

The Joke and its relation to the unconscious is divided into three parts. The first one is the analytic part, which is a synopsis of all the previous theories of comedy, joking and wit; it contains a taxonomy of jokes and emphasizes on those jokes that have

³¹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 10a

³² Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London-California-New Delhi: Sage Publications LTD, 2005, p.156

tendencies towards hidden meanings; the second is the synthetic part, which is an attempt to make connections between the structure of the joke and the pleasurable tendencies of the joke. The last part is the theoretical part, where he analyzes the relation between his theories about dreams and physical comedy. The idea of relating jokes, dreams and the unconscious was quite new at that time. In the introduction of the book, John Carey states that this connection was vital for Freud and that “his theory of jokes grew out of his theory of dreams, because he believed that dreams use jokes as part of their disguise”.³³ Also, according to John Carey, Freud sees joking as an emotional catharsis: “We are used to thinking that we joke about what normally makes us sad or afraid. The joke gives us a sense of release or relief by replacing fear or sadness with laughter”.³⁴

Like Bergson, Freud referred to the relation between comic and object: “The comic is found only by a subsequent transference in things, situations etc”.³⁵ According to Freud, the criteria and characteristics of jokes are: activity, relation to the content of thoughts, the characteristics of playful judgment, the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, sense in nonsense, the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment, the bringing forward of what is hidden and the peculiar brevity of wit – condensation with modification. More specifically, the transformation of one of the thoughts into an unusual form which will provide a basis for its combination with the second thought.³⁶ Freud concludes saying that every theory of comic is objected by its critics on the score that its definition overlooks what is essential to comic.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p. vii.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p. ix.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p. 185.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p. 22.

The main notions that I will use from the theory of Freud is brevity -*Distinguidas Project* and *Gustavia* are brief in duration- and displacement, which is present almost in all of the works analyzed. Freud defines displacement in the following words: “the essential thing about it is its diversion of the train of thought, its displacement of the psychological emphasis to a different theme from the one broached.”³⁷ Parts of the joke techniques will be used in order to explain the word play in oral speech in *Gustavia* and in written speech in *Laughing Hole*.

In brief, a presentation of joke techniques according to Freud:

A. Condensation:

- b) With formation of a composite word
- c) With modification

B. Multiple use of the same material

- b) As a whole or in parts
- c) In different order
- d) With slight modification
- e) Of the same word full and empty

C. Double meaning

- a) Meaning as a name and as a thing
- b) Metaphorical and literal meanings
- c) Double meaning proper (play upon words)
- d) Double entendre

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p. 43

e) Double meaning with allusion

To sum up, Freud deals with the structure of the joke and in general with the characteristics of verbal humor, while Bergson describes a theory, more connected to the visual dimension of humor. Therefore, the combination of elements of these two theories -repetition, brevity, displacement and word play- is proved to be useful to my analysis, providing complementary aspects of the humor mechanisms.

Chapter 3: Analyses of the performances

- *How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?*

- *A fish.*

(Popular joke)

I. *Distinguidas Project* (1991 onwards)

Distinguidas or *Distinguished Pieces* is designed to be a work of a lifetime, since it contains all the pieces La Ribot has made since 1991. Its first performance was held in 1994 under the title of *13 Distinguished Pieces*. In 1997, she presented the second series of *Distinguidas*, *Mas Distinguidas*, followed by *Still Distinguished* in 2000. In 2003 she performed a version titled *Panoramix* in Tate Modern, which included all the *Distinguished Pieces* made from 1991 until 2000. *Paradistinguidas* is the continuation of the project presented in 2012.

Panoramix is a kind of meta-performance, a single durational work lasting around three and a half hours and it consists of thirty-four small works (*Piezas Distinguidas*), each lasting from 30 seconds to 7 minutes. These distinguished pieces are for sale or have been sold to “distinguished proprietors”. La Ribot is planning to create one hundred such pieces.

La Ribot explains the whole idea in an interview held in 2001: “Each of my pieces states in a more lively and eloquent way what I could try to say in words about visual art and dance. In concrete terms, I prepare these pieces like a painter in his workshop

and not like a choreographer in a studio. The space in which I work is not empty; I remain in contact with all the things that make up my familiar environment, whereas in dance, space is much more neutral. That sort of work, even if it is derived from the influences of, or my interest in the plastic arts is fairly elementary, direct. Ultimately each piece is influenced by whatever my artistic thoughts are at the time. In the second series, entitled *Mas Distinguidas*, I have composed pieces in an ensemble that redefines space. It is horizontal and all my movements are written in a zoom-like manner moving in - moving out, into the center. When working on a series, I always look for an organic order which also reflects the direction of the observation. For *Still Distinguished* I thought about public space and decided to show the pieces in gallery spaces. It is closer to sculpture, time is extended and the whole space is covered: surface, corners, etc.”³⁸

Basic characteristics of these pieces are the use of many objects, which are exposed hanging on the walls during the performance, as well as the image of the body itself, very often transformed into an object; also, the naked, provocative body in combination with the performer’s inexorably staring at the audience, a constant change of costumes and objects, an obsession with chairs and red color, absurdity and surprise. A motif that is repeated is the exposed, still body, almost becoming an object. What transforms the body from subject to object is the relationship between stillness and time. The beginning and the end of each distinguished piece is the same: picking up objects marks the beginning of a piece, throwing them away is the end of each piece. La Ribot said at Luc Peter’s documentary for *Distinguidas* that the pieces are not short stories, but situations³⁹. This notion of becoming is obvious by the way

³⁸ www.outoftheboxfestival.com

³⁹ *La Ribot Distinguida*, documentary film by Luc Peter (2003).

she throws away whatever constitutes her costume, which is like releasing her from the role and getting ready to become something else.

La Ribot performs all the pieces alone, hence the whole performance is structured around and about her figure; since humor is the element that prevails, I will focus on analyzing five miniature pieces from *Distinguidas* with similarities in structure and effect (*Manual de uso*, *Cosmopolita*, *Ya mi gustavia a mi ser pez*, *Capricho mio*, *Soccoro! Gloria*) keeping in mind the characteristics of the comic character according to Bergson along with elements from Freud's theory about how the joke is constructed.

Manual de Uso (no 20)

Manuel de Uso (Manual) was presented for the first time in the series *Mas Distinguidas* (1997). La Ribot enters the stage naked and immediately wears a pair of transparent, plastic trousers and anorak. She walks to the center of stage, taking out of her pocket a little booklet, which is a manual with instructions, as indicated by the title of the piece. She starts reading, following one instruction after the other with her body. She reads: "Operating instructions. Thank you for choosing this unit. This is a light, compact and exceptionally powerful unit. Please read these instructions carefully before use. Remove the top cover (*she takes off the upper cloth and throws it away*). Remove the lower cover and keep it (*she takes off the pants and leave them on the floor*). Unfold the unit (*she raises both her arms slowly and bends backwards, making an arch with her spine and then she goes back to her previous standing still posture*). Decompose the unit (*she concentrates on her breath, holding it, like digesting food*). Fold the unit in two (*she "folds" herself in two*). Repeat the action

(she folds again, kneeling, with hands and face on the floor). Gently make the unit glide to the floor *(she slowly slides to the floor and stays there)*. Insert the top right stick on the right lower crease of the lower cover *(she takes her pants and wears them on her right arm)*. Insert the middle part of the lower cover into the top part of the unit *(she puts her head inside the pants and continues reading)*. Wrap the rest of the cover around the unit *(she wraps her pants around her neck)*. Please wait patiently until the unit is totally extinguishable *(she lies down on the floor and stays there for some moments)*. Wait. *(She stays still, lying on the floor, waiting.)*”

Cosmopolita (no 7)

Comopolita (Cosmopolitan) was first presented in *13 Distinguished Pieces* (1994). La Ribot enters the stage wearing a shiny leotard and a red strip on her head. She mentions the names of various regions or countries, showing specific parts at her body with provocative gestures and movements. “Las Palmas *(she walks slowly towards the audience, showing her hands)*. Manila *(she puts her arms down, moving her fingers)*. Brazil *(showing her one hand by touching it with the other)*, Sudan *(showing her armpit)*. Costa Rica *(touching her belly from the front to the back)*. Buenos Aires *(pointing with her finger horizontally in front of her)*. Netherlands *(showing the pubic symphysis)*. England *(her right foot makes her turn)*. Pernambuco *(showing her right leg)*. Rodesia *(making a circle with her finger on her right knee)*. Oregon *(touching her cheeks)*. Hong Kong *(fists in front of her pubic symphysis)*. Ohio *(touching the area under her eyes)*. Libya *(touching her lips)*. Peloponnesos *(raising her hand from behind her head)*. Onduras *(another turn, with her chest)*. Amazon *(touching the front side of her body)*. Peru *(pointing on her left eye)*.”

Ya me Gustaria a mi ser pez! (no 6)

Ya me Gustaria a mi ser pez! (And I would like to be a fish!) is also one of the *13 Distinguished Pieces*. La Ribot enters the gallery space naked and prepares herself for the piece, putting on a pair of black shoes and holding two chairs. She traverses the space, takes off the wall a long black dress and wears it. She continues, holding the chairs and collecting several things from the walls; pearls for her neck, a chamber pot, a mask and a snorkel, a jacket, a radio and an orange bandana for her head. She wears the jacket and while holding all these objects, she puts one chair on the other, puts on the lower chair the chamber pot, sits on the other chair, switches on the radio, wears the bandana, the mask and the snorkel. Then, she gets off her pocket a packet of cigarettes, smokes a cigarette and exhales the smoke through the snorkel. While she continues doing this action, she starts sliding on the chair and with very slow movements, she ends up lying on the floor, still.

Capricho Mio (no 8)

Capricho Mio (My Caprice) was presented for the first time in *13 Distinguished Pieces*. La Ribot enters the stage wearing a towel, holding a measure and looking at it. At first she measures her forehead, looks at the measure and measures it again; she says a number and then does the same with her arm, then she measures from her belly diagonally down to the other side – an arbitrary area for measuring. She continues measuring and announcing numbers as well as showing the numbers with her fingers; a part on her leg, her calf, her foot, her ear, around her knees, around her head, around her neck, measuring also a distance in front of her, from her head to the floor saying that it is two meters high. Then she measures her nose, looks at the result and, irritated, measures it again, deciding in the end that the right number is “one”. Then

she measures the distance between her mouth and the pubic area. In the end, she stays silent for some seconds and then, showing her breasts, her waist and her hips, without measuring them, she just announces 80 – 60 – 80, which are supposed to be the ideal analogies for these parts.

Socorro! Gloria! (Striptease) (Help! Glory!)

La Ribot enters the stage, where there are a chair and a microphone. She takes off her jacket and puts it on the chair. Then she takes off her cap, she makes her hair with her hands, leaves the cap on the floor, sits on the chair and checks the microphone, her hair and her clothes, as getting ready to speak. She hesitates, seems nervous, takes off her sweater and reveals a bra worn on top of a shirt. She seems to feel awkward and as if trying to solve a problem, because something is wrong. She looks at herself, takes off the bra, inside which there is a shoe that falls on the floor. Again she looks nervous; this time she takes off her foulard, looking around and then decides to take off her shoes. She approaches the microphone, like wanting to say something but she changes her mind again and takes off her shirt, inside which she wears an animal print blouse. Then she takes off her pajama trousers, and is surprised to find that what she wears inside is an animal print uniform. Curious, she examines it, looks at the audience and finally takes it off. Inside she wears a green blouse and red trousers, which immediately takes off. This time there is something on her knee... She looks at it with query. There is a white textile around her knee, like a bandage, which unfolds when she stands up, revealing a baby shirt. She misses her step while she takes it off and throws it on the floor. Then, something falls from inside her blouse; she looks at it with surprise and then looks the audience again surprised. She takes off the green blouse and something else falls again. She stops for a moment but then a pink, long,

night dress is revealed under the blouse. She is again surprised; she touches it, looks at the audience and takes it off too. Now she wears a mini skirt, a red blouse and black tights. She smiles and sits again on the chair. For one more time, she tries to say something on the microphone but at the last moment she regrets and says nothing. She looks at the audience, looks worried, not knowing what to do, and suddenly she takes off the skirt and the blouse. Now she is wearing the black tights and a black leotard; she stands up, takes off the leotard, then the tights and immediately the white blouse that is shown underneath. She slowly takes off the garters, one by one (the pairs are four, three black and the last one white) and throws them away. Now she wears only a pair of blue underwear. She stands up again, takes off the blue panties, and then the white panties that are under them, and then a pair of white panties, and then a pair of red ones, and a pair of green ones, and a pair of yellow ones. The last ones are purple; she shows some skin to the audience and then sits on the chair, looking at the audience with anticipation. She takes off the last pair of panties and sits cross-legged. Then, she takes off the blue jersey, under which she wears a black bra. The piece ends when she takes off this last piece of cloth, throwing it away along with the end of the music.

These five miniature pieces have similarities in structure and effect; they are brief in duration, a main characteristic in joke construction, according to Freud, and as a result, the climax is fast. The solipsistic nature of these pieces –the fact that they are structured around the figure of La Ribot- is connected to jokes; as Freud says, “the joke-work is the process of joke-formation in the first person”.⁴⁰ The structure of these performances is similar to that of a joke, because apart from brevity, the element of displacement is present; also they have as a protagonist a comic figure, La Ribot.

⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p.224.

According to Bergson, the characteristics of a comic physiognomy are automatism, absent-mindedness, anti-sociability; furthermore, the comic character has to be unconscious of his comic nature. This element is better expressed in *Socorro! Gloria!* (*striptease*), a piece which is constructed on the naivety presented. As Bergson states, “absent-mindedness is essentially laughable, and so we laugh at any rigid, ready-made, mechanical in gesture, attitude and even facial expression – this kind of rigidity, we can find in language too.”⁴¹ The notion absent-mindedness is connected according to Bergson with rigid mechanism, it leads to it. Music also plays an important role in this piece, since all the movements are coordinated with the music heard. Bergson had also connected humor to musicality, when he said that, “by a certain arrangement of rhythm, rhyme and assonance, it is possible to lull the imagination, to rock it and from between like and like with a regular see-saw motion, and thus prepare it submissively to accept the vision suggested.”⁴² This is the only piece from *Distinguidas* that has a form interrelated to more classical forms of theater, reminding also the tradition of clown and Commedia dell'arte.

Bergson observed that body played a role in comic; he called it a sudden shift from the soul to the body, with his own words, when “the body takes precedence of the soul”.⁴³ One of his main ideas is automatism: “the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.”⁴⁴ “Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical

⁴¹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 28b.

⁴² Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 21a.

⁴³ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 18a.

⁴⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 11b.

arrangement”.⁴⁵ The notion of automatism from Bergson can be found in the repetition used and is also connected to the notion of objectification, which characterizes the work of *Distinguidas* as a whole, since the body of the performer very often gives the impression of an object. One main idea in Bergson's work is that “we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing”⁴⁶ Why is there something comic in the repetition? Two important things: a repressed feeling which goes off like a spring and an idea that delights in repressing the feeling anew. In *Manual de Uso*, it is only when La Ribot throws away the plastic clothes and keeps following the instructions with her body that we become aware that the object is her body and not the clothes. Also, the end is comic and tragic at the same time; the instructions are about how to extinguish the object, how to kill the object. But only something that has life can die. Apart from objectification, here is introduced the notion of displacement by Freud; instead from a manual for a device, there is a manual for the human body; we meet this notion also in other *Distinguished Pieces*. In *Cosmopolita* (this piece is the briefest of all, lasting only 1 minute and 30 seconds), the words for the various parts of the body are replaced with names of places throughout the world. Only the first word used has two meanings - double meaning is a common joke technique according to Freud: in Spanish, “las palmas” means the palms, but Las Palmas is also the capital city of the Canary Islands. The result of this displacement is an absurd correlation between these two irrelevant connotations, creating images that do not exist, like her body is the map of the world, playing with the imagination of the audience. This technique, again, reveals the emptiness of the construction, indicating that words can mean anything. The meaning of a word is not

⁴⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 23a.

⁴⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 24a.

predefined, but is constructed for the sake of order or communication. Furthermore, along with the costume that reminds us something between commercial dance and circus, the use of gestures is of specific importance; it is not that she just points parts of her body, she performs them. It is the combination between the gestures and the words that provoke laughter. Bergson says that gestures, when imitated by another individual, become laughable; these movements conducted originally by any person would not be laughable.

Hence, absurdity in Freud's theory of jokes can explain why the unexpected correlations that are made produce laughter. The element of surprise is what provokes laughter; this is the reason Kant defined the comic as "an affect caused by the sudden transformation of an expectation which comes to nothing".⁴⁷ In *Capricho mio*, the techniques of absurdity and displacement also prevail. All this arbitrary measuring of the size of several parts of her body and the wrong numbers that La Ribot announces provoke the laughter of the audience due to the fact that the measurements are so obviously wrong and to the fact that some areas that she measures are arbitrary. These numbers express not the truth but a wish, how she would like her body to be, or how she wants the others to see her. She presents an image of an imaginary, ideal body. Also, the areas that she measures are not always the normal ones, e.g. she measures areas also outside the body or areas that consist of more than one parts of the body, or measures only a small part of a part of her body. Moreover, the numbers she is saying are bare, they are not followed by a module; it could be anything, one meter, one centimeter or one inch.

⁴⁷ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 65.

Ya me Gustaria a mi ser pez! is a surrealist piece, based on absurdity. Nothing makes sense, the objects are completely irrelevant to each other, as well as what she does with them. Why put one chair on another, what's the use of putting a chamber pot, why wear a swimming mask? Displacement is also what she does with smoking, instead of exhaling normally in the air as we would expect, she exhales from a snorkel. Bergson could explain why this is funny: “a comic effect is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form”⁴⁸ or “a comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the nature expression of an idea into another key”.⁴⁹ A point where Bergson meets Freud is when he says that comic uses the logic of the humor instead of the logic of the reason.

II. *Gustavia* (2008)

There is no better start for thinking than laughter.

Walter Benjamin

Gustavia is a one hour performance. The space of the performance is a black box; everything is black, the walls are covered with black curtains, the floor is black too and the two performers (La Ribot and Mathilde Monnier) enter the stage wearing black clothes and shoes.

⁴⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 36a.

⁴⁹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 93a.

The first scene is the presentation of a dirge; La Ribot and Mathilde Monnier enter the stage and stand in front of a microphone. They both wear the same clothes, a black blouse, black underwear and black shoes. La Ribot holds a black handkerchief. They start to weep but only making the voice, not making any grimaces or any other movements with their body; they are completely still and only the sound of crying is heard. Gradually, the sound is getting more and more acute and there is an impact in their faces. After a while, they start to use also their bodies, La Ribot wipes her “tears” and M.M. holds and stretches her hands. The crying becomes louder and louder but it is still obvious that they only pretend to cry and instead of empathy, it causes laughter to the audience, exactly because we know that they do it on purpose.

In between their dirge, they laugh sub rosa. La Ribot is putting the handkerchief on her cheek and M.M. is putting her finger on her cheek, like holding a tear. A sound of light rain is heard. La Ribot gets away from the microphone and sits on a sofa. They continue “crying”. Alternately, one is sitting on the chair, holding the foulard, the other goes to the microphone and says something. Then, they both sit on the sofa. Suddenly, M.M. stands up and L.R. falls down. (This happens because M.M. was sitting steadily and L.R. was sitting on the edge of the sofa).

L.R.: Oh, she cries this time. Salted. Because... because she is dreaming.

M.M.: Small arrival in sleep. Die when we get rid of her. From the arms of life.

L.R.: To die. To sleep. This is all. Maybe dreaming.

M.M.: I am completely undressed. (*At this moment L.R. is blowing her nose. Pause.*)

Deathly silence, aaaaaahhhhh!

Then she goes back to the sofa and the roles are reversed, M.M. is the one who is not sitting steadily on the sofa. L.R. pretends that she will stand up but immediately she sits back again – M.M. loses her balance for a second. The same happens again and again, L.R. is playing with standing up and sitting down and M.M. tries to synchronize with her in order not to fall. During all this game, the “crying” never stopped. Then again L.R. goes to the microphone. Now the distinction between crying and laughter is not clear; it is like she is crying and laughing at the same time. She is standing in front of the microphone, but she says nothing and goes back to the sofa. They both sit on the two edges of the sofa, keep crying and continue the previous game of standing up suddenly, surprising each other so as to fall down. L.R. starts to take some action in order to avoid falling down; she pushes the sofa down with her one hand, she extends one foot and pushes the floor, in order to be more stable. There is a contradiction between the action of crying and the simultaneous action of being naughty and playing with each other. L.R. tries to set free her hand, where M.M. is sitting and when she sees that she cannot, she puts her one leg on M.M.’s hand and in this strange position, each one tries to free herself and not free the other. Finally, L.R. frees herself and also grabs the foulard from M.M. Then, M.M. goes again to the microphone and says some words. M.M. falls along with the lights that go off and a sound of a thunder (*lights off and sound of rain*). The second scene is very characteristic of slapstick; in the dark, only the sound of the rain and a voice is heard. Then, with dim lights, we see M.M. and L.R. They are doing movements that remind of animals, they are in all fours, crawl, scream (*like the sound a bird makes*).

L.R. takes a board and walks randomly on stage. M.M. Seems unaware of this fact and every now and then she is hit by the board; she falls down, gets up again, hit by the board again and so on. As this action continues happening, she is more and more

tired when she gets up. This scene ends and then La Ribot enters the stage holding a microphone. She says: “I will never go back. I will go back when she 'll be dead. I am going to come back. I want her to die. To have died (she), I will come. To die with a trace. To die in a hole. To be dead. I will come back. She never died. I will also have entered. While she will be dying, I'll be back. To die. So that I come back. I will come back. That she dies. I will come back digging. Digging, dying. Coming back. Digging the artists. Dying, given that, being dead. Buried. Having around bandages of her death. Today it is my birthday. I want to die, die on stage.

In the following scene, L.R and M.M are playing with their trousers, showing and hiding their skin, following the rhythm of the music. There seems to be a competitiveness between them, who will manage to do it faster. The last scene lasts for twenty minutes; L.R. And M.M. Are standing on two chairs and immediately start speaking. It is not a dialogue but two parallel monologues, overlapping each other. All the phrases that they use begin with the same words: “A woman”.

Full text:

Femme de gauche (La Ribot)

Femme de droit (Mathilde Monnier)

A woman opens her mouth.

A woman shrugs her shoulders.

A woman stretches her tongue.

A woman with very long arms.

A woman has two knees.

A woman with a very small chest here and very

large there.

A woman has legs which look from there to there.

One woman opens her buttocks.

A woman has breasts which squint.

A woman emerges from a paah.

A woman with a very small chest.

One woman with two little kids.

A woman without a belly.

One woman throws her milk (*she does the movement with her hand*).

A woman with two pieces of hair.

A woman without an elbow.

One woman with hair only on the one side.

A woman with very small wrist, like this.

One woman with three legs.

A woman with very long fingers.

One woman with very long toes.

A woman with two left feet.

A woman has a spine which climbs up and does ouch aih ouch aih every morning.

A woman has space here, a lot of space, and not at all here.

A woman has a parrot on her shoulders.

A woman has two big ankles which go from one side to other.

He talks tah tah tah tah.

A woman with two reeds.

A woman has no space here (showing her chest).

A woman has milk that comes out, comes in, comes out, comes in.

A woman has eyes of a cat, on the forehead.

A woman with her legs stuck.

A woman with no nose, it is flat.

A woman has teeth.

A woman has eyebrows.

A woman has a thread which does a curve from behind and comes out trrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr tah (showing over her head).

A woman with a flat tummy.

A woman imagines a woman.

A woman has nightmares.

A woman imagines nightmares.

A woman not thinking.

A woman not seeing.

There is a phantom in the lake.

And it swims on the flat boat.

A woman follows children.

A woman has ears.

An unbalanced woman.

A woman has five toes.

A woman has a very flat chest.

Pi pou pi pou yoga yoga.

A woman has a very intense perfume.

A woman has a brownie at the place of her sex.

A woman has hair here, hair here, hair here, hair here (showing on her body).

A woman has a lot of space in between her breasts.

A woman has fat here, fat here and here she is very slim.

A woman has two stretched shoulders , she has one left cheek and one right cheek.

A woman has one nose.

A woman has a diamond on her teeth.

A woman takes her a dog for a walk.

A woman has one very long ear and one square ear.

A woman pleated.

A woman has pointed ears.

A woman opens the door of the house.

A woman has one eyebrow which falls down here.

A woman licks the stairs of the house.

A woman has an axis which is dismissed.

A woman goes ups to the first floor.

A beautiful woman.

A woman gets herself killed on the first floor.

A dream woman.

A woman screws with her neighbor.

A woman of nightmares, a woman without night.

A woman takes the couch because it is slippery there.

A woman thinks in her dream.

A woman opens the oven, ah, it is well done, she closes it.

A woman sees things.

She gets off her clothes and go to the cinema.

A woman has a skin that pulls her out of the water.

A woman goes up with the elevator.

A woman swims.

A woman has four little kids in the cellar of the house.

A woman dives to follow a little kid.

A woman takes for a walk another kid.

A woman is followed by a dog.

A woman with a pleated skin.

A woman watches all the neighbors screw.

A woman folded.

A woman screws her husband on the bed.

A woman with fat here.

A woman takes the chicken, takes the feathers out, pah pah pah pah.

A woman who has hair.

A woman stubs her belly with a knife.

A woman goes down.

A woman being aggressive with all the world.

A woman dead on the ground floor.

A woman goes up.

A woman opens the fridge.

In order to see.

A woman takes the children – puff – in the fridge third floor.

A woman takes a mouth.

A woman who saves money from her toothbrush.

She has a bomb for a belly which explodes with all the world within.

A woman opens the tap with water flowing everywhere and she washes herself – she closes it and brushes her teeth.

A woman takes a plastic bag.

A woman goes down there, in the cellar where she was raped by her father.

A 12 year-old woman in the plateau.

A woman watches the neighbor.

A long woman who screws with the aunt.

Oh la la the fiancé watches her husband .. pah pah
pah pah paaaaah.

Ah ah ah ah chicken chicken chicken.

A woman who does not see anything.

A woman goes to sleep.

A rigid woman in her bed who is waiting.

A woman has nightmares in bed with her
husband.

A virgin woman who is already screwed.

A duck woman.

A woman is dreaming.

A woman who has a cat on the throat.

A violent woman with a bazookas pah pah pah
pah pah.

A woman is cleaning the windows.

A woman at the third floor.

She opens the mouth, raaaaaaaaarhhhhhhhhhh.

A woman shows what she loves in order to keep
watching.

A woman sees.

A woman who has no hope.

A woman on a seesaw.

A woman illegal.

A woman cleans.

A woman opens her legs.

A woman plastics, boxes here, where can I sit?

A woman sleeps at her home – she is not afraid.

A woman opens her buttocks.

A woman in silence in the house.

A woman has a dog in between her legs.

A woman who does the housework.

A woman retire, passé, pirouette, arabesque.

A woman obsessive with the housework.

An acrobatic woman.

Desperate housewife.

A woman reads.

A woman who has vacuumed the hair.

A woman singing while dancing.

A woman who adooooooooes the dust.

A woman has just one shoe.

A woman who has no house.

A woman grabs herself.

A woman who has a little shelter.

A free woman.

A woman hidden in the forest.

She takes the helicopter and sees the world.

A woman does the grand ecart.

A woman takes the whole world into her hands
and crushes it with all her strength.
Toooooooooorrrrrrrhhhhhhhhhhh

A woman in premiere (position).

A woman in seconde (position).

A woman in cinquieme (position).

A tendu woman.

A woman who kills a policeman

taahhhhhhhhhh.

A battement woman.

A woman who takes the water and
taaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh.

An efacee woman.

Tah tah.

An ecartee woman.

One woman who does sex tourism.

A woman pirouette – pirouette.

A woman not politically correct.

A daaaance woman.

A socialist woman.

A woman like Duncan, without shoes.

A feminist woman.

A woman who does curve.

A realistic, feminist, post dramatic woman.

A woman who does arch.

Realistic.

She has screwed a lot.

A not realistic woman.

A woman who has backache.

A surrealist woman.

A woman in pointe shoes.

A sharp woman.

A woman supports.

A woman goes up.

A woman changes.

A Trotskystean woman.

A woman in equilibrium.

A Republican woman from Spain.

A woman who loves.

A global woman.

A woman who dominates the people.

Galactic.

A woman with power on her hands.

A woman wanted by the police.

A phallocratic woman.

Ouh – pah – degage, violent.

A woman with her left heel.

A woman with a mini skirt.

A woman from Tazmania or Mexico.

A woman who loves velvet.

A woman who is bored in Azherbaitzan.

A woman who laughs.

A woman wearing a burga.

A woman politically correct.

A woman supports royalty.

A woman who cuts her burga let herself fly.

Two socialist women.

A woman taking the guitar

A moral woman.

tah tah tah tah tahhh.

An anti-realistic woman.

She sings “Les enfants de la patrie” (the national anthem of France).

A democrat.

A woman dares.

With a trumpet, tah tah tah tah rahhh.

A woman who does not believe anything.

Here, much more elegant, here.

A woman who in politics her body of dreams.

A woman or who is the woman of the house.

A top model woman.

A textile woman on the beach.

A woman at war.

A woman who wears an evening dress in order to make politics.

A woman at battle.

A red woman, a yellow woman.

A woman eternity.

Who does tatatatatah, the republic, oooooh I love the music.

A woman who also loves very much the guitar.

A woman motherhood.

Who is the woman of the house?

A Marxist woman.

A woman on a boat.

A woman who does not have heels.

A Leninist woman.

A very big woman.

Does not resist to the world to nobody.

A Marxist woman.

A woman ready to do everything to win.

A Leninist, sensitive woman.

A green woman.

A woman who has a little gigolo in order to make money.

A black woman.

A woman who sleeps for money .

A blonde woman.

A middle-class woman.

A woman with botox in a green house.

A witch woman.

A woman with two chests.

A Russian woman with hair that fall.

Two here and two here (she shows on herself).

A woman who cuts the fat here.

She walks at four steps.

A woman with heavy breasts.

A woman with a dog in the belly, who gives birth.

A woman has a lot of work.

A woman who gives birth and who will work.

The next day.

A woman knows about politics.

A woman with a brown horse.

A woman wearing the french flag.

A woman who does not see because she has her hair here (in front of her face).

She cuts them, tah tah tah tah tah tah tah.

She sticks them, tah tah tah tah tah tah tah.

A woman who has just one friend.

A woman who has two friends who think.

A woman who screws with her friends.

A philosopher woman.

A woman with hair.

A woman who adores hair and who searches for hair on the carpet.

A woman who surrounds herself with friends.

A woman who has only one friend.

A woman who has three homosexual friends.

A woman who screws with two sociologists and one psychoanalyst.

A woman who loves intellectuals.

But who does not sleep with them.

A woman who talks with them.

A woman who reflects with her neighbor.

Lying on the coach.

A femme fatale.

A genial woman.

With a horse between the legs.

A sceptic woman (*posture of the body, like Rodin's "Thinker"*).

A woman who does not talk to anyone.

Ethnographic.

A woman who sleeps with a psychiatrist.

A TGV woman.

A woman – phenomenon.

A woman who walks to grab life.

An astral woman.

A woman who believes.

A commercial woman.

A woman who has one sex.

A Eurostar woman.

A woman who loves love.

A tango woman.

A faithful woman.

A woman who puts a body in the drawer.

A hole woman, herself.

who locked the door with a key.

A duck woman.

A woman who closes the door of the house.

A woman who thinks.

A woman who searches for a word.

A woman who has something to say.

A woman who searches a speech.

A woman who searched her vocabulary.

A woman without speech.

A woman who says “give me one franc, three francs.

A woman without words.

A woman who is a lawyer.

A woman in silence.

A woman who is a nurse.

A woman who writes books without knowing how to read.

A woman who reads very important things.

A woman who opens a drawer and finds an A.

A woman with a vision.

And an O.

A woman who loves literature.

A liquid woman.

An enlightened woman.

A woman...

A goddess woman.

A woman...

A god woman.

A Lord woman.

A genial woman.

A woman from tragedy

A super sensational woman.

A tragedy woman.

An Etrusquian woman.

A woman who has very beautiful arms.

A Shakespearean woman.

A Greek woman.

A woman who loves philosophy.

A woman of spirit.

A bravo woman.

An elongated woman.

Here.

A woman enters.

A woman here.

A woman with a hat on the head.

A Roman woman.

Passive.

Passion.

A Greek woman.

A woman with spots on the body.

A woman without words in Greece.

A woman is followed.

A woman who falls on the ground without dying.

A woman with a shadow that follows her.

A woman searching for her ancestors.

A woman who takes lots of pills to stay young.

A woman who does not want to die.

A woman who has no souvenirs.

A woman is bored at the theatre.

A woman who digs the grave.

A buried woman.

A woman goes out.

With glasses that go up.

With a candle.

A woman falls on stage.

A woman who searches, who collects flowers.

A woman takes a hat and throws it away.

A woman who throws them with a magnificent gesture.

A woman opens the door of the cemetery.

A woman who searches for a flat.

A woman recognizes her neighbor.

A woman closes the door.

A defective woman.

A woman is followed by a ghost.

A woman who falls down.

A woman crying, crying.

A ghost from the grave

A very curious woman.

with a stone from the cemetery.

A woman who sees inside.

In a mass grave.

A woman rolls in the cemetery.

A woman attends.

Who searches for her friends from the mass grave.

A woman in dark.

A woman screws with all the friends.

(lights out)

A woman buried.

A woman who takes the flowers, lightweight,
tah tah tah.

A woman who eats the ground.

A woman fainted.

A sad woman.

A woman in silence.

As mentioned before, humor is not a common element in contemporary art and especially dance; La Ribot and Mathilde Monnier are two choreographers who come from different styles and practices of dance, but who share “similar concerns about the future of art, and especially, performance art”.⁵⁰ They both use humor extensively in their work and that was the element that brought them together. Their aim was to collaborate and make a dance performance which will constitute an ironic commentary on the notion of femininity, gender and sexuality. They both perform the same role, the role of a woman called Gustavia. As mentioned in the official description of the performance, body-burlesque, however, is rooted in squandered energy, repetition and accident.⁵¹

Josefine Wikstrom says in her text, *Dark Innovation*, that the framework of the performance is the theatrical burlesque. She refers to the scene where Monnier pretends not to see La Ribot wondering with the plank on her shoulder, making a comparison with similar scenes in *Laurel and Hardy*.⁵² Dale refers to M. Wilson Disher’s claim regarding six kinds of jokes in slapstick: falls, blows, surprise, knavery, mimicry, stupidity. “They all play a part, but for comedy to register as slapstick you need only the fall and its flip side, the blow. [...] The essence of slapstick gag is a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero’s dignity. [...] All these gags depend on a rupture in the extended link between physical effort and the result,

⁵⁰ www.laribot.com

⁵¹ www.laribot.com

⁵² Josefine Wikstrom, “Dark Innovation”, in *Critical Endeavor*, www.laribot.com

which the actor may exploit nonsensically, treating one object as if it were another.”⁵³ Regarding slapstick scenes, Dale also emphasizes on the fact that they “seem repetitive to some people, because slapstick is mechanical”⁵⁴, an obvious link with Bergson’s automatism. Wikstrom also states that, “this is not a burlesque show but an exploration of the representations of women through the language of classical burlesque and its absurd humor”.⁵⁵ Freud's tendency to economy is observed also here, in all scenes.

Concerning the humor mechanisms already mentioned, one of the most recognizable ones here is Bergson's automatism, for example in the first scene of the dirge, where the crying is obviously fake, because the way it is interpreted is mechanic; the same applies in the scene where they both sit on the sofa, and when one stands up, the other falls. Falling is also a common technique of slapstick; Bergson used in his essay about comic the example of the involuntary fall, claiming that a fall it has a comic effect only when it is involuntary, because it is related to clumsiness.⁵⁶ Mathilde Monnier fulfills the characteristics of the comic character according to Bergson, because of this unconsciousness of what is happening.

The use of speech, also, plays an important role in *Gustavia*; La Ribot's monologue in the beginning of the piece is an example of the joke techniques that Freud refers to, specifically, the second one, the “multiple use of the same material, in different order or with slight modification”; it is a play with the words “die” and “come back” in various tenses.

⁵³ Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*, Mineapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 3-4.

⁵⁴ Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*, Mineapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Josefina Wikstrom, “Dark Innovation”, in *Critical Endeavor*, www.laribot.com

⁵⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com, p. 5b.

Freud's notion of displacement is also found in speech, where random quotes from literary texts are used, for example in the scene after the dirge, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (“To die. To sleep. This is all. Maybe dreaming”.)

The characteristics of the structure of the joke from Freud, the play with the notions of abstract and concrete as they are presented in his theory for joke-formation, is present in the last scene, a scene that its structure is based on “condensation with modification” and a repetition that makes us feel that it could continue forever. This scene is the strongest in the piece; it is the last twenty minutes of the piece where the two performers are standing on two chairs, addressing the audience by talking incessantly. However, it is not a conversation between them but parallel monologues with the same structure; all their sentences begin with the words “a woman”. It is an aggregation of descriptions of real or imaginary women, talking very fast and overlapping on each other, using gestures or their whole body to give a clear image. The result of this process is not the creation of single images, but a chaotic composition of these images, given one after the other, creating a mass, absurd image of what a woman can be. In order to do that, they use a vast variety of examples; descriptions of the physical appearance of possible women, either real or imaginary, e.g., “A woman has a nose”, “A woman with three legs” or “A woman without an elbow”, examples of women and domesticity, e.g., “A woman adores dust”, “A woman who is obsessive with the housework”, examples of different nationalities or examples of women from the past along with contemporary images, e.g. “An Etrusquian woman”. Hence, the second joke technique from Freud is used, where the same material is used in different ways. Also, they play with the words with many ways, for example, they use derivatives of the same words, or what one says, the other says the opposite, or they say words one after the other that are irrelevant in meaning

but similar phonetically or partly similar (like “passion” and “passive”). Obviously, the issue here is the female identity. How does this amount of different images, both realistic and surrealistic, function in the piece? These images are fragments and they create exactly a chaotic and fragmentary image of the woman. Images of common women are presented along with special women, realistic along with surrealistic. The speech could continue forever. The possible descriptions of the images of what a woman can be are infinite therefore the identity of the woman is “open”. The identity is never defined, it remains unfinished and consequently impossible. The speed of speech is important in creating this effect; the fast, overlapping sequence of images that aims to break the image of the woman, what a woman is. One sentence replaces the other, making an image which is replaced by the following, proving that the image is a construction. Body and language function for the same purpose, to diffuse the power of stereotypes.

In *Joke and its relation to the unconscious*, Freud states that joke, very often, is a representation of something that cannot be expressed directly;⁵⁷ this function of joke here is suitable, since a direct explanation of the meaning of this scene would be too didactic and therefore lose its essence, by being contradictory with the openness of possibilities they want to express.

III. *Laughing Hole* (2006)

Laughing Hole is a piece about laughter, performed by three performers, La Ribot, Marie-Caroline Hominal and Delphine Rosay. The real protagonist, though, is the action of laughter along with the use of word-phrases; laughter not only as a reaction

⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p.161.

to humor but mainly as a physical action. The piece was performed in gallery spaces and lasted from two to eight hours; the audience could come and go whenever they wanted and sit wherever they wanted in the room.

What prevails here is the use of words, not as speech acts but as written slogans put all over the walls and the floor of the gallery. During the long performance, around 900 cardboard signs featuring combinations of words, very often surrealistic ones, like “Guantanamo beach” or “Alien brutality”. In detail, I tried to make a categorization of all the words I noted down from the video I saw:

- **Alien:** Feed aliens, Disturbing aliens, Dying aliens, Alien bar, Alien brutality, Alien memory
- **Anonymous:** Anonymous there, Anonymous and illegal
- **Bay:** Memory bay, Guantanamo bay
- **Broken:** Broken security, Broken whole
- **Brutal:** Alien brutality, Brutal war, Brutal me, Brutal fall, Brutal mum, Brutal killing, Brutal fall, Brutal bay, Just brutal, Brutality here, Brutal politician, Helping brutes, Brutally soft
- **Building:** Missing building, Secret building, Building occupation, Change building
- **Chip:** Fish and chips, Chip and pin
- **Clean:** Clean me, This is clean, Clean up, Clean here, Sell clean, Clean fall
- **Detention:** Detention please, Detention war, Dying in detention
- **Die:** Me dying, Die there, Raw death, Speculated death, Please die
- **Disturb:** Disturbingly yours, Do not disturb, This is disturbing, Disturb me, Disturbing help, Disturbingly lost, Just disturbing, Please disturb, Disturbing alien
- **Duck:** Spectator duck, Lost duck, Micro duck, Impotent duck
- **Fall:** Brutal fall, Clean fall, Secret fall
- **Feed:** Your feeding, Lost feed, Raw feed
- **Gaza:** Gaza party, Gaza desert, Gaza occupation, Gaza traffic, Gaza strip, Gaza terror, Remember terror
- **Guantanamo:** My Guantanamo, Disturbing Guantanamo, Guantanamo party, Kill in Guantanamo, Guantanamo war, Guantanamo bar, Anonymous in Guantanamo, Guantanamo duck, Guantanamobay, This is Guantanamo, Guantanamo hall
- **Hand:** Hands up, Shit hand, Shaking hands
- **Help:** Helping me, Your help, Help over 40
- **Here:** Terror here, Impotents here, Holes here, Brutality here, Clean here, War here, Sales here, Mums here, Soft here, Still here, Holes here

- **Hole:** Illegal hole, My hole, Hole sold, Holes here, Change holes, Over 40s hole, Dying hole, Another hole, Funny hole, Operation hole
- **Illegal:** Illegal sale, Illegal bay, Illegally sold, Illegal line, Illegal hole, Anonymous and illegal
- **Imperatives:** Do not die, Do not steal, Do not miss, Do not disturb, Disturb me, Please die, Fuck me gently, Eat whole
- **Impotent:** Impotent terror, Still impotent, Humanly impotent, Impotents here, This is impotent, Impotent occupation, Impotent duck, Impotent mum
- **Just:** Just lost, Just me, Just for fun, Just brutal, Just sales, Just raw
- **Killing:** Killing time, Start killing, Humanitarian killing
- **Laugh:** Laugh lines, Laughing war, Laughing bay, Laughing touch, Still laughing, Humanitarian laughing, Laughing party, Fall laughing, Lost laughs, Soft laugh
- **Line:** Laugh lines, Line up, Mum's line
- **Lost:** Lost feed, Lost touch, Lost laughs, Just lost, Lost politicians
- **Memory:** Memory bay, Alien memory, Memory there
- **Micro:** Microsoft, Micro duck, Micro death
- **Missing:** Missing secret, Missing another, Missing spectator, Remain missing, Missing economy
- **Mum:** For mum, Impotent mum, Mum deserted, Mum's line, Mums here
- **My:** My life, My flight, My fall, My operation
- **Occupation:** Another occupation, Building occupation, Gaza occupation, Over 40s occupation, Your occupation
- **Operation:** Falling operation, Operation hole, My operation, Flight operation, Your operation
- **Over 40s:** Help over 40, Over 40s operation, Over 40s story, Soft over 40s, Over 40s hole, Over death, Over 40s occupation, Please over 40s, You are over 40
- **Party:** Laughing party, Dead party, Guantanamo party, Gaza party, Drinking party, Falling party, Secret party, Spectator party, Desert party
- **Please:** Fun please, Please die, Please disturb
- **Politics:** Lost politicians, Politicians dying, Brutal politician, Soft politicians, Politicians sold, Political context, Still political
- **Raw:** Raw death, Raw laughter, Raw feed, Still raw
- **Remember:** Remember me, Remember touch, Remember terror
- **Secret:** Secret killing, Secret strip, Secret building, Missing secret, Your secret, Secret operation, Secret line, Secret fall
- **Shit:** Shit party, Shit hand, Massive shit, Shit campaign, My shit
- **Soft:** Soft fall, Feed soft, Soft laughter, Soft option, Soft politicians, Brutally soft, Soft over 40s
- **Spectator:** You're spectator, Missing spectator, Spectator party, Lebanon spectator
- **Still:** Still fun, Still raw, Still terrible, Still political, Still helping, Still laughing, Still killing, Still impotent, Still me, Still there
- **Story:** That's the story, Story tales, Whole story, Another story, My story, Disgusting story
- **Strip:** Body strip, Desert strip
- **Terror:** Terror of war, Impotent terror, My terror, Remember terror
- **This is:** This is dying, This is disturbing, This is clean, This is helping, This is impotent, This is Guantanamo

- **There:** Die there, Anonymous there, For war there
- **Touch:** My touch, Funny touch, Lost touch
- **Up:** Buy up, Look up, Hands up
- **War:** Buy war, Terror of war, War lord, Fore war there, Guantanamo war
- **Whole:** Destructive whole, Eat whole

The performers hold the placards with these words, laughing all the time, falling down in the floor and standing up again making us wonder: What is the meaning of these phrases and how are they connected to laughter? Is laughter contagious? How close is laughter to crying? And when does laughter become terrifying? When do we, as spectators, feel excluded?

At the beginning of the performance, the floor is covered with many carton placards. At first the spectators cannot see the written side of the placards, but only the piles of them in the floor. The three performers enter the room and start taking one by one the placards and showing them to the audience. Their endless laughter begins at the same time and does not stop till the end of the performance. All three of them wear the same clothes, robes and flip-flops. Their costumes remind of the clothes that prisoners wear. Clive Jenkins, a sound engineer, mixes the sound from the microphones of the performers, broadcasting laughter through the speakers around the walls. Each performer holds a placard for a while, revealing each time a different phrase, hand-written and in capital letters, and then sticks them in random places on the walls with brown tape, and he never stops laughing. It seems that the placards are the reason for the performers' laughter, but the contradiction between their laughter and the terrifying meanings of many of the presented phrases, converts very often the laughter into crying. The performance goes on in the same motif, until all the placards are put on the walls.

Concerning the structure of the performance, since the actions are repetitive, is there a built-up and if yes, in which sense? Indeed, the built-up of the performance is based on repetition and aggregation; not only the never ending laughter but also the repetition of the same words in different phrases and contexts. Concerning the use of the words as such, at first the spectators may think that the phrases are random and irrelevant to each other, but after a while and after a more careful look, it is obvious that all the phrases are related, creating a huge chain of different combinations of the same words, using the techniques mentioned by Freud⁵⁸ These elliptical messages are slogans, commands, comments, some address the audience, some create correlations. The majority of phrases consist of two words, sometimes three, rarely four. This kind of playing with the words has the effect that the comical is blurred with the tragic, the same way that laughter is blurred with crying. The fact that they mention words with a specific heavy connotation, like Guantanamo and Gaza while at the same time they are laughing, makes it ironical and sarcastic.

According to Freud, a common joke technique is the multiple use of the same material, in different order or with slight modification. In *Laughing Hole*, all the words are recycled. This game of shifting meaning is a technique similar to that used in *Gustavia*; a fragmentary presentation of several subjects, creating many different images on the minds of the spectators, aiming to show an opening of possibilities, rather than fixed, didactic messages. This is the same technique used in *Gustavia*, the logic is the same and is based on repetition and the creation of an infinite number of possible images. Finally, the actual meaning of phrases is the combination of the words and the connotations of the spectators. Repetition is also found in their incessant, mechanic laughter, which also mechanizes their bodies. Another key notion

⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London: Penguin Books, 1905, p.33.

for this performance is the notion of exhaustion – the many forms of exhaustion, in laughter itself, in the performers, in the spectators, in the use of words. In fact, exhaustion is a result of repetition and both of them lead to another notion, that of distortion, which is moreover related to grotesque. If laughter lasted one minute for example, its meaning wouldn't change; the very fact that it is repetitive distorts the nature of laughter itself – this grotesque laughter often gives the impression that it is no longer laughter, that it is something else. Also, laughter as an action influences physically the image of the body and here what is presented is an image of a body surrendered to an exhausting, insane laughter. Bergson identified repetition at the body of the comic physiognomy and here there is an example of bodies characterized by this notion of mechanic. This kind of laughter does not seem human.

Spectatorship is an important concept in this piece; the word-play has political connotations and according to Ramsay Burt, in his essay, *Preferring to laugh*, the aim of the exposition to all these meanings is to reveal our passivity, as spectators in the performance and as spectators in life, that we are looking horrible things happening without reacting, to reveal our responsibility.⁵⁹ Also, he mentions the object-like qualities of what is installed, that these kind of works make beholders aware of their own material presence within the gallery – this time what is objectified is not the body of the performer, but the body of the spectator. The topics are specific and refer to the “invisible others”. La Ribot's words about Laughing Hole summarize this idea: “I am speaking about the reality that is too big for us, out of our limits, out of our rules, a reality that is interpreted like in the cinema, an illegal reality”.

⁵⁹ Ramsay Burt, *Preferring to laugh*, www.laribot.com.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

*If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh,
otherwise they will kill you.*

Oscar Wilde

In this thesis, I aimed to analyze the humor mechanisms that are the basic elements of the performances *Distinguidas*, *Gustavia* and *Laughing Hole* and attempted to give an interpretation on the effects of them to the audience. I used the specific notions, mentioned by Bergson – repetition and the characteristics of the comic character, as well as Freud's joke-formation, that the dramaturgy of the pieces is characterized by brevity. I wanted to prove that the humorous result comes from the combination of the body - gestures and the use of speech. Bergson's automatism applies to the kind of movement used, whereas Freud's connection between jokes and the world of dreams give a concrete explanation about the role of playing with words and the creation of absurdity that prevails, reminding us Theophile Gautier and his definition about comic being “ in its extreme form is the logic of the absurd”.⁶⁰

Repetition is an element that both thinkers refer to and is used in all performances, each time transforming the meaning of what is presented; in *Gustavia*, it creates successive images concerning the identity of the woman; in *Laughing Hole*, the repetition of the same words in different connotations create completely different meanings; in *Distinguidas* repetition is found in the actions that consist the choreography and is the element that plays a leading role in the notion of

⁶⁰ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analyses*. Translated by Christine Shantz, Toronto-Buffalo-London: 1998, p. 65.

objectification. In her text, “Not Funny” Barbara Kruger describes the comedic as “motored by its intimacy with objectification, by its ability to step outside of it all and still get under its own skin.”⁶¹ Bergson was right that when something human gives us an impression of a thing has a comic effect.

In the pieces I analyzed from *Distinguidas*, the creation of the comic character is delightful and tense; *Cosmopolita*, *Capricho Mio* and *Socorro! Gloria!* are characteristic examples of a dramaturgy built up towards a comic character, naïve and isolated in his own personal world. Bergson says that “the art of the comic poet consists in making us so well acquainted with the particular vice, in introducing us, the spectators, to such a degree of intimacy with it, that in the end we get hold of some of the strings of the marionette with which he is playing, and actually work them ourselves.”⁶²

Another element that is revealed is a peculiar relationship between the tragic and the comic, especially in *Laughing Hole*, where the use of the words provoke mixed feelings. Also, in *Gustavia*, the content of their speech and also the use of their body have relativity to grotesque; the boundaries of comic are blurred with sadness, terror and disappointment. In *Manual de Uso*, also comic and tragic are mixed; Jennifer Higgin stresses the fact that humor can, paradoxically, be a way of coping with the most tragic of circumstances⁶³, a relevant example is that of *Laughing Hole* and the word-play with words that have heavy meaning, like Guantanamo and Gaza.

⁶¹ Jennifer Higgin (ed.), *The Artist's Joke*, London-Cambridge: Whitechapel - MIT Press, 2007, p. 15.

⁶² Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com. p. 7b.

⁶³ Jennifer Higgin (ed.), *The Artist's Joke*, London-Cambridge: Whitechapel - MIT Press, 2007, p. 13.

La Ribot does not use humor, though, as an end in itself but as a means for something else, a rebellious way of expression. In these pieces, humor acts not only in order to provoke laughter but also as a means to discover another dimension of reality, to communicate with a truth different from what is conventionally established. Bergson said that “art is certainly only a more direct vision of reality. Realism is in the work when idealism is in the soul – it is only through ideality that we can resume contact with reality”.⁶⁴ Additionally, Higgle argues, that “perturbing, provoking laughter, attacks presuppositions and conventions.”⁶⁵ This is why Berger, in his book, *Cultural Theory of Humor* concludes that, “the comic, is dangerous to all established order.” Also, Mary Douglas, an anthropologist who dealt with humor, in her book, *The social control of cognition: some factors in joke perception*, combines the theories of Freud and Bergson, finding the essence of the joke in its attack against control, “something conventional is attacked by something non-conventional, something organized and under control, by something vital and energetic, from an elation of life according to Bergson or from an elation of libido according to Freud. Jokes correlate dissimilar elements in such a way that an admissible norm is doubted by the appearance of another, which was hidden in the first one.”⁶⁶

In terms of structure, humor methods guarantee clarity as a result of brevity, whereas in terms of effectiveness, lead to passing messages through laughter. I would like to add how charming I find this way of dramaturgy because it presupposes intelligence and ability for abstraction and a concentration to only what is absolutely necessary.

⁶⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Temple of the Earth Publishing, www.templeoftheearth.com. p. 52a.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Higgle (ed.), *The Artist's Joke*, London-Cambridge: Whitechapel - MIT Press, 2007, p. 79.

⁶⁶ Jan Bremmer-Herman Roodenburg (ed.), *Πολιτισμική ιστορία του χιούμορ: Από την Αρχαιότητα έως τη σημερινή εποχή*, μτφ. Γιώργος Διπλάς, Αθήνα: Πολύτροπον, 2005, σ. 286.

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