

Humour in the Nazi camps: a defence against dehumanisation

Simon Dureuil

Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier, France
psydureuil@gmail.com

Sabine Sportouch

Université Paris Cité, France
sportouch.sabine@gmail.com

Dimitra Laimou

Université Paris Cité, Laboratoire de Psychologie Clinique, Psychopathologie, Psychanalyse, F-92100 Boulogne-Billancourt, and Université de Picardie Jules Verne, CHSSC EA 4289, Amiens, France
dimitra.laimou@wanadoo.fr

Abstract

In this article we discuss the use of humour in the Nazi camps. This is not an easy subject to approach, and some may fear that doing it diminishes the gravity and horror of the “Final Solution.” However, we will show that it is one of the most acute manifestations of psychic resistance, both individual and collective, of the deportees, who, in a state of weakness and humiliation and faced with the omnipresence of death, managed to express their life drive, as well as their subjectivity, through the pleasure of laughter. We will then look at the various manifestations of humour in the camps, from operettas to more spontaneous humour. In addition, we will discuss the various defensive functions, from the social act of creating a bond and recreating a community, to the defence mechanism of distancing oneself from the horrifying reality, to the Symbolic action that, for a time, distanced one from the reduction to the Real body. All of these played a fundamental role in maintaining the deportee's position as a subject.

Keywords: functions of humour, Nazi camps, Holocaust, subjectivity, Second World War.

1. Introduction

The decision to talk about humour in the Nazi camps is never easy, and it remains a subject seldom studied and a field that has been accessible for only a short time, i.e. from the 1980s. In 1976, the American writer and scholar Terrence Des Pres, a pioneer of the study of Holocaust

humour, proposed a hypothesis to explain this: “The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonour its dead” (Des Pres, as cited in Lipman, 1993, p. 7), while encouraging post-Second World War generations to recognise and contextualise the importance of humour during the Holocaust.

Indeed, some feared that the emphasis on humour in the camps would detract from the suffering inflicted or even lead to the experience of the camps being discredited. It is undoubtedly true that the development of the theme of humour in the camps can have harmful effects when it is manipulated from a negationist or antisemitic perspective, as Bruneteaux, for example, writes: “Are we not seeking to relativise the hell of the camps and, as a result, to imply that the survivors exaggerated their ordeal? After all, did they not manage to make fun of their torturers?” (Bruneteaux, 2001, p. 218, our translation). However, it is essential to address this subject for several reasons. First, due to our position as researchers attempting to examine and analyse the experiences in the camps, we have to consider the totality of the psychological mechanisms of which humour is one form, albeit perhaps not the most frequent. Furthermore, these manifestations of humour served as channels of resistance and as ways to mobilise the life drive that could aid survival and combat the dehumanisation at work in the camps. As a result, highlighting these defences, analysing them and sometimes recognising their creative and/or artistic dimension seems essential to us in order to demonstrate the life force of the internees, who were not reduced to absolute passivity, despite an environment that strongly impelled this. In so doing, we can give a more accurate account of their experience and their specific subjective position. And it seems to us that we can subscribe to the words of Des Pres:

Even so, can laughter be restorative in a case as extreme as the Holocaust? That something so slight should alleviate the burden of something so gigantic might, on the face of it, be a joke in itself. But then, humour counts most in precisely those situations where more decisive remedies fail.

(Des Pres, 1988, pp. 217-218).

We will begin by presenting the material that prompted us to write this article, drawing on examples we have encountered in our study of the letters written by Jews interned at the Drancy transit camp (“LettresCamps” project¹, Laimou et al. July 2025, Laimou et al., 2026a, Laimou et al., 2026b, Laimou et al, Submitted, Mathé et al. 2026). Then we will set out a characterisation of humour in order to specify how we are using the term here. This will be followed by an overview of the various forms of humour in the concentration camps, ranging from operettas organised collectively to more spontaneous jokes. In particular, we will refer to the accounts of Jewish deportees collected by Ostrower (2015) in her book (and related articles) on the subject of humour in the camps. Finally, we will explore the various functions of humour: social cohesion, defence when confronted with harmful emotions, and an attempt to restore the Symbolic body (which we will define below) and resubjectivation. Our work is multidisciplinary, drawing on the social sciences, philosophy and psychoanalysis. We first refer to Freud to characterise humour and its psychological effects, then to Lacan to detail the effects that humour has on the body and its consequences on subjectivation.

2. Humour in the French internment camps

In our study of the correspondence of Jewish internees in the Drancy and Compiègne camps, humour appears on a few occasions (Laimou et al., July 2025, Laimou et al., 2026a, Laimou et

¹ This project, directed by Dimitra Laimou, was originated within the “Centre d’histoire des sociétés, des sciences et des conflits” (CHSSC EA 4289) Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens. Ethics Committee Number: 2022-12-1/2023-21

al., 2026b, Laimou et al, Submitted, Mathé et al. 2026). When they wrote to their loved ones, their families, they used humour, often around the issue of food and the “quality” of life in the camp. Regarding food, there is a link between affects, relationships with others and orality. This can be seen in this letter from Gabriel Ramet, an internee, who writes: “I received your parcel, Ah! what an orgy... Thank you with all my heart and all my stomach!” (Ramet, as cited in Sabbagh, 2002/2019, p. 26, our translation). The humorous personification that appears here marks the link between affect, the relationship with the other and the satisfaction of the oral drive.

We note some attempts by the internees to distance themselves from reality, both for themselves and for the addressees: “But we’re having a very good holiday here at ‘Drancy beach’” (CMLXXXVI(6)14, May 1943, our translation). This can be seen as an avoidance of the reality of the camp, tinged with irony, but also the idea of a limited temporality (holidays). In another example: “But here too, we’re sorting things out, and one of my husband’s nightshirts is a superb bathrobe for my hot showers, twice a week: you can see how comfortable we are! It’s lovely, and I hope I get them in my next hotel!” (CMLXXXVI(18)1, October 1943, our translation).

In Drancy, humour appears in the letters and has an additional function, that of reassuring loved ones, showing them that even if the various senses are attacked (hunger, cold, etc.), humour remains. In so doing, the sender urges those close to them to maintain a position of desire, and allows them a more vital space, where their drives can still be mobilised.

As we will show, many of the functions of humour can be found in the extermination camps, albeit with several differences. In the letters, for example, the shared pleasure of humour is neither immediate nor guaranteed, as the recipient can only imagine the tone and expression of the sender. And since they are not living the same experience, it is more difficult to grasp the references and the reality of the situations being mocked by the sender. Finally, not being able to observe the pleasure of the person who finds the joke funny also reduces the sender’s *jouissance* and thus limits the effects of humour.

3. A characterisation of humour

Before examining the various uses of humour in extermination camps, we would like to clarify the nature of our object of study. The term *humour* has a fairly broad meaning, with no fixed definition. Humour in general does not appear as a particular mode of expression nor as the specific treatment of a theme (there is black humour, absurd humour, etc.). Riffaterre (1972, p. 71) notes that “[h]umour has no types, themes or motifs that belong to it alone; it imposes on itself no stylistic or lexical restrictions; it has neither situational sequences nor narrative functions of its own; it is therefore not a genre” [our translation]. The term itself remains vague: it can apply to a character trait, to the quality of what causes laughter, etc. Valéry writes:

The word ‘humour’ cannot be translated. If it could, the French would not employ it. But employ it they do, precisely because of the indeterminacy that they read into it, which makes it a very useful word when trying to account for taste. Each statement in which it figures alters its meaning.

(Valéry, 1921, p. 26)

He highlights the problematic nature of a definition that can only expand as new outputs appear that provoke laughter. From an etymological point of view, the word *humour* is Middle English via Old French from the Latin *humor*, meaning moisture, used initially in the theory of the “cardinal humours” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). It is interesting to note here that the original organic, physiological dimension, consisting of a fluid (the “humour”), eventually transforms into a means of expression and manifestation of being (social, psychological, drive-related and,

in some interpretations, ontological). It is in fact from the drive and the mobilisation of the body that the term is constructed.

In 1905, Freud drew a distinction between the *comic* (*Das Komische*), the *joke*² (*Der Witz*) and *humour* (*Das Humor*), pointing out that in all three cases an economy is made. With the comic, it is an economy of investment in representation. Thus, laughter comes from a two-stage shift, first with a strong affect (e.g. anxiety when confronted with a dangerous situation, or anger with an intolerable one) and then, when faced with a situation that is in reality less dangerous or shocking than it seemed, the affect recedes. This can be seen in the example of a small child who laughs when they see that the toy they thought was broken is, after all, intact. As far as jokes are concerned, it is the economy of expenditure on inhibition, because the joke is based on a transgression that manifests in a limited and temporary lifting of repression. As for humour, Freud sees it as an economy of affect in the sense that it allows us to bypass the confrontation with an unpleasant affect. Freud also points out that while with the comic and the joke there is a comparison between two modes of representation for the same content, this is not the case in humour: “The fact that the situation is dominated by the emotion that is to be avoided, which is of an unpleasurable character, puts an end to the possibility of comparing it with the characteristics of the comic and of jokes” (Freud, 1905/1981, p. 235). We will not develop these differences any further, especially since, according to Freud, humour can have a transversal character, as it can merge with the joke and with other forms of the comic. We want to focus on the question of humour broadly conceived, and we will adhere to the definition that Ostrower (2015) gave to fifty-five former deportees whom she interviewed on this question: “[Say] what made you laugh or smile.”

In this article we will also explore black humour, as the last bastion of defence in hopeless situations, as noted by Gubanov (2018, p. 382): “At the present time, black humour serves to transform the tragic events of our lives into abstract ideas. The abstract idea is abstracted from the events that occurred and reduces the psycho-traumatic perception of real phenomena.” It can be defined as follows: “a form of humour that deals with grim subjects such as death, illness, deformity, disability or war with bitter amusement and presents these tragic, distressing or morbid themes in a humorous light” (Willinger et al., 2017, p. 160). Several authors have written about the use of black humour in traumatic contexts. For example, Gullotta (2014) has worked on what he calls “Gulag humour.” One of the first points he highlights is the constant presence of humour in the Soviet camps, from 1917 until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, as a form of discreet but permanent rebellion. He notes that the use of black humour in the Gulag often had an aggressive dimension, serving to diminish other groups of prisoners and encourage solidarity among members of the same group: “*Urki* [i.e. criminals in the Gulag] used black humour as a means of showing their superiority towards political prisoners, or simply weaker prisoners, by laughing at their misfortunes” (Gullotta, 2014, p. 101).

Before exploring the various manifestations of humour in the camps and its different functions, we can return to the distinction between humour and irony proposed by Bergson in *Laughter* (1911). In the case of irony, “we state what ought to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is actually being done” (p. 127), while with humour “we describe with scrupulous minuteness what is being done, and pretend to believe that this is just what ought to

² James Strachey, Freud’s primary translator and the general editor of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, chose to translate *Der Witz* as “joke” throughout his texts, a choice that has been widely noted and sometimes criticised. In his preface to Volume VIII (Freud, 1905/1981, p. 7), Strachey discusses the difficulty of translating *Der Witz*, the meaning of which does not map neatly onto any single English word, explaining that he ultimately chose “joke” rather than “wit,” as a broader term that allows for more interpretive flexibility. Solms’s *Revised Standard Edition* (2024) also uses “joke.” Therefore, for purposes of consistency, we have retained the term “joke” in this article.

be done” (p. 127). If we adhere to this definition, it appears that its use in the camps is particularly justified: the internees cannot change what is, and laughter is one of the few ways – although there may be others – in which they can confront it.

4. Humour in the camps

Haïm Vidal Séphiha, linguist and former Auschwitz-Birkenau deportee, notes the importance of humour in the camps: “And if you adapt, laughter underlies it, but it is the laughter of derision. The operative word in the concentration camp world is derision...” (Séphiha, 2009, pp. 109-110, our translation). We can see here the importance attributed to laughter, in a completely absurd context of violence, suffering and death, framed by a bureaucratic administration and organisation. And as Wiesel notes, the humour and laughter generated in the camps could sometimes be laughter for pleasure, playful laughter, but it could also take other forms:

Laughter that springs from lucid and desperate awareness, a mirthless laughter, a laughter of protest against the absurdities of existence, a laughter of revolt against a universe where man, whatever he may do, is condemned in advance. A laughter of compassion for man who cannot escape the ambiguity of his condition and of his faith.

(Wiesel, 1973, p.198)

This is a laughter that engages the subject, his ethos, and is a channel of protest, marked by the assertion of a certain collective strength, a certain community of minds. Humour thus emerges as “a way of dealing with the tragedy of the human condition,” in the words of psychoanalyst Hélène Trivouss-Widlöcher (2002, p. 34, our translation). According to Oring, we can even go so far as to say that there is a transcendental dimension to humour that can be seen as: “the unwillingness of the individual to surrender to the impossible conditions of existence and attempts to achieve a measure of liberation from the [...] forces that remain beyond one’s control” (Oring, 1983, p. 268).

Various forms of humour appeared in the camps, e.g. short humorous texts, theatre and operettas (see Lauterwein, 2009, for further examples). One of these was the “deportee theatre,” which took place in Dachau in 1943, more or less officially. Another was a comedy with a particularly long title, written by Rudolf Kalmar (1900-1974), which was allowed to be performed for a few weeks before being banned: *Die Blutnacht auf dem Schreckenstein oder Ritter Adolars Brautfahrt und ihr grausiges Ende oder Die wahre Liebe ist das nicht. Ein komisch-schauriges Ritterstück in drei Aufzügen mit Musik*. [The Night of Blood at Schreckenstein or Knight Adolar’s Bridal Journey and its Gruesome End or True Love This Is Not: A Comical and Macabre Knight’s Play in Three Acts with Music] (our translation).

In this play, we follow the adventures of Count Adolar, an almost transparent parody of Hitler (according to accounts, it seems that the actors would happily draw out the “Adol...” sound). He is visited at his castle by three knights, whom he eventually kills after raping Anneliese, the heroine. The play, which is rather sombre, ends with the following lines: “Is everything really that bad?/ All will be well in the end/ Thanks to the magic word: humour, humour!” (Kalmar, as cited in Naumann, 1983, pp. 220-221, our translation). Here we find a critical function of humour, in which the performance serves to bypass external censorship and allows Hitler to be ridiculed. One of the prisoners who took part in the performance said:

How many of them, who performed the play on powdery barrels, survived the Fascism? Only a few. They had the certainty, as they lay at night on their wooden bunks: We have done something that gives strength to our comrades. We have made the Nazis look ridiculous

(Naumann, as cited in Lipman, 1993, p. 73).

However, operettas (and other productions) can have other roles. This is illustrated by the operetta *Le Verfügbar aux Enfers*, written at Ravensbrück by Germaine Tillion with the help of her fellow prisoners. This play focuses more directly on the camp experience. The majority of the writing of *Verfügbar* took place in October 1944, when Tillion's friends managed to conceal her absence from work and provided her with paper and ink so that she could write, hidden in a crate. She did not authorise publication of the text until 2005, as she feared it would be misunderstood by the public. The work was inspired by Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers* [Orpheus in the Underworld], and was based on existing melodies (traditional, popular and bawdy songs, and sometimes classical music themes), often suggested by fellow inmates. The *Verfügbaren* (francised into *Verfügbars* by Tillion) were prisoners with no fixed tasks who performed the most difficult chores, as was the case with Tillion.

The operetta is in three acts (Spring, Summer and Winter) and features a naturalist in a concentration camp, without a first name, defined only by his function, who presents the natural species *Verfügbar*³. He appears as a detached and often critical scientific lecturer (although he uses only his authority and hardly any scientific method in his presentation), whom Tillion (2005, p. 12) describes thus: "Compère and barker of the Revue. Black frock coat, black cardboard top hat, huge white cardboard cuffs, trousers befitting his means... Long, pale, bland, old-fashioned, self-important" (our translation). His performance alternates with a women's chorus, the *Verfügbars*, which has a comedic function. The chorus often mocks the lecturer's comments, as well as the Nazis, the functioning of the camp and the camp officers. Sometimes, the women make fun of themselves, particularly for their "naivety." There is a clear contrast here. On the one hand, there is the coldness of the anonymous naturalist, who refers to the administrative and dehumanising dimension of the camps which creates the *Verfügbar*, that is, a species different from and inferior to humans. He identifies it as "the product of the conjugation of a male member of the Gestapo with a female member of the Resistance" (Tillion, 2005, pp. 30-32) which is "classed as an inferior animal" and is "related to the gastropods (from *gaster*: stomach; and *podos*: foot), because it has its stomach in its heels" (Tillion, 2005, pp. 46-48, our translation). On the other hand, there is the choir, in which all the women are affectionately named (Lulu de Colmar, Titine, Marmotte, etc.) and are thus clearly identified as distinct subjects who escape the anonymisation of the camp. Moreover, clandestine writing and performances (or rather, whispered readings) had a rallying function, contributing to the "coalition of friendship" essential to survival (Tillion, 1988, p. 31). All this hinged on a certain form of sublimation, or at least on a creative and ultimately drive-related dynamic.

Freud considered drive to be a borderline concept between the psychic and the somatic, since it is the psychic representation of excitations from inside the body, or to put it another way, the psychic integration of bodily events. The drive strives to be satisfied, i.e. to see a reduction in the subject's level of tension or of psychic excitation. Indeed, the drive should be seen as a pressure that is felt when a physical need demands to be satisfied. And once it is satisfied, the tension decreases and pleasure can appear. Then, the cycle begins again with the drive moving towards a new object of investment. Remember that, for Freud, artistic creation is a kind of drive satisfaction – in other words, a reduction in excitation or psychic tension – in a non-sexual form, more detached from the erogenous zones alone. The self-mockery that appears from time to time in the text can serve as a means of mobilising the struggle, as Andrieu notes: "Black humour and self-derision [...] hold up to the inmates a pitiless mirror, the very description of which forces a reaction, leads to refusal and represents a victory of the spirit over the system of dehumanisation" (Andrieu, 2013, p. 8). In fact, this makes it possible to put into words their own weaknesses and from there to work out ways of trying to remedy them.

³ *Verfügbar* is German for "available."

The final point that seems to us essential in Germaine Tillion's work is the parodic misappropriation of the signifiers and roles used in the camp. She creates a hole in the discourse of the concentration camp Other, or to put it another way, she discredits the Nazis by hijacking and mocking their very language. In this way, the transformation of the *Verfügbars* into entities separate from humans probably refers in part to the vision of the Nazis that she can mock through the lecturer, but she also introduces an element of resistance (where the *Verfügbar* would have come from a mother in the Resistance). In addition, by distancing themselves from the demands imposed by the concentration camp Other through its language, the deportees can show their own subjectivity and their own version of the terms. Thus, in *Verfügbar*, Tillion underlines the absurdity of being identified as “NN” or *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog, i.e. political deportees to be closely watched) without knowing the reason for it or its meaning. She makes fun of the tautological nature of this assignation in a dialogue between the NN chorus and a black triangle⁴ (i.e. the *Asoziale*, the prisoners from marginalised groups such as the homeless, prostitutes, and alcoholics). Tillion (2005, p. 104) writes:

The chorus [Loudly]: Me, I'm not leaving in a Transport.
Black triangle [Impressed]: Why?
Chorus: Because I'm NN.
Black triangle: What does it mean, NN?
Chorus: It means I'm not leaving in a Transport.
Black Triangle: But why are you NN?
Chorus: Because I'm from block 32.
[Long thoughtful silence] Black triangle: NN it must mean something...
The chorus: Of course... It means *Nacht und Nebel*, night and fog.
Black triangle: It's not clear...

Finally, we would like to discuss the testimonies of fifty-five former deportees collected by Ostrower on the subject of humour, in order to show that humour was also present in less structured forms, in spontaneous oral exchanges between deportees or even through drawings. She cites several examples in an article (Ostrower, 2014a) inspired by her book *It Kept Us Alive: Humor in the Holocaust* (Ostrower, 2014b). The starting point for the work is the question: “Can you talk about humour during the Shoah?”⁵ (Ostrower, 2015). Here Ostrower defines humour (as noted above) as “anything that made people laugh or smile.” Lily Rackman, a deportee interviewed by Ostrower, says that humour was her own way of dealing with the strangeness and horror of what happened in the camps:

The whole thing [the camp] was so grotesque, it just wasn't real. I didn't see the reality, so I escaped to this: I created a world of laughter... I think that laughter and humour means not to take things in the form of what we see, but to dress it in a different format, to make it something else. Because it was absurd, all that time. It is simply inconceivable that they could do to people what they did to us... the fact that I was able to view the most shameful conditions as grotesque – that is what helped me to stay alive

(Rackman, as cited in Ostrower, 2014a, p. 8).

⁴ The *Asoziale* were required to wear badges in the form of a black triangle.

⁵ *Shoah*, meaning “devastation, desolation or ruin” (Garber, 2018), is the Hebrew term for the Jewish genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and is widely used in various European countries as an alternative to “Holocaust.” In France, the term has been in popular use particularly since 1985, the year of release of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. The term *Shoah* does not contain the sacrificial dimension attached to the word “Holocaust.”

5. Functions of humour

We will now describe the various uses of humour in the camps. We will start with the list of uses of humour in general, put forward by Ziv: (1) a function to release aggression, to show one's superiority, to mock the other and/or resist frustration; (2) a sexual dimension (and it seems to me that we can add to this various transgressions, especially in a regressive mode of the scatological and other types); (3) a social function which feeds and is fed by relationships with others and the sharing of experiences; (4) a defensive function involving black humour and/or self-derision; and finally (5) a more intellectual function via the elaborated jokes and wordplays, in particular, which allows us to develop patterns and directions of thought that are far removed from the imposed situation, and offers a way out of the absence of meaning (Ziv, 1984). Ostrower shows that among the people she interviewed, it was above all the expression of humour as a defence mechanism (60% of statements) that was apparent, and in particular self-derisive humour (47%) and black humour (25%). She also found the presence of humour in connection with food and hunger (around 12%).

The first function identified by Ziv, the "aggressive function" of humour, appears in the camps in the mocking of the Nazis or camp agents. It was a way of expressing criticism without voicing it directly, which was obviously impossible in any other form if one wished to survive. This usage brings to mind a confrontation – although there is no reliable source that can verify this, other than the account given by his son, Martin – between Freud and the Gestapo. On 4 June 1938, Freud, then aged 82, was granted permission to leave Vienna after being searched twice by the Gestapo. After confiscating some of his possessions and making him pay an "escape tax," the Nazis required him to sign an attestation guaranteeing that he had not been mistreated. He did so and added: "I can recommend the Gestapo most highly to everyone." Sarcasm was the only element that Freud, forced to leave his home and obey unjust demands, had left. Jeremy Dauber (2017) notes that the Nazis were well aware of the dangerous nature of humour, with nearly five thousand political humourists sentenced to death between 1934 and 1945 by the Nazi regime. He also quotes a Nazi prosecutor who stated that, since the better the joke, the more it would spread and the more dangerous it would be, the more severely the person responsible for it should be punished (Dauber, 2017).

The second function Ziv describes, which relates to sexuality, was, as Ostrower notes (2014a) less common in camp humour, and she refers instead to more scatological and regressive dimensions. Where the deportees were reduced to a state of animality by the Nazis (they were stripped naked, shorn, mistreated, lost their privacy and suffered many other forms of violence), the use of regressive humour could restore the possibility of talking about these dehumanisations and taking control of them at the moment of the enunciation.

Ziv's third function of humour, that of a means of social bonding, was particularly important in the camps. As we have already seen with the work of Tillion and her fellow prisoners, humour can be used to produce a movement of the body, and to strengthen the collective. In the camps, food can also play the role of a cultural and familial object, which sometimes unfolds in the exchange of recipes and serves as a reminder of a specific knowledge, a cultural belonging and a narcissistic group pact (Kaës, 2009). Some of the humour is also based on the use of Yiddish and/or shared cultural references, which support something of a shared identity. For example, Nachum Monderer-Manor, a former deportee, tells Ostrower (2014a) a version of the following joke (which could also be found in various versions in the ghettos, particularly in Warsaw): "There's an SS raid on a Jewish home at breakfast time. 'Who are these men?' a frightened child asks his grandmother, who replies in Yiddish: *Ess, Ess, mein Kind* [eat, eat, my child], which of course sounds like SS." The linguistic and cultural mobilisations specific to prisoners produce a communal effect by mobilising shared signifiers, an enunciation and a specific prosody that summon up points of identification and past experiences of satisfaction. The pleasure of humour

is rooted in the handling of language in its pure sonority. The transgression in language itself plays with the lifting of repression. And this pleasure unfolds in and through the body via the enunciation, the pleasure of articulation itself. Furthermore, a subject can act on another's body by making them laugh. Humour therefore leads to a consideration of the subject on another level, that of the real, of the effects of the lived body, precisely where the violence of the camp acts.

To Ziv's (1984) social function of humour, we would like to add another dimension, that of social correction, as put forward by Bergson (1911). He writes: "Consequently it [the comic] expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absent-mindedness in men and in events" (Bergson, 1911, pp. 87-88). He refers to laughter as a sanction/condemnation directed at "social errors," as can be observed today, for example in political humour, which points out the failings of those in power. We can take up this understanding of humour in the camps, since it sheds light on the cruel and brutal behaviour of the SS and the collaborators in the camps (the deportees who, to improve their conditions, denounced their comrades). However, Bergson's logic neglects the transgressive function of laughter, which can extend to the deconstruction of meaning through absurdity. He thus omits the dimension of pleasure inherent in joking, and the question of drives remains absent as far as he is concerned.

The fourth function proposed by Ziv (1984), that of humour as defence, was one of the most common in the camps, as we have seen above in other traumatic situations. This function is particularly evident in black humour and self-derision. We can also consider humour to be a defensive action in that it protects the subject from certain affects and mobilises, even if it remains temporary and limited, the pleasure principle. Freud (1927/1981, p. 162) notes that "the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest." He used black humour, for example, in response to the death of his daughter Sophie, when he felt himself entering old age: "On March 13 of this year I quite suddenly took a step into real old age. Since then the thought of death has not left me, and sometimes I have the impression that seven of my internal organs are fighting to have the honour of bringing my life to an end" (Freud as cited in Jones, 1957, p. 79). In this way, he transforms his sadness, his anxiety of death and perhaps a certain feeling of passivity into a drive-related movement that allows him to distance himself from his body: his personified organs are fighting with his own subjectivity. In the case of black humour, those who practise it often target themselves. Arie Sover (2021) proposes the term *self-humour* (meaning all kinds of self-deprecating humour), of which he describes the function as follows: "Self-humour changes his consciousness towards physical reality. He cognitively removes himself from his predicament, and looks at it from the outside, as if it is not him in that situation" (Sover, 2021, p.140). We can thus see the idea of a certain separation between the "I" who tells the joke, and the "I" who experiences the given situation.

On the subject of humour, Freud points out that: "Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances" (Freud, 1927/1981, p. 163). Humour makes it possible to avoid the reality principle⁶ in order to highlight a part of the ego that does not give in to external constraints. Freud goes further, pointing out that unlike the

⁶ Freud posits that two principles organise psychic functioning: the pleasure principle and the reality principle. They act in concert, with the former guiding the drive and seeking immediate satisfaction, while the latter acts as a regulator, modifying the pleasure principle by postponing satisfaction. Thus, instead of taking the shortest route (pleasure principle), satisfaction takes detours depending on the concrete reality of the environment and the conditions imposed by the external world (reality principle).

comic, which is a “pure flash of the ego,” humour is the mark of an over-investment of the super-ego⁷, “if we assume that it [i.e. the humorous attitude] consists in the humourist’s having withdrawn the psychical accent from his ego and having transposed it on to his super-ego” (Freud, 1927/1981, p. 164). In this way, the superego recovers a part of its investment and can protect the ego from harmful external influences: this may shed light on the richness and relevance of humour in the face of the horrors of the camps. Freud also presents humour “as the highest of these defensive processes [in comparison with repression and symptom]” (Freud, 1905/1981, p. 233) in that, unlike repression, it does not withdraw the ideational content linked to affect from conscious attention. As a result, the cost incurred by the defence mechanism is much lower, it can be shared, and there is no return of the repressed-symptom, since it is the laughter itself that translates and plays with this return. The result, therefore, is a kind of short-circuiting of the symptom, a reduction in the suffering and anguish. However, the effect of humour can only be temporary.

Finally, Ziv proposes a fifth, more intellectual function of humour, which acts to create a shift away from the given situation. This is found repeatedly in the camps as a way of distancing oneself from the terrible reality. Humour can help to create and explore the inscription of language in the body, going beyond the mere suffering of the lived body that overwhelms all other aspects of the internee’s experience. Jokes about hunger and food can have the effect of distancing us from the sensations of the body. Yehuda Feigin, a former deportee (as cited in Ostrower, 2015, p. 193) recounts the following: “There was a lot of humour over food. What does a person talk about? About what he lacks! The first thing was food. Because every single animal, what does it look for? Not diamonds and not houses, but food.” An example of this can be seen in Germaine Tillion’s *Verfügbar aux Enfers*, which relates an exchange between the “Verfügbars” on an imaginary tourist and culinary itinerary (thus echoing conversations that may have taken place in the camp):

Titine: I’m hungry!
Nénette: Me too...
Havas: Good! Where are we going for lunch? It’s your turn Titine...
Titine: We were in Avignon...
Rosine: We’ll go by car, not too late... [...] Around midday we’ll arrive in Gordes for lunch...
Marmotte: No, around eleven o’clock...
Rosine: Why around eleven o’clock?
Marmotte: I’m hungry and it’ll annoy me to wait until midday to have lunch... As I’m free, I have the right to have lunch at eleven, haven’t I?
Rosine [Very conciliatory]: But first you’re not hungry. You’re forgetting that you had breakfast at Dédé in Avignon who gave you a huge bowl of chocolate, with butter, toast, rusks, jam and a pound cake... [...].
Marmotte: So half past eleven...

(Tillion, 2005, pp. 148-150, our translation).

In this extract, we see at the same time an attempt to deny the reality of hunger in the words “you’re not hungry. You’re forgetting that you had breakfast...,” that is, a fantasising via food, and a kind of fixation on the time, which gives rise to a light-hearted argument about a detail from a fictional situation. In addition, this allows the presentification of the missing object and

⁷ It should be remembered that the superego, the ego and the id make up the three instances of Freud’s Second Topography that form the individual’s psychic apparatus. The superego is presented as a moral authority constituted by the internalisation of social and parental prohibitions. However, if the subject’s functioning is flexible enough, the superego works in concert with the id and the ego to achieve a compromise between desire and prohibition that allows for “controlled” drive satisfaction.

gives it substance, at least in the discourse: it is a real symbolisation function (we define the Symbolic and its derivatives below). Former deportee Lily Rickman states:

There were those who exchanged recipes all day. We were supposed to stay in our bunks on Sundays. Recipes were passed through the bunks-how much sugar, how much flour, how much this or that. Someone next to me gave many recipes and then all of a sudden her mood changed and she didn't want to participate. They asked if I knew what happened to her, I said: "I think she burned her cake"

(Rickman, cited in Ostrower, 2015, p. 193).

Here, instead of giving in to the despondency that might arise from the potential collapse of her neighbour or her sadness that prevents her from taking part in the group, Lily Rickman offers another hypothesis. She acknowledges the absence of her fellow inmate, while providing a humorous explanation that is striking in its impossibility. In this way, the affect is diverted, cancelled out, and the exchanges can continue, and it is the avoidance function of humour that comes to the fore. It is the distortion that creates the laughter.

Having discussed how the functions of humour proposed by Ziv (1984) manifested in the camps, we offer two additional functions. First, we add the function of restoring a certain "continuity of being" for the subject between who they were before the camp and who they continue to be during their internment. Bergson (1911) sees the appearance of laughter as arising from the intersection of two (or more) realities: "A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (Bergson, 1911, p. 96). This reading is all the more important in the camps, as the humour that took place there enabled the deportees to remobilise another lived experience, that of their life before and/or after. Laughter thus constitutes an act of resistance that is rooted in the recollection of what the subject was before. Humour can restore the familiar (*Heimlich*), where only violent strangeness reigns. Thus Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and former deportee, explains how he "trained" a friend in humour by imagining amusing situations that might occur after the camp:

"I practically trained a friend of mine who worked next to me on the building site to develop a sense of humour. I suggested to him that we would promise each other to invent at least one amusing story daily, about some incident that could happen one day after our liberation"

(Frankl, 1946/1992, p. 54).

What is apparent here is, on the one hand, the proposal to make a sense of humour a form of "therapy." In addition, there is the possibility of maintaining a link, through humour, between daily life in the camp and life to come, thus highlighting the transitory aspect of the situation. Humour becomes a vehicle for hope. The idea of a subjective continuity, albeit transformed by the violence of the camp, is maintained. Humour serves here as a defence mechanism that guarantees the subject's persistence despite attacks from outside. In what Frankl proposes, it is through the collective effort, in the complicity between himself and his comrade, that the movement is sustained.

The second additional function we propose is that humour can appear as a defence, through recourse to the Symbolic, against the dehumanising effects of the camps. To develop this point, we will now make a somewhat complex but necessary digression on the contributions of Jacques Lacan (e.g. 2007, 2021), particularly on the question of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. We will briefly review certain of his concepts in order to better understand the effects of language, in this case humour, on the body. When we refer to the Symbolic, we mean it in a particular sense, as developed by Lacan. He describes the subject's experience in terms of three interrelated modalities, which he calls registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

The Imaginary relates to the domain of self-image and the body, which unfolds in representations and narcissism. One of the central points in the construction of the subject, of their constitution as they position themselves in the world and in relation to others, is the Imaginary.

The Symbolic includes everything that has to do with language. It is through this register that the subject is named and inscribed in language by the Other. The Symbolic is what separates the subject from the Real, through the introduction of speech. Pure bodily sensations can then be distanced and, at the same time, integrated into the ego. Lacan proposes a pseudo-mythical reading in which, for example, the baby experiences a form of total satisfaction in the dual relationship with the mother. Then, what allows for its psychic separation is the intervention of the Symbolic carried by the speech of a third party (the father, for example). During this intervention, a fundamental lack appears, which the subject attempts to fill in vain: this is the emergence of the circuit of desire made possible by language.

The Real can initially be defined by what it is not, i.e. as a register that belongs neither to the Symbolic nor to the Imaginary. To be more precise, it can be understood as the experience of the body insofar as it cannot be spoken (by the Symbolic) or registered as an image. The Real is not directly accessible to the speaking subject, who conceals it behind their fantasy network (to simplify, we can think of this network as a set of filters between the subject and 'objective' reality). The Real is outside meaning, and when the subject encounters it, their fantasised experience is erased, the Symbolic is pierced and a traumatic effect is created. In the camps, the Real imposes itself on prisoners where they are directly struck in the body, dehumanised and confronted with the materiality of death.

Thus, when we use the term *Symbolic* here, we are referring more to the possibility of representation, of producing meaning beyond bodily experiences (the Real) through language. One could even go so far as to say that this marks the inscription in desire and the possibility of saying 'I'.

To return to our premise, humour is a defence against the dehumanising effects of the camps. First, of course, there is the violence and starvation that produces emaciated, weakened bodies, numbed by cold and lack. But there are also the humiliations that affect privacy (shaved hair, nudity, communal latrines...) and produce a homogenising effect, destroying the individual subjective specificities of the deportees in order to reduce them to a state of animality. And the subjects, with their desires and their history, are reduced to the status of vermin or parasites to be eliminated, and identified by a single sign, manifested in a star or a coloured triangle. This privation of identity goes even further, seizing the very flesh of the prisoners through tattooed numbers. All this tends to erase the drive-activated, desiring body with its particular subjective coordinates, leaving only the raw, real body.

We have defined above Lacan's three registers and, based on these, Lacan proposes that the subject's body is likewise structured according to these three registers. He posits that the subject *has* their body, rather than *being* it, in the sense that the body is always permeated by fantastical dynamics and marked by language, which prevents its perfect incarnation. This can be seen in the separation that exists between the subject's body in reality and its reflection, in the division between signifiers and bodily experiences. Lacan understands the body of the speaking subject as constituted by the meeting of those three registers, through the Symbolic body, the Imaginary body and the Real body. The Symbolic body is the body as it is mediated by signifiers in and in relation to the Other (i.e. the way in which the subject was spoken to as an *infans*, or, put simply, the social). The Imaginary body is the body as it appears as an image, through the various points of identification that nourish the ego, in particular. Finally, the Real body is the body that escapes representation and symbolisation. This is the body that is subjected to and experiences raw sensations that are inaccessible to language. In our hypothesis, humour could serve to remobilise the Symbolic body, the body:

[T]hat in which the being sustained by it does not know that language is what discerns it [the body] for him, to the point that it would not be there if it were not able to be spoken of. The first body [the real, organic one] makes the second from incorporating itself there [by the language]

(Lacan, 1970, p. 61).

We mention the remobilisation of the Symbolic body because it mobilises the *jouissance* of laughter, limited by language and by the enunciation itself. Humour can thus produce the beginnings of a Symbolic elaboration through the mobilisation of the subject of the enunciation. In this way, the deportee can avoid remaining the object of an external utterance assigned by the Nazis, the one that defines and freezes them as a “Jew” to be exterminated. And as we have noted, humour brings into existence cultural and social facts, prosodies and sounds that are known and shared. In short, all these elements constitute points of identification that pass through language, guaranteeing a part in the signifying chain, in discourse, and ultimately a place in the relationship with the Other, the one that pre-exists the violent orders of the camps. It now remains for us to recognise the last, fundamental and specific function of humour in the camps: humour as a means of subjectivation.

6. Humour as a means of subjectivation

We have seen various functions of humour in the camps: mockery of the Nazis and assertion of the deportees’ value, a social act making it possible to forge links and recreate a community, a defence mechanism forming part of the pleasure principle to distance oneself from the appalling reality, and a Symbolic action, distancing oneself, for a time, from the reduction to the Real body, without speech and the organic needs such as food.

We can add a last dimension, that of the ethical work that the use of humour can constitute for the deportee. In the camps, we witness the most absolute loss of power to act on the part of the subjects, crushed by brutality and transformed into waste-bodies, animal-bodies, without a name. Humour and laughter appear to be a revival of Spinoza’s *conatus*, or “persevering in one’s being.” He writes: “Sorrow lessens or limits a man’s power of action... it lessens or limits the effort by which a man endeavours to persevere in his own being” (Spinoza, 1677/1954, p. 155). In contrast, the affect of joy (*laetitia*) increases the power of action:

By ‘joy’, therefore, in what follows, I shall understand the passive states through which the mind passes to a greater perfection; by ‘sorrow’, on the other hand, the passive states through which it passes to a less perfection. The emotion of joy, related at the same time both to the mind and the body, I call ‘pleasurable excitement’ (*titillatio*) or ‘cheerfulness’; that of sorrow I call ‘pain’ or ‘melancholy’”

(Spinoza, 1677/1954, p. 137).

As Spinoza notes: “laughter and merriment are nothing but joy, and therefore, provided they are not excessive, are in themselves good” (Spinoza, 1677/1954, p. 222). This should not be taken to mean that the deportee who uses humour is in a state of absolute joy, but rather a moment of suspension of sadness. The psychoanalyst Theodor Reik writes of “Jewish humour” that: “Life is often tragic, but its pathos reflects itself most distinctly in jokes... there is behind the comic facade not only something serious... but sheer horror” (Reik, 1962, p. 27). Spinoza’s pure joy can be understood as an intense drive-related mobilisation in response to traumatic effects: the horror does not disappear, but the comedy veils it and uses it as a framework.

Mobilising the *conatus* through humour meant rejecting the Nazi degradations that rendered the internees in the camps virtually powerless. This was achieved in particular through black humour. Freud presents the example of a man condemned to death who, on his way to his execution on a Monday morning, declares: “Well, the week’s beginning nicely” (Freud,

1927/1981, p. 161). Freud sees this as a way of gaining a certain amount of pleasure and putting the reality of death at a distance. We can see here a fight against passivity; he is no longer a manipulated body, destined to disappear. He remains a desiring subject, even in the face of death. In the camps, we find this black humour:

The consolation to friends upon leaving was, ‘Come on, cheer up, old man. We’ll meet again someday in a better world – in a shop window as soap’. To which the friend would reply, ‘Yes, but while they’ll make toilet soap from my fat, you’ll be a bar of cheap laundry soap’ [In the camps, the rumour circulated that the fat of Jewish internees was used to make soap]

(DeKoven Ezrahi, 1982, p. 31).

There is also an alternative version of this black humour, in which one deportee tells another to eat less so that the soap will be smaller. This alternative is more enlightening in terms of the function of humour: we move from fear of a terrible act to a symbolic regaining of control, ironically making slimming a choice and symbolically hindering the action of the SS.

We have seen with Spinoza that humour is a remobilisation of the Symbolic body and a way of elaborating its power to act. It is the desire and drive dimensions that are mobilised. We can go further by proposing the hypothesis that creation in the camps, and humour in particular, which mobilises the body, the voice and the enunciation, allows the remobilisation of the deportee’s position as subject. In the testimonies of survivors, humour also has this effect. As Agamben puts it:

[T]he subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectification. But this expression holds only if it is not forgotten that ‘to bear witness to a desubjectification’ can only mean there is no subject of testimony ... and that every testimony is a field of forces incessantly traversed by currents of subjectification and desubjectification.

(Agamben, 1999, pp. 120-121)

Thus, according to Agamben, in testimony it is the message that imposes itself and the bearer of the testimony itself fades away, without disappearing, nevertheless. Humour grounded in asserting a subjective perspective is essential to avoid perceiving a victim’s testimony in the camps merely as part of an undifferentiated mass, but rather to recognise its singularities – in contrast with the dehumanising effects of the Nazis’ mass murders, which sought to erase every face. Here, subjectivation is achieved through a shared act of enunciation: the humour is always addressed to another. To a certain extent, humour brings us closer to the way in which Levinas (1963/1990) thinks about the intersubjectivity made possible by speech:

To speak, at the same time as knowing the Other, is making oneself known to him. The Other is not only known, he is *greeted*. He is not only named, but also invoked ... I not only think of what he is for me, but also and simultaneously, and even before, I *am* for him ... I do not only *know* something, I am also part of society ... Speaking and hearing become one rather than succeed one another

(Levinas, 1963/1990, pp. 7-8, emphasis in the original).

This is particularly interesting in the camps, where subjectivities are under attack; thus, the exchange of words between deportees introduces mutual recognition of their position as subjects. In effect, the speaker makes the other person a subject by speaking to them, and in the same action, becomes a subject for the other person in the sense that by producing a “You” in the address, it produces an “I.” But humour allows us to take a further step towards the other by mobilising both bodies through laughter and the pleasure that flows from it. Hegel posits that humour is fundamentally based on the person, the embodiment of the humourist: “In humour it is the person of the artist which comes on the scene” (Hegel, 1832/1988, p. 600).

7. Conclusion

As we have seen, humour in the camps takes on multiple functions at the group and individual level, in terms of affect, the mobilisation of drive, the Symbolic incorporation of the body and, finally, the subjectivity of the subject. It constitutes a fundamental defence, and sometimes a weapon, when there is no other solution.

The position of the deportees as humour-makers, one might say, is akin to that of Isaac in Genesis. In this, we agree with Elie Wiesel (1976), Jacqueline Bussie (2007) and Whitney Carpenter (2010). Isaac, whose name is often translated as “he will laugh” and whose birth is preceded by the incredulous laughter of Sara, when told she is pregnant at the age of ninety, and of Abraham, who will become a father aged one hundred, would represent the survivor of the Shoah, who, faced with unjust and arbitrary violence, can and must continue to laugh:

Isaac, after this horrible experience... should have committed suicide. Isaac, the survivor of the Holocaust, always remembers having seen his father, knife in hand, and the voice of God ordering his father to commence killing his son... And in spite of everything, Isaac was capable of laughter. (Bussie, 2007, p. 61)

And if Isaac does not laugh immediately, he will laugh later with his wife Rebecca, as it appears in the Genesis through a play on words in Hebrew (between “he will laugh” and “he caressed”) which highlights the drive-related link between laughter and sexuality (Genesis 26-8). This future tense (“he will laugh”) suggests that humour and the laughter it provokes will always constitute a means of resistance, especially for those who, like Isaac, are the innocent victims of the extreme and absurd violence imposed by a persecuting and murderous Other. And for the deportees, who unlike Isaac have no angel to stop the murderous arm, laughter and humour are even more necessary in order to combat the traumatic effects, to maintain as much as possible of the drive, desire and ultimately of life, beyond mere organic survival.

Acknowledgements

To the historians Dr. Guillaume Pollack, Pr. Philippe Nivet, Pr. Xavier Boniface and Adam Veiller.

To Karen Taieb (records manager at the *Mémorial de la Shoah* in Paris), to Aurélien Gnat (director of the *Mémorial de l'internement et de la déportation – Camp de Royallieu*), to the archivists for their contribution to this project.

To the families who found the strength to entrust the letters of their loved ones to the collective memory, thus allowing their words to be re-read, re-heard and re-transmitted.

To Julianne McCorry for her excellent translation of the text.

To the students of Université de Picardie Jules Verne for their contribution to the digitisation of archives and to retranscription of letters: Clémence Noel, Manon Skrzypczak and Gaïhla Ponsart-Syz.

Funding statement

The MESHS-Lille (Maison Européenne des Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société/European centre for humanities and social sciences)

The Conseil Régional Hauts-de-France/ the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Haut-de-France

The IPA (International Psychoanalytical Association), [grant number RG2304].

Laboratoire « Centre d'Histoire des Sociétés, des Sciences et des Conflits EA 4289 », Université de Picardie Jules Verne and the Laboratoire « Psychologie clinique, psychopathologie, psychanalyse » (UR 4056), Institut de Psychologie, Université de Paris.

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