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**The Heart-shaped Cookie Knife: *Miss Lonelyhearts* as Accelerated
Bergsonian Comedy**

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Bergsonian Comedy**

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Dedication

To Caroline, without whom I would be nowhere.

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Abstract

The Heart-shaped Cookie Knife: *Miss Lonelyhearts* as Accelerated Bergsonian Comedy

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This report provides a new examination of the nature and function of laughter in Nathanael West's novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*, using Bergson's theory of comedy as a critical lens. This approach allows us to understand the close connection between mechanization and comedy in West's novel, and also to recognize the text's hitherto untold significance for post-industrial American literature. Building on Bergson in original ways, and incorporating the work of twentieth-century theorists such as Fredric Jameson, I argue that *Miss Lonelyhearts* illuminates a proto-postmodern cityscape where comedy is governed by the mechanizing logic of capital and media. West's characters, figured as comedic machines, are pushed to their biological, psychological and mechanical limits in this world, and laughter marks the moments of their breakage. Synthesizing several disparate strands of criticism on comedy, irony and media, my reading accounts for the ways in which laughter functions and *malfunctions* in this text, and the means by which West produces comedy from such profound tragedy.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Bergson and West: Groundwork of the Mechanics of Comedy	5
Mechanization, Media and the Metropolis	17
The Mechanisms of Form and Metafiction.....	22
Humana Ex Machina.....	27
Conclusion	42
Works Cited	44

Introduction

“Several have defined man as ‘an animal which laughs.’ They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at...” (3)

Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*

Cartoonist: “It's so horribly sad. Why is it I feel like laughing?”

North by Northwest, screenplay by Ernest Lehman

Nathanael West's short novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, it seems strikingly prescient, as if written long before its time. West's deft, metafictional pastiche of postindustrial US society, his episodic plot laden with wacky caricatures and non-sequiturs, and his keen eye for the effects of mass media might lead us to believe the story was penned in the heyday of Pynchon, Barth and Coover, over twenty years after West's death. Secondly, and more importantly, West's novel is notable for its depiction of comedy, a depiction that is both curious and instructive: curious because comedy seems connected with a strange kind of *mechanization* in his characters, and instructive because West's depiction illustrates the importance of mass media in governing paradigms of comedy in contemporary life. This report will argue that these dual aspects of West's comedy—its sense of mechanization and its arguments about mass media—are necessarily connected. An understanding of this connection will, incidentally, provide an explanation for the novel's seeming prescience, but will also help us to account for how laughter arises and functions in literature produced during an age of increasing media saturation.

In seeking to understand the presence of comedic mechanization in West's novel, we should look to Henri Bergson who, in his collection *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), presents a model of comedy that depends on exactly the kind of machine-like rigidity we see in West. Within this model, the more humans resemble machines and vice-versa, the greater the comedic potential; the more humans fall into unconscious, mechanized models, the funnier they become. Of all major theorists of comedy, Bergson comes to mind not just because of his exploration of comedy through machines, but also for his connection of the concepts of machine-like rigidity with the rigidity of stock characters produced by cultural media. In this way, the replication of behavior exemplified by the stock character can be viewed as a kind of mechanization in and of itself: once committed to print, this character can only perform the same actions over and over again, her plot like a machine's programmed fate; anyone who imitates that stock character (consciously or unconsciously) is merely following in the same well-worn tracks, thus partaking in her machine-like state. My use of the term *mechanization* will thus incorporate both the metaphorical depiction of humans as literal machines, and also the analogous process by which humans exhibit machine-like stock characteristics.

Bergson's theory is compelling and malleable in and of itself, but his account of media's role in comedy is necessarily limited. Writing at the turn of the 20th century, Bergson was at the cusp of *mass* media's rise. He could not have anticipated the extent to which film, television and advertising would pervade the lives and sensibilities of human beings in the 20th century, nor how these media would proliferate exponentially the stock character templates into which people knowingly or unknowingly become assimilated.

Employing Bergson's theory, and inferring beyond the limits of its original cultural context, we gain a new understanding of why the imagery of comedic mechanization features so heavily in *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

We also see how 20th-century forms of mass media accelerate the processes identified by Bergson, producing an overwhelming amount of comedic material, which in turn leads to extremely fraught psychological and affective states in West's characters. We see the violence inherent in both West's comedy and the functions he forces his character to inhabit, right down to the fundamental comedic plot structure of marriage after strife. These characters, machine-like, cannot handle their surplus mechanized comedic roles and so, like machines, they break down. This breakage entails a kind of emotional deadness that anticipates Fredric Jameson's notion of "flat affect." This prefiguration, I will argue, is one reason why the novel anticipates so strongly the concerns of post-1960s postmodernism: *Miss Lonelyhearts* illustrates an incipient Jamesonian vision of postmodern culture before Jameson even begins to write. Jameson thus provides a useful retrospective lens through which to explore affect in West.

This essay begins by summarizing *Miss Lonelyhearts* and highlighting its curious focus on comedic mechanization. After presenting Bergson's theory of laughter in a radically condensed form, I will then argue that mechanization governs the comedic logic of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and that the story demonstrates mass media's role in accelerating Bergson's model of comedy as machine-like rigidity. While Bergson accounts only for literature, we can extend his theory to show that other media such as journalism, radio, film and television all mechanize their subjects by absorbing them within the bounds of artistic

or documentary form, marking humanity as measurable, reproducible, predictable and thus increasingly comedic. *Miss Lonelyhearts* illustrates this process at the levels of both form and content. My reading will account for West's novel in metafictional, as well as Bergsonian terms. In addition, incorporating Fredric Jameson's work on pastiche and Linda Hutcheon's work on irony will prove a crucial step to exploring the brittle affective and linguistic states produced in West's world of hostile comedy. Synthesizing several disparate strands of criticism on humor in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, my reading will account for the ways in which laughter functions and *malfunctions* in this text, and the means by which West produces comedy from such profound tragedy.

Bergson and West: Groundwork of the Mechanics of Comedy

Miss Lonelyhearts follows the disillusionment and (literal) downfall of the eponymous protagonist, who initially took up the job of advice columnist as a joke, dispensing motivational, palliative maxims with tongue planted firmly in-cheek: “Life is worthwhile, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar” (1). However, the overwhelming influx of letters, expressing all manner of heartfelt suffering, have exhausted any cool sense of comedic distance: “The letters were no longer funny” (1). Goaded and tormented by his omnipresent editor, Shrike—a kind of Pynchonian trickster figure, relentlessly ironic and irreverent—Miss Lonelyhearts strives, in vain, to find a sincere response to the pleas of his readers. Shrike singles out the protagonist’s most cherished panacea, the salvation offered by Christ, for particular scorn, and West likewise complicates this belief structure. West layers the novel densely with Christian symbolism, structuring the book in fourteen chapters like the Stations of the Cross. However, this framework oscillates bathetically between the sublime and the ridiculous: the fourteen chapters are also modelled on comic strip panels, and Miss Lonelyhearts dies in a most abrupt, inglorious way: shot, perhaps accidentally, by a jealous reader on a staircase.

What’s curious here is not just West’s proto-postmodern comedy (manifest for example in a keen sense of formal play) but the *mechanized materiality* of that comedy. The strongest comedians, such as Shrike and his acolytes, are merely “machines for making jokes,” processing variable input as invariable output: “A button machine makes buttons,

no matter what the power used, foot, steam, or electricity. [Shrike & co.], no matter what the motivating force, death, love or God, made jokes” (15). Laughter, likewise, is figured overwhelmingly as a mechanical process, either functional or dysfunctional. When the comedic machine seems to break, when laughter becomes defective, *Miss Lonelyhearts* presents us with fruitful opportunities for critical troubleshooting. Why do the city’s inhabitants have “torn mouths?” (39). Why is laughter figured in terms of mechanical failure? (16). Why is the comedic posture so compromised, providing no relief from postindustrial life? Finally, why, at the end of the novel, does Betty begin to share this common characteristic with her peers: that “something had gone wrong with her laugh?” (55).

For an explanation of why the comedic entails the mechanical, we turn naturally to Bergson. He opens his essay on laughter by discounting the possibility of “imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition,” choosing instead to regard it as “above all, a living thing” (2). He nevertheless succeeds in providing a broad, yet impressively comprehensive and malleable account of comedy. Bergson begins with three key observations. Firstly, “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*” (3). In other words, non-human phenomena can never be laughable unless we discern in them some human element: animals are only funny when we can ascribe something akin to human intentionality to their actions and appearance, for example. Secondly, Bergson notes “the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter” (4). He does not mean that we cannot be inspired by both pity and laughter at the same time, but that emotion and humor are antithetical impulses, that an excess of humor dampens pathos and vice-versa, and that, “to produce

the whole of its effect... the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple” (5). At its most extreme, laughter disables and makes latent our capacity for compassion, though a weak laugh may be overridden by a stronger pathetic appeal. Finally, Bergson notes that laughter “must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification” (8). Laughter must be understood within the context of society at large, but also within the smaller context of localized, sometimes exclusive groups (6-7).

Having made these preliminary observations, Bergson goes on to provide two typical instances of comedy: firstly, “a man running along the street, stumbles and falls; the passers-by burst out laughing” (8); secondly, we have “a person who attends to the petty occupations of his everyday life with mathematical precision. The objects around him, however, have all been tampered with by a mischievous wag...” (9), thus he has mud in his inkwell and chairs with loosely-screwed legs etc. Bergson writes that “the laughable element in both cases consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being” (10). What’s funny is the fact that a certain “momentum” carries both of these characters forward despite inclement circumstances. Both exhibit “absentmindedness,” a “physical obstinacy,” or “rigidity” (9). Momentum is built up by the muscular movement of the pedestrian (9), and by the inflexible habits and impulses of the obsessive second victim, both of whom “continued like a machine in the same straight line” (10).

Bergson's book-length exploration of laughter and comedy is multifaceted, but the one idea to which he returns again and again is rigidity, or, "*the mechanization of life*," whether in action, language or character,

... all these being processes that consist in looking upon life as a repeating mechanism, with reversible action and interchangeable parts. Actual life is comedy just so far as it produces, in a natural fashion, actions of the same kind,—consequently, just so far as it forgets itself, for were it always on the alert, it would be ever-changing continuity, irrevertible progress, undivided unity. And so the ludicrous in events may be defined as absentmindedness in things, just as the ludicrous in an individual character always results from some fundamental absentmindedness in the person (101-102).

Bergson analyzes this kind of inflexibility in terms of social evolution, arguing that "the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art" (20). We can connect this insight to the postindustrial world of *Miss Lonelyhearts* (and eventually to Jameson's identification of the postmodern assimilation of the human to the flat image) where mass expression meets mass media, where moral faults begin to become indistinguishable from aesthetic faults, and where the deplorable amounts to the laughable. Social optimization and normalization takes place not in a state of nature, but in the realms of print and film, and so even if the faults we find laughable are no longer as fatal as they once might have been, they still represent, even if only in aesthetic terms, "a certain rigidity of body, mind

and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability” (21).

This is where laughter itself comes in, for “this rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective (21).” Laughter, Bergson writes, “corrects men’s manners,” for “a defect that is ridiculous, as soon as it feels itself to be so, endeavors to modify itself or at least to appear as though it did” (17). Human beings living social lives must constantly be aware of the potential to be laughable: “what life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence” (18). The two governing forces of social life are “*tension* and *elasticity*,” and “if these two forces are lacking in the body to any considerable extent, we have sickness and infirmity and accidents of every kind. If they are lacking in the mind, we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity. Finally, if they are lacking in the character, we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the causes of crime” (18).

Bergson’s analysis thus heightens the ethical and affective stakes for comedy, placing it within a societal infrastructure of optimization, making laughter instrumental for rooting out “separatist tendencies” and policing “eccentricity” (19). Sianne Ngai provides a useful interpretation of Bergson’s model by demonstrating that the comedic demands of flexibility align with those placed on the worker in an industrial and postindustrial society. Ngai argues that the perfectly flexible comic performer, what she calls “the zany,” is in fact also “capitalism’s ideal worker as already described by Marx: the perpetual temp,

extra, or odd-jobber—itinerant and malleable—for whom labor is ultimately abstract and homogeneous” (Ngai 202). This figuration of the demands of postindustrial labor will be especially useful when we come to analyze the nature of Miss Lonelyhearts’ job, which requires exactly this kind of comedic flexibility. Far from being funny, “The art of the zany is frantic and beset” (Ngai 186). Ngai’s analysis shows us that we can invert Bergson’s theory: just as perfect inflexibility is comical, “perhaps there is something fundamentally anticomical and even pathological” about those who do nothing but adapt to changing circumstances. This explains “the discomfiting aspect of all of modernity’s zanies,” revealing them to be “unhappily striving wannabe[s], poser[s] or arriviste[s]” (Ngai 189). We will seek and find this kind of pathology in West’s most manic characters.

With such high stakes—that is, with principles of conformity, deviance, labor and capital in play—and with such psychological tension, it is no surprise that Bergson’s depiction of laughter is fundamentally a ruthless one. As outlined above, laughter must be divorced, even if only momentarily, from emotion. Comedic stimuli present an “impertinence” towards society, to which society responds with laughter, “an even greater impertinence.” So “there is nothing very benevolent in laughter. It seems rather inclined to return evil for evil” (194). Although laughter sometimes “relieves us from the strain of living,” this process only works to the extent that we abstain temporarily from the constant, exhausting challenges of adaptation and indulge in “play” (196). Bergson does not say much about what this notion of “play” entails. Presumably, it’s a kind of comedic simulation, where the stakes of conformity vs. aberration hold no real-world consequences. For example, we might jokingly exaggerate faults that we or our peers do not exhibit in

any serious measure in order to relieve ourselves of the guilt of actually possessing those vices. So laughter serves a cathartic purpose, but this does not distract from its rigorously corrective function. The relationship between “play” laughter and “real” laughter would be somewhat analogous to that which obtains between “play” violence and “real” violence; it is, at times, a fine balance.

Ultimately, when deployed for its primary purpose, laughter gives no quarter to the sensitivities of its deviant target; the act is necessarily bound up with its own kind of psychological violence, figured primarily by Bergson as humiliation, whether directed towards the self, or others:

Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness (197).

It is the ability to recognize these mechanisms that allows comedians to provoke laughter and manipulate our corrective impulses to their advantage. The comic aspect is fundamentally “imitable” (23). The more we fall into unconscious patterns and become like machines, puppets or lifeless objects, the more abstracted, measurable and reproducible our actions and characteristics become: “we begin, then, to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves” (33). All character is potentially comic to the extent that it contains “the *ready-made* element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically. It is... that which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for that very

reason, that which enables others to mimic us” (148). Comedians are always masterful mimics, and one of the prime tools of professional comedy, one which will be instrumental in a reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, is the ultimate representation of rigidity: the deadpan, the immoveable comic face, the one constant element in all satire, parody and irony, deployed in the field of Bergsonian play as a simulation of absurd rigidity.

The most laughable subjects are those who fix themselves on single ideas, become rigid in their alignment with ideology or morality. This is the reason why virtue is more easily parodied than vice, since a virtuous character is more likely to remain steadfast despite changing circumstances, while a wicked character will display expert adaptability in the service of self-preservation. Immorality does not make us laugh, but inflexibility and unsociability do (138-139). Thus Don Quixote is a paradigmatic comic character in Bergson’s mind. Don Quixote is unswerving in the pursuit of his romantic ideals. His character lacks the “common sense” faculty of “a mind continually adapting itself anew and changing ideas when it changes objects” (183). So when he sees windmills, instead of understanding them as such, he “molds” them in his mind so as to conform with romantic ideas of fantastical beasts he expects from reading tales of knightly heroism. Once Don Quixote’s epistemology becomes fixed, he becomes unconscious: “he proceeds with the certainty and precision of a somnambulist who is acting in his dream” (184).

We can thus understand why one of the most important elements of Bergson’s theory concerns the idea of comic types: “It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which others will fall, as into a ready-made frame; it is to crystallise into a stock character” (149). Thus Don

Quixote falls victim to the rigid behaviors of his fictional heroes and becomes a stock character himself. Here Bergson introduces what might be called media's *multiplying effect* on the comedic mechanism: Don Quixote, in replicating a comic type, becomes typical, and thus spawns countless other types in his image. Crucially, we don't even need to consciously imitate a comic character in order to partake in this process and become comic ourselves:

Every comic character is a type. Inversely, every resemblance to a type has something comic in it. Though we may long have associated with an individual without discovering anything about him to laugh at, still, if advantage is taken of some accidental analogy to dub him with the name of a famous hero of romance or drama, he will in our eyes border upon the ridiculous, if only for a moment. And yet this hero of romance may not be a comic character at all. But then it is comic to be like him. It is comic to wander out of one's own self (184-185).

So we develop the term "quixotic" to refer to those who emulate Don Quixote himself, already a comic stock character. We have a whole host of similar media-derived adjectives that lend themselves to parody, despite their serious implications: Draconian, Machiavellian, Orwellian—these words all imply caricature to an extent. Pathological sceptics are "doubting Thomases," those pursuing single-minded revenge are chasing their own "white whale," those who cannot make up their mind are "playing Prince Hamlet," a TV show that's past its prime has "jumped the shark," and so on. Countless artists since Cervantes have also capitalized on this comedic process, for example Jane Austen in

Northanger Abbey, whose protagonist Catherine Morland seeks to model herself on the heroines of gothic novels.

In each of these cases, an artistic medium provides a concrete template into which people might wittingly or unwittingly fall, and because these templates represent rigidity, they provide ready-made tools for any cartoonists and satirists looking for a way to make their target ridiculous. The argument here is not so much that art creates new templates, but that it codifies comedic systems and crystallizes stock characters in the popular imagination. This is really where Bergson's argument ends and my modifications and incorporation of subsequent theorists begins. It stands to reason that, the more popular and powerful the stock character, the more pervasive his or her depiction, the easier it can be deployed in comedic, ironic, satiric or parodic terms, and the easier it is for people to fall into such categories. This is a function of *mass* media, something for which Bergson does not fully account. This is partly because radio, film and television had not come into being when he wrote these essays in 1900. (However, it is worth noting that, in his time, a cultural phenomenon like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had long since spread throughout the West and inspired everything from merchandise to the titular epithet of a racial quietist.)

As audio-visual recording technology spreads, new aspects of the human experience become quantifiable in myriad unprecedented ways. Radio producers can rehearse the mass hysteria of an alien invasion, and filmmakers can capture and replicate the terror of a train threatening to flatten an audience or a gun pointed at a spectator. News media records factual events and renders them as image, sound and text. In tracking this kind of aesthetic "flatness" in the postmodern era, Jameson also points to stars like Marilyn

Monroe who “are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images” (11). In my reading, this media assimilation constitutes a kind of mechanization, a reduction of the flux of phenomena to the level of reproduction and thus imitation and caricature. In a recent treatment of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West critic Robert Wexelblatt characterizes mass culture’s chief functions as “the manufacturing of clichés, the transmogrification of any idea into a slogan, any attitude into a posture, any belief into a convention, and any dream into a business” (Wexelblatt 224). We can read this insight in the context of Jameson’s broader characterization of all-consuming late capitalism, where “the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity” (Jameson 49). Jameson’s formulation implies that there is no stable or neutral point from which to critique the mechanisms of capitalism because every available point is enmeshed in capitalist structures. This is pertinent to an analysis of comedy because, as we have seen, comedic templates proliferate with the production and dissemination of mass media, and so comedy is bound up closely with the mechanisms and flows of capital. Just as there is no point outside of capitalism, there is no position that cannot be assimilated/mechanized by media and thus fall victim to parody.

A reading of Bergson allows us to understand more deeply the relationship between this commodifying function of mass culture, and the mechanized nature and history of comedy. Thus phrases like “Oh, the humanity!” and “Houston, we have a problem” have become not only slogans with promotional cash value for newsreels or

movies, but also tools in any number of comedy routines, all the more potent for their endless iterability. Thus tragedy becomes farce. In addition, in order to grasp the further implications of Bergson's theory, and to understand *Miss Lonelyhearts* in context, we must read this state of increasing media saturation along with the skepticism produced during the modernist period after World War I, a skepticism that Jean-François Lyotard would later describe as the postmodern characteristic of "incredulity toward metanarratives," as a result of which "the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (Lyotard xxiv).

Mechanization, Media and the Metropolis

In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the characters are imprisoned by the process of mechanization outlined above, absorbed wittingly or unwittingly into corrosive ironic discourse and obsolete narrative forms. Machinic imagery is everywhere in the text, beginning with the assembly line symbol of the “heart-shaped cookie knife” (1), moving through descriptions of characters as geometric shapes, joke-making machines, and even deadly tools, such as when Shrike’s “triangular face” is buried “like the blade of a hatchet” in a lover’s neck (8). An absurd aside has Shrike brandishing a news clipping detailing the unorthodox criminal proceedings of a convicted killer: “Prayers for the condemned man’s soul will be offered on an adding machine. Numbers, he explained, constitute the only universal language” (7). This could be an allusion to Elmer Rice’s 1923 play *The Adding Machine*, wherein the protagonist, Mr. Zero, learns that he is to be replaced by the eponymous device, murders his boss, and then operates an adding machine in the afterlife. In both West’s vignette and Rice’s play, the ineffable, whether in the form of religious ritual or human labor, has become quantifiable, and it’s crucial to note, as Georg Simmel does, that this “universal” numeric language is easily transposed onto the mechanisms of capitalism: measurement and valuation become synonymous in the mechanized worldview (Simmel 12).

Simmel’s essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” provides useful insights for understanding the relationship between this mechanized, numerical worldview, and the urban setting of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Simmel argues that the metropolis, as the seat of the

money economy, is implicated fundamentally in the process of quantification, whereby multifarious phenomena are reduced to the plane of numerical exchange. The metropolis thus prompts its inhabitants to “deal with persons as with numbers” (Simmel 12). New York City, as a paradigmatic metropolitan space, in its sheer size and complexity, creates modes of production, consumption and interaction that favor the intellectual over the emotional and forms “structures of the highest impersonality” (Simmel 14). Likewise, the overwhelming level of sensory stimulation in a metropolis, combined with a principle of exchange that annihilates distinctions between things, encourages the development of a “blasé” attitude towards one’s environment (Simmel 14), exactly that exemplified by Shrike and his cronies. Crucially, it is Miss Lonelyhearts’ momentary escape from the metropolis and its relentless comedy, into the more tranquil, emotionally nurturing space of the countryside—a literalized analogue of Chaplin’s escape into idyllic bliss in *Modern Times* (1936)—that allows him, upon his return, to recognize the brutal mechanistic logic of the city in the bodies of its inhabitants, moving unconsciously “with a dream-like violence” in crowds with “broken hands and torn mouths” (38), reduced to a state of brittle, machinic materiality.

It’s clear from Simmel’s analysis that the city’s saturated mediascape would likewise encourage the treatment of people in terms of quantifiable types or forms, their differences less important than their shared mechanical (and therefore comic, in a Bergsonian sense) nature. Recall that Bergson’s model of comedy appeals, like metropolitan life, “to intelligence, pure and simple” (Bergson 5). In urban space as in the mediascape, stimuli are fundamentally interchangeable within a modern, mechanized,

arithmetic mindset. Thus Shrike can laugh mercilessly at Miss Lonelyhearts, his readers and their troubles, cycling wryly and effortlessly, as if switching TV channels, through a virtuosic pastiche of the various responses to the world's problems. His send-ups are effective because the contours of each worldview are so familiar to the consumer of popular media (34). Miss Lonelyhearts' aforementioned rural retreat also allows him to recognize the mechanistic logic of this urban mediascape and reach the story's most important insight: "Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst" (38-39).

This process of mechanization has absorbed human ideals, resulting in a fall which has rendered even the most profound suffering and sources of hope as causes for laughter. Even Miss Lonelyhearts' tentative Christianity, what he calls "the Christ dream" (39), his most dearly treasured model for solace—what Jameson would have called a "precapitalist enclave" (Jameson 49)—is fraught with anxieties about sincerity and irony, humility and arrogance. Robert Emmet Long notes Miss Lonelyhearts' early use of the phrase "the Christ business," signaling "merely another of the many commercialized dreams of escape from an irreducible emptiness" (Long 80). It is thus no accident that "Christ was Shrike's particular joke" (3), the ultimate stock character to ridicule, the literal apotheosis of Bergsonian moralistic rigidity. What's even more tragic is that the Christ dream is merely one of many thrown onto the ash heap by Shrike and company, a process that Long identifies in West's pawn shop dream sequence, a scene that "evokes the discarding or destruction of dreams in a commercial society" (Long 51).

This process of commodification is precisely Shrike's *modus operandi*. When Miss Lonelyhearts tries to get fired by recommending suicide in his column, Shrike responds by half-joking: "remember, please, that your job is to increase the circulation of our paper. Suicide, it is only reasonable to think, must defeat this purpose" (17-18). When Shrike reads some of Miss Lonelyhearts' advice early in the novel, the editor tut-tuts ironically: "the same old stuff... Why don't you give them something new and hopeful? Tell them about art." Shrike then proceeds to rattle off a series of platitudes that are anything but new: "*Art Is a Way Out... Art Is One of Life's Richest Offerings*" (4). The maxims are capitalized to signal the very investment of capital itself, an industry of self-help that deals as much in trademarks as in solace. "Go on from there" (4), Shrike says, confident that Miss Lonelyhearts is familiar with the well-worn tracks of this mechanical line of thought.

Returning briefly to Ngai, we may highlight several points of interest in this moment. Here, the demands of both comedy and capitalism are perfectly aligned: Miss Lonelyhearts' job literally begins as a "joke" (32). Anticipating what Ngai calls "a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working" (Ngai 188), Miss Lonelyhearts must read and respond appropriately to his readers' plights, sincerely from their point of view, hilariously from his, fulfilling both the terms of his job and the terms of the joke. The job reveals the tensions in Simmel's model of metropolitan production and consumption. In the metropolis, the producer must cater to the market as a whole, rather than to individuals, being unacquainted with his myriad consumers (Simmel 12). Although of course Miss Lonelyhearts does not know all of his readers, their requests are highly personal, but still they exhibit some kind of homogeneity: "on most days he

received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife” (1). As we will see, Miss Lonelyhearts can no longer reconcile the mechanized, potentially comedic template of these letters with their tragic content. The impulse to laugh is exhausted: “He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end” (1). He recognizes his own complicity in the process of media-based comedic mechanization and seeks for the rest of the story to make amends. His task is to demonstrate that “Christ was the answer” (3) without this notion becoming cheapened and made “puerile” like all the rest of humanity’s “dreams” (39).

The Mechanisms of Form and Metafiction

Since *Miss Lonelyhearts* explicitly implicates the media in the process of rendering dreams puerile, it's worth thinking more carefully about the form and structure of West's novel, because the text is itself carefully mediated. West writes that his original idea included the subtitle: "A novel in the form of a comic strip," with "the chapters to be squares in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in conventional balloons." Despite abandoning this idea, West "retained some of the comic strip technique: Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture." Finally, "Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald" ("Some Notes on Miss L." 53). West builds a metafictional structure of mediation and layers, where the main character attempts to write new content in a newspaper, while himself encased in one of the newspaper's most restrictive and heartless forms: the comic strip.

The violent logic of the comic strip form confines its subjects temporally as well as psychologically. The visible lines of its panels and its speech boxes imply literal encasement, facilitating the restrictive formation of both cels and cells. Whereas in prose, the sentence, the unit of sense, can be structured to accommodate change, contingency, conjunction, disjunction and sequence, the individual panel lends itself more easily to a static or synchronic tableau. The traditionally episodic structure of a newspaper cartoon strip dooms its characters to a kind of eternal return, reliving the same jokes over and over, often in the same outfits, poses and configurations. In West's particular model, characters

are explicitly denied any form of progress, imprisoned within two dimensions and forced instead to go, in West's words as quoted above, "backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture" ("Some Notes on Miss L." 53).¹

A character without freedom is a puppet, in Bergsonian terms, and "the originality of a comic artist is... expressed in the special kind of life he imparts to a mere puppet" (31). The usage is curious, as Bergson employs mostly mechanical imagery up until this point and we tend not to think of puppets as mechanical. Puppets are produced and used for primarily comedic purposes, with stock phrases and rigid characteristics, embodying tensions between personality and performance, and so the image is evocative, but we might equally substitute robots or automatons in place of Bergson's image. Despite the fact that there are no literal strings or speech bubbles hovering over his characters, West restricts them to the conventional expressions of stock characters, as Wexelblatt notes:

[I]n West the plain sense is that Shrike can only mock, Betty can only give idiotic pep talks, journalists can only joke, and Mary, Fay, and Doyle can only react in the pitiful ways they do. This sense of personal limitation, or *automation* [cf. Bergson], builds up the theme of falseness having infected the whole of humankind. West's idealist is not authentic; Miss Lonelyhearts himself is aware of the clichés he writes (225).

Likewise, Robert Emmet Long notes that West's characters are "like the figures in a cartoon...stripped down to the sharp outline of a few traits" (Long 48). Miss Lonelyhearts,

¹ The sketch I outline here is argued more in terms of tendency than hard and fast distinction. There are no doubt comic strips that complicate these generic conventions.

despite perhaps being the most self-aware character in the novel, cannot escape his fictional and mechanized form:

Suddenly tired, he sat down on a bench... If he could only throw the stone. He searched the sky for a target. But the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine (5).

This moment, where a text in comic-book form makes reference an eraser's effacement of the environment, is pure metafiction. Miss Lonelyhearts is seeing not only a natural sky rendered with artificial means, but the very "gray sky" of the paper in which he himself is written. Miss Lonelyhearts' search for a target is also an attempt to transcend two-dimensionality, to escape his own caricature and the guilt his actions cause, represented by "the stone that had formed in his gut" (4), and to lash out at his creator, by firing back the load he is forced to bear for the sake of comedy. The brokenness of the paper is quite literally his own.

Miss Lonelyhearts further demonstrates his awareness in another metafictional moment, when, in trying to explain his situation to Betty, he illustrates the structure of his own story:

Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but

after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator (31-32).

This is the story's most profound metafictional tableau, and thus it is worth quoting at length. Here Miss Lonelyhearts realizes his own place within a rigid narrative, and yet tries to escape. His story, with its clean moral arc, is a cliché, typical and mechanistic, thus potentially ridiculous. However, as Kenneth Goldsmith writes, clichés always carry at the same time the potential for deep meaning: "the cliché has the ability to teeter between states, being at once truthful and exaggerated. The seed upon which a cliché is built remains firmly embedded within, ready to re-reveal itself at any given moment, evoked by a variety of conditions including reframing, recontextualization, removal, one's mood, and so forth" (Goldsmith 170). Miss Lonelyhearts' story has the potential to touch us, but also to provoke jaded scorn. This constant tension between profundity and triteness is the price a comic character must pay for awareness of his own laughable nature.

Ultimately, Miss Lonelyhearts is doomed to the comic logic of his form. The story as a whole will repeat the patterns of its individual episodes by ending with a comic and violent image. Long notes that the ending "has the graphic, pictorial quality of a comic strip ending—Miss Lonelyhearts' fall on the staircase a visual analogue of his fall from

grace” (Long 48-49). The ending aligns with Bergson’s notions of mechanization and absentmindedness, whereby the unintentional reprisal of mechanical forms produces comedy. Miss Lonelyhearts arrives at the house of Doyle, the crippled, jealous reader who thinks the protagonist has tried to rape his wife. Miss Lonelyhearts aims finally to fulfill the story’s Christian typology: “God had sent him so that Miss Lonelyhearts could perform a miracle and be certain of his conversion. It was a sign. He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole” (56). His unselfconscious inhabitation of the messianic role leads him, with his arms outstretched, to attempt to embrace Doyle, and in the scuffle, Miss Lonelyhearts is accidentally shot: “The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both rolled part of the way down the stairs.” (56). It’s crucial to note that the gun is wrapped in a newspaper; that Miss Lonelyhearts is thus killed by a lifeless object of violence housed in the similarly deadening form he attempted to transcend, his death divorced entirely from intentionality, a cog in the great comedic machine of the universe.

Humana Ex Machina

Although, in ending this way, the novel may jettison intentionality, leaving us with deterministic materialism, and although West's comedic logic may rely heavily on mechanization throughout the text, but we must not forget that Bergsonian comedy lies somewhere in between the machinic and the personal, that "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*" (3). Although Bergson states, axiomatically, that "[t]he attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (29), he qualifies his statement by specifying that "the suggestion must also be a subtle one, for the general appearance of the person, whose every limb has been made rigid as a machine, must continue to give us the impression of a living thing." He writes: "The more exactly these two images, that of a person and that of a machine, fit into each other, the more striking is the comic effect" (31). So while the process of mechanization prompts us to look for the machinic in the human, and while West shows us the gradual dissolution of intentionality, we must not forget the human in the machine.

Likewise, although West's characters are figured heavily in machinic terms, and although he disclaims any psychology for his characters ("Some Notes on Miss L." 53), it is nevertheless crucial to map the actions, social interactions and affective states of his characters for several reasons: to understand more fully the function of irony, to measure the human toll of the accelerated Bergsonian model of comedy, to account further for the bizarre ways in which West's humans and machines become grotesquely melded, and to

explain (as I highlighted above) “their broken hands and torn mouths” (38). Because although *Miss Lonelyhearts* is populated with mechanized stock characters, they are not without fascinating quirks and forms of breakage.

For these purposes, Linda Hutcheon’s work is instructive. Her focus is on irony as “a discursive strategy operating at the level of language (verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual)” (Hutcheon 10). Although Hutcheon limits herself to irony, which does not always align with the comic, her theory speaks to Bergson in fruitful ways. And although Hutcheon does not cite Bergson, she engages thoroughly with the linkage between mockery and aggression, arguing that:

[T]here is an affective “charge” to irony that cannot be ignored and that cannot be separated from its politics of use if it is to account for the range of emotional response (from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distanced detachment to passionate engagement). Sometimes irony can indeed be interpreted as a withdrawal of affect; sometimes, however, there is a deliberate engaging of emotion (Hutcheon 15).

For Hutcheon, irony almost always has an “edge” or “sting,” and is best understood in the affective terms of its “target” (Hutcheon 15). Irony is embedded in power structures, “invokes notions of hierarchy and subordination, judgement and perhaps even moral superiority” (Hutcheon 17). Yet irony is also “transideological” (Hutcheon 9), capable of being deployed for any number of political ends, a characteristic that renders it at once more potent and more unwieldy as discursive weapon. *Miss Lonelyhearts* suffers from

irony's indiscriminate nature because it denies him any consolation, not due to inherent faults in worldviews like Christianity but merely because they exhibit uniform rigidity. For West, irony doesn't even amount to a critique so much as an indiscriminate form of attack that frequently backfires. Shrike, the consummate ironist, suffers from this volatility because his ridicule of ideology leaves him no political or psychological structure of his own in which to take shelter when he breaks down. Even his lack of principles is subject to ironic scorn. Irony can thus be directed towards both self and other, its "sting" put in the service of any agenda. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is full of instances where insincere feeling and callous laughter provoke deep suffering in both the speaker and the listener, where irony is figured as an omnidirectional weapon. Irony is both a means of defense and attack, one of the primary means by which West's characters enact psychological violence on themselves and on one another.

These heightened affective and psychological stakes illustrate the importance of searching for glimpses of humanity in the broken machinery of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The best means to track affect in West's novel is to chart instances of laughter, smiles and grins. Bergson, as we have seen, characterizes laughter as a corrective, often cruel act, but also as a means of relieving tension and participating in a kind of liberating, playful "absentmindedness." Laughter can thus signify the dual impulses towards derision and escape, the same urges that feature heavily in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The laugh which the comedian provokes is the source of his power, but the laugh which he himself expresses can also signal a crack in his deadpan facade, an unspoken urge to escape from his rigid,

machine-like role. The laugh, the smile, the “torn mouth” (38), are thus the fault lines in West’s curious topography of mechanized humanity, the signs of function and malfunction.

There are 41 occurrences of the word “laugh,” as well as its variations and derivatives, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Some of these usages are benign, and many would not raise an eyebrow in any other context, but curious patterns begin to emerge when the text is read closely. Even before we reach the first laugh, we notice a breakage in familiar patterns of humor. “The letters,” West writes, “were no longer funny. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end” (1). Responses to these letters serve as a kind of benchmark for humanity in this story. West’s great achievement is the balance these pleas maintain between tragedy and comedy, something which was noted by several early reviewers like T.C. Wilson, who writes “Broken-hearted, Desperate, Disillusioned-with-tubercular husband, and the rest are laughable in their naive letters, but their suffering is depressing. Mr. West presents them with much power” (Wilson, 52). The sheer volume of this sadness often overloads comedy’s inhuman mechanism. In order to see this process in action, we need to track instances of broken comedic machines and defective laughter.

The central focus of the story is an exhausted joke, one which no longer provokes what it is designed for: laughter. The act’s absence therefore, is marked as a conspicuous lapse in functionality. The joke is no longer funny, but does this mark a problem with the joke, or with *Miss Lonelyhearts*’ sense of humor? In line with Simmel’s work on overstimulation in the metropolis, West implies that overabundance of a comic pattern leads to a deadening, monotonous effect, threatening to swing back in the direction of

endless sadness and tragedy. He hints at the logical endpoint of an accelerated Bergsonian model of progressive mechanization, whereby fundamental aspects of humanity are absorbed within rigid structures of flat affect, figured in Shrike's perpetual "dead pan" (21), and where sadness itself is commodified and consumed in the form of letters (as quoted above) "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife" (1).

In order to account for this sense of exhaustion in West, where laughter and emotion are figured in terms of deadness and breakage, we should turn to Jameson who, writing many years later, presents a compelling picture of a culture in which this kind of pastiche is dominant. Jameson provides a bridge between West and the postmodern world of media-saturation the latter predicts. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* the abundance of callous, mirthless, media-trained laughter and its result in increasing mechanical failure leads inevitably to what Jameson would later call "the waning of affect in postmodern culture" (10). Jameson characterizes the postmodern era in terms of "flatness or depthlessness... superficiality in the most literal sense" (9). Jameson links postmodern flatness to the deconstruction by critics of "the hermeneutic model" of the self, consisting of "the inside and the outside." In removing this binary, the self's former "depth" is "replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces" (12). Since there is no true self in postmodern culture, neither is there true expression from within, only reflection of other surfaces. As in Bergson's emotionless comedy of types, Jameson's account of flat affect is fundamentally depersonalized. The end of the ego leads, after all to

..the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal,
the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the

emergent primacy of mechanical production). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling (15).

In his characters' fraught comedic reactions to this situation, West also anticipates Jameson's account of how pastiche supersedes parody in postmodern art. Like Bergson, Jameson locates comedy in the imitable. Parody, a kind of "systematic mimicry," thrives, for example, on the "idiosyncrasies of the moderns and their 'inimitable' styles" such as "the Faulknerian long sentence" and "Wallace Stevens's inveterate hypostasis of nonsubstantive parts of speech." Parody, like Bergson's laughter, contains a corrective element. The "characteristic" styles of these writers "ostentatiously deviate from a norm which then reasserts itself, in a not unfriendly way, by a systematic mimicry of their willful eccentricities" (Jameson 16). Jameson's picture of parody, like Bergson's model of society, involves a kind of balance between conformity and transgression, mediated by comedy.

However, with the twentieth century's rapid trend towards media-saturation, parody begins to lose its stable foothold: "the explosion of modern literature into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms has been followed by a linguistic fragmentation of social life itself to the point where the norm itself is eclipsed: reduced to a neutral and reified media speech... which itself becomes but one more idiolect among many. Modernist styles thereby become postmodernist codes" (Jameson 17). In such a situation, "parody finds itself without a vocation." Enter pastiche:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs (Jameson 17).

Jameson's imagery is provocative for a reading of West. The "statue with blind eyeballs" brings to mind a similar depiction of Shrike: "Although his gestures were elaborate, his face was blank. He practiced a trick used much by moving-picture comedians—the dead pan. No matter how fantastic or excited his speech, he never changed his expression. Under the shining white globe of his brow, his features huddled together in a dead, gray triangle" (6). Shrike's comedy is, like Jameson's pastiche, thoroughly disinterested, expressed neutrally and without any of the "ulterior motives" of parody.

With the disappearance of parody as stable means of critique, when every pose that Miss Lonelyhearts can adopt is a mechanized stereotype, and when every register of speech is just "one more idiolect among many," the self becomes a placeholder for any number of media-derived templates. Although for Jameson this state of pastiche is ambient, already present in the postmodern world, what West's story illustrates, at an earlier stage in this process, is that this is a painful, confusing transition to make. The breakage of bodies in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a stark illustration of Jameson's idea that the postmodern self is no longer merely alienated but fragmented (Jameson 14). Comedy, previously a form of

expression and a social corrective, dependent on the hermeneutic model of self, is decentered.

Hence, within this decentered locality, laughter itself is often warped in this text, figured explicitly in terms of space and disorientation. When we reach the first usage, we are presented with the act as a kind of multidimensional phenomenon, given a metaphorical scope beyond the merely linguistic plane: “‘Ah, humanity...’ But he was heavy with shadow and the joke went into a dying fall. He tried to break its fall by laughing at himself. Why laugh at himself, however, when Shrike was waiting at the speakeasy to do a much better job?” (4). Miss Lonelyhearts’ joke here begins to fall flat, and self-laughter serves as a kind of cushioning mechanism, to protect the self from the humiliation of a failed attempt at humor. Note the use of the word “break,” connoting at once a fault, an act of violence, and a means of impeding downward motion. This downward trajectory hints further at the fraught state of comedy in West’s fictional world. Both the joke and the laugh are here presented as defective: Miss Lonelyhearts cannot even laugh at himself effectively.

Defective laughter is found throughout West’s novel, showing us that tensions between the body’s fluid biology and comedy’s rigid mechanics cannot always be comfortably reconciled. This is especially true because laughter is so thoroughly couched in structures of conflict, attack and defense. When Betty laughs at Miss Lonelyhearts in panel four, he “found nothing at which to laugh back” (11). Frustrated at the failure of his comic faculty, he unleashes an abusive tirade against Betty and then “finished with a short laugh that was like a bark” (12). This subtle aberration in the act of laughter illustrates Hutcheon’s image of an “edge,” the fine boundary between comedy and violence, irony

and sincerity, mockery and threat. Betty cannot read these distinctions, and so “she raised her arm as though to ward off a blow.” Bursting into tears, she declares “I love you,” which leaves Miss Lonelyhearts nonplussed, unable to account for Betty’s anti-comedic character: “And I love you... you and your damned smiling through tears” (13).

We see similar aberrations when we look for other examples of laughter in the text. Emotions fluctuate radically and rapidly between joy and sorrow. When Gates begins to mock an old man in the bar, the latter “looked as if he were going to cry, but suddenly laughed instead. A terrible cough started under his laugh, and catching at the bottom of his lungs, it ripped into his throat. He turned away to wipe his mouth” (16). Like the rattling sound in a car that signals a broken motor, this *faulty* laugh hints at a machine-like caricature, but also implies a fundamental rupture in the mechanized self. This “clean old man,” depicted as queer, cannot reconcile his humanity with his status as rigid, parodic target. As Hutcheon argues, irony in this instance, even self-directed irony, exposes structures of power and exclusion, acceptance and denial (Hutcheon 17).

D.J. Enright writes that “irony’s guns face in every direction” (qtd. in Hutcheon 10). His remark is instructive for thinking about the effect of mockery on the figure of Shrike, himself the consummate satirist, but also depicted, like Miss Lonelyhearts, as “the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator” (32). Once again, defective laughter signals the break in comedy’s rigid facade. After Miss Lonelyhearts accuses Shrike of domestic abuse, “Shrike laughed, but *too long and too loudly*, then broke off with an elaborate sigh. ‘Ah, my lad,’ he said, ‘you’re wrong. It’s Mary who does the beating’ (2,1 emphasis mine).

After briefly attempting to maintain the illusion of irony during his “heart-to-heart talk” with Miss Lonelyhearts, Shrike (literally) cracks:

Here the dead pan broke and pain actually crept into his voice. “She’s selfish. She’s a damned selfish bitch. She was a virgin when I married her and has been fighting ever since to remain one. Sleeping with her is like sleeping with a knife in one’s groin.” It was Miss Lonelyhearts’ turn to laugh. He put his face close to Shrike’s and laughed as hard as he could. Shrike tried to ignore him by finishing as though the whole thing were a joke (21).

The self as pure surface is brittle: even Shrike cannot fulfill the rigid, exhausting role of the perpetual ironist. He suffers from a lack of empathy and cannot always navigate the intricate comic structure in which he is enmeshed. He loses control of both his demeanor and the joke, experiencing release but also vulnerability. Miss Lonelyhearts happens to take advantage of the moment for the purposes of revenge. Comedy can never be separated entirely from aggression in this text.

The only characters who seem to laugh without consequence are Miss Lonelyhearts’ male friends who are also Shrike’s acolytes, usually named as Gates and Goldsmith. Miss Lonelyhearts depicts them as well assimilated within the mechanized logic of comedy: “they were machines for making jokes. A button machine makes buttons, no matter what the power used, foot, steam or electricity. They, no matter what the motivating force, death, love or God, made jokes” (15). Predictably then, as humanoid machines, these characters themselves fall victim to parody, to manipulation. Shrike

himself knows how best to stoke their comic tendencies, to “keep [Goldsmith] laughing,” rendering his protégé as both the beneficiary and the victim of his own mirth, showing him to be locked in a pose of Bergsonian rigidity, even if his laughter seems to function perfectly: “you are a nasty product of this unbelieving age. You cannot believe, you can only laugh. You take everything with a bag of salt and forget that salt is the enemy of fire as well as ice... It doesn’t preserve, it kills” (44). Salt here figures as the “pinch of salt” necessary to any cool ironic outlook on life, but also the corrosive power of irony and laughter, even on those who would use it against others.

Other characters laugh “like a crazy person” (42), “apologetically” (48), “wildly” (48), “laugh himself out” (48), and think they will “die laughing” (50), instances which hint subtly or strongly at pathologies of various kinds, but it is through a study of Betty that we can arrive at something approaching a reparative reading of laughter in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, if only for a moment. The following exchange occurs between Betty and Miss Lonelyhearts:

Her smile opened into a laugh. She was laughing at him. On the defense, he examined her laugh for “bitterness,” “sour-grapes,” “a-broken-heart,” “the devil-may-care.” But to his confusion, he found nothing at which to laugh back. Her smile had opened naturally, not like an umbrella, and while he watched her laugh folded and became a smile again, a smile that was neither “wry,” “ironical” nor “mysterious” (12).

West presents another instance of laughter with expanded spatial and metaphorical dimensions. As Bergson writes, laughter can be a means to escape the tension of rigid life.

Laughter here is a process but, crucially, not a mechanized one: Betty's smile opens naturally, "not like an umbrella." Because it does not exhibit the Bergsonian characteristic of rigidity, Miss Lonelyhearts cannot find any template, whether "wry," "ironical" or "mysterious" to latch onto and thus ridicule. Miss Lonelyhearts' eventual choice of joke falls somewhat flat and fails to sublimate its implicit aggression: "'Betty the Buddha,' he said. 'Betty the Buddha. You have the smug smile; all you need is the pot belly.' His voice was so full of hatred that he himself was surprised. He fidgeted for a while in silence and finally sat down beside her on the couch to take her hand" (12).

The joke is not only violent, it's also not funny. It misses the mark because it cannot encompass a genuinely unique and natural phenomenon, the expression of spontaneous emotion. Comedy fails when it encounters, in Bergson's words, "the *individuality* of things or beings" (152), "a certain immateriality of life" (157). To convey this quintessence, the emotion itself and not merely its manifestation or outward show as lifeless behaviorism, is, for Bergson, the "loftiest ambition of art" (155). It is for this reason that West's portrait of Betty's smile is one of the most redemptive and, I would argue, successful passages in the novel.

This kind of freedom does not last long, and Betty threatens to become a stock character in the eyes of Miss Lonelyhearts, even if she does provoke an ambivalent response in him. The panel entitled "Miss Lonelyhearts in the Country" serves as an escape from the mechanized urban center. Betty's house is infused with the flux of nature, and its capacity for habitation has diminished: "The heavy, musty smell of old furniture and wood rot made them cough." Despite Miss Lonelyhearts' complaints, his companion is content:

“Betty said that she did not mind because it was *not* a human smell” (36). This telling remark hints at Betty’s attempt to escape from the rigid framework of human society and its jokes to an undifferentiated state of nature, to something like this smell which is “not human.” Non-human nature, as we recall from Bergson, is never comic in and of itself. Miss Lonelyhearts responds to this in a way that either signifies a genuine reciprocal emotion or a condescending act of mockery that could shatter her peace: “She put so much meaning into the word “human” that he laughed and kissed her” (36).

West does not let us know how Betty responds to this ambiguous expression of affection, but in the end, despite her sunny disposition, she, like all the other characters, cannot escape the all-encompassing logic of comedic mechanization. It is significant that Betty is given the last act of individualized laughter in the novel, one which serves as a kind of diagnostic for the affective and psychological states of comedy in West’s fictional world. The lead up to Betty’s last laugh is just as significant. In the novel’s penultimate episode, Miss Lonelyhearts approaches her after a party at Shrike’s apartment. He has apparently achieved a kind of equilibrium between intellect and emotion, the mind and the rock that signifies his guilt, but Betty’s own equilibrium has been broken: “he approached Betty with a smile, for his mind was free and clear... But she did not smile back. ‘What are you grinning at?’ she snapped” (54). Later, at a soda fountain, Betty attempts to maintain a calm demeanor while making small talk:

“You ought to see Bill Wheelright about a job. He owns an agency—he’s a swell guy... He’s in love with me.”

“I couldn’t work for a rival.”

She screwed up her nose and they both laughed.

He was still laughing when he noticed that something had gone wrong with her laugh. She was crying (55).

Betty's laugh, her means of escape and relieving tension has become defective like all the others'. It becomes something like a Bergsonian self-corrective that she cannot abide: "oh..." she sobbed. 'I'm a fool.' She ran out of the store" (55). This breakdown is all the more tragic because, ironically, it results in Betty's absorption within one of the most paradigmatic comedic narratives in literature, the Shakespearean model which begins in strife and ends in marriage. Indeed, West's model of comedy, bound up so closely with violence, reveals the violence inherent in the "comedy" of a marriage forced into existence by the plot. As Miss Lonelyhearts proposes to Betty, she becomes reduced to essential parts with predictable functions, like a caricature:

He begged the party dress to marry him, saying all the things it expected to hear, all the things that went with strawberry sodas and farms in Connecticut. He was just what the party dress wanted him to be: simple and sweet, whimsical and poetic, a trifle collegiate yet very masculine. By the time they arrived at her house, they were discussing their life after marriage.

Where they would live and in how many rooms... (55).

The synecdoche of "the party dress" illustrates not only the objectification and mechanization of Betty in terms of function, but also the hollow nature of her psyche at this point. A dress on its own is empty, and the lovers' last instance of collective mirth is likewise rendered trite and hollow, like an insipid fairytale: "With a great deal of laughter,

they decided to have three beds in their bedroom. Twin beds for sleep, very prim and puritanical, and between them a love bed, an ornate double bed with cupids, nymphs and Pans” (55). The reference to “Pans” is multivalent: evoking not just the god of sexuality and pastoral bliss, but also the “dead pans” of the preceding narrative, implying that the readers should not take the escape seriously. West’s idyll is revealed to be implicitly ridiculous, and all the more so for his characters’ unselfconscious entertainment of it. Both Miss Lonelyhearts and his lover have been mechanized in a typical pastoral form; Betty’s laugh is stripped of individuality and absorbed within the story’s comedic eschatology. What makes this marriage plot all the more tragic, beyond this lurid parody, is that it, like all the other plots and arcs in the novel, is frustrated, and comes to nothing with the death of Miss Lonelyhearts. Their final act of laughter, machine-like, rings hollow.

Conclusion

Miss Lonelyhearts is a story about postindustrial mechanization in an urban space, but it's also fundamentally a story about comedy and mass media. These too are forms of mechanization, in a Bergsonian sense. It's remarkable to think that in 1933, in a world before television and the internet (the most omnivorous forms of mass media yet invented) when classical Hollywood cinema was only newly ascendant, West could write: "Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst" (38-39). The twentieth century was not yet halfway done, advertising had not even attained a fraction of its current power, and West could highlight the mechanizing, commodifying logic of mass media. His key insight however, is found in the word "puerile," with its comedic connotations of triviality and silliness. Comedy itself is intimately bound up with the logic of both capital and the media.

Bergson's theory of comedy as rigidity offers a compelling way to read *Miss Lonelyhearts*, but the theory is best augmented by accounting for this multiplying effect of mass media. We then see in West's novel a kind of *accelerated* Bergsonian model, whereby the logic of the entertainment industry and capitalism itself absorbs and mechanizes human experience, proliferating the number of templates for character, belief and experience and thus increasing the potential for all-pervasive comedy. When comedy is all-pervasive, its corrective function becomes corrupted, lacking any center from which to critique deviance. Thus parody falls to pastiche, the neutral reproduction of styles, attitudes and affectations.

This is the reason why there is no escape for Miss Lonelyhearts, because each response to suffering in the world can be lampooned with perfect nonchalance by Shrike and co.

Bergson likewise provides us with an explanation for the proliferation of machinic and mechanized imagery in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, especially in episodes involving comedy and laughter. However, in order to account for those scenes where comedic machines seem to break, we turn to Ngai, Simmel, Hutcheon and Jameson who illustrate the physiological, psychological and affective consequences of an *overloading* of the comedic mechanism. Cool irony is not enough when it too can be mechanized. Comedy in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a hopelessly inadequate human response, one which seems more like a cry for help than an expression of mirth. Laughter is the fissure in West's comedic façade, and if we listen to this laughter we can tell, as we can with Betty's, that something has most definitely "gone wrong" (54).

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