

COMIC AGENTS: FROM A POETIC TO AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PARADIGM OF COMEDY (ARISTOTLE AND ALFRED GELL)

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Abstract: Aristotle was concerned with the comedy genre as a kind of poetry. Its creators, the comic poets, interested him only marginally. This genological approach to its subject-matter dominated the theory and philosophy of art for subsequent centuries as evidenced by the subsequent elaborations of interpretations of Aristotle's catharsis. The alternative approach focused instead on subjects as creators of art. As a consequence of the long-term development of anthropocentrism in the humanities, however, this approach took over. The "performative turn" represents its more recent version. It allows one to interpret *Poetics* and other classical works not in the context of an object (comedy), but in the context of the acting subject. I claim that social anthropology further explores the concept of comedy and itself presumes it in its conceptual foundations and research approach. I elaborate the argument on the basis of the concept of the "spirit of comedy" coined by Alfred Gell.

Keywords: comedy, interpretation of catharsis, social anthropology, Aristotle, Alfred Gell

In his writings about comedy – in *Poetics*, as well as in *Rhetorics*, *Ethics: Nicomachean* and *Eudemian*, *On Generation and Corruption* – Aristotle was concerned mainly with the comedy genre as a kind of poetry.¹ He mentions its creators, namely the comic poets, only in

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¹ I propose a broad meaning of the phrase "learning to read". See Luke Carson and Heather White (2012). "Preface". *Genre*, 45(1), 1-7. It means not only to "read poetry" but also to read a work of art by a spectator and author. In ancient times the most "poetic" genre was drama. Today drama transgresses its limits to search for intimacy or – on the contrary – to transcend everyday reality. Comedy and tragedy become the foremost fields of the "poetry of experience," in its intimate dimension as well as in its transcending of cognition and creation. This is reflected in the proposed

passing. This kind of genological approach to its subject-matter dominated the theory and philosophy of art for subsequent centuries. The alternative approach focused instead on subjects as creators of art and as a consequence of the long-term development of anthropocentrism in the humanities this approach took over. The “performative turn” represents its more recent version and allows one to interpret *Poetics* and other classical works not in the context of an object (comedy), but in the context of the acting subject.² It turns out, however, that social anthropology, understood as the systematic exploration of human subjects and their relations, itself presumes – in its foundational dimension and research approach – the concept of the “spirit of comedy” as coined by Alfred Gell.³

ARISTOTLE’S ACCOUNT OF THE COMMON FEATURES AND COMPONENTS OF COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

“For Tragedy and Comedy are both composed of the same letters.”
(Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*)

Aristotle’s distinction between tragedy and comedy, and his unambiguous preference of the former, persisted in Mediterranean culture as a relatively stable cultural construct. Apparently, many of the characteristic features attributed to tragedy may equally well be applied to comedy, namely: imitation (*Poetics* 1447a 15); the use of rhythm, word and melody (1447a 21); imitation of human actions (of higher types in tragedy, and lower types in comedy, 1448a 10); representation of characters acting directly (1448a 24); forms more excellent than previous ones; improvisation (1449a 8); iambic metric in dialogues (1449a 20); generality of themes (1449b 8); “language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament,” i.e. poetic language, characterized by clarity and lack of vulgarity (1449b 28, 1458 a 20); appropriate (i.e. reversed) style (*Rhetoric* 1408a 10-13); certain components (*mythos*, *ethos*, *lexis*, *dianoia*, *opsis*, and *melos*, 1450a

layout of topics in the present paper: from genre to the anthropological dimension to Alfred Gell’s “spirit of comedy.”

² This parallels how Eric Fallick read the works of Plato in the perspective of human contemplative action. See Eric S. Fallick, *The Practice of Contemplation*, <http://www.eumaiosllc.com/content/ContemplationessayESF.html> [28.04.2015].

³ The genological meaning of the genre of comedy is inseparable from the ethical dimension. For a similar observation on the integrality of irony and ethics see Liviu Iulian Cocei (2015). “Ethical Implications Regarding the Use and Abuse of Irony”. *Agathos: An International Review of the Humanities and Social Science*, 6(1), 51-61.

10); structure (*prologue, episode, eksodos, parodos, and stasimon*; 1452b 17); the sequence of events (1450a 24); the ordered and non-accidental dimension (1450b 25-35); probability and necessity (1451a 35); the rationality of action (1454b 5) and its philosophical nature (1451b 5); the generalization of the role of the choir (in comedy after 486 B.C.); and priority of the construction of the comic plot with regard to the identification of characters (1451b). Above all, comedy and tragedy are both attributed to the category of “rest”, because “rest and wit are something essential in life” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1128b).

There followed periods and settings in our culture, in which comedy celebrated its triumphs over tragedy, while the latter underwent “fossilization.”

ARISTOTLE ON CATHARSIS AS THE CONCLUSION OF COMEDY

Aristotle’s statements regarding the stylistic marks of the dramatic genre are widely known:

Further, if it be objected that the description is not true to fact, the poet may perhaps reply, ‘But the objects are as they ought to be’; just as Sophocles said that he drew men as they ought to be; Euripides, as they are. (*Poetics* 1460b 33)

OR

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type – not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. (1449a 30).

Characters were not assumed by Aristotle to represent only noble individuals. But for him the main question – *why?* – concerned the teleology of artistic representation. For instance, to paraphrase the teleological explanation of the possible use of falsehood in comedy, it could be claimed that the author presented the reverse of the normative ideal by bringing forth a situation that was expected not to appear in reality. Thus, it functioned in a sense as a counter-example.

The authors of comedy, however, did not depict suffering – in the sense of Greek *pathos* or *hamartia* – of characters, mainly because their direct purpose was not an excitation of compassion, fear or terror, but rather of laughter. Comedy writers, unlike scoffers and satirists, also refrained from ridiculing individuals. Instead, by creating plots where certain types of human defects could be clearly depicted, and by mitigating the consequences of wandering (*hamartia*) through dual completion – positive for the good characters, and negative for the bad

ones (*Poetics* 1453 and 35) – the authors of comedies sought to educate society.

So, the lost part of *Poetics* could therefore have possibly contained the following definition of comedy: comedy is an imitative representation of an amusing action, which is characterized by the following features: it is finite, has an appropriate size, is cast in decorative language (clear and not vulgar), varies in different parts of the work, is presented in a dramatic and non-narrative form, and, finally, by evoking laughter it culminates in catharsis. Accordingly, laughter is the means, not the end, of comedy.

By analogy with the above definition and aim of comedy, the goal of drama (i.e. tragedy) is catharsis. But in tragedy catharsis may be understood differently. Below, I briefly outline the most pertinent interpretations.

1. Lev Vygotsky,⁴ on the basis of Darwin's naturalistic theory, claimed that some moods cause certain habitual movements that can be considered useful. Taking the opposite movements under the influence of opposite impulses became habitual in us and in some animals. These are involuntary movements, consequences of habitual associations, and their annihilation at the climax of the process is catharsis. In art, the release of nervous energy takes place in the opposite direction: affective contradiction leads to conflicting emotions and that in turn results in their destruction. Thus, painful and unpleasant affects are transformed into their opposites in the case of tragedy while humorous affects are transformed into a sense of failure or sadness, depending on the type of comic effect, ranging from farce to comedy.

2. The interpretation of catharsis as ritual purification stems from an attempt to disambiguate the family of related words: *catharos*, *catharsis* and *catharmos* by M. Nussbaum.⁵ This interpretation is rooted in the separation of what is worse from what is better (Plato 415d); of divine elements in humans from mortal ones; and in the restoration of purity and healing. In *Sophist* Plato identified the pre-Platonic understanding of catharsis with the cleaning and curing of *catharmos*, namely ritual purification, and with the removal of the stigma of evil.

⁴ Lev S. Vygotsky (1971). *The Psychology of Art*. Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

⁵ Martha Nussbaum (2001). *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001.

3. The medical interpretation relates to the everyday Greek use of the term, which preceded the inception of tragedy. It meant different kinds of purification: menstrual, urinal or defecatory, “the blood as purified by blood,”⁶ as well as the natural process of release of nervous tension and soothing the emotions of pity and fear.⁷ This interpretation stems from the Corps of Hippocrates and his use of terms like *phobos* (meaning chills, tremor, palpitations, piloerection, and the cooling effect) and *eleos* (referring to tears, quickened breathing, and the effect of moisture).

4. Moral and emotional interpretations are grounded in experiences of emotional relief, and emotional and intellectual purification. Catharsis is understood as a calling forth of emotions. This interpretation accounts for the cognitive aspect of tragic catharsis as an experience of learning, and thus it accords with the purpose of mimesis in the entire work of Aristotle⁸ (esp. *Nicomachean Ethics*). Aristotle believes emotions can be subject to learning and education, eventually leading to the development of character and virtues.⁹ Hence, the cognitive objective of catharsis is to become more virtuous by confronting situations with the appropriate emotional response.

5. Aesthetic interpretation refers to the rationality of the world and tragic events as well as to the credibility of the represented events and the presence of a fault, *hamartia*, which makes the fall of the character intelligible. The purification of the tragic act is achieved by demonstrating that its motive was not morally repulsive.¹⁰ *Hamartia* (through trials and tribulations) and *anagnorisis* reveal the structural features of the situation, thus making us aware that it was a mistake, to which we can respond in the case of tragedy with pity, while in the case of comedy – which we experience a safe distance from the situation – we laugh. In comedy, however, one can feel a fear of being ridiculed, and as “anxiety predisposes people to seek a way out” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1382, 1383b), they will thereby learn as well.

⁶ Walter Burkert (1992). *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in Archaic Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁷ Jacob Bernays (1857). *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie*. Breslau: Verlag von Eduard Trevendt.

⁸ Leon Golden (1992). *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

⁹ Stephen Halliwell (2002). *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ Gerald Frank Else (1965). *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

6. The holistic interpretation takes into account Keeseey's "fruitful ambiguity"¹¹ of tragic catharsis. This account embraces four dimensions of the latter: a) religious and moral (esp. fidelity and obedience to the gods and to oneself), b) dianoetic-logical (from inexpressible confusion to organized knowledge), c) affective (emotional tension reaching a peak, however, being dianoetically inspired by the logos), and d) "somatic-medical" (catharsis having an impact not only on emotions and the soul, but also on the bodily "humours," thus sustaining health and pleasure).

AGENT, POET AND COMEDY WRITER

In this section I intend to redefine and expand the traditional meaning of comedy as genre by taking into account the category of agent. We need to consider as pertinent the subjective agency of the comedy character (as fictional) as well as the comedy writer, the director of the comedy performance and the performer of the comedy. Following Giddens¹² and M. Archer, I understand the concept of agency as an individual's ability to intentionally make a difference in the state of affairs or sequence of events.

In treating fictional characters as free human beings (H. Gouhier)¹³ and as capable of a specific way of thinking (Aristotle), endowed with real existence only to the extent that they are performed on the stage, it is useful to blur the differences between the real and imaginary dimensions.¹⁴ We do so in order to relate these dimensions; that is, to answer the question: how do the internal components of a fictional work really affect the decisions and the life of an individual? Ingarden formulated the concept of metaphysical and existential qualities.¹⁵ Aesthetic qualities, such as, for example, humor and ridicule, are subject to the cathartic process within the emotional-moral dimension, namely through intellectually mediated learning and through distance conceptualized on the basis of the moral model of actions adopted by the agent.

¹¹ Donald Keeseey (1978-1979). "On Some Recent Interpretations of Catharsis", *Classical World* 72 (4), 193-207.

¹² Anthony Giddens (1986). *The Constitution of Society, Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹³ Henri Gouhier (1952). *Le Theatre et l'Existence*. Paris: Aubier.

¹⁴ See Roman Ingarden's theory of quasi-judgment. Roman Ingarden (1973). *The Literary Work of Art*. Translated and introduced by George G. Grabowicz. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

¹⁵ Roman Ingarden. *The Literary Work of Art, op. cit.*

Aristotle (esp. in *Poetics*) often referred to “creators of comedy” and described them as having a natural instinct for mimicry, which enables cognitive processes (1448b 5); as appreciating the highest pleasure in learning (1448b 14); and as being capable of generalization and philosophizing. Thus, they are “the creators of the more common disposition,” who represent the deeds of the wicked – first as mockery and satire, then as dramatic ridiculousness (1448b 25). These are then identified with poets who have found a natural delight in comedy (1449 and 5) and creators perfecting improvisations of phallic representations (1449 and 10) tending towards formal perfection, especially by constructing a single plot and only then picking up at random the names of the characters (1451b 10). They have extraordinary imagination and create the style appropriate for the genre – a clear language and uncommon gestures (1455 and 25). In addition, they have talent and inspiration (1455 and 30).

No less relevant for Aristotle’s understanding of the agents of comedy than *Poetics* are the pertinent excerpts from *Nicomachean Ethics*. The latter describes them as people who avoid exaggeration. Aristotle illustrates this with an example of an abusive choir’s costume in comedy:

the man who goes to excess and is vulgar exceeds [...] by spending beyond what is right. For on small objects of expenditure he spends much and displays a tasteless showiness; e.g. [...] he provides the chorus for a comedy he brings them on to the stage in purple, as they do at Megara. (1123a 22-27)

In *Poetics* Aristotle highlights the inappropriateness of using the theater’s surplus of parallel codes.

The agent is also a witty man, who is considerate in the sense of *arete* (virtue). The following passage succinctly expresses Aristotle’s most important – but totally ignored in writings on the comic creator – ideas concerning the ethical foundations of human attitudes in the context of jokes, humor and laughter. It also clarifies the basic distinctions between the artistic genres:

Since life includes rest as well as activity, and in this is included leisure and amusement, there seems here also to be a kind of intercourse which is tasteful; there is such a thing as saying – and again listening to – what one should and as one should. The kind of people one is speaking or listening to will also make a difference. Evidently here also there is both an excess and a deficiency as compared with the mean.

Those who carry humour to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons, striving after humour at all costs, and aiming rather at raising a laugh than at saying what

is becoming and at avoiding pain to the object of their fun; while those who can neither make a joke themselves nor put up with those who do are thought to be boorish and unpolished. But those who joke in a tasteful way are called ready-witted, which implies a sort of readiness to turn this way and that; for such sallies are thought to be movements of the character, and as bodies are discriminated by their movements, so too are characters.

The ridiculous side of things is not far to seek, however, and most people delight more than they should in amusement and in jestingly, and so even buffoons are called ready-witted because they are found attractive; but that they differ from the ready-witted man, and to no small extent, is clear from what has been said.

To the middle state belongs also tact; it is the mark of a tactful man to say and listen to such things as befit a good and well-bred man [...]

One may see this even from the old and the new comedies; to the authors of the former indecency of language was amusing, to those of the latter innuendo is more so; and these differ in no small degree in respect of propriety.

[...] The refined and well-bred man, therefore, will be as we have described, being as it were a law to himself. Such, then, is the man who observes the mean, whether he be called tactful or ready-witted. The buffoon, on the other hand, is the slave of his sense of humour, and spares neither himself nor others if he can raise a laugh, and says things none of which a man of refinement would say, and to some of which he would not even listen. (*Nic. Et.* 1127b 36-1128b 5)

Aristotle describes features of comedy as products of responsible agents engaged in social relations and culture, i.e. of virtuous, tactful, free and right people. Thus, Aristotle transgressed the ontological barrier between the subject of agency and the causal effects. Therefore, he determined the characteristics of the effects by the attitude and virtues of the agent.

Ingarden's categories of metaphysical and existential qualities are an original attempt to explain the functioning of the relationship between the world of art and concrete decisions taken in real human life. An alternative proposal to clarify the "ontological acrobatics" – an expression coined by Z. Raszewski¹⁶ – was proposed by Henri Bergson in his philosophy of comicality.¹⁷ Bergson highlighted the role of laughter as a "battering ram" disrupting the inertia of thinking and manners and constituting a form of defense of humans and culture against the determinations of matter. The appropriate ontological context for Bergson's philosophy is Cartesian dualism (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*). However, in accordance with Bergson's concept, matter is abstract and perhaps even to some extent enchanted.

¹⁶ Zbigniew Raszewski (1991). *Teatr w świecie widowisk*. Warszawa: Krag.

¹⁷ Henri Bergson (2012). *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Emereo Publishing.

Laughter, in Bergson's account, because of its role in the socio-cultural context and the individual dimension, quite naturally undermines any destructive determination. Nonetheless, it is still possible to pose an Aristotelian type of question: can an immoral, tactless, enslaved and unrighteous creator of comedy use laughter properly, namely to bring about rest and entertainment?

COMEDY IN THE METHODOLOGY OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropologists claim ritual has the function of transgressing determinations. Richard Schechner succinctly expresses it thus:

In both animals and humans rituals arise or are devised around disruptive, turbulent, and ambivalent interactions where faulty communication can lead to violent or even fatal encounters [...] If these interactions are the "real events" rituals enfold, then what are the rituals themselves? They are ambivalent symbolic actions pointing at the real transactions even as they help people avoid too direct a confrontation with these events. Thus rituals are also bridges—reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters".¹⁸

Jerzy Grotowski uses the metaphor of a bridge to link the ritual with the person of the actor:

The ritual is a time of great intensity; intensity, which is provoked. Witnesses join then in a state of intensity, because – they say – they feel a presence. And this is enabled by Performer, which became the bridge between the witness and the thing. In this sense, Performer is the pontifex: the person building bridges.¹⁹

The actor - having the status of an intermediary like a priest or shaman -, according to Grotowski, not only effected communication within two dimensions of reality, but also changed herself within the ontological level. Thus, the actor herself became a "Jacob's ladder" or "primitive elevator"²⁰ with "elastic energy," allowing her to go through different states of reality: from physical exercise to the most sublime, mystical way of living.

¹⁸ Richard Schechner (1993). *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*. London: Routledge, p. 223.

¹⁹ Jerzy Grotowski (1990). "Performer". In his *Teksty z lat 1965-1969*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Centralnego Programu Badań Podstawowych, pp. 216-218.

²⁰ Jerzy Grotowski (1995). "From art as ensemble to art as vehicle". In T. Richards, *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Action*. London: Routledge.

Alfred Gell is a remarkable contemporary anthropologist of art,²¹ who attributed a special “comic” disposition to himself. This comic disposition, he admitted, significantly influenced his research attitude and teaching activities and explicitly affirmed the subversive function of laughter. For him, however, the background was constituted not – as in the case of Bergson – by matter opposing human spirit, but rather by social communication. At this point, then, Gell’s conception has some affinity to Aristotle’s social conception – offered in *Nicomachean Ethics* – of the virtuous human being who is tactful, free and righteous. Moreover, for Gell:

the attitude of the spectator towards a work of art is fundamentally conditioned by his notion of the technical processes which gave rise to it, and the fact that it was created by the agency of another person, the artist. The moral significance of the work of art arises from the mismatch between the spectator’s internal awareness of his own powers as an agent and the conception he forms of the powers possessed by the artist.²²

This “mismatch” in the last work of Gell, *Art and Agency*, is specified and named after the key category of his anthropology of art, namely “the nexus.”

Gell believed laughter functioned as a medium of interpersonal relations, constituting the “spirit of comedy,” which revolutionized thinking in anthropology and contributed to the formulation of the standards of modernity. The “spirit of comedy,” according to Gell, is the basic element of modern art and without this spirit it is not even possible to interpret this art. Gell’s favorite modern artist was Marcel Duchamp, whom he studied almost obsessively throughout his whole academic career from 1970 till 1996. According to Gell, it was Duchamp who initiated almost every *avant-garde* trend, including conceptualism.²³ Gell recurrently studied Duchamp’s works but for him the one that most representatively and perspicuously expressed the

²¹ He studied and worked at the University of Cambridge and the London School of Economics. He died in 1997. He wrote *Anthropology of Time* and the widely commented on *Art and Agency*. See Eric Hirsch (1999). “Alfred Gell”, *American Anthropologist*, 101(1), 152-155.

²² Alfred Gell (1999/2006). “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology”. In *The Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams*. Edited by Eric Hirsch. Oxford and New York: Berg, p. 172.

²³ Alfred Gell (2013). “The Network of Standard Stoppages”. In *Distributed Objects. Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell*. Edited by Liana Chua and Mark Elliott. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, p. 111.

author's "wit," was *Fountain*. He interpreted it like he did other contemporary works – for instance Picasso's *Baboon and Young* – in the context of "enchantment," but this "secret transsubstantialization,"²⁴ cannot be created or appreciated without "wit":

it is always the case that materials and the ideas associated with those materials, are taken up and transformed into something else, even if it is only, as in the case of Duchamp's notorious urinal, by putting them in art exhibition and providing them with a title (*Fountain*) and an author ('R. Mutt' alias M. Duchamp, 1917).²⁵

"Wit" in Gell's works on anthropology of art has also another basic role, as a structural element of "traps." It is a cognitive element of works intended to be presented to others, to inspire them to transcend their own cognitive and perceptual limitations. Examples are those displayed during the New York exhibition of 1988 in the Center for African Art and in particular its central work *Zande Hunting Net*.²⁶ "Traps" as works of art are a challenge to people's cognitive capacity, irrespective of whether it is Duchamp's *Large Glass*, or a tribe's "primitive" everyday object, like *Hunting Net* or a Trobriand Island canoe prow-board.

Gell was himself a spectator gifted with a large dose of "wit." It enabled him to interpret adequately modern works of art and utilitarian objects, and on this basis he identified the fundamental feature of anthropology – recognized so far by only a few researchers²⁷ – namely the "spirit of comedy." In his posthumously published *The Art of Anthropology* (1999/2006), Eric Hirsch, Gell's student at the London School of Economics, wrote in the Foreword:

For the first time I clearly understood the tension between the very serious anthropological scholar and the man always intent on never taking himself or his

²⁴ Alfred Gell A. (1999/2006). "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology", *op. cit.*, pp. 159-186.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-74.

²⁶ Alfred Gell (1996). "Vogel's net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps", *Journal of Material Culture*, 1, 15-38 and Alfred Gell (1999/2006). *Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams*, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-214.

²⁷ Geertz claims that serious anthropological writing is a necessity as no one would otherwise believe that they really were "there" and the fundamental myth of anthropology would be overthrown. Clifford Geertz (1988). *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 3-5.

work too seriously. Alfred was as “ambitious” in this quest as some of his other colleagues were in Their “seriousness.”²⁸

Gell’s workplace was always accompanied by atmosphere of humor and wit, enriched by entertaining games of his own invention. He had the personality of an anthropologist whose work has not yet been discovered and fully appreciated. Gell worked on the cultures of the Far East, spending many years there during two internships. His later work, especially *Art and Agency*, and a posthumous collection of essays *The Art of Anthropology*, and the previous one - *Anthropology of Time*, are testimonies to the “philosophical maturation” of the social anthropologist. Gell’s “philosophical maturation” is reflected not only in his numerous references to philosophers, but first and foremost in his detached attitude to objects of cultural anthropology. In large measure it was apparently a matter of Gell’s personality and also of the traits mentioned above by Hirsch, but it was also because of the deadly disease he contracted while working on his monographs.

In Gell’s draft of his Introduction to *The Art of Anthropology* we read:

I find that I am drawn, inexorably, towards a new, and possibly difficult theme: namely, comedy, and its status as an anthropological muse [...] And I must observe that, for me, the attraction of anthropology has never been its passionate, tragic, or even serious nature, but its potential for comedy.”²⁹

And then:

I became an anthropologist, so the spirit of comedy, which the very act of writing summons up whenever I try to put words on paper, had to express itself in the peculiar form of a series of academic texts.”³⁰

Gell wrote these words close to his death, so he was detached from scientific knowledge as exemplified by cultural anthropology.

Of course, Gell objected to the popular meaning of laughter and comedy in the sense of humor. Rather, he defined laughter as “gentle emotion,” which has “far-reaching literary and scientific implications.”³¹ Gell’s concept of comedy thus transgresses the

²⁸ Eric Hirsch (2006). “Foreword”. In Alfred Gell. *Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams, op. cit.*, p. x.

²⁹ Alfred Gell (1999/2006). “Introduction (draft)”. In his *Art of Anthropology, op. cit.*, note 2, p. xi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

following dichotomies: suffering vs. laughter, violence vs. ethics, and universal vs. particular.

Gell appreciated the model of the comic scientific style³² in the writings of Bronisław Malinowski (doyen of the LSE). His favorite model was Malinowski's *Argonauts* and *Coral Gardens*: "the tone of his ethnographies is light, even sunny."³³ Malinowski's heroes – implying the "heroism of the anti-hero" – have the same characteristics "which is why they are still so readable."³⁴ Malinowski, like Aristotle, used counter-examples. For example, Malinowski wrote:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight [...] Imagine yourself then, making your first entry into the village, alone or in company with your white ciceroni. Some natives flock round you, especially if they smell tobacco.³⁵

According to both Malinowski and Gell, the imagination and cool detachment of the self-aware subject are the basis for research on the nature of the world.

The "philosophical character" of social anthropology³⁶ – in the sense of the contexts as well as Aristotelian distance and generality, style, and research approach to the subject-matter – is an appreciated added value in this field. In the *Preface to Argonauts of the Western Pacific* James Frazer admits:

It is characteristics of Dr. Malinowski's method that he takes full account of the complexity of human nature. He sees man, so to say, in the round and not in the flat. He remembers that man is a creature of emotion at least as much as of

³² Gell devotes a lot of attention to the issue of style as a problem against the background of his conception of the anthropology of visual arts, esp. chapter 8 "Style and Culture". In Alfred Gell (1998/2008). *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford.

³³ Alfred Gell (1999/2006). "Introduction (draft)", *op. cit.*, p. xii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Bronisław Malinowski (1950). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, p. 4.

³⁶ In this context, it is important to note M. Mauss's position on the anti-"philosophicality" of anthropology. Marcel Mauss (1985). "A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self". Translated by W. D. Halls. In *The category of the person. Anthropology, philosophy, history*. Edited by Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-25.

reason, and he is constantly at pains to discover the emotional as well as the rational basis of human action.³⁷

Frazer continued the characterization of Malinowski, relating it to the context of the writer's features and his research and artistic style:

The man of science [...] is too apt to view mankind only in the abstract, selecting for his consideration a single side of our complex and many-sided being. Of this one-sided treatment Moliere is a conspicuous example among great writers. All his characters are seen only in the flat: one is a miser, a hypocrite – but not one of them is a man [...] truth to nature has been sacrificed to literary effect. Very different is the presentation [...] of Cervantes and Shakespeare [...] No doubt in science a certain abstractness of treatment is [...] necessary, since science is nothing but knowledge raised to the highest power, and all knowledge implies a process of abstraction and generalization.³⁸

At the same time, however, it has to be admitted that contemporary social and cultural anthropology is surrendering its subjective character to a “systemic” one that including inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to the object of study, which has become – under the pressure of sociology – the concept of the individual as a network of mutual relationships and determinations. The category of agency – especially in the account of the sociologist M. Archer³⁹ – seems incomplete as it always needs further determination by a “system.” Gell's concept of the “spirit of comedy” appears capable of edifying social and cultural knowledge, which stems from agency. This concept, I argue, perhaps with some due modifications regarding the category of agency introduced in *Agency and Art*, might become a fruitful alternative to the cultural approach, especially with its radical anti-essentialist conception of the human being.⁴⁰

Recently, we have been witness to the emergence of a new field of critical anthropology. Douglas Holmes and George Marcus propose to

³⁷ James G. Frazer (1950). “Preface”. In Bronisław Malinowski, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

³⁹ Margaret S. Archer (2004). *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, as well as Margaret S. Archer (ed.) (2013). *Social Morphogenesis*. Heidelberg and New York: Springer.

⁴⁰ One of the important features of the nature and essence of the human being is self-determination as “a great cognitive process”, inseparable from the cognitive potentiality. See Tadeusz Rostworowski (2011). “Self-Determination. The Fundamental Category of Person in the Understanding of Karol Wojtyła”, *Agathos: An International Review of the Humanities and Social Science*, 2(1), 17-25.

“redefine ethnography” in order to overcome Malinowski’s vision.⁴¹ Critical ethnology proposes an approach based on participation, which leaves no room for distance or imagination. As a result we obtain a multi-voice perspective of the complexity of different systems, which are supposedly treated on a par. In contrast, the traditional approach of Malinowski and Gell allows a researcher to take on a role similar to that of a creator of comedy, namely that of an *eutrapelos* having at the same time detachment from the object of research and self-identity.⁴² From the perspective offered by proponents of the new ethnology people are simultaneously participants of a given cultural system and researchers into it. It leads thus to a radical pluralism of perspectives and egalitarianism of research attitudes, which nonetheless can only result in a vision of loosely connected elements of reality, ultimately forming well-matched puzzles. Malinowski’s research attitude and Gell’s “spirit of comedy,” in contrast, offer a detached attitude based on “wit” and support the paradox of complex unity, namely the complex of interacting intentionalities, as exemplified by Gell’s “nexus,” and of substances transcending it,⁴³ where human identity occupies the central place among all values.

Malinowski’s comprehensive writing and Gell’s “wit” – as a legendary lecturer and author of intelligent jokes, aphorisms and drawings – and their metaphors, phrases and imagination as well as individual style surely do not contribute to “corrosive relativism,”⁴⁴ but rather express anthropological *eutrapelos* – the “spirit of comedy.”

⁴¹ Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus (2009). “Przeformułowanie etnografii. Wyzwanie dla antropologii współczesności”. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications, Polish ed. *Metody badań jakościowych*, Vol. 2, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN SA, pp. 645-662. On earlier intuitions see: George E. Marcus and Michael J. Fisher (1986). *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴² That is, of course, if we take Geertz’s position on the double and unstable personality of Malinowski as being concerned with the writing style of the American anthropologist rather than a substantive comment. Clifford Geertz (1988). *Works and Lives*, *op. cit.*

⁴³ See Karol Wojtyła (1994). *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*. Lublin: TN KUL. In the performing arts Jerzy Grotowski used terminology from his readings of Eckhart, who spoke about the “inner” and “outer” man (see Grotowski J., “Performer”, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-218). Anticipation of the complex unity of the human being stems from the letter of St. Paul to Corinthians (2, 4.16).

⁴⁴ The expression is from C. Geertz (1988). *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, *op. cit.*, p. 2. Gell opposed the thesis of anthropological relativism, which he attributed to Durkheim and his ontological approach to theoretical social categories.

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However, he distinguished “cultural relativism,” which did not have any metaphysical properties. Alfred Gell (1996). *Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*. Oxford; Washington: Berg, esp. chapters: “Durkheim” (pp. 3-14) and “Cultural Relativism” (pp. 54-60).

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