

Book review*

Casadei, Delia (2024). *Risible: Laughter without Reason and the Reproduction of Sound*. University of California Press.

The past decades have seen laughter emerge as a fertile site of scholarly inquiry across philosophy, literary studies, media history, and humour research. Yet much of this scholarship, whether framed by the classical theories of superiority, incongruity, or relief (Morreall, 2009), or by cultural analyses of comedy and wit (Attardo, 2008), has tended to treat laughter as a secondary effect of humour. In such paradigms, laughter is conceived as a secondary (re)action, a response to something else: the comic stimulus, the incongruous event, or the witty remark

Delia Casadei's *Risible* (2024) challenges this premise with notable force and an engaging premise to reconsider it independently. Instead of viewing laughter as a response to humour, Casadei redefines it as a phenomenon in its own right: risibility, a sonic, embodied, and reproductive event with deep cultural and political implications. The book functions as an intellectual history of this risibility, a genealogy of sound reproduction, and a critique of modern categories of the human. Published by University of California Press as part of its open-access programme, *Risible* demonstrates both erudition and a daring enterprise. It traverses philosophy from Aristotle to Bataille, media history from early phonographs to TV laugh tracks, and cultural theory from Sylvia Wynter to Achille Mbembe. The result is a book that questions disciplinary boundaries and compels humour scholars to rethink their most basic assumptions about what laughter is, and what it does.

At the heart of *Risible*, as Casadei lays it out, is the recovery of an earlier, largely forgotten meaning of the word *risible*. For much of its history, *risibilis* denoted the capacity to laugh, a property attributed to humans as the “laughing animal” (p. 7). Only from the eighteenth century onward did *risible* come to mean the object of laughter, that which is mockable or laughable (p. 1). Casadei calls these two conceptual regimes set apart by time, space, and intellectual reception *Risible 1.0* and *Risible 2.0*. In *Risible 1.0*, laughter is a constitutive capacity of the human, but also one that destabilises rationality: laughter aligns humans with animals, interrupting language and reason. In *Risible 2.0*, by contrast, laughter is subordinated to causality; it is always laughter *at* something, an act of mockery that can be explained through humour theory.

The book's guiding question is: what happens if we resuscitate *Risible 1.0* and take seriously laughter's (post-human) status as a sonic, convulsive event without reason? Casadei argues that doing so opens up an alternative history of sound and humanity, one in which laughter is both a marker of human fragility and a technique of reproduction—biological, social, and technological.

Casadei's argument is grounded in a wide-ranging philosophical archive. From Aristotle's (350 BCE) attribution of risibility as a defining human property, through Hobbes's (1640) reflections on laughter as an unnamed passion, to Kant's (1790) incongruity theory, laughter

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emerges as a site where philosophy grapples with the limits of logos. Giambattista Vico (1727), Casadei explains, noted that laughter demonstrates humanity's "feeble nature", placing humans between animals and serious men (p. 2). Whereas Henri Bergson (1900) sought to tether laughter to social correction, Mikhail Bakhtin described it as unruly, embodied, and carnivalesque (1965). Casadei aligns more closely with the latter, reading laughter as a disruptive force that resists neat categorisation. Yet she departs from both Bergson and Bakhtin by insisting on laughter's sonic specificity: it is convulsive, repetitive, and curiously contagious, straddling the line between bodily emission and mechanical reproduction, begging the question which came first: the sound or the laughter.

This focus on laughter as sound and sound as laughter enables Casadei to link it to broader debates in sound studies. Scholars such as Steven Connor (2014) and Brandon LaBelle (2014) have examined paralinguistic phenomena, coughs, stutters, and gasps, but Casadei writes that laughter is unique in being historically annexed as a specifically human property. Its sonic profile, oscillating between rupture and proliferation, lends it a privileged role in the cultural construction of "the human". Political theory also plays a crucial role. Drawing on Wynter's (2003) feminist critique of "Man" as an exclusionary colonial category, and Mbembe's (2019) theorisation of necropolitics, Casadei shows how laughter has been racialised, gendered, and devalued as reproductive labour. Laughter, she argues, both supports and destabilises hierarchies of humanity.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, "Laughter without reason", includes Chapter 1. "Unknown causes, or the limit of logos", Chapter 2. "Risible creatures", and Chapter 3. "Laughter as (sound) reproduction" and traces the intellectual history of risibility. Casadei begins with Maya Angelou's performance of "The Mask", in which unexplained laughter resists interpretation and instead registers trauma and survival. From there, she moves through Aristotle (350 BCE), Hobbes (1640), Kant (1790), Bataille (2004), and others to map what she terms "laughter without reason" (p. 19). This laughter does not signal humour but rather articulates an unknowing, a failure of language and causality. A subsequent reconstruction of the genealogy of laughter as a defining human property shows how this notion was entangled with Renaissance humanism and colonialism and demonstrates how the attribution of risibility to humans generated contradictions around language, ownership, and mastery. The end of Part One deepens this analysis by linking laughter to reproduction, both biological and technological. Ancient fertility rituals, Renaissance novels, and contemporary reproductive technologies all reveal laughter as a sonic supplement to processes of generation. Laughter, in this view, is not merely expressive but materially reproductive.

The second part of the book, "Laughter as mass sound reproduction", comprises Chapter 4. "George W. Johnson's laughable phonography", Chapter 5. "Contagion", and Chapter 6. "Canned laughter, gimmick sound". Casadei turns to media history, tracing how laughter was bound to sound recording technologies from the late nineteenth century onward. She revisits George W. Johnson's "Laughing Song" (1892), the first commercially successful phonograph record, performed by an African American formerly enslaved man. While often read as an object of racist appropriation, Casadei argues Johnson's laughter also functions as a "necropolitical" (p. 9), a life-and-death-governing refusal of lyrical selfhood. Such laughter erases song, disavowing the very voice phonography sought to capture. In the 1890s, laughing songs were marketed as globally contagious commodities. Exhibitors claimed listeners could not help but laugh, framing laughter as an epidemic. Yet this discourse dovetailed with colonial anxieties about cholera and racialised pathologies. The Neapolitan contrafact "A RISA" (Berardo Cantalamessa, 1895), Casadei goes on, exemplified how laughter was appropriated and racialised within European contexts. Finally, she analyses the rise of the laugh track in mid-twentieth-century American television. For her, canned laughter represents the "abbreviation of

labour” (p. 137): it compressed the vocal work of live audiences into a reproducible commodity. More than a gimmick, however, laugh tracks revealed deep anxieties about authenticity, manipulation, and political interference in the McCarthy era. The enduring disgust for canned laughter, Casadei argues, signals cultural unease about occluded reproductive labour. Today, we might call it hate-watching or perhaps hate-listening. Together, these case studies demonstrate that laughter was central to the very constitution of “sound” as a modern category of the audible, reproducible, and ambiguously human.

Within humour studies, Casadei’s intervention is something original. The field has long been dominated by the “big three” explanatory models: the superiority theory, in which laughter expresses dominance over others (Plato; Hobbes); the incongruity theory, in which laughter arises from mismatched expectations (Kant, 1790; Schopenhauer, 1818); and the relief theory, which frames laughter as the release of psychic (Freud, 1905) or nervous energy (Morreall, 2009). These models, while still generative today, remain committed to what Casadei terms *Risible 2.0*: a causally oriented, object-driven conception of laughter. In such frameworks, laughter is always “laughing at” something, with its meaning traceable to a joke, a stimulus, or a comic trigger (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). Casadei decisively shifts the ground by recovering *Risible 1.0*: laughter as capacity, as convulsive sound, as an event not tethered to reason or stimulus. In doing so, she exposes the limits of humour theory’s longstanding attachment to causality. Her insistence that laughter must be studied phenomenologically as a sonic act in its own right moves the field away from textualist and cognitive models toward embodied, affective, and materialist approaches.

Equally important is Casadei’s reworking of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1984) which framed laughter as a collective, carnivalesque force of renewal, opposed to seriousness and authority. Casadei inherits Bakhtin’s emphasis on laughter’s unruly materiality, but she tempers its celebratory and rebellious framing by foregrounding how laughter has also been racialised, gendered, and commodified as reproductive labour. Here her work resonates with Parvulescu’s (2010) and Hennefeld’s (2018) feminist analyses, while also carving out an original path that treats laughter as simultaneously productive and exploitative. For humour scholars, then, *Risible* is both a provocation and somewhat of a reorientation. It is not content to extend existing theories but rather demands a rethinking of the very object of study. If humour research has historically asked *why* we laugh, Casadei asks instead *what laughter is* and *what it does*. This subtle but decisive reframing marks a theoretical advance for the field and is in line with work around recent advances in postmedia studies (Bradley et al., 2023).

One of the book’s most exciting dimensions is its potential impact outside humour studies. By foregrounding aurality and sound reproduction, *Risible* offers insights relevant to several adjacent disciplines. For sound studies and musicology, Casadei demonstrates that laughter played a constitutive role in the emergence of sound as a modern category. Her readings of phonographic laughter connect directly to debates about mediation technologies, reproducibility, and the ontology of sound (Connor, 2014; LaBelle, 2014). For media and television studies, the analysis of canned laughter provides a novel account of how broadcast technologies shape audience perception and affect. Scholars of media aesthetics, sitcom history, and audience studies will find this particularly fruitful. For performance and theatre studies, by treating laughter as both a technique and a resourceful sound effect, Casadei opens new avenues for thinking about performance beyond text and gesture. For cultural anthropology and sociology, laughter’s role in marking boundaries between the human and non-human, or in encoding contagion and racialisation, speaks to anthropological concerns with ritual, embodiment, and social order. For science and technology studies (STS), the entanglement of laughter with phonography, reproductive technology, and media infrastructures aligns with STS interests in how technologies mediate human capacities. And for philosophy of affect and the

body, Casadei's insistence on laughter as convulsion, interruption, and unknowable sonic force situates her work alongside scholarship on affect, non-rationality, and bodily intensities. This breadth underscores the book's ambition: it is not simply a contribution to humour research but a reconfiguration of how scholars might approach laughter as a transdisciplinary object.

Granted, no book as ambitious as *Risible* is without limitations. Casadei's prose, while elegant, is conceptually dense and theoretically demanding. The book assumes familiarity with several philosophical traditions and a substantial body of sound studies. For readers mainly interested in empirical humour research, this may present a challenge. While Casadei references global circulation (e.g., laughing songs in colonial India and North Africa), the case studies remain predominantly Euro-American. A deeper engagement with non-Western traditions of laughter could have broadened the book's critical reach. Occasionally, Casadei's emphasis on laughter's ambivalence, being both reproductive and disruptive, humanising and dehumanising, risks oversimplifying differences across contexts, cultures, and user groups. More focus on how specific communities navigate laughter's contradictions for particular purposes might have grounded the analysis further. That said, these critiques are secondary to the book's achievements. Indeed, the very excess and difficulty of *Risible* mirror its subject: laughter as unruly, excessive, and resistant to containment.

Casadei's book occupies a productive scholarly position. Against the causal paradigms of superiority, incongruity, and relief, and against overly celebratory accounts of laughter as inherently liberatory or excessively human, Casadei insists on laughter's uncertainty, uncanny materiality, and sonic specificity. In doing so, she not only expands the remit of humour studies but also forges bridges to sound studies, media history, anthropology, performance, and philosophy. If humour research has often been preoccupied with decoding the logic of jokes, *Risible* asks us to listen instead: to the convulsions, repetitions, and reverberations of laughter as sound. That shift, from laughter as *meaning* to laughter as *phenomenon*, marks the book as a useful addition to humour studies and beyond: a work that, like laughter itself, exceeds containment, reverberating across disciplines with intriguingly generative force.

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