

Who's afraid of humour?

"Death has no sense of humour. It does not want to be laughed at", said Terry Gilliam to the Portuguese humourist Ricardo Araújo Pereira a few months ago. Gilliam, the author of the nonsensical animation sequences of Monty Python, was in Portugal promoting his latest picture, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, which was partly shot at the Knights Templar Castle, in Tomar. By coincidence, Umberto Eco also chose that castle as one of the locations of *Foucault's Pendulum*, a monument to humour and a powerful vaccine against obscurantism, fake news and conspiracy theories.

Terry Gilliam, Monty Python, Ricardo Araújo Pereira, Don Quixote, Cervantes, Umberto Eco, the editors and contributors of the EJHR are all on the right side of history: the side of life against death, the side of laughter against all the agelasts. Back to Eco, who made *The Name of the Rose* spin around a fictitious –but very much likely– Second Book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the philosopher would have developed the reflections that we can only presume from the book that survived. The existence of that second book, which would have confirmed the importance attributed by Aristotle to laughter, starts a conspiracy to hide the book led by the librarian himself, who is like a fox in the henhouse, unable to laugh and willing to commit murder in order to impose the false dogma according to which God does not laugh. While we are at Aristotle, allow me to remember a true episode of involuntary humour: during the dictatorship in Portugal that lasted for almost 50 years until 1974, a book written by Aristotle more than 2000 years ago once happened to be apprehended by the police. The trouble with it was its subversive title: *Politics*. By making one laugh, humour sows doubt, the yeast of a critical mind, the food of free thinking.

Who's afraid of humour? Yesterday's and today's Savonarolas. All those that chased, censored, and burned Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, Rabelais's *Pantagruel*, Molière's *Tartuffe*. The little, medium and big bureaucrats laughed at by the cartoons of *Krokodil* and jokes about the *diamat* and "scientific socialism" classes. In order to be efficient, laughter needs wit, is challenging, stimulates cleverness, not stupidity. Laughter has no political agenda. It is neither a liberator nor an oppressor, it is amoral. But it requires style, quality, high standards. Liberticide laughter is often vulgar, it flounders in the gutter of sarcasm. Rebel laughter appeals to intelligent thinking, it resorts mainly to irony and is relentless in the way it tackles the baseness of prejudice applying ridicule with surgical accuracy.

Anyway, the question 'who's afraid of humour' has not a simple answer. All of us, sometimes, are afraid of humour. Then, the best we can do is to follow the example of those who, from Menippean satire to wit to *mot d'esprit* to incongruence to irony, have long ago discovered the benefits of self-deprecating humour.

In order to lose the fear of humour, we had better start laughing at ourselves.

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